

**“I need my child to know that I am here”: Young Care Leaver’s
Experiences with their Own Motherhood in Argentina”**



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Abstract

The transition to an autonomous lifestyle is a process that starts at eighteen years old for care leavers in Argentina, when they are no longer protected by the Children's Rights laws. Studies have demonstrated that female care leavers are likely to have children within the first few years after leaving care. This transition to adulthood in parallel with the transition to motherhood is particularly challenging without some kind of family support. Additionally, motherhood encourages young women to develop new worthwhile relationships as their previous family dynamics re-signify their identities as mothers. This research focuses and documents the experiences of female care leavers in their roles as mothers after living in institutional care during adolescence.

Findings suggests that female care leavers offer a different type of childhood to their children than what they have experienced, providing a secure type of relationship, health, education and love. Moreover, an ambivalence relationship with their birth families has encouraged to developed new worthwhile relationships that have a meaningful role on their lives. Finally, motherhood along with community participation has empowered these young women and promoted their agency

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Introduction

This study explores the experiences of young female care leavers about their own motherhood in Argentina. The young women's identities about their own motherhood after experiencing themselves a lack of parental care are analysed. The essence of this study is to describe these young mothers positively (Alderson and Morrow, 2011) by drawing attention to their agency and capacities after living without parental care, and not contribute to stigmatisation care leavers sometimes have to face.

Various research studies have been conducted on the life of young people after leaving care, with particular attention on specific challenges of adult life such as looking for housing, financial issues, education, and mental health. Although there are currently no studies showing the statistics on care leavers and parenthood in Argentina, certain studies conducted internationally have examined the relationship between leaving care and reproductive behaviour after care, noting an increase in pregnancies among female care leavers (Geiger and Schelbe, 2014). Building on similar investigations, this study centres on motherhood after leaving care, in an attempt to understand how young women who have lacked parental care during their adolescence construct their motherhood identity and navigate challenging new experiences with their children.

First, an overview of the current international and Argentinian literature in relation to care leavers in general, and also pointing to specific literature on care leavers and motherhood will be provided. In this first chapter, the facts and figures of care leavers and youth in Argentina will be presented, where this study was conducted.

Subsequently, the methodology followed in this study as well as the ethical implications that have been considered will be explained. In this respect, in order to contact and recruit the sample, this study had the assistance of gatekeepers, Argentinian NGO "Doncel". This

organisation's work aims to strengthen young people in transition from being in the care system to autonomy in Argentina.¹

Furthermore, the procedures for obtaining and analysing the data will also be explained in methodology chapter, and the data will be discussed in the findings chapter of this study.

It is worth remarking, that in this research I refer to the participants as “young mothers”, since the focus of this research is on their current situation as young women (under the age of 30) with children. The term “young mothers” is not intended to bear any negative connotations about becoming mothers at an early age, but to express that the women became mothers during their youth, after leaving the care system.

¹ The work of Doncel can be read in English here: http://doncel.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Doncel_ENG.pdf

Chapter One

Literature review: care leavers and young motherhood. Theory and outline of the Argentinian situation.

In this chapter a review of the current literature on care leavers and young motherhood is provided. Since this study focuses on care leavers in Argentina, it will be first briefly explain the current statistics and legal context surrounding this issue in Argentina. Also, an outline of the relationship between leaving care and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), which Argentina has signed and ratified, will be noted. Furthermore, it will be detailed various notions identified in the Argentinian as well as the international literature, in relation to youth, life after care, transition to adulthood and autonomous type of life, family planning and motherhood among care leavers. Because the Argentinian literature on care leavers is quite limited and not always peer reviewed (Governmental and NGO reports, conference transcripts), it have also been selected international work that has been peer reviewed.

1.1 Statistics and Legal Context in Argentina

1.1a Institutional Care in Argentina

According to research by the National Secretariat of Children and Family in partnership with UNICEF (UNICEF & MNDS, 2012), 14,675 children lack parental care in Argentina; this is almost 0.12% of the youth population of Argentina. This National Secretariat survey notes that 10,488 of the children without parental care are in institutional or residential care, whereas 4,240 children are in foster care. Because institutional care is the main form of care for these children and young people, it shows the significant amount of children living in institutions, growing up without any kind of parental care. As reported by this National Secretariat survey, main causes for children to enter home care institutions are violence and abuse (44%), followed by abandonment (33%), sexual abuse (13%) and other causes (11%). On the other hand, principal causes for children to exit care institutions are family reunification (54%), adulthood without autonomous project (20%), adulthood with

autonomous project (8%), adoption (7%), program abandonment (7%), and other causes (4%).

In addition, the Argentinian Government offers a range of programmes to these young people to make the transition to an independent lifestyle more successful. However, these programmes are usually focused on preparing for work experience and searching for a place to live. Examples of these kinds of programmes in Argentina are “Programa Sostén” (“Support Programme”), created after the approval of law n° 11.852, with the goal of “*Accompanying the young people who are institutionalized in diagramming their life project*”. The main objective of this policy is to provide a grant for a period of six months (renewable) to every young person who is in care so that they may obtain vocational training which can also be set up through government programmes and which will allow them to enter the labour market after they leave care. Another programme called “*Mi Lugar*” (“My place”), initiated by the Ministry of Social Development of the City of Buenos Aires, has the main objective of “*Creating and promoting the necessary conditions for young people who are institutionalized to leave care, strengthening the necessary resources to enable them to carry out their project of self-reliance*”. This programme also provides a grant and social support for the young people who are in institutional care in the city so that they may develop an autonomous and independent lifestyle, but mainly focuses on creating a career path to provide financial autonomy.

1.3 Womanhood, Motherhood and Care leavers

In this section, a summary of research on motherhood and care leavers is provided. Since there is limited literature about this topic in the Argentinian context, a reference on studies from the UK and the United States are included.

Several authors have noted the relationship between young parenthood and gender, affirming that young motherhood is usually related to the development of the identity of womanhood as well as a having a sense of something of their own to take care of (Bailey 1999; Chase et al. 2006; Coleman & Cater 2006; Rolfe 2008). The impact that pregnancy

and motherhood has on women cannot be ignored as it shapes their identities and sense of self. Bailey (1999) notes that motherhood increases the self-esteem and changes behaviour as the focus shifts to another person. It also transforms the way in which the woman relates with the others. Furthermore, Coleman and Carter (2006) note that the transition into motherhood for young women is usually related to their childhood history. A strong desire to change their previous family situations by being responsible for someone else and having the chance to create a stable family environment is also a key factor. These young care leavers have to face multiple transitions: moving out of care, into an autonomous lifestyle, and to motherhood, where they will be taking care of someone else. All these new responsibilities occur within a short period of time and it is therefore necessary to gain insight into their perceptions and experiences in order to develop a better understanding of their necessities and the type of support they require.

Argentinian author Climent (2009) highlights teenage pregnancy as a gender and social issue, stating that it more frequently occurs in lower classes where girls do not have the economic support necessary to maintain a child and therefore they rely on state welfare. In this respect, care leavers face a financial concern when they depart the care system and have to economically support themselves and their children. In addition, these women often lack any family support, which makes motherhood even more challenging and could affect their quality of life.

On the other hand, many investigations have studied the consequences that living in institutional care has on young people, it has been shown that these youth experience difficulties finishing the mandatory level of education, entering the labour market, and obtaining an average social status (Biehal et al. 1994; Mendes 2009; Stein 2006). Also, a study conducted in the UK notes a relation between gender and the care system (Barn, R., & Mantovani, N., 2007), stating that girls who had a disruptive family history dominated by abuse and who spent time in different institutions, were more likely to get pregnant during adolescence. Furthermore, the evidence shows that care leavers with children of their own are more likely to experience poverty and rely on welfare (Biehal, 1996). It is

therefore important to keep studying this highly at risk population in order to prevent continued reliance on state support (Mendes, 2009).

A British survey targeted specifically at young people leaving care shows how parenthood seemed to have positive outcomes for these young adults, since it allowed them to develop a sense of family, of having something of their own. In addition, international type of findings show a frequency of early pregnancy among care leavers, higher than the average in their peers without a history of being in institutional care (Cashmore and Paxman, 1996; Dixon and Stein, 2002), which also demonstrates a relationship between leaving care and young parenthood.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that young parenthood in general and among care leavers in particular, is often analysed through moral interpretations and ethically judged in the society. In this regard, teenage and young mothers are usually stereotyped as promiscuous and immature, having to face the stigma of being “bad mothers” (Alldred, 2011).

Moreover, Knight et al. (2006) have noted that pregnant young care leavers, were stigmatized for eventually becoming a risky type of mother, and so confronted exclusion within their close relationships. However, these moral and ethical interpretations about parenthood among care leavers have been challenged by certain studies, which noticed that parenthood is achieved responsibly among care leavers, with a positive impact on their lives (Biehal and Wade 1996; Barn & Mantovani 2006)



1.4 Aims and Research Question:

The objective of this study is to explore and analyse young women's identities, experiences, and perceptions about their own motherhood and family relationships after leaving the institutional care system.

In order to explore this research aims, this study addresses the following research question:

- How do female care leavers perceive and define themselves as a mother?



Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1 A Qualitative Approach

A qualitative and documental type of approach has been chosen for the purpose of this study, since qualitative research allows to obtain a rich and comprehensive understanding of the young people's lives (Gallagher, 2008), as well as detailed and in-depth knowledge about their views, which also attributes meaning to the context in which these young

people's experiences take place (Bryman, 2004). Additionally, by documenting moment of these young women's everyday experiences, closeness to these people's stories is obtained. Furthermore, qualitative interviews have been chosen (discussed in detail in the section "Interview Style") since it encourages young people's agency by allowing them to construct their past experiences and give meaning to their present (Corsaro, Honig, & Qvortrup, 2009). This approach also allows the women to share their experiences about motherhood and will offer me insights into what meaning these experiences have had for care leavers and how these experiences have influenced their identities as mothers.

2.2 Participants and Recruitment.

Data obtained in this study have been generated with a sample of 5 young women (between eighteen and twenty-eight years old) who are mothers and lived in institutional care during their childhood or adolescence. Participants were contacted through the NGO Doncel, and were also informed about the purpose of this project and the fact that they could withdraw from this study at any time.

A purposeful sampling has been employed (Bryman, 2004) in order to recruit participants with intersecting characteristics such as: young people with history of being in institutional care, care leavers, and young motherhood. The professionals at Doncel who work with young people leaving care are aware of the women who have left the care system and who are also young mothers. Additionally, because of time management, ethical issues related to the level of study, and resources available, this research does not include care leavers who have had legal conflicts or are dealing with substance abuse. In this respect, possible biases could be appreciated about the sample, since these young women are receive social support from this NGO.

2.3 Interview approach

Data has been collected through the use of *qualitative interviews* qualitative, in depth interviews with follow-up is the optimal approach to learn about these young people's perceptions and discourses (Mason, 2002). Also, as stated by Rubin and Ruben (1995) qualitative interviews are chosen for this type of study in order to understand the young people's experiences, views, and feelings about their own motherhood after leaving institutional care. In this respect, within this method the "*life history*" type of approach was chosen, which focuses on the interviewee, and his/her storytelling in order to understand how their perspectives and discourses are constructed (Atkinson, 2004). Contrary to the life story method, which has a broader focus, the life history method focuses on specific topics of the interviewee's life (Bryman, 2004). The life history interviewing method aims to understand the different events in the participants' lives, and the connections that the participant draws between these happenings as stated verbally (Atkinson, 2004). Furthermore, the relationship between motherhood and leaving care, the similarities and differences between their experiences as children and their children's experiences, as well as the challenges they are currently facing, were some of the important points touched on during the interview process.

2.5 Analysis:

For the analysis of the interviews, a *thematic narrative analysis* approach has been chosen. After re-reading the transcripts, the findings were structured into themes, in order to place the emphasis on the information that was relayed, rather than how it was told (Reissman, 2004). Most themes were structured in order to provide a possible answer to the research questions about the young women's experiences and perceptions about their own motherhood and family relationships after leaving the care system. Other themes emerged when certain topics or statements were similarly repeated among the participants or when important differences appeared.

It has been noted that the use of this type of analysis aims to emphasize the meaning that people construct about their own experiences, the type of connections they make between these events, and the stories they choose to tell in order to explain these occurrences (Bryman, 2004). This was important to keep in mind when listening to the young women's trajectories through motherhood, and the meaning and associations they construct regarding their roles as mothers in relation to their childhood experiences. Also, this method helped provide a glimpse of the different challenges these women deal with, as well as to deconstruct a negative image about young motherhood among care leavers.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

2.6b Informed Consent

For data to be collected and photographs taken, an informed consent was asked to be signed, clarifying that data and photographs could be used to publish articles about the information analysed.

Furthermore, participants were alerted in the informed consent (as well as in my verbal explanation of the study), that they could terminate the interview and not be photographed whenever they felt uncomfortable. In order to photograph the daily experiences of these young ladies with their children, permission was asked in advance for these pictures to be used in possible dissemination events.

2.6c Sensitive Issues

During the process of this study, it was possible that delicate issues may arise during the course of these interviews, such as past experiences of neglect or abuse and negative aspects of institutionalization. When these situations occurred, it was dealt with the issues sensitively and recommendations and contacts to support and assist the young people with these issues were provided, such as therapeutic services at hospitals or other governmental social programmes.

Throughout the data collection process, regular interaction with the gatekeepers were held in order to ensure that the study was being conducted in an ethical and safe manner for both participants and researchers. However, this feedback was mainly on the rapport built and to check that no ethical dilemma had emerged.

2.6d Protection from Harm

Even though the target group of this study are not considered “children” by the United Nations since they are over eighteen years old (UNCRC, 1989), they can still be considered a “vulnerable group”, contemplating the risk factors such as: family disruption, institutional care, lack of proper guidance and support, education drop out, poverty, and teenage or very young motherhood (Barn & Mantovani, 2006). As noted by Alderson and Morrow (2011), it is important to consider the risks and benefits that a study might have on its participants, even when asking general questions in an interview. Furthermore, the essence of this study is to portray these young mothers positively (Alderson and Morrow, 2011) highlighting their strengths and capacities after living without parental care. With this aim in mind, participants will be represented during the writing and dissemination of the findings from a constructive position, without exposing them to possible negative criticism or judgement.

As previously mentioned, if any risk or harmful situation had appeared during the interviews, it would have handled it delicately, providing the participants with the resources available nationally and locally to deal with these situations.

Chapter Three: Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, relevant data extracts of the interviews will be exhibit, and analyse the topics raised in the context of the existing literature. The section is organised around the themes that were recurrent during the interview process and important for the focus of this study.

First, participants' experiences and reasons for being in institutional care will be presented, in order to provide some important background information to their live circumstances and to current situation. Subsequently, it will be discussed how these experiences have impacted on their identities, followed by the participants' experiences of motherhood, their type of parenting and the differences with their own childhood events. Furthermore, an explanation of the ambivalence of their current relationship with their birth families. By the end of this chapter, it will be outlined their new significant relationships as well as their participation in community activities as a protective factor.

3.1 Participants' History of Being in Institutional Care

Regarding the reasons for first entering institutional care, three of the interviewees have stated that their own biological families were the ones who contacted the community social worker to place them in residential care. They explained that their families chose to do this "for their own safety", in order to remove them from any possible harm related to drug abuse or crime. During the interviews, signs of guilt and anger were perceived, as if the reason for being placed in institutional care had been their own fault.

Diana explained: *"I was in institutional care because I was getting into trouble, teenager things, you know? Like hanging out with the wrong people, doing things I should not have done. So, my mother got fed up with this, and decided to put me in residential care"*.

Similarly, Zara recalls: *"My mother thought that I was going to hurt myself or someone else, and so she thought that residential care was going to prevent this and that I would be safer. I will never forget the day the social worker came to take me to the institution...it was the saddest day of my life"*.

These extracts demonstrate the difficulties that the parents of these young women faced during their adolescence, when dealing with problematic situations. The interviewees have expressed feeling being in care, both as a punishment and as abandonment by their biological families. During the interviews it was apparent that being placed in institutional

care was something that was still difficult for them to comprehend and it marked an irreparable distance from their birth families as well as certain resentment toward their families for not being able to take care of them properly.

The fourth participant indicated that when turning to the judicial system to search for help because her father (who was the only person responsible for her care) was being abusive, the answer was to offer her a place in residential care because she was still under the age of eighteen years old. This experience highlights the limitedness of the Argentinian system in solving the situation of children and young people who cannot live with their parents; placing them in institutional care is the only option. Under the current system, children and adolescents are punished as they are excluded from a family environment and have no choice of a more protective solution. Changes in the possibilities offered to children and young people need to be made in order to clearly ensure that the state is acting in their best interest.

Argentinian author Bustelo Graffignia (2012) points out the position of dependency that children are put in during their childhood, and how the dominant discourse treats children not as human beings but as “human becomings” and the focus is placed on preparing them for adult life successfully. Bustelo Graffignia also notes how the current discourses and practices consider children as objects, where the state has a paternalistic type of role in considering the “best interest of the child”. In the case of the women interviewed here, the policies and practices in relation to children without parental care have failed to prevent institutional care. When trying to safeguard them from an abusive or negligent family, being in care sends a contradictory message. To be in institutional care and deprived of living in a family environment was not felt as protective for these young women.

Moreover, it could be argued that these young people have lived an important part of their lives without the possibility to participate in decisions that affected them directly since the state’s policies and practices determined that being placed in residential care was the best (and only) choice. In this respect, further below it is argued that the family circumstances that led this young women being in care has had a profound influence on their personalities and on the relationship with their own children.

3.2 The Impact of Being in Institutional Care on Their Identities

The four participants stated that institutionalization was not problematic in itself, but that the causes that led them to live in residential care and their lives after care were not without difficulties. The negative consequences that being in care has for children and young people cognitively, emotionally, socially, and financially as well as the risk behaviours associated with life after care, such as substance abuse, mental distress, and abusive relationships, have already been studied in depth (Coleman-Cowgar et al.: 2011, Stein and Dumaret: 2011).

Also, while institutional care may not be a ‘solution’ for children who are without parental care, it is worth noting the different meanings these young women have given to that moment of their lives and how it has impacted their personalities and motherhood. They have all openly stated that they realized they were at risk living with their birth families, and that entering institutionalized care offered some measure of protection. Through the process, they became aware of the rights they had, as well as the resources available at the governmental level to seek assistance. Furthermore, participants established enduring relationships with the social workers and professionals who interacted with them while in residential care, relationships that are still maintained and have acted as part of their social support network and assisted them during their transition to adulthood.

Likewise, Kaes et al. (1993) notes the importance of the social context as a vector for transmission. What is deemed right or wrong delimits someone’s actions, and if this is not taught within the family structure, then it will be determined through the individual’s social context. Institutional care occurred during adolescence for these young women, meaning that it had a different effect than it would have had if it had happened during early childhood. Listening to their stories, this period of their lives seems to have set the limit for what is acceptable and what is not, and the causes and consequences of child maltreatment or negligence.

3.2 a Dealing with stigma after being in care

As stated in the literature review, different studies have reported that care leavers face usually find themselves in a vulnerable position, at risk of being homeless, without their education finished, with poor working possibilities, develop a threatening type of behaviour and mental health crises. It have been also noted, care leavers agency in their transition to adulthood, their capacity to overcome obstacles, and their use of the resources and support available in order to have a high-quality life. However, negative stereotypes of care leavers have caused that young care leavers are usually discriminated.

“Sometimes I get really nervous when people find out that I lived in residential care. There are a lot of prejudices around this, a tendency to believe that because someone has been in residential care they are a drug addict, a thief, or someone you cannot trust, and that is not true”. (Maria)

Marias’s quotes illustrates the anxiety of being socially stigmatized for their past in the care system. This demonstrates the negative social representation there is around children who are in institutional care, without parental support, something that encourages discrimination and shame among these young people.

In addition to the challenges these women have to face regarding their economic and housing situations, their single motherhood and lack of parental support also puts them in a very difficult position socially, since children are expected to have both their parents present in some way. As stated by Ribbens (1994), the idea that children are a result of a marriage arises the social status of the individuals and the way in which families are formed is a cultural and historical construction, not a representation of nature.

In this respect, the professionals working in this field should also have the responsibility to influence social perceptions about care leavers in general, and care leavers who are also mothers in particular, so that they are not excluded from the society again and can participate in the community without fear.



3.3 Single Motherhood among Care Leavers

Regarding the explicit analysis of the ways in which these women experience motherhood, it is important to consider not only their personal and individual views, but also the impact that the social and historical context has had on their decisions. During the process of getting to know these women through the interviews, it was significant that all of them expressed a desire for motherhood before their first pregnancy and also implied having had knowledge of contraception options, but pregnancy and the joint raising of children was not explicitly discussed between the women and their partners.

As one of the participants explained: *“We were not looking to have a baby at that moment, I was not thinking about getting pregnant, so when I started to feel sick the first two months of my pregnancy I thought it was because I was eating junk all day. But then, we weren’t using any type of protection method...so it was pretty obvious that it was going to happen eventually”*. (Maria)

Moreover, another interviewee stated: *“The father of my first child got angry when he found out I was pregnant because I didn’t tell him about it at the beginning, but why should I? This was my own thing, we were already separated, and he had nothing to do with it; I did not owe him any explanation”*. (Zara)

Maria’s testimony demonstrates how pregnancy was not planned with her partner, but not avoided either. Likewise, pregnancy appears almost as an expected surprise and motherhood as something that was not clearly considered, but subtly implied. On the other hand, Zara’s quotes illustrates how when separated from her partner, pregnancy was perceived as an individual process, without involving the father of her child in the process. Moreover, even though their pregnancies were not openly premeditated and discussed with the children’s fathers, and they occurred at a time when their educational, financial, and living situations had not been resolved, all the interviewees expressed wanting to become mothers, and therefore no birth control methods were employed.

About her pregnancy, Diana recalls: *“I was not surprised when I found out I was pregnant, I was really happy...Now I think that perhaps that happiness was not shared by the father of my child”* (Diana).

Diana’s quotes illustrate how she contemplates about the period of her life, when her pregnancy took place, noticing that a lack of communication about parenthood with her then partner led to very different reactions about the pregnancy, which also impacted on the parental roles. In this respect, it is clear that the women’s pregnancies were not planned or discussed openly with their partners, but motherhood was a desire and an intention they did have, and therefore they were not alarmed to find out about their pregnancies. These

pregnancies were not a result of any lack of sexual or reproductive health education, but a deeply held desire prompted in part by the events of their lives. Moreover, the fact that motherhood appeared after leaving care among these participants also raises the question of whether motherhood is perhaps perceived as an indicator of adulthood and independence.

As one of the interviewees expressed: *“When I separated from the father of my child, my baby was two months old. My parents were not there with me, they were living abroad. My mother and sister-in-law came in to my house, knowing that I was in a vulnerable position and they tried to take my child away...they did not know who they were up against, I would never give my child away”*. (Diana)

Diana’s quotes illustrates on one hand, the lack of strong and reliable family support during their motherhood, and on the other hand, it also demonstrates how this hard situation does not put at risk the care of their children. Regarding their identities as mothers and how they have been shaped by their past in institutional care, it should be stated that the difficulties of full responsibility for their children’s care do not in any way imply the possibility of considering institutional care for their own or their peer’s children. In many instances the women have mentioned taking care of nephews, godsons, as well as their own children being left in the care of a friend or a cousin. They have developed the ability to take care of their children without exposing them to harm, and are aware when a peer needs help taking care of their children. This support network can be seen as an important factor for prevention of institutionalisation for any child they are related to.

For the interviewees, motherhood seemed to signify womanhood and autonomy, where being a mother reaffirmed their place as women but also as adults and independent human beings. Once adulthood is reached at the age of eighteen, care leavers are no longer protected by the state as children, and a transition to become independent outside institutional care begins. Leaving care, adulthood, and autonomy seem to be synonymous for these women, and young motherhood has emerged as a way for these young ladies to experience and apply their adulthood, their maturity. There is a clear relationship between aging out of care and motherhood, as consequences of having to develop an (early) adult

lifestyle. Furthermore, occupying a leading role in a family is perceived by these young women as a type of reparation, by exercising the parental responsibilities, protection, care, and support which they were deprived of in childhood, they now have the chance to create the family they have lacked.

In this respect, Rolfe (2008) noted that young motherhood is usually related to the feeling of having “grown up” among more vulnerable women who must then struggle to balance motherhood with financial issues, compounded by the fact that early motherhood often prevents them from achieving higher educational and economical levels. In this respect, the target group that was focused on in this study has faced multiple factors that combine to make them even more vulnerable: early motherhood, lack of extended family relationships, low socio-economic status, gender inequality, and a history of abuse and/or neglect during their childhood, which led them to institutional care.

In the women’s discourses, it is striking to note that their pregnancies were not part of a plan with a partner, but actually a project of their own. They have indicated that their first pregnancies were not principally about forming a family with their partners but about beginning a family with their own children and becoming a parent in order to fulfil that role differently from the way their own parents had.

In their position as single mothers, these young women have had some difficulties trying to balance work or studies and childcare. One of the interviewees had to use different child care services, having her child in kindergarten and day care for almost nine hours per day in order to work and study at the same time. Another participant had to work part-time from home because one of her children was too young to be at nursery school and she had no one to help her take care of her child. The other two participants changed jobs several times until they found the balance between childcare and employment.

Three of the interviewees did not have daily contact with the father of their child, and the contact they have with family members is limited or null, making them fully responsible for the care of their children. This situation would seem to be a point of vulnerability, yet

during the interviews all of them expressed pride at their abilities to function as single mothers and develop new types of relationships.

“I am a mother who works every day, and I don’t complain about it. I support my kid all by myself, without asking anyone for anything. I don’t like to depend on someone else, I am not that kind of person”. (Diana)

Diana’s quotes exemplify something that all the interviewees agreed on: their satisfaction for their independence. The participants demonstrated feeling very proud of their independence and the effort they make to ensure that their children’s needs are covered. However, when lacking an extended support network, this may jeopardize their possibilities for success in other spheres of life, like their education or improvement of their housing situations, and therefore their opportunities for progress are limited. As Osgood et al. (2010) noted when comparing the transition to adulthood between vulnerable youth and their non-vulnerable peers, the difficulties in achieving independence without proper support can negatively affect the education, accommodation, and mental health spheres of life.

3.4 Difference from their own Childhood Experiences

While conducting the interviews, it was noteworthy how the participants contemplated their own childhoods in terms of things they wanted to do differently for children of their own. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that all interviewees’ children were enrolled in school, had regular medical check-ups, enjoyed time with their friends, and were carefully attended by their mothers. This is not to say that these mothers have not experienced any struggles or obstacles in relation to their motherhood, but it is important to note that their situations contradict popular stereotypes about young care leavers failing as mothers (Barn and Mantovani, 2007). The women’s challenges were related to financial issues, finding care facilities for their children, balancing work and single motherhood, and access to better opportunities that would improve their quality of life. These struggles in no way call into

question the love these mothers clearly had for their children and the sense of responsibility as attentive caregivers. At the time of interview, none of the children were at risk of being placed in institutional care or being neglected.

The contrast that these mothers drew between their own childhood experiences and the experiences of their children was considerable. One of the interviewees reflected on the impact that reuniting with her biological family had on her motherhood: *“After I left residential care and once my little boy was born, I returned to my family’s house, where my cousins, grandparents, and uncles live as well. I felt really uncomfortable; they were constantly judging me as a mother and pointing out that my child was bad mannered. I decided to leave at that point and live on my own; I don’t want the chain of abuse to continue. The mistreatment ends with me”*. (Diana)

Diana’s extract prove her determination to end the cycle of violence, of which she was a victim in the first place while being a child. Now, with her new role as a mother she has being capable to distinguish a harmful environment for her and her child, and move forward. In general from the interviews, it is clear that no linear cause-consequences between these women’s experience during childhood and their own children’s experience of childhood. All the women identified their placement in institutional care as a turning point in their lives and although it was a difficult and dark moment, it also encouraged them to be more aware of children’s needs and rights. This awareness of the fact that their own rights were neglected during their childhood seems to have impacted their motherhood and the women all seemed very careful to avoid committing the same mistakes. Also, it could be argued that becoming a mother at a young age allowed them to be more sympathetic with their children. Having only recently felt the impact of parental abuse or negligence, they have chosen to differentiate themselves from their progenitors. Motherhood, then, presents an opportunity to correct the abuses and/or negligence suffered in the past. Being in care, has produced another type of motherhood for them; making them more conscious in the raising of their children due to the harm that they know can be caused by placement in residential care.

“I need my daughters to know that I am always here for them, I would like them to remember that I never let them go”. (Zara)

“I want my child to remember that I always stood by his side. That I did not care about money, men, nothing...I just cared about him”. (Diana)

These quotes demonstrate the spirit of these young mother’s accounts about their own motherhood. They have presented themselves as capable of differentiating themselves as parents and reflecting on what being a good mother means to them: prioritizing their children, being present, showing their children they are independent women, providing them with health and education, and behaving differently from their own parents. The term *presence* was used frequently throughout all the interviews when historicizing their motherhood.

“There are all kinds of families, and I’m not going to start judging, but I would never be a mother who chooses her partner before her children, in that sense I have things very clear”. (Maria)

Maria’s passage demonstrates in what way the need to be a present mother has been repeated in all the interviewees, in the context of various different topics covered, with the women all stating firmly that nothing would keep them from “being there” for their children. Further research should to be done in order to delve deeper into this issue and analyse whether the presence is conceived of as physically being there or if it can also be understood symbolically. Memories from previous relationships affect this new mother-child bond, which can act both positively and negatively. In this respect, it can be seen how past family relationships and memories built around them constantly influence these young women’s view of motherhood as well as the way they present themselves as being opposed to their own childhood experiences.

“It was very difficult to respect myself, to find myself, to be honest...it is very hard when you are being humiliated all the time and you start believing what your family says about

you. I used to study and work at the same time, supporting two young daughters, like an obligation, and then I asked myself 'what is the purpose of all this?'. And so, I started to appreciate myself, because I don't want my daughters have to live through the same thing I did, I need to be sure that they know I am here, that they have their mother". (Zara)

Zara's quotes illustrates, that in order for her to have a positive relationship with her children, she would first needed to think about what was wrong during her childhood and her relationship with her birth family. It also exemplify that in order to prevent that her own history of being in institutional care is repeated with her children, she would have to deliberate about her past and make several changes on relating habits.

The period of their lives in which these women were in institutional care marked them so profoundly and it would seem that the possibility of having their own children in institutional care has inspired a significant protectiveness as mothers. This does not mean that institutional care is therefore cautionary for these young women and good for their motherhood, but that the impact being in care has had on them has created an acute awareness on how to protect their children.

Also, Diana noted: *"My mother used to stand for a lot of things because she was afraid of going out to get to know the world, she did not work, and she had to live with my father who was very abusive. I resent her for that and questioned her decisions, I would never allow that type of relationship".*

Diana's statements exemplify a moment in her life that marked a shift on the things she did not wanted to repeat with her child and herself. This perspective, gained through painful circumstances, demonstrates how these two participants portray themselves as mothers, their identities are constructed in contrast to what they experienced as children. In this regard, Slade (1999) observed that the ability of a mother to be sensitive to her child's needs is influenced by what this relationship represents for her as well as by what her relationship with her own mother represents for her. Likewise, learning from their own mothers as well as from other women, they have developed their identity as mothers. The young women were very firm on certain points and clear in defining what was acceptable

for them and what it was not. That mothers should be present for their children, independent from any man, and never choose a romantic relationship over their child, were all notions strongly held by these mothers.

3.4a The Non-inherited Type of Parenting

In relation to their type of parenting, it has been stated that prototypes of attachment can be transmitted from one generation to the next, alleging that the form of attachment developed by the mother with her parents in her own childhood will be replicated in the type of attachment relationship that she develops with her own children (Oates, 2007). However, more studies need to be conducted in order to determine what happens with mothers who have had inconsistent modes of attachment relationships.

One of the interviewees, who shared custody of her second child because she did not have a place to live and the father of her child did, recalls: *“When I was separated from my second child, I saw myself in her, she didn’t have her mother’s presence, just like me when I was a child. I saw myself in her place and felt something similar to abandonment, and so I said to myself: she will have scars from not having me around every day, and that is not right, I can give her more even if we are not living together, because we still see each other. That was the moment when I started being aware of my role and being more responsible”* (Zara).

Zara’s quotes illustrate how she identifies with her child, projecting her own story of being neglected by her family. It could be argued that attributing her own story to her children could be stressful for her kids, but in this case it has allowed her to have more empathy with her children and develop a more conscious type of maternal role. Overall, it can be observed that the identification developed between these mothers and their children is a response to the desire to avoid their parent’s mistakes being repeated in this next generation.

Even with the struggles and difficulties these mothers face every day, their efforts to develop a relationship based on a secure type of attachment with their children is unquestionable: they have been present figures for their children, covering their needs and demands and providing love when stressful situations occurred (Bowlby, 1988).

3.5 Relationship with Birth Families after Leaving Care

Once these young ladies left institutional care, the first motherhood experiences incited many emotions among these care leavers and their birth families. In some cases, the exit from the care system along with the start of an adult life, balancing work and new family responsibilities, encouraged the young care leavers to reconnect with their birth families. However, these encounters were infused with tensions related to the family history. In this respect, one participant noted: *“When I left the institution I went home to live with my dad. I had no other option, nowhere to go, and I thought this time would be different...it was a mistake that I should have never made and I realize that now. I can’t wait to leave, and have my own place”*. (Maria)

Diana also explained how she contacted her father, because her own child was asking about him: *“I still don’t have complete confidence that I can count on him, and I do not have my hopes very high that he will be there for me when I need him. I tend to think that he might disappear at any moment, and we’ll be back to the same place. So I do not get my expectations really high, I am careful”* (Diana).

Maria and Diana’s statements demonstrate the ambiguity surrounding the type of relationships these women have with their birth families. Particularly, the participant’s children motivated these young ladies to turn to their families again so that their children might establish a meaningful relationship with their grandparents. However, the history of mistreatment and vulnerability is still very present in their attitudes and behaviour, and so a distance from the birth family is perceived in this reconnection. As Biehal et al. (1995) stated, these meetings usually cause negative feelings and unresolved dynamics often

emerge again, meaning these relationships very fragile and it is difficult to establish a healthy bond that these women can have confidence in and rely on.

3.6 The Importance of Supportive Relationships

Given the fact that their family relationships have been erratic, these young women have developed the capacity to establish extra-familiar, yet significant, long-lasting relationships during their adolescence and youth. The four interviewees have stated that they keep in contact with the peers they met during their time in institutional care, and pointed out that they help each other whenever it is necessary even though they live in very distant neighbourhoods. Once out of care they have also developed new peer relationships, which have helped them in raising their children as well as in completing their studies and in their professional lives. In this respect, one of the interviewees explained: *“I met my child’s godparents after I got involved politically in my community five years ago. I met a really nice group of people; they have helped me take care of my child when I had a lot of work to do, and every time I needed them, they have been there for me”* (Kiara).

These peer relationships fulfil a supportive role for the young mothers, which is essential for these women who are learning to be autonomous and to be mothers at the same time. Since they are lacking support from their families, these types of relationships have acted as protective factors for the young care leavers. The women have also maintained meaningful contact with professionals who they met while under the state’s protection. They have all mentioned that they keep in touch with the social worker that was in charge of their case. The bonds formed with their former social workers have transcended a simple professional rapport and the personal relationships remain strong even though the women were no longer in institutional care or in situations of major risk. These support networks have connected the women with work possibilities, help in moving to a new home, or obtaining resources and assistance for the care of their children. In this respect, these professionals, as part of the community, have taken the responsibility to support these young ladies once out of care.

Kaes et al. (1993) stated that because human beings are part of a social structure, the experiences and contact that we have with different groups of people shape our identities, identifications, ideologies, and rituals. The stories of the care leavers interviewed for this study demonstrate that there is a real need for formalized support that is not dependent on the good intentions and extra assistance offered by professionals in the system. Although there are “follow up” programmes, both governmental and non-governmental, for adults who have recently exited institutionalized care, there seems to be a need for continued assistance by a familiar professional who has formed a relationship with the care leaver and can therefore better facilitate the leaving process and have a greater influence on the you care leaver’s success as an adult.

3.7 Community Participation as a Protective Factor

Although these young women are considered members of a vulnerable population for the reasons mentioned earlier (leaving care, financial, educational, child care, and social challenges), the young mothers have also shown their willingness to participate in community activities that aim to help others. This has been shown to empower young people by allowing them to be seen as a role model for others. In several opportunities the women interviewed presented themselves as being eager to help other children and young people who were (according to the interviewees) in a more vulnerable position. In this respect, one of the interviewees (Kiara) mentioned that she provided tutoring for children on the weekends at a community centre that she went to with her daughter for three years. Another participant (Zara), during the time the interviews were conducted in 2014, volunteered as a cook for the adolescents and professionals of an institution near her home. Zara knew she had the ability to cook for a large amount of people, and she did it every day for seven months, expressing happiness at being able to collaborate with the institution and the people there.

These instances demonstrate the sense of empowerment that is gained through helping someone else, and contradicts the stereotype of willing victims who prefer to remain the

receivers of state intervention or welfare. Lansdown (2005) further emphasizes the ways in which participation in community and cultural activities acknowledge young people's capacities and agency and encourage them to enjoy their citizenship and feel like a part of their society.

Taking in consideration the research questions of this study, it can be seen how the motherhood experiences of these care leavers' present different nuances on their life's spheres. These young mothers perceive and define themselves in contrast with their birth families, noting that their close relationship with their children would never be jeopardize, and that also they would never put in danger the possibility to be present in their children's lives. In this regard, it can be seen the complexities of the new relationship between these young women and their birth families, since they have become mothers themselves. This relationship, dyed of ambivalence, have make these young women try to form a new type of bond with their birth parents, but at the same type, the memories of the past makes this relationship tense and lack of confidence.



Chapter Five:

Conclusions

To conclude, the important issues discussed in this research are the experiences and challenges young female care leavers encounter in relation to their own motherhood. In this respect, issues such as the procedures for collection and analysis of the data, as well as other sensitive issues involved in this research were considered in depth.

With regard to the data analysed in this study, it should be noted that various topics appeared over the course of this study. First of all, institutional care and early childhood experiences undoubtedly had an impact on these women's decisions to have children of their own and an influence on their thoughts on the best way to raise them. Moreover, the women's narratives about their past have played an active role in the construction of their concepts of motherhood. Furthermore, contrary to the belief that harmful parenting styles are perpetuated in proceeding generations, these young mothers are particularly concerned with covering their children's needs and being present for their children.

On the other hand, ambiguous and contradictory feelings arose when the care leavers resumed contact with their birth families. Despite the hope that a new and healthier type of bond could be developed with their birth families and a relationship built between their parents and their children, the memories of their own childhood and a lack of willingness to change on the part of the birth families makes this relationship strained and hard to rely on. In relation to care practices for their children and transition to adulthood, these young women have established new and worthwhile relationships that have been helpful, but continuous and personalized after-care assistance should also be explicitly established in order to support this population of female care leavers who have become young mothers.

Overall, the most significant relationship these women have established is the one with their children. Through the testimonies of the young mothers, it is clear that this relationship has encouraged these women to search for better work opportunities, attempt to finish their educations, take care of themselves and their kids, and seek out extra help whenever it is needed. Motherhood has been the way in which these young women have found their independence; it has encouraged their agency in exercising their rights and demanding the resources available to protect them and their children. As one participant stated: *"Sometimes it gets really difficult to wake up in the morning so early and go to work, but then I think how amazing it is that we are now finally living on our own...and that gives me strength to get up so that I can pay the rent"* (Kiara).

Community participation has also proven to act as a factor of protection and empowerment for these young mothers, allowing them to serve as role models for others. Moreover, the literature reviewed on life after care still shows some gaps in relation to parenthood and new family relationships. In this respect, the present study aimed to research the influence that institutionalized care has had on care leaver's identities as mothers, as well as their agency in overcoming difficult situations. More longitudinal studies should be conducted in order to consecutively examine the consequences that being in care may have on the new families formed by care leavers. In this respect, a change in policies and practices could be considered in order to reduce risk factors for young mothers after care, and encourage full exercise of their Right to a Family for the first time.

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