



Social workers pursuing solidarity for careleavers

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The research project

Good Traces – Transitions from care into adulthood as experiences and practices in the changing landscape of social care services

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Leaving care in Finland

- The Child Welfare Act (2007): A child or a young person is entitled to receive aftercare after the termination of substitute care or placement once the placement has lasted six months or longer
- until the age of 23
- voluntary for the young people
- In the end of 2022, 13 033 children and young people were in after care, of which 10365 were over 18-year-olds transitioning from care to early adulthood

Aftercare as social work

Aftercare is carried out as a supportive measure in open care:

- Social work, in cooperation with other authorities, supports the care leavers' successful independent living and aims to ensure housing, education, social and psychological support, access to necessary services, and financial support
- provided by wellbeing service counties (municipalities) > actualises in the everyday work of aftercare professionals

While earlier studies have examined care-leavers' experiences of the transition, their well-being after out-of-home care, and the relationship between young people and care professionals, we still know little about the **practitioners' concrete actions** to support young people towards adulthood.

- **How aftercare practitioners' actions support the transition from care towards adulthood and to more independent life?**

Materials and methods

- 7 workshops/focus group interviews with aftercare professionals in 3 municipalities in Finland
- 51 participants: social workers, social counsellors and professional/voluntary support persons
- Oral story completion method facilitating open-ended discussion

Your aftercare service team has been nominated for the National Good Practice Award. Your work has received good feedback from clients and co-operative partners. People throughout Finland and internationally want to learn more about your work. How has this come about? What is the work of your team like?

- The analysis: 1) identification and coding of the explicit and implicit references to love, respect and solidarity as expressed by the participants in relation to their work practices 2) data-driven thematic analysis

Recognition as solidarity

Solidarity as a form of recognition (Honneth 1995)

- the validation of an individual in their communities of interest and in society
- actualises in being able to join a community, feel belonging and to contribute in a meaningful way, and to receive recognition for the contribution to a community and society
- Recognition through experiencing solidarity generates self-esteem, vital to develop agency in relation to other people and to society.

Previous research suggests that all activities offering opportunities to develop one's potential and experience solidarity serve to enhance the community dimension of recognition (Niemi 2020; Turtiainen 2020; Ågren & Kallio 2023).

Young people have described how a sense of solidarity may develop from small communal encounters and with regards to how people in a community interact with them (e.g. Paulsen and Thomas 2018)

Research question

How social work practitioners working with young people transitioning from care to adulthood facilitate experiences of solidarity for care leavers?

How is solidarity implemented in practice by aftercare practitioners?

- Solidarity as sympathy and compassion
- Supporting community relationships
- Supporting participation
- Advocating for recognition in services and in society
- Promoting equality

Solidarity as sympathy and compassion

“We assume that a young person should somehow live completely in accordance with the norms of society before they can receive support services. We try to progress in small steps and hope for the best for the client within the limits of what they are capable of and how they want to live this life.”

“I think that our clients deserve [aftercare support]. They have a history as child welfare clients, usually for reasons that are not their fault. (...) It’s their right to receive this support, and it’s a bit different from the adult social services.”

Supporting community relationships

The aftercare practitioners felt that their aim is to

- combat loneliness and increase care-leavers' sense of belonging in a community
- ensure that everyone has meaningful social relationships and communal ties

“What we see in aftercare counselling as one of the most important things is creating a positive network. So we aim to direct the young people away from the public authority networks and to find structures and networks that could become permanent in their lives”

- Promoting social skills

in counselling work, for instance, by introducing different places or situations to a care-leaver, such as cafés, community centres or hobbies with the practitioner acting as a good example.

Supporting participation

Promoting care-leavers' sense of having a voice and contributing to their peer community and to society

- encouraging the young people to act for themselves (personal issues)
- supporting their involvement in influencing services
 - acting as experts by experience
 - offering a (sometimes financially compensated) role in working on aftercare information materials

Advocating for the recognition of care leavers in services and in society

- aiming to bring the position of care-leavers into the wider social debate
- talking to decision-makers about the specific needs arising from the individual out-of-home care histories
- standing up for care leavers to ensure their rights in the social and health services

"We are dealing with people who have no understanding for why someone might not be able to function like others, why they need support. So you just have to keep explaining and clarifying, that this is just the way it happens to be like, this is the situation for these young people (...) Like it takes a lot of effort to stand up for the youth, to be on their side."

"The situation is so bad for these young people (...) It's insane. And we try to highlight the meaning of this transition, get the adult social work to understand that it's not trivial..."

Promoting equality

“It’s like the Wild West: one city says that all study expenses should come from funds for promoting independence and another says no study expenses from these funds (...) Here again we see the inequality among these young people.”

- wanting to promote equal after-care support among care leavers
- after care as a potential community to which care leavers could experience solidarity and sense of belonging
- wanting to promote open-for-all community spaces where care leavers and other young people can drop in spontaneously and meet other people. In such spaces, aftercare is not the defining feature of a young person's life but a basis for different forms of support establishing a non-stigmatising community for care-leavers on an equal footing with other young people.

Conclusions

- In the aftercare practitioners' work, promoting solidarity for care leavers is manifested in sympathy and compassion, supporting community relationships and participation, advocating for recognition in services and in society, and promoting equality.
- a) relationality, (b) advocacy and (c) equality as means to pursue solidarity and recognition in aftercare
- The solidarity aspect of recognition is inseparable of the other elements of recognition as categorized by Honneth.
- While the analysis does not facilitate conclusions about whether the care leavers experience solidarity or if they feel recognised, it tells us about the apparent and invisible, deliberate and subconscious efforts by the practitioners to gain recognition through solidarity for their clients.