

Time and context shaping the transition from out-of-home care to adulthood in Portugal

Alyona Artamonova^{a,*}, Maria das Dores Guerreiro^b, Ingrid Höjer^c

^a Population Research Centre, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Landjeven 1, 9747 AD Groningen, the Netherlands

^b Department of Sociology, ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisbon, Portugal

^c Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sprängkullsgatan 23, 411 23 Gothenburg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The difficulties that modern care leavers face on the way to independence are the focus of many studies. The present research illustrates how time and context - operationalised through belonging to different generations, from the previous century to today - has shaped care leavers' pathways to adulthood in Portugal. To trace these pathways, ten care leavers were selected based on purposeful sampling and snowball methods. To reveal the factors that indicate care leavers' better life outcomes, interviews with seven experts working with this vulnerable population group were organised. The pathways of male informants look "normal", even thriving, when compared with the trajectories of the general population of Portugal in the second half of the 20th century, while the experiences of female care leavers sound somewhat traumatising. The timing and sequence of the young cohorts' transition to adulthood events does not look aberrant compared to the general population. The various factors that determine a care leaver's better life outcomes emerged as access to the tangible and intangible resources needed to generate human and social capital, and personal agency. Care leavers from older cohorts were empowered by means of education and the support of former residents of out-of-home care institutions. Women from older cohorts could receive education but, due to the social context, they were not expected to build careers. The educational opportunities given to them were very basic and did not afford them the confidence to deal with adversity. Care leavers from younger cohorts seem to lose the advantage of competitive education and the sense of belonging to a large and powerful childcare institution due to the democratisation of the education system and de-institutionalisation of residential care in the country. However, they can stay in care longer, gain practical skills for independent living and benefit from the personalised support of professionals to deal with adversity.

1. Introduction

Transition to adulthood is a process where many people share quite similar experiences. However, there are differences in starting points, available resources, strategies employed and other aspects that require researchers to unveil pathways (or trajectories) with various intermediate transitional points (Storø, 2017). Pathways of care leavers are of special interest in many countries since this group is amongst the most vulnerable in society and its representatives need extra support from the state (Aldgate, 1994; Donkoh, Underhill, & Montgomery, 2006; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014). Researchers from different parts of Europe have reported that inequalities in the state or in a family's access to resources lead to differences in the transition to adulthood between care leavers, whose transitions are "accelerated and compressed" (non-normative trajectories), and the general population, who are

"allowed a period of extended dependency" (normative trajectories) (Storø, 2017, p. 772). Educational achievements, finding a job, family formation and parental experiences are usually more problematic for people with the background of living in residential care homes than for those who grew up in biological families (Barth, 1990; Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1990; Stein & Munro, 2008).

A growing body of research emphasises that children and young people with experience of out-of-home care do not perform well in school, compared to their peers. Furthermore, their chances of moving on to further and higher education are limited (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015; Cameron et al., 2018; Dahlen, 2015; Forsman, Brännström, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2016). The results of a research review, performed by O'Higgins, Sebba, and Luke (2015), demonstrates that there is a correlation between being in care and educational achievements, but that this correlation is also dependent on

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: a.artamonova@rug.nl (A. Artamonova), maria.guerreiro@iscte-iul.pt (M.d.D. Guerreiro), ingrid.hojer@socwork.gu.se (I. Höjer).

other risk factors related to the individual child/young person, the family and the environment. Research shows that young people in care view education as a springboard to a better life, and that their motivation for educational success is strong. Thus, educational institutions, with well informed and committed professionals, may constitute a platform for the opening of educational pathways and enhancing of future life opportunities for young people placed in out-of-home care (Höjer & Johansson, 2013; Johansson & Höjer, 2012).

The transition to adulthood trajectories can vary among representatives of different generations. Pathways to adulthood in Europe have changed considerably in recent decades, becoming less standardised (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). These changes must be taken into account in order to trace the transforming needs of care leavers living in a modernising society (Pinkerton, 2011). Portugal is a European country with a rich history characterised by modernisation processes that have unfolded quickly over several decades. The country demonstrated a transition from a context of modest state support, limited access to education, and institutionalised residential care in the second half of the previous century to today's more generous welfare system, complete with the universal education and family-oriented care that corresponds with the expectations of a modern country (Costa Pinto, 2011; Guerreiro, 2014; Viegas & Costa, 2000). It enables us to explore the experiences of care leavers from older generations who had to organise their transitions in less advantageous contexts than the modern generation. In addition to this, the perspective of professionals involved in preparing adolescents for independence is required to understand the outcomes of residential care, since the process of autonomisation is the life project of every young person and the professional project for a specialist (Storø, 2017).

Our study aims to illustrate and reflect upon how time and context operationalised through belonging to different generations has shaped care leavers' pathways to adulthood in Portugal in the second half of the previous century and today. The pathway to adulthood is understood as a sequence of events such as leaving residential care, finishing education, first employment, union formation and childbearing. We followed the interpretations of Lahire (2017) and assume that pathways involve more than just the basic facts and timing of events; rather, they portray a persons' experiences at these life events. The following research questions were asked: What were the pathways to adulthood of care leavers in the different social realities of Portugal? What characterised the pathways of care leavers in the second half of the previous century and today? What were the factors behind out-of-home care better life outcomes from the perspective of professionals involved in work with care leavers?

Our study contributes to the existing literature on leaving out-of-home care by sketching trajectories of different generations of care leavers and, at the same time, giving voice to experts working with young people in out-of-home care in Portugal. The deinstitutionalisation of the child care system that has occurred in Europe is usually discussed with approval. Our findings propose an alternative point of view: that the old residential system could have some strengths that were lost when children were dispersed individually or in small numbers to foster homes. Some measures on empowering vulnerable children that have been applied in the past are worth raising to the surface of social work practice with respect to modernised social reality.

2. Background

2.1. Previous research on care leavers in Portugal

The pathways from out-of-home care to independent life receive increased attention from researchers worldwide. International research confirms that young people with the experience of living in child residential care become parents at a younger age, drop out from education, get low-skilled jobs, and demonstrate offending behaviour and mental health problems more often than young people without such

experience (Stein & Munro, 2008).

In Portugal, there have been several studies that aim to understand how care leavers organise their lives. A study of care leavers born between 1920 and 1983 showed that the informants were generally socially integrated (Maia, Martins, Marques, Alves, & Veiga, 2012). The percent of those who did not have a partner and children was low; the majority reached a medium or upper high school level; the vast majority continued to invest in their academic career after leaving care; they rarely had problems with employment. Contemporary care leavers have to deal with problems such as poor school results and a low level of education, followed by modestly paid jobs with temporary contracts, the absence of stable housing, drug addictions, and the tendency to reproduce their social vulnerability (Colen, Belo, Borges, Branco, & Marques, 2005). The disadvantages of a care leaver's past life could influence the family formation plans of young people in today's Portugal. Finding a partner and childbearing became a misplaced priority for young people going through the process of leaving care; they hardly saw themselves as future partners or parents (Adeboye, Guerreiro, & Höjer, 2019).

Researchers from Portugal have also looked at the factors of better societal integration. Women and those who had shorter periods of institutionalisation demonstrated more successful integration in the community after leaving residential care than men and youngsters who spent many years in care (Colen et al., 2005). Additionally, an association between good school results and successful integration after leaving care was found (Martins, 2016). One more important issue today is the social image of children and youth who grew up in residential care that the general population of Portugal has in mind. The results obtained in the study of Calheiros, Garrido, Lopes, and Patrício (2015) demonstrated that the attributes of this group in today's Portugal are mainly negative: aggressive, sad, and lonely. This image hardly supports the successful integration of care leavers to the society.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The life course approach and the model of identity capital were integrated in this research to explain the differences in the pathways of care leavers to adulthood. The principles of the life course include socio-historical events and geographical location, linked lives, human agency, and timing of life (Elder, 1994). The approach has proved its functionality in explaining the intergenerational differences in life passages, while the identity capital model, introduced by Côté (1997), is appropriate for explaining why some care leavers, making the transition to adulthood in the same context, might be more successful than others.

Identity capital is understood as an individual's investment in their personal self (Côté & Levine, 2014). Such investment requires access to tangible and intangible resources. Tangible resources are socially visible; they usually guarantee entrance into social groups and institutions (Côté & Levine, 2014; Côté, 1997). Examples of this type of resources include human capital (educational attainment and practical skills) and social capital (membership in a group that can offer support). The degree to which a young person accumulates these types of capital prior to the transition to adulthood can influence how their trajectory unfolds after adolescence (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Intangible resources refer to personal assets, and more specifically, a personal agency that is defined as bearing responsibility for one's own life course (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). The higher the level of agency, the higher the likelihood that a young person can overcome life difficulties (Lee & Berrick, 2014), or in terms of Rutter (1999), to be resilient. Positive future expectations from others might also function as factors in a youth's resilience (Benard, 1995; Happer, McCreddie, & Aldgate, 2006). Through relationships that convey high expectations, young people learn to believe in their futures.

Based on the life course principle of the embeddedness of an individual's developmental path in the conditions and events occurring

during the historical period in which the individual lives, we can assume that the two different contexts of Portugal in the second half of the previous century and nowadays are likely to frame access to the differing tangible and intangible resources available to care leavers from different generations. We look at the contextual dimensions of welfare support, and the education and childcare systems in the country. In these dimensions, social capital, human capital, and the resilience of care leavers were likely to be formed.

2.3. Two different contexts of Portugal

2.3.1. Portugal of the second half of the XX century

The modernisation of Portuguese society is inextricably linked with the political development of the country in the previous century (Costa Pinto, 2011). The non-democratic dictatorial corporative political regime (Estado Novo or New State) existed in the country from 1926 until the 'Carnation Revolution' of April 1974 (Guerreiro, 2014). During those years, the government made few efforts to improve healthcare, increase the level of education of the citizens, or diminish poverty and social inequality (including gender) (Viegas & Costa, 2000).

Before the Revolution, very basic classical social risks for the working population in urban areas were covered by welfare system (Carolo & Pereirinha, 2010). Only in the last several years of the New State did the system start to fill the gaps in social protection and offer support to the rural population. The responsibility for taking care of children was placed mainly on mothers; extended kin networks were the main source of support for a person indicating the so-called family welfare existing in the country.

Long years of dictatorship did not contribute to the development of the universal education system. In 1950, 58% of the population aged ten years and over were literate (67% for men and 51% for women) (Candeias, 2004). Very few attended higher education, with an even scarcer number of women. Up to the 1980s, gender differences remained perceptible. They reflected the gender order and expectations about women's central social roles as mothers and wives (Guerreiro, 2014). Due to an obligation to take responsibility for family wellbeing rather than building careers in adulthood (Costa Pinto, 2011), girls and young women were not encouraged to get an education. The literacy rate does not fully reflect the level of education experienced by the population. In 1960, only about 30% of Portuguese citizens completed, attended or were attending the first six years of school, while university education was considered an attribute of men from the elites (Viegas & Costa, 2000).

Historically, there were two main institutions responsible for the majority of child care facilities in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Rodrigues & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2017). They originated in the monarchic period of the XV and XVIII centuries to represent the out-of-home care system in Portugal. The institutions aimed to support minors at risk by providing them with accommodation, food and education. This support was essential during the 20th century when the educational system of the country left much to be desired and the level of poverty was much higher than in current days. The organisations educated many outstanding members of Portuguese society and are evaluated to have given good life chances to children at risk (Maia et al., 2012). However, living in institutionalised care facilities could have its downsides. One is the sexual abuse that took place in the care institutions of many countries (Timmerman & Schreuder, 2014), including Portugal (Rodrigues, Barbosa-Ducharne, & del Valle, 2013).

2.3.2. Portugal of nowadays

After the integration of Portugal into the EU in 1986, the large-scale extension of welfare policy began. The improved economic situation observed in this period allowed new family support measures such as the expansion of care services for children, the elderly and the handicapped (Costa Pinto, 2011). However, the Portuguese continued to rely on the support of the extended family. Researchers emphasise that kin

networks function across generations and social classes in the Portuguese society even when women were encouraged to enter labour market and had to combine employment and family care (Nilsen, Brannen, & Lewis, 2012).

Concerning the education system, steps towards the universalisation of free basic education were taken after the Revolution. By 1991, the percent of the literate population aged ten years and over had increased to 89% (92% for men and 86% for women) (Candeias, 2004). In the 1990s, over 20% of the Portuguese population had secondary level education; the proportion of young people between 20 and 24 years old at university was close to 30% (Viegas & Costa, 2000). Another important aspect is the share of female university students, who made up 55% of the total in 1991. Still, education was a relatively new experience for many families since most young people's parents and grandparents had no access to it. For many social groups like the poor, migrants (mainly Africans), and those who are less familiar with the culture of schooling, the education process remained problematic. Gradually, these shortcomings reduced and nowadays the system is considered universal.

The country's modernisation and democratisation caused changes in family and work values (Viegas & Costa, 2000). In the minds of the modern Portuguese population, the importance of loving relationships, personal development, education, and gender equality replaced the value of the traditional authoritarian, patriarchal family where mainly men had opportunities for pursuing education and career (Guerreiro, Torres, & Capucha, 2009).

As for child welfare policies and services, in 1986, the first act was approved that said that children at risk had to be placed in small family-oriented care settings, thus redefining the now-established *out-of-home care system* (Rodrigues & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2017). In 2008, the Portuguese Minister for Labour and Social Solidarity started a project that aimed to provide young people with a safe and family-oriented environment (DOM plan: Portuguese acronym for challenges, opportunities and changes) (Council of Europe, 2010). A modern set of care and social support measures for children and young people in danger includes the Autonomization Apartments, where young people between 15 and 25 years are provided with the skills required for independent living (da Segurança, 2017). The number of children and young people in institutions has gradually decreased since 2004 (Rodrigues et al., 2013). Researchers report that contemporary Portuguese residential care homes base their services on a family model with therapeutic elements, personalised care, an optimal number of caregivers, attached and significant relationships between caregivers and service users, and assistance with integration into society (Rodrigues, Barbosa-Ducharne, & Del Valle, 2014).

2.3.3. Normative pathways to adulthood

In many European countries, very similar trends of changes in the patterns of the transition to adulthood have been observed over the past decades. Demographers have reported a shift from the old pattern of the transition to adulthood – early and simple – towards a late and complex one (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010).

In the second half of the XX century, many Portuguese young people started their transitions to adulthood quite early. The representatives of cohorts born in 1930–59 were deprived of access to education or spent no more than six years on it (Artamonova, 2018). On average, they entered the labour market at the age of 17 and left the parental home to marry at the age of 21. Family formation trajectories were quite homogeneous: childbirth followed a marriage (Ramos, 2016). Men started family formation later than women. Cohabitations were rare and children born outside wedlock were not legally recognised (Guerreiro, 2014).

Since then, pathways to adult life in Portugal have become more diverse. Young Portuguese people now study longer. They usually do not have financial independence from parents: families continue providing them with housing and living costs (Nilsen et al., 2012). In 2016,

the mean age of leaving the parental home was equal to 29.1 years (29.9 years for men and 28.2 years for women) (Eurostat, 2017). The “uncertain transitions” found by Guerreiro and Abrantes (2005, p. 170) vary from prosperous trajectories with a promising career, higher education, and an arranged family life, to destructive ones with unemployment, low education, and poorly satisfied survival needs. The latter trajectories depend on youngsters’ resources to manoeuvre in precarious social contexts where structural social inequalities are quite significant (Costa, Mauritti, Martins, Nunes, & Romão, 2018). This inevitably influences young people’s pathways, for example, by changing family formation and transition to parenthood patterns. Trajectories that start with cohabitation as the first stage before official marriage or giving birth to children in an independent union have become more prominent (Artamonova, 2018). Nearly 80% of children born outside wedlock live together with both parents (Guerreiro, 2014).

3. Study design

3.1. Sampling and access

In our research, the aim of the interviews was to give a voice to care leavers from different generations and to the experts working with them. The interviews with care leavers were collected using the method of non-probability purposive sampling. The inclusion criterion of participants was having an experience of living in residential care for at least three years. Interviews with men and women from older (1930–59) and younger (1990–99) cohorts were conducted with the assistance of professionals from child care institutions. The interviews with experts were also collected using the method of purposive sampling.

In the first step, the representatives of two main organisations (denoted from here as Institution A and Institution B) that potentially could provide the researchers with access to informants from both groups were contacted. After a consultation with representatives of Institution A, it was decided to consult an additional organisation (denoted from here on as Organisation C) where care leavers from older generations could be found. The goal of this organisation is to promote the well-being and quality of life of older people. In the second step, the researchers reached out to people whose contacts were provided by the organisations. In the third step, the snowball principle started functioning and more care leavers were found through the networks of participants. In parallel, the representatives of the institutions recruited experts from their employees. The professional from Organisation C was involved on a voluntary basis.

3.2. Interview design and analysis

In our individual biographical semi-structured in-depth interviews with care leavers, the focus was on the time and circumstances of transition to adulthood events. The interview guideline included six sections: identification information, childhood and years in the

residential care, preparation for leaving care, education, employment, union formation and childbearing. Structuring the guideline interview sections in chronological order around these transition to adulthood events helped to (i) collect in-depth information about interviewees and changes over their life course, (ii) provide direction to their stories, and (iii) allow for thorough comparable analyses. One interview was held with each participant. The duration of interviews varied from 40 to 70 min.

The semi-structured interviews with experts from Institution A and Institution B were organised as discussions in pairs, while the expert from Organisation C gave an individual interview. Professionals were asked about the general life outcomes of care leavers in the dimensions of education, employment, partnership and parenthood. The factors of care leavers’ better life outcomes were also discussed. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min.

Transcription and analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection in February – April 2018. The data was visualised in the form of lifelines for all care leavers based on their answers. The lifelines of care leavers from older cohorts were observed through the age window of 0–40 years, while the lifelines of young participants were presented entirely (Fig. 1). Interviews with all participants were dissected using thematic analysis. Conclusions about the factors of successful transitions to adulthood were triangulated with experts’ observations. Overlaps in the information received from the care leavers and experts signalled about data saturation. The use of thematic analysis was optimal for this study because this accessible and flexible method offers tools for coding and analysing qualitative data systematically and linking the emerging themes to broader theoretical issues (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Our analytical approach combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis: inductive because a number of important themes arose from coding the participants’ experiences and the experts’ observations; deductive because we drew on theoretical constructs from the life course perspective (Elder, 1994) and the identity capital model (Côté, 1997) in order to render issues that participants did not explicitly articulate. In order to answer the research questions, it was decided to focus on the roles of social capital, human capital, and resilience in the transition from out-of-home care to adulthood.

3.3. Participants

The sample of care leavers consisted of ten people (Table 1). In order to account for the interviewees’ privacy, their names are replaced by pseudonyms. The older generation of males was represented by five men between the ages of 63–80 years old at the moment of data collection who spent 7–16 years in Institution A. The older generation of female care leavers was represented by two women aged 62 and 64 who were living in residential care homes (that also belonged to Institution A) for 8–15 years. The young generation of care leavers was represented by two men and one woman of 25–26 years old who spent 8–21 years in different residential care homes in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. The

Table 1
Characteristics of care leavers.

Informant	Year of Birth	Age at Entering Care (years)	Period in Care (years)	Level of Education	Ever Had a Partner/Spouse	Matrimonial Status	Number of Children
Alberto	1938	10	7	Not finished higher	Yes	Married	2
Jorge	1942	3	13	Secondary professional	Yes	Married	2
Filipe	1948	7	9	Higher	Yes	Married	2
Julian	1950	9	10	Higher	Yes	Married	3
Madalena	1954	2	15	Upper-secondary	Yes	Divorced	1
Eduardo	1955	9	16	Higher	No	Single	0
Catarina	1956	6	8	Not finished higher	Yes	Single	0
Marco	1992	1	21	Secondary professional	Yes	Single	0
Sara	1992	15	9	Higher	Yes	Cohabited	1
Jose	1993	5	18	Higher	Yes	Cohabited	0

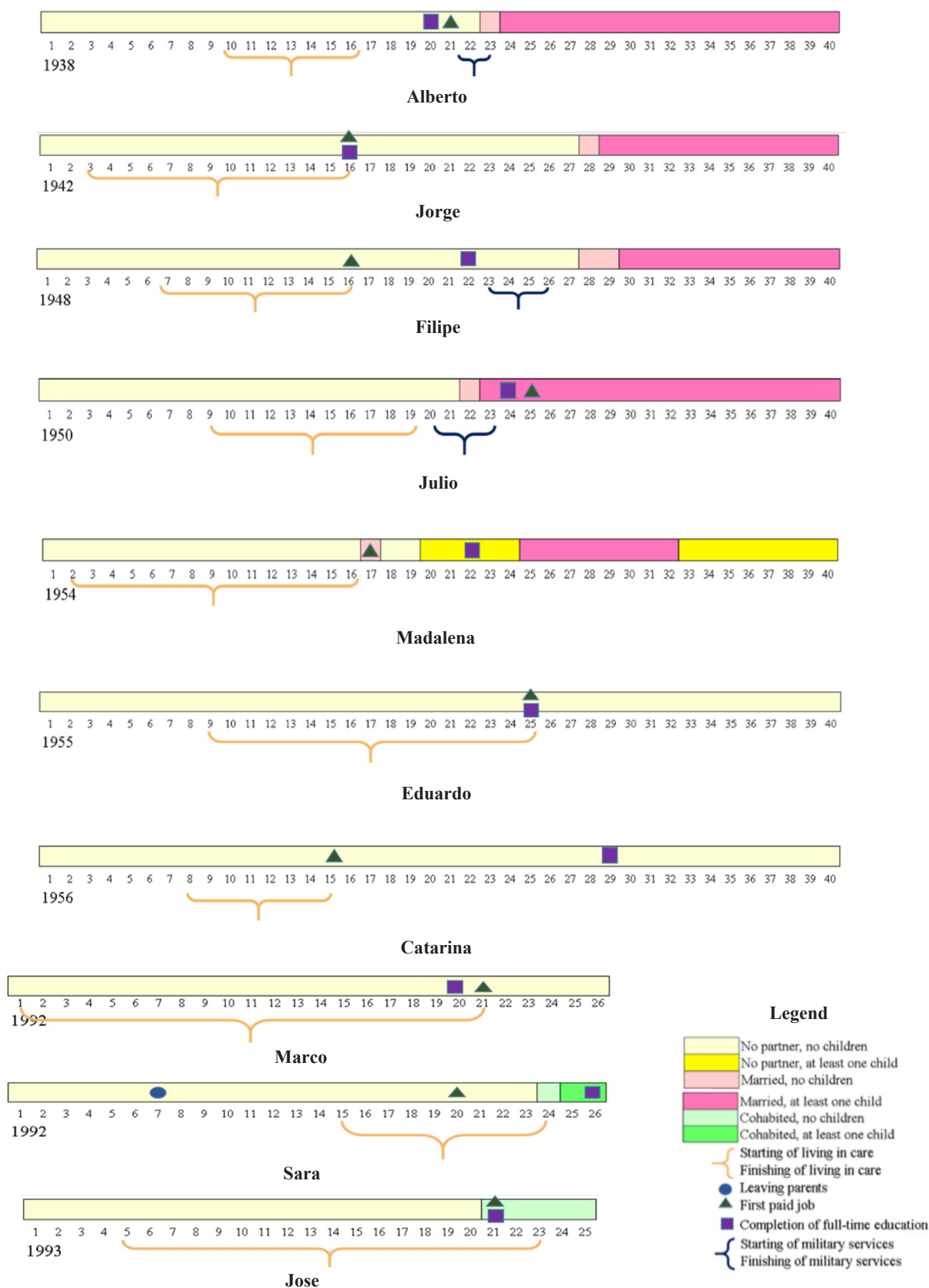


Fig. 1. Lifelines of care leavers.

sample of experts included four people from Institution A, two professionals from Institution B, and one from Organisation C.

4. Findings

4.1. Lifelines of care leavers

Alberto was born in the South of Portugal. Because his family was big and very poor, he was institutionalised at the age of ten (Fig. 1). He was living in residential care for five years and studied accountancy for four more years. After that, he went to but didn't complete university, and had to search for a job. Alberto was first employed at the age of 21 and since then has never had problems finding a job. He spent several years in the military services in the north of Angola, and became a captain. After coming back, he got married at the age of 23. A year after his marriage, his first child was born. He has never been divorced.

Jorge entered institutionalised care at the age of three because his parents were victims of tuberculosis. He had a direct transition from the care institution to his first job at the age of 16. With the support of one of his educators, he got a position in an airline company. Later, Jorge was sent to work in Kenya. He got ill there and returned to a Portuguese hospital, where he met his wife. They got married when he was 28 and had two children. The first child was born a year after the marriage.

Filipe was institutionalised at the age of seven because his widowed mother could not afford to raise children alone. Filipe spent nine years in care. He did not like living there because of its constant control. He left the institution immediately after high school graduation and refused a special scholarship for excellent study results. The day after leaving care, he got a position in an accounting company. He combined work with evening classes at the university. Filipe spent two and a half years in Angola and came back from the war only after the Revolution. He got married at the age of 28. Two years later, his first son was born.

Julio's mother worked for the local priest who helped to arrange a place in institutionalised care. Julio thinks that it was done because the village authorities saw his potential and the institution was a place to obtain an education. The ten-year-long period of his life in the institution started when he was nine. After leaving the institution, he entered the labour market but was suddenly called for military service, where he remained for three and a half years. In parallel, Julio got married at the age of 22 and his first child was born when he was 23. He studied for a degree in electronics and thermodynamics after the war.

Eduardo was born in Cape Verde. He came to Lisbon as a child with religious people who took responsibility for him. He was institutionalised at the age of nine. Eduardo finished a commercial school, technical college, and university. The institution paid for his education until he officially left it as a student and immediately started his work there as a teacher (when he was 25). Within a year, he got a job in the Ministry of Education. Later, Eduardo worked in different countries. He has never had a partner or children.

Madalena was sent to institutionalised care at the age of two because of an epidemic that meant her mother had to go to a specialised hospital in the North of the country. She hated living in the institution and ran away when she turned 16. After a short period of living with her relatives, Madalena realised that she wanted to live independently. She got married quite early with one goal: to become independent. Her transition to motherhood – which happened after a divorce – was not planned or desired. Madalena wanted to have an abortion but her female kin network convinced her to save the life of the child and helped her to deal with motherhood. She got a professional education and made a successful career, which was unusual for Portuguese women of that time.

Catarina was born in a small and very poor village in the North of Portugal. Her father died when she was six. The family moved to Lisbon where her mother got ill and had to stay in a hospital for several months. As a result, Catarina was institutionalised and spent eight years in care. During these years, she felt very lonely. It was shocking for

Catarina to come back home at the age of 15: she was immediately forced to start working in a clothing store. Later, Catarina combined work and studying, and even went to Brazil in search of a better life. In 1986, Portugal joined the EU and Catarina, then 30, got a position in Brussels. After migration, she met a man and they were dating for ten years but never formed a family.

Marco was placed in out-of-home care at the age of one year because his father died and his mother was not ready to take care of the son alone. Marco went through many residential care homes. When he turned 19, he became a participant of the Autonomization Apartments project. After school, he started a special two-year professional course in social animation. He went to work in England for two years to earn money for his higher education. He entered the labour market in London at the age of 21. He currently lives in Lisbon and has two jobs. He was engaged in several romantic relationships but has never cohabited with a partner. Marco is ready for serious relationships and parenthood.

Before entering out-of-home care at the age of five, *Jose* lived in poverty and neglect. Jose was living in different residential care homes until his elder brother, who remembered Jose, asked the social services for permission to live together in one care home. At the age of 16, Jose moved to the Autonomization Apartments and lived there until the age of 23. He finished his bachelor's and started a master's degree when he was 21. Jose wants to finish his master's degree but currently does not have enough money. His first job, working as a therapist in a football club, was not permanent. When Jose became self-employed, he grew a client base gradually. At the time of interview, he was working on a business plan for his own practice. Jose has a girlfriend and they live together. He plans to have children later.

Sara was born in Cape Verde. Her mother thought life was better in Portugal and, when Sara was seven, sent her to an aunt who lived in Lisbon. The aunt beat Sara and forced her to work as a babysitter. Sometimes, Sara had to skip school. When she was 15, she spoke about the situation to a classroom teacher who advised her to apply for a place in residential care. Sara followed the advice. After several years of living in care, she entered the Automization Apartment project. After graduation from high school, she started professional courses in child education and became the best student of the year in the courses. Due to that, the courses authorities helped her to find her first job in a private college when she was 20. Later, Sara obtained both bachelor's and master's degrees. At the age of 24, Sara got pregnant and left the Autonomization Apartment for her partner's house. They live together and plan to get married. Their son was born when Sara was 25.

With these lifelines in mind, we now turn to the different types of resources that care leavers in Portugal could use in transition to adulthood.

4.2. Access to resources needed for successful transition to adulthood

Educators of Institution B and the expert from Organisation C indicated that factors of care leavers' better life outcomes included support networks (or an analogue of family welfare), valuable education and resilience. These factors correspond to the resources needed for successful life pathways introduced by Côté (1997) in his identity capital model: social capital, human capital and personal agency.

4.2.1. Social capital

Half of the informants were institutionalised because of poverty, parental illness or the loss of the family breadwinners. Under the circumstances of limited state support and scarce opportunities for widowed women to meet the basic needs of their children, especially in rural areas, mothers of several older cohorts representatives had to move with their children to Lisbon. However, it emerged from the data that even working in the city did not improve the situation sufficiently and children had to be placed into out-of-home care. For some families, it was a good solution. One of the informants mentioned that his family

was taught how to get into Institution A:

There were people who checked if a child was in poor conditions. A child had to be dirty, without good food. So, we were advised that when these people were coming, we were ready. It was a trick to go there (Filipe, 70 y.o.).

Care leavers from the young cohort, in turn, mentioned such reasons for living in out-of-home care as neglect and danger to their lives:

Spent some years of childhood in poverty, neglect, my house burned several times. We almost died in the time they stopped fire (Jose, 25 y.o.);
The aunt was very bad to me, she was always beating me (Sara, 26 y.o.).

The reasons for placement in residential care (above) is associated with the relationship with family members later in life. Almost all informants from the older generation maintained at least rare contact with relatives or parents' friends during their years in care. The only exception was Eduardo, who came from Cape Verde. Distance from Lisbon and poverty were the reasons of rare visits received by the informants from older generation. While Filipe could spend holidays with his family, Catarina, who was in similar situation and had her family living in Lisbon area, lived permanently in the institution:

During the summers, we had holidays, three months of summer. What we did for those months was to go to countryside. We spent three months together, my sisters and me (Filipe, 70 y.o.);
We didn't go home because my mother had no money to come and take us (Catarina, 62 y.o.).

For some participants, peers who they met in residential care became close friends, and even 'replaced' family members:

The first message from Institution A was that we met mates that had to be our family and it had to be in that way for the end of our lives. My mother was Institution A and I respect the institution (...) We were many, very united, if something happened, we protected each other and acted together. We were very strong (Jorge, 74 y.o.);
We were equal and we were brothers in mind (Julio, 68 y.o.);

Other older care leavers, like Filipe and Madalena, wanted to leave the institution as soon as possible. Madalena expressed her protest by creating problems for educators until she met an educator who saw her potential and filled a missing father-figure role. Catarina found maintaining special connections with peers or professionals difficult. She felt abandoned and the decision of professionals to send her alone to another school aggravated the situation and left an imprint on her life course:

When I started secondary school, every day I was going there alone and coming back, I felt very unhappy because I was alone... It was too much for me. And I was alone all these years (Catarina, 62 y.o.).

Informants from the older generation mentioned the importance of the support of their families and friends after leaving care, with some of them starting to live in their family members' homes. Because they did not suffer from neglect and lived in care mainly because of poverty, they could keep warm relations with their families and return to their homes after leaving care.

Care leavers from the younger generation did not report the same kind of relations with their families. Instead of poverty and economic deprivation as the main reasons for removal from their biological family homes, current approaches to child protection requiring foster care solutions pay much more attention to emotional aspects, such as neglect and other forms of child abuse, that are coupled with issues of material poverty. These younger care leavers reported rare contact with their families but good relationships with educators in out-of-home care for children and with peers. The case of Jose seems important in this sense. He was a good student and deserved the respect of educators. Special

connections with them helped him to gain information about the Autonomization Apartments project and he became a participant. Marco, in turn, lived in many residential care homes that did not facilitate enduring contacts with professionals. However, he had two reliable connections with peers from his last home. One of them helped him to find a job in England and the other informed him about the Autonomization Apartments project and sheltered him after he came back to Portugal from England. Sara could get support from educators:

Was lucky because my educator was like the second mother to me and helped me with everything (Sara, 26 y.o.).

Professional caregivers in the Autonomization Apartments were also important for young people:

In the autonomy apartment, educators became friends, I never looked at them like at authoritarians and they never looked at me like at a kid who they needed to teach about life, we always were like friends (Jose, 25 y.o.).

Educators, in turn, reported that they try to build close relationships with a "certain degree of informality" with their young service users. They do for the young people "what parents usually do for their children". It is worth mentioning that after leaving the Autonomization Apartments, young people have an opportunity to continue getting the support of educators. Interviewed professionals mentioned that former clients turn to them for any kind of support:

We have youngsters who left many years ago but still contact us requiring help for this kind of certain [bureaucratic] things. They tend to reserve to us in the moments of difficulties in their lives, even emotional difficulties, when they want to share with us certain difficulties with their parents or their girl-/boyfriend, or their job (educators from Institution B);
We have examples of people who keep in touch very often because they need support in solving their problems or just to be together (educators from Institution A).

Thus, educators became a part of young people's specific "family welfare" that kept functioning after they had left the Autonomization Apartments, at least for those who could not go back to parental homes.

4.2.2. Human capital

More than half of all informants have higher or have started, but not finished higher education. Three others received upper-secondary or secondary professional education. Male care leavers from older cohorts were specialised in accountancy, economics, informatics, electronics, watch repairing and metalwork. At least half of them were first employed in their areas of specialisation.

The expert from Organisation C generalised a theory about the role of education that youngsters received in the institution. Before the Portuguese 1974 Revolution, Institution A was the key provider of education – together with residential care support – to Portuguese children from vulnerable groups of the population. Employers knew about the excellent training and reliability of former students of Institution A and were ready to offer them jobs. It was an effective way to empower these children and give them an advantage over less educated peers from the general population:

Institution A was the tool to provide the country with qualified working force. Mainly in the spheres of accounting, engineering, and arts. The situation 50–60 years ago was not the same as it is now. At that time, Institution A was a place to educate children (expert from Organisation C);
We were known as very hard-working people, honest and with good skills (Julio, 68 y.o.).

Boys received professional training in Institution A. After leaving the institution, they could go to university and capitalise on high demand in the labour market, while women were not expected to make

careers and were given basic knowledge without specialisation. Female inhabitants of out-of-home care were not provided with access to higher education by the institution. They were aware of this and tried to find opportunities to study independently in order to have a better life:

I wanted to study, so at 16, I worked and started to study in the evenings. Always, during my adult life, I went on with my studying. It was the only possibility to get a better job (Catarina, 62 y.o.).

Nowadays, according to the educators interviewed, care leavers tend to choose secondary vocational education. They think this change is related to “the explosion of (vocational) schools” that emerged when it became clear that a basic education was not sufficient to be competitive in the labour market and obtain a good salary. They hope that more young service users aim for higher education, especially since all their university fees either in public or in private universities can be paid by the Portuguese government. The employment trends of modern care leavers reflect their educational profiles. The tendency is to work in restaurants, pubs, supermarkets and other branches of the service industry where wages are comparatively low.

Informants from the young cohort received educational training in child education, physiotherapy and social animations. None of them reported problems with finding a job but they are aware of the advantages of good education:

I didn't go to the university. But a university is a university. I know that if I'm going to compete with someone with the university degree, I'm automatically behind them (Marco, 26 y.o.).

Education is not the only component of care leavers' human capital. Another aspect is the preparation for independence and gaining skills for adult life. All male informants and Sara, who is a female representative of the young cohort of care leavers, reported their readiness for independent life. Women from older cohorts said that they were not prepared for “real life”. They also mentioned that it was common for female care leavers of that time:

I know that many of the girls who left the same time as me, they didn't have a good life after that. I heard that some of the girls, when they left school, because they were alone, not prepared, they just went to prostitution (Catarina, 62 y.o.).

It is noteworthy that representatives of older and young cohorts mentioned different aspects of preparation for life after care. While older care leavers mainly referred to preparation in terms of education, the labour market, and Portuguese laws, younger ones recalled more practical skills: using contraception, paying bills, applying for jobs, and money management. Respondents from the younger cohorts found the skill of saving money very useful because they could use this saved money for their next life step:

As I started to earn money when I was young, I got money from both Institution A and my job. I had quite a lot of money and didn't know how to manage it. The educators were very helpful with it. I got pregnant and started living with my husband, we could renovate the house, prepare it for welcoming a baby. I bought everything [spending saved money]. (Sara, 26 y.o.); When I was saving for the trip to England, I was given 500 euros and I had to save. And the educators control, after a few months, they look at your receipts. (...) It was really nice (Marco, 26 y.o.).

4.2.3. Personal agency and resilience

Personal agency and resilience are not the easiest concepts to extract from data. These themes appeared naturally from the narratives and nonverbal signals (sad smiles, concentration, tears, etc.). They indirectly displayed how the informants mitigated adverse life situations.

Many male research participants from older cohorts spoke about their years in care like an adventure that they shared with their “brothers”. They described in detail the football matches they watched,

the visits of the president of Portugal to Institution A, and their work in the magazines of the institution. In contrast to this, female informants described their period in care as something very traumatising. Even stories about punishments in the institutions sounded differently. Men mainly told funny stories and women, in turn, described how bad they felt in the institutions. Catarina always felt lonely and later was afraid of losing control over life; Madalena attempted suicide several times. They both applied for psychological support at the after-care stage of life because of severe symptoms of depression. Finally, the women interviewed took some advantage from their situations. Catarina is sure that her personal strength has come from years in the institution. She learned to be alone, independent and hardworking. Madalena developed warm relationships with her friends, sister and daughter, and could develop a career.

Another adversity, that only men from the young cohort reported, was discrimination against them at school and in the neighbourhoods where they lived. Jose is sure that Portuguese people see children in care as “poor and badly educated”. It made children either behave accordingly or pretend to have ordinary families:

Sometimes we had to do cultural activities, like going to the museums or cinema, and always people saw institutionalised kids and treated us differently. We don't mind, we behave according to that. People shouldn't do that to kids. People treated us differently and kids reacted, people didn't like kids, new kids came and people treated them differently because in the past others behaved badly and it's a cycle (Jose, 25 y.o.).

I was trying to hide my situation. Imagine, my colleagues say: “this holiday, I'm going to France...” and I was like “yes, my mother and I are going too”, you know, I was lying. But I think it's normal for people like us (Marco, 26 y.o.).

Despite the difficulties that the informants of this study faced, they have achieved a lot in their lives and gained something they can be proud of. For Catarina and Madalena it was a career. For Marco and Jose, it was education and stability. Filipe was proud of his “courage, even something crazy” and broad view of the world that, he thinks, distinguished him from his peers and helped him to become successful. For other men from older cohorts it was “being a deserving part of Institution A”. Care leavers were proud of overcoming any difficulties they faced:

I feel good when my friends nowadays, if they have some problems, call me and say that they have problems but then think about my life and realise that their problems are not serious. I am happy in these moments (Sara, 26 y.o.).

5. Discussion

In many countries, care leavers' pathways to adulthood are often considered more problematic than the pathways of general population representatives (Stein & Munro, 2008). These differences are caused by inequality in access to different types of resources. The informants of this study showcased quite successful transitions. It was particularly pronounced in the case of male care leavers from older generations, whose pathways looked prosperous even in comparison with trajectories of their peers who had no experience of living in care.

However, the real situation of male care leavers in the second half of the previous century could be different from the situation represented by the informants participating in this study. In his narrative, Eduardo touched the problem of the invisibility of “unsuccessful” care leavers from his cohort who preferred to deny contacts with their peers because they did not achieve the success that institutional representatives expected from them. He connects it with the different educational paths they could follow at that time:

After the primary school, they could choose technical school that led

to university. These people usually show up. The other path was vocational education that was a kind of stigmatised. I met my peers who chose this path in the streets and saw their bad situations. These people were more likely to go down and never show up. It could happen also because, in the process of modernisation, the need in their professions disappeared and they couldn't find a job anywhere (Eduardo, 63 y.o.).

The reasoning of Eduardo gives us ground to assume that not all care leavers faced no problems with employment. At the same time, however, the majority of them could still be competitive in the labour market, especially because of the existing network of care leavers and their reputation in the Portuguese society of that time.

As the informants mentioned, care leavers from older cohorts were united, strong and respected, in contrast to male care leavers from the young cohort who had to deal with discrimination. These inter-generational distinctions are of interest. Male informants of this research lived in different conditions. Older cohorts' representatives were placed in care mainly because of the poverty that was widespread in Portugal at that time, so they did not feel stigmatised. They lived in a huge institution where boys became brothers who "lived, slept and ate together" and protected each other. They did not have personalised care, but instead they had each other's support and could identify themselves as the wards of a big and powerful institution. Younger cohort representatives were placed in care mainly because of neglect or their parents belonging to unreliable, marginalised groups; society knew about it and had prejudices about children in care. However, in return, modern kids in care experienced a de-institutionalised environment with educators who were not afraid of developing attached relationships with them, as was mentioned by the informants and described in the research of [Rodrigues et al. \(2014\)](#). In both types of conditions, boys could be resilient.

Female informants from older cohorts were less lucky. It was explained by Filipe, whose sister also spent several years in out-of-home care, that women were more traumatised in institutions than men. As a result, they did not want to discuss their experiences:

The life of girls in Institution A was hard. She [the sister] doesn't like to talk about it, it was very traumatic. We speak about everything but not about that period, not even at home (Filipe, 70 y.o.).

This research does not have resources to clarify if different perceptions of life in care reported by male and female informants appeared because of different types of reflexivity on life experiences ([Caetano, 2017](#)), a higher resilience of men to institutionalisation or different conditions of living in state care for boys and girls. However, we can speculate that the reason was in different expectations about the roles of women and men in Portuguese society of that time. Males in Institution A observed the successful trajectories of peers and could be confident in their own future. Female care leavers lacked this opportunity: they observed women who lacked education and who were fully dependent on men. These gender differences are reflected even in the family formation of the informants. While men from older generations desired to start a family, their female peers in the sample saw a marriage (and possible subsequent divorce) as the only way for women to achieve independence in Portuguese society in times of their youth (Madalena) or a factor of becoming as poor and socially vulnerable as their biological parents (Catarina). Women from the young cohort demonstrated successful transitions to adulthood. However, this is a small sample, and the results cannot be generalised to represent the situation of other female care leavers from their generation. Collecting interviews with women from the young cohort was problematic. Interviews with several young women were arranged, but they did not appear at the appointed time and stopped answering calls and messages. Presumably, it happened because even in modern Portugal where the rights of women are protected, female care leavers still have difficulties talking about their experiences in out-of-home care.

As with the majority of research in social science, this research had its limitations. In addition to the limited accessibility of female care leavers, complications were faced in getting access to care leavers between the ages of 40–50 years. As the expert from Organisation C mentioned, young people immediately after leaving care prefer to concentrate on shaping their trajectories in the dimensions of education, employment and identity. Later, often at the age of 50, achieving some stability, they start to analyse their past, the role of residential care and think about contacts from childhood. This behaviour pattern made it impossible at the data-gathering stage to gain access to informants at the age of 40–50 years. Before this age-range, care leavers are visible to educators (who are quite young and had time to work only with young cohorts) and later they appear in the organisations of former residential care students. However, less successful pathways seem to remain more in the shadow, requiring the focus of other researchers, possibly other forms of access to the empirical research field, and more time to reach results.

Despite the acknowledged research limitations, we obtained a quite comprehensive sketch of the social reality of Portuguese care leavers' transit to adulthood.

6. Conclusion and possible policy implications

The life course tradition and the model of identity capital were chosen as the main framework to explain how time and context shaped the pathways to adulthood of Portuguese care leavers. We revealed the differences in the access to tangible and intangible resources required for a successful transition from out-of-home care to adulthood in the Portugal of the second half of the previous century and nowadays. For older and young cohorts, the role of residential care seems different because of changes in the country. Care leavers from older cohorts were empowered by means of an education that favourably distinguished them from peers who had grown up in biological families. Moreover, male care leavers from older cohorts were given resources to generate human and social capital that general population representatives did not have access to. Women from older cohorts also could get education and support, but they were not expected to build careers, so the education opportunities were very basic and the level of personal agency to change their lives in the Portugal of their adulthood was poorer than in the case of male care leavers. Young representatives of this vulnerable population group seem to lose the advantage of better education and belonging to a big and powerful institution since the democratisation of the education system and de-institutionalisation of residential care in the country. However, they received access to other resources: a home-like environment, the opportunity to stay in care longer and gain practical skills for independent living, and the support of psychologists to deal with adversity.

The results make it possible to give recommendations on how to improve the situation of care leavers. A good level of educational attainment can provide opportunities for the future success of young people from less advantaged backgrounds, and thus represent life changing factors. An important measure on supporting young generations of care leavers in Portugal is to establish a mechanism to stimulate children in care to continue their education and aim towards university level. It can contribute to the accumulation of human capital and give them a similar advantage that their predecessors from older generations had over their peers. The results also give evidence of the importance of a social network to facilitate contact with future employers, and to provide advice and practical help on how to proceed to further and higher education. If such a network does not exist, social workers, social pedagogues and educators need to be aware that it is their task to provide young people exiting from care with such advice and practical help. One possible macro-level step is the creation of state-supported programmes of interaction between employers and care leavers to engage them in the labour market and supply them with support networks.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alyona Artamonova: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Visualization, Project administration. **Maria das Dores Guerreiro:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision. **Ingrid Höjer:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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