"I need my child to know that I am here":
Young Care Leaver's Experiences with their Own Motherhood in Argentina[1]

LUCÍA COLER

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

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?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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

---

[1] Este documento formó parte de la tesis de Maestría en Estudios de la infancia / *MSc in Childhood Studies*, realizada en la Universidad de Edimburgo durante el período del 2014-2015.

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).

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).

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.

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.

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.

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 interviewee's 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)

> "*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)

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*".

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.

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.

_____

Bibliography

- Alldred, P. (2011). "How Come I Fell Pregnant?" Young Mothers' Narratives of Conception. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 16*(2), 139-156.

- Alderson, P., & Morrow, V. (Eds.). (2011). *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook.* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.4135/9781446268377

- Alderson, P & Morrow, V (Eds.). (2011). Disseminating and Implementing the Findings. In *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook.* (2nd ed., pp. 125-134). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.4135/9781446268377.n10

- Atkinson, R. (2004). Life story interview. In M. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. Liao (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of social science research methods.* (pp. 567-571). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.4135/9781412950589.n492

- Biehal, N., Clayden, J., Stein, M., & Wade, J. (1994). Leaving care in England: A research perspective. *Children and Youth Services Review. 16,23 l-254.*

- Biehal, N., Clayden, J., Stein, M., & Wade, J. (1995). *Moving on: Young people and leaving care schemes,* London HMSO.

- Biehal, N., & Wade, J. (1996). Looking back, looking forward: Care leavers, families and change. Children and Youth Services Review, 18(4/5), 425–445.

- Barn, R., & Mantovani, N. (n.d). Young mothers and the care system: Contextualizing risk and vulnerability. *British Journal Of Social Work*, *37*(2), 225-243.

- Bowlby, J. (1988) *A Secure Base: Parent–child attachment and healthy human development,* New York, NY, Basic Books.

- Bravo, D (2012). Full stop-new life: management experience and new challenges. In: *Transitioning from the protection system to independence: towards a comprehensive model of support for young people leaving care*. Doncel/FLACSO/UNICEF/ College of Applied Sciences in Oslo and Akershus.

- Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods* (Second ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Bustelo Graffigna. Eduardo. (2012). Notas sobre infancia y teoría: Un enfoque latinoamericano. *Salud Colectiva, 8*(3), 287.

- Cashmore, J. and Paxman, M. 1996, *Longitudinal study of wards leaving care*, Social Policy research Centre, Sydney.

- CLIMENT, Graciela I, "Voces, silencios y gritos: Los significados del embarazo en la adolescencia y los estilos parentales educativos", en *Revista Argentina de Sociología,* Mayo-Diciembre, 186-213. 2009.

- Coleman-Cowger, Victoria H., Green, Binta Alleyne, & Clark, Trenette T. (2011). The impact of mental health issues, substance use, and exposure to victimization on pregnancy rates

among a sample of youth with past-year foster care placement. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(11), 2207-2212.

- Corsaro, W., Honig, M., & Qvortrup, J. (2009). *The Palgrave handbook of childhood studies*. Basingstoke ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan

- Curtis, Sarah, Gesler, Wil, Smith, Glenn, & Washburn, Sarah. (2000). Approaches to sampling and case selection in qualitative research: Examples in the geography of health. *Social Science & Medicine, 50*(7), 1001-1014

- De Vaus, D. A, (2002) "Finding a sample" from De Vaus, D. A, *Surveys in social research* pp.69-93, London: Routledge

- Dixon, J. and Stein, M. 2002, *Still a bairn? Through care and after care services in Scotland,* Social work Research and Development Unit, University of York.

- Esquivel, V. (2014). What is a transformative approach to care, and why do we need it? *Gender & Development, 22*(3), 423-439.

- Faur, E. (2011). A Widening Gap? The Political and Social Organization of Childcare in Argentina. *Development and Change, 42*(4), 967-994.

- Fonagy, P, Steele, M, Moran, G, Steele, H, & Higgitt, A. (1993). Measuring the ghost in the nursery. An empirical-study of the relation between parents mental representations of childhood experiences and their infants security of attachment. *Journal Of The American Psychoanalytic Association, 41*(4), 957-989.

- Gallagher, M. (2008) 'Data collection and Analysis' in Tisdall, E.K.M, Davis, J.M. and Gallagher, M. (eds.) *Research with Children and Young People: Research design, methods and analysis*. London: Sage.

- Gallagher, M. (2008) "Ethics"in Tisdall, E.K.M, Davis, J.M. and Gallagher, M. (eds.) *Research with Children and Young People: Research design, methods and analysis*. London: Sage.

- Geiger, J., & Schelbe, L. (2014). Stopping the Cycle of Child Abuse and Neglect: A Call to Action to Focus on Pregnant and Parenting Youth in and Aging Out of the Foster Care System. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 8*(1), 25-50.

- General Assembly of the United Nations (2009). Guidelines for the alternative care of children. Adopted by the UN General Assembly 18 December 2009. http://www. iss-ssi.org/2009/assets/files/guidelines/Guidelines-English.pdf (A/RES/64/142)

- Goodley, D. (2004). *Researching life stories. [electronic resource] : method, theory, and analyses in a biographical age*. London ; New York : Routledge Falmer, 2004

- Greene, S., & Hogan, D. (2005) "Narrative analysis of children's experience" in Greene, S., & Hogan, D *Researching children's experience: Methods and approaches*. London: SAGE.

- Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012). Themes and codes. In *Applied thematic analysis.* (pp. 49-79). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.4135/9781483384436.n3

- Hammersley, Martyn. (1995). *Ethnography principles in practice /*. Milton Park, Abingdon,

Oxon ;: Routledge.

- INDEC, (2015) "Encuesta Nacional Joven" (National survey about youth). Available at: http://www.indec.gov.ar/ftp/cuadros/poblacion/resultados_enj_2014.pdf

- Kaes, R. Faimberg, H., Enriquez, M., & Baranes, J.-J. (1993). Transmission de la vie psychique entre générations. Paris: Dunod.

- Knight, A., Chase, E., & Aggleton, P. (2006). Teenage Pregnancy among Young People in and Leaving Care: Messages and Implications for Foster Care. *Adoption & Fostering, 30*(1), 58-69.

- Lansdown, G., & UNICEF. (2005). *The evolving capacities of the child*. Florence, Italy: Save the Children.

- Leve, L, Kerr, D, & Harold, G 2013, 'Young Adult Outcomes Associated With Teen Pregnancy Among High-Risk Girls in a Randomized Controlled Trial of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care', *Journal Of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 22, 5, pp. 421-434, CINAHL Plus, EBSCO*host.*

- Mason, J. (2002) "Qualitative Interviewing" from Mason, Jennifer, *Qualitative researching* pp.62- 83, London: Sage

- Matthews, H. (1998). The Geography of Children: Some ethical and methodological considerations for project and dissertation work. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 22*(3), 311-324.

- Morton, S. and Nutley, S., (2011) "7. 'What Happens Next? Getting research into policy and practice'" from Lynn Jamieson, Roona Simpson and Ruth Lewis (eds), *Researching families and relationships: reflections on process* pp.150-163, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan ©

- Oates, John ed. (2007). Attachment Relationships: Quality of Care for Young Children. Early Childhood in Focus, 1. Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University.

- O'Reilly, K. (2012). *Ethnographic methods. [electronic resource]*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York : Routledge, 2012.

- Osgood, D., Foster, E., & Courtney, M. (2010). Vulnerable Populations and the Transition to Adulthood. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 209-229

- Plowman, L., & Stevenson, O. (n.d). EXPLORING THE QUOTIDIAN IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LIVES AT HOME. *Home Cultures*, *10*(3), 329-347

- Potter, J. (1998) Discursive Social Psychology: From Attitudes to Evaluative Practices, European Review of Social Psychology, 9:1, 233-266, DOI: 10.1080/14792779843000090

- Qvortrup, J. (2005) 'Varieties of Childhood', in Qvortrup, J. (ed.) Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency and Culture, Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 1-20.

- Ribbens, Jane, (1994) "Indivduals, Families and Children" from Ribbens, Jane., *Mothers and their children: feminist sociology of childrearing* pp.46-73, London: Sage ©

- Riessman, C. (2004). Narrative analysis. In M. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. Liao (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of social science research methods.* (pp. 706-710). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.4135/9781412950589.n611

- Riessman, C. (2004). Narrative interviewing. In M. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. Liao (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of social science research methods.* (pp. 710-711). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.4135/9781412950589.n612

- Rolfe, A. (2008). 'You've got to grow up when you've got a kid': Marginalized young women's accounts of motherhood. *Journal Of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *18*(4), 299-314. doi:10.1002/casp.925.

- Rosaline, B. (2008). 1 THE SCOPE AND CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH. In *Introducing qualitative research.* (pp. 9-35). London, England: SAGE Publications

- Rubin, Herbert J. & Ruben, Irene S., (2005) "Structuring the Interview" from Rubin, Herbert J. & Ruben, Irene S., *Qualitative interviewing the art of hearing data* pp.129-151, Thousand Oakes: SAGE Publications

- Slade, A. (1999). Representation, symbolization, and affect regulation in the concomitant treatment of a mother and child: Attachment theory and child psychotherapy. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry, 19*(5), 797-830.

- Stein, M. (2006). Young people aging out of care: The poverty of theory. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*(4), 422-434.

- Stein, Mike, & Dumaret, Annick-Camille. (2011). The mental health of young people aging out of care and entering adulthood: Exploring the evidence from England and France. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(12), 2504-2511.

- UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38f0.html

- UNICEF, FLACSO Argentina, Doncel Civil Association and College of Applied Sciences in Oslo and Akershus, (2012). "Transitioning from the protection system to independence: towards a comprehensive model of support for young people leaving care".