

# Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational  
and Social Endeavour

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# 11. Care Leavers in Italy

From 'Vulnerable' Children  
to 'Autonomous' Adults?

*Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti  
and Mirella Ferrari*

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Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti and Mirella Ferrari use data from their study of young people leaving the residential care system on reaching adulthood. They discuss the discourses around 'care' before offering three different ways to present narrative accounts. Each researcher demonstrates a distinctive approach – through realism, by focusing on a facet of interest, by fictionalizing the interview in order to go beyond it. Including the stories in full enables the reader to decide their relative utility.

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This chapter is about care leavers, that is, young adults exiting the foster-care system whose lives and identities are shaped by dominant narratives and practices of 'vulnerability'. Our approach aims to deconstruct vulnerability and challenge master stories. We use discourse as a recursive and multiple concept — the discourse of discourses — to reflect on the perspectives of meaning in the foster care system, as well as in the researchers' view. We involved fostered people and professionals in participatory ways to discuss and dialogue with them about adulthood, learning and identity building, asking: what kind of life paths and struggles lead from foster care to adult life? What kind of learning is generated by the experience of fostering?



These questions are illuminated by the notion of discourse and by the experience of care leavers as insiders. Narrative methods (Formenti & West, 2016; Merrill & West, 2009) focus on subjective experience and meaning, but a critical appraisal and the multiplication of perspectives are needed to avoid the naturalization of vulnerability, to overcome linear theories of care and education and to celebrate complexity. Thus, this study merges self-narration and cooperative inquiry in the pursuit of a more complex and thicker interpretation of the life trajectories of young 'vulnerable' adults, to be shared with professionals and decision makers in order to innovate socio-educational care practices.

### Discourse: A Metaphor and Its Limits

What do we mean by 'discourse' in the framework of complexity theory and biographical studies? The discourse of discourse is a recursive way to interrogate this word that seems to overemphasize the role of propositional knowing (Heron, 1996), at risk of decontextualizing it and diminishing the embodied, presentational, emotional, or even spiritual ways to knowing. The linguistic origins of discourse studies highlight that parts can only be interpreted in relation to a whole. Isolated letters, words, or sentences are meaningless without a context. By context, we can mean the word in relation to letters, or the phrase in relation to words, or the conversation where they are produced, and so on. In communication, meaning is multiple and layered, often ambiguous, and requiring further contextualization. Briefly, discourse entails the whole layered system of communication, far beyond speech. The users of language, their bodies and actions, their webs of affiliation and, more generally, the practices of languaging (Maturana, 1990) in communities, form the meaning-full context.

Which discourse are we interested in? This manifold notion is used to interpret social interaction (microsociology, ethnomethodology), cultures (anthropology, ethnography), opinion making (social psychology), media, and so on. Discourse is disciplined by knowledge and power, to determine and shape our lives at the individual and collective levels (Foucault, 1969); normally accepted ideas become hegemonic (Gramsci, 1975) and their function is to legitimize and enforce power. The dominant discourse creates a medium where speakers are produced

by, instead of making communication. Disciplinary structures inform our behaviour; the discourse of discourses reveals how established ideas and dominant narratives control creativity, freedom and self-positioning. Counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1975) is discourse too, contrasting dominant assumptions, beliefs and established patterns of behaviour with alternative ones. Revelation is not exempt from discourse, hence from interpretation. From a systemic point of view, different levels or perspectives should not be reduced to one. The social, interactional and individual (macro, meso, micro) are separated, yet entangled. So, there is not one discourse, but different positions, actions and propositions. We interrogate them from a recursive perspective of complexity (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Formenti, 2018) and contextualization (Edwards, Biesta & Thorpe, 2009).

Our definition of discourse comes from its etymology: *currere*, that means ‘to run’ in Latin, is an embodied metaphor connecting languaging and enacting. The former is the ongoing process of coordination and co-evolution that builds a world together with self-consciousness (Maturana, 1990); the latter is the construction of meaning through action:

...knowledge depends on being in a world that is inseparable from our bodies, our language, and our social history — in short, from our embodiment. (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991, p. 149)

So, discourse identifies an ongoing, and multi-layered, process (*currere*) of co-evolution. At the micro-level this process is about subjects within a system of interactions and interdependencies. At the meso-level there is a building of myths, artefacts, practices that influence the larger social system (the macro-level) where narratives and myths evolve with objects, spaces, images, institutions, media, in an ecological network of ideas, cultures and technologies. These entangled levels are always involved in learning, transformation and education. In his analysis of discourse in formal education, van Dijk identified three levels:

[...] the structures of discourses used in education: style, contents, complexity, etc. [...] the processes of learning: the acquisition of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, abilities, and other cognitive and emotional changes which are the goals of institutional education. Finally, the relationships between textual structures, textual processing and the structures of the socio-cultural contexts. (van Dijk, 1980)

Beyond this textual approach, we use a generative methodology of 'discursive multiplication' (multiplying narrations and their interpretations rather than fixing them) to explore structures, processes and contexts that may be hidden, unconscious, and embodied.

## Foster Care: A Complex World

**F**oster care is a form of child protection where parents maintain their legal rights, but the child is temporarily separated from them. It takes different forms: foster family, family-like housing, residential centre, therapeutic unit, and others. The process is monitored by Social Services and entails a personalized socio-educational project. Custody ends with the re-insertion of the child in the original family, adoption, or adulthood. The latter is the most frequent case for institutionalized minors in Italy.

Foster care is a complex world, with its own dominant representations, metaphors and narrations. It is important to acknowledge that vulnerability is not inherent to these children or families, but the result of actions and communications. It is real though, and it structures meaning, identities and professional intervention.

The dominant narrative of vulnerability composes different ideas:

### *Multiple Problems*

**C**hildren in this category are labelled and positioned within a frame of expectations about school under-achievement, behavioural problems and psychological symptoms. All of these are interpreted as signs and results of family problems. Life trajectories are qualified — forward and backward — by 'problems'.

### *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*

**T**he problem-based definition becomes a predictor of future educational and professional failure, low-status careers and/or delinquency. The children's negative expectations and vulnerability justify official intervention. To correct and compensate for disadvantage dominates professional practices.

*Control and Fragmentation*

Fostered children are constantly accompanied, monitored and assessed by social workers, residential care workers, assistants, educators, psychotherapists, speech therapists, family tutors, etc. Their practices and perspectives are different. Psychologists and psychotherapists focus on mental and emotional aspects, leaving aside economic and practical issues, or the social context. Social workers aim to ensure legality, school attendance, fulfilment of basic needs, and protection from violence or trauma. Educators intervene in everyday life, to sustain formal and informal learning. Original families are stigmatized and silenced, while foster families may be over-idealized.

Starting from the — usually sudden and unexpected — forced extraction from their everyday context, these children are storied and categorized from their first entry into the foster-care system. There are many silenced stories of injustice, institutional carelessness, and symbolic violence, but they — or their parents — have no voice to speak aloud. Taking a child away from home, to place him or her in residence, is based on the assumption of his or her 'best interest'. In Italy, this means 12,400 (12 per thousand of overall minors) hosted in residential structures and 14,020 in foster families (in 2014). The law recommends family fostering, but data (unfortunately old, fragmentary and incoherent) show that institutionalization is growing. Available databases are focused on child protection and rights, dominated by quantitative data and categorization, hence blurring many relevant differences and obscuring the influence of context. Numbers do not tell much about meaning and lives; about becoming an adult in foster care and developing an identity, a life project, agency, freedom; about participation in education, work and public life — actions that could stop the spiral of violence and loneliness characterizing so many lives. The above-mentioned self-fulfilling prophecies are at risk of confirmation in linear deterministic studies, at best descriptive, not critical or transformative. Therefore, qualitative and participatory research is needed, in order to develop good theories and models to understand the social, political and educational factors at work in this phenomenon.

Biographical narratives bring nuances and embodied experience into the frame, allowing multiple perspectives and meanings and chronicling

disorienting dilemmas and ways to overcome them — perhaps transformative ones (Mezirow, 1991). We are interested in the insider's self-positioning, that helps him or her achieve a distance from the dominant discourse. Thus, we multiply our levels of analysis and our settings for research.

## Categorization and Meanings

**W**hat to call our subjects? Vulnerable? At risk? NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training), looked after, care leavers? Names are not neutral. They reflect discourse. Different words are used in literature; at first, we used them interchangeably, but a deeper reflection illuminated discourses of vulnerability and education, of which we are a part too.

### From Vulnerable Children to NEETs: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

**A**t the macro level, vulnerability offers a strong rationale for intervention based on the child's 'best interest'. Surveys map the main reasons that are referred to by the social agencies: relational problems within the family, addiction or neglectful conduct. Parental inadequacy is the dominant narrative. Negligent parents are stories of not loving, immorality or general incompetence, obscuring the role of poverty intensified by the economic crisis. Wealthy families are rarely referred to agencies. From databases, we can learn that single parents and foreign fathers are more highly represented than average; most mothers and more than forty per cent of fathers are unemployed. Yet poverty, unemployment and social problems should never be reasons for child removal in a democratic society where citizen's rights are respected. A distressed family should receive the best help in order to overcome a problematic situation; this is not always the case.

Gender and ethnic backgrounds are also relevant. Boys (unaccompanied foreign minors) are an increasing presence following migration fluxes; once from Romania and Morocco (Belotti, 2010), later Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Albania (ANCI, 2012), and recently, the Middle East and Central Africa. Institutionalization becomes a solution



for adolescents (or undocumented young adults cheating on their real age) who are not 'vulnerable' in the ordinary sense; on the contrary they may be quite resilient and aware of their situation. After a difficult and perilous journey, they need to establish meaningful relationships and build some hope for the future. Migration is redefining the population in residential care, hence challenging established practices.

Age groups and length of time in care also vary. The number of adolescents and young adults is increasing, as well as the number who stay for a short period of time (under twenty-four months), while the average duration of stay is four years. When they become adults, these people disappear from records. No longer 'vulnerable children' needing protection, they are free to make their own lives, or more likely to enter another 'vulnerable' category, like NEETs, who are excluded from both formal education and the labour market. OECD<sup>1</sup> and EUROSTAT<sup>2</sup> use this category to measure the risks of social exclusion and to assess labour market dynamics. Italy scores highly in this group (Rosina, 2015), which is composed of different subgroups: highly qualified people looking for a job; a 'grey area' with low competence but open to learning possibilities; and a 'dark area' of people who despair of finding a job, stuck in complex situations and at risk of longer unemployment. Young adults who experienced fostering are more likely to fall into the dark category due to their lack of social capital and family support.

### Looked-After People: The Reproduction of Care and Control

Literature uses another label, 'looked-after'; a passive verb with a connotation of care and attention. The 'looked-after' person is dependent, not competent enough or autonomous, and needing education, social care, psychotherapy, tutoring, and so on. Differently from 'vulnerability', this word focuses on a needs-based relationship with many connotations of education, care, and control. Life within foster houses can be extremely disciplined. This meso-level discourse shapes everyday practices, identities, and scripts enacted and internalized by professionals and youngsters. It conveys undisputed assumptions:

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1 OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

2 EUROSTAT: The Directorate-General of the EU responsible for statistical information.

- moving from a home to a residence (or foster family) is for the best, an opportunity to grow up in a better place;
- regular contact with parents and relatives is guaranteed, but needs to be monitored;
- conflict, tensions and difficulties must be erased from these children's lives, in order for them to learn different attitudes and to open possibilities for the future.

These are prejudicial ideas, suggesting that we do know, in fact, what is best. But systematic research on best practices is lacking; different models are implemented in Italy with substantial regional differences (Belotti, 2010), and in Europe. Comparative research (Eurochild, 2010) shows uneven results among EU countries (Thoburn, 2010). In France, child care intervention seems more akin to separation (nine per thousand). Great Britain has a similarly high rate of children in care (eight per thousand), Spain is lower (six per thousand), while Italy was reported at four per thousand. Data seem to offer evidence of a 'Mediterranean model' (Naldini & Saraceno, 2008) that insists on maintaining the original family ties, in contrast to northern Europe. However, no country among those considered by ANCI<sup>3</sup> (Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Belgium and Spain) produces regular statistics, let alone a shared model (ANCI, 2012).

We know from other studies (Carr & McAlister, 2016) that institutionalization may become repetitive and chronic. Once one has been entered into the system, it is difficult to be discharged, due in part to the lack of appropriate intervention in the family and social environments. The likelihood of further institutionalization increases; e.g., looked-after people enter the justice system at higher rates than average.

When you are 'looked after', the role of learning is weakened. Awareness, competence and autonomy may be developed in conflictual relationships, in struggles and even in relation to traumatic experiences. If adolescents, or young adults, are patronized and infantilized, this prevents them from learning what is needed to become an adult. Qualitative research can demonstrate that they are not really, or always, passive; they can position themselves in active ways and develop their own views of what they need; some may even develop a strong

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3 Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani.

motivation to support their peers, even going so far as to choose a career in the helping professions (Melkman et al., 2015).

## Care Leavers: Biographical Transitions and Challenging Transformations

The label of 'care leaver' shifts the focus from categories or relationships to transition: these subjects are moving, in the middle of identity development, to a new and evolving context. To leave care is a crucial moment of passage, highlighted by the active verb, in contrast with the passivity of 'being looked after'. This invites us to see the process, and hence also the interactions, challenges and transforming discourses that comprise it. This label focuses the transition from the care system to the external world, from institutionalization to freedom, and the challenges it brings. This is the moment in life when these people are asked, authorized, or forced to leave a protective environment and to take adult responsibilities; to behave and think like adults (or not). This transition can be excessively accelerated and compressed (Allen, 2003; Stein & Munro, 2008): care leavers are expected to make sudden and difficult changes with no previous experience and no time to elaborate a strategy. Several studies (Morgan, 2006; 2008; 2011; Pandolfi, 2015) show that most care leavers are not prepared for this step, and the lack of family support or other social networks adds to their difficulties.

In Italy, care leavers may volunteer to enter a period of 'administrative extension' and receive further aid for a short time (a maximum of three years). This entails rules, constraints, monitoring, and semi-autonomy, over a negotiated period. Here again, words are not neutral. This bureaucratic naming stresses the economic and structural dimensions of extension. It conceals the emotional, relational, and existential aspects, which require imagination and new forms of intervention.

We use biographies to address the transition (Field, Gallacher & Ingram, 2009; Field & Lynch, 2015) and investigate assumptions of care leavers and professionals that are revealed, maintained or transformed through conversations, not least in the research setting. It is a learning occasion for the whole system. Following Mezirow (1991), we expect to find disorienting dilemmas and disclose the frames of reference that structured a life, a world, and its truths. A dilemma is a learning

moment in adult life, an occasion to take a reflective stance backwards and forwards and potentially trigger transformative learning (Formenti, 2016; Formenti & West, 2018). When care leavers take a stance towards their previous relationships and contexts, they develop their own ideas of adulthood and adult identity in continuity and/or discontinuity with previous discourses. Thanks to narration, they may position themselves in the proximal and larger system, revealing dominant discourses but also other dimensions and counter-narratives.

In order to think like an adult (Mezirow, 2012), we need to face disorienting dilemmas that question (often dramatically) our previous frames of meaning. Adaptation without dilemma can hardly bring us to adulthood. Being positioned and storied by social discourse (macro) and by the care system (meso) may lead fostered people to plain adaptation ('I'm what they say I am'), to counter dependence ('I'm different, I rebel'), and/or to a never-ending process of questioning ('I am confused'). Critical and reflexive questions illuminate these risks:

- Macro: Am I 'vulnerable' or NEET? Do these labels predict my future? Are they shaping my identity?
- Meso: Which stories did I receive and build with my family, the buddies in the residence centre, the educators and other professionals, schoolmates, teachers, and so on? Did I learn myths, representations, identity scripts? What was being 'looked after' for me? Can I unlearn it?
- Micro: How do I deal with my story? How do see myself, or relate to my experience? Am I becoming an adult, and how?

Stories show dilemmas. For example, between the institutional definition of successful practices in residential care and its subjective experience. Or, between autonomy and heteronomy, often polarized in taking decisions, e.g., between living on one's own or going back to family. Dilemmas are often expressed as questions: 'If I go back to my family home, will this be a failure? Will it ruin my future?' Biographical interviews show tensions between falling into clichés and/or developing a personal script, a different identity or theory, or a deeper understanding of social determinants. These need to be contrasted, somehow, in the pursuit of one's own meaningful life (a process called 'biographicity', see Alheit & Dausien, 2000).

## Methodology

We started by interviewing a small sample of ten care leavers. Sampling itself was the result of a reflexive dialogic process with a group of professionals who coordinate residential units. They are involved in our research as co-researchers and insiders of the context that we want to illuminate by implementing a compositional method (Formenti, 2008), connecting different perspectives and allowing multiple descriptions (Bateson, 1979). More practically, we needed their collaboration to define the features of our sample and to get in touch with young adults whom we could interview. The first research meeting started a rich conversation that questioned previous ideas and hidden assumptions on both sides. For instance, those regarding 'administrative extension' programmes (from eighteen to twenty-one) which we interpreted as meant to sustain transition by creating a protected space for the unprepared. On the contrary, we found that the programme is suggested to the ones who have the best resources, the stronger and most motivated deemed most likely to keep on and 'make it up'. Our surprise revealed our hidden assumption that 'vulnerability' is a reason for intervention: we were unconsciously confirming that help is linked to fragility as compensation. Professionals applied, as they said, more realistic criteria linked to limited resources. Since the offer can be made only to a few, they choose the ones with better odds. So we ended up recognizing assumptions, perspectives and maybe prejudices on both sides. Our meetings in the project were not intended to build consensus. On the contrary, differences and curiosity were praised in the name of complexity.

Our sample of ten care leavers is not meant to be representative, but interesting (Merrill & West, 2009). It is a diverse group, in terms of gender and age (eighteen to twenty-seven), ethnic origins, religion, extension measures, work, living in the original family, with or without a partner, and having (or not having) problems with justice. Their unique voices can clarify the nature of the transition of leaving care better than any statistics. This sampling has a limit, as one professional said: 'It will be almost impossible to have the most interesting ones, those whom we have more in our hearts, that is, those who said no and choose their own way, since that is their own way and we have to respect it'.



The co-construction of a safe relationship during the interview was sustained by building a dialogical 'good-enough space' (Merrill & West, 2009) based on reciprocal learning and reflexivity. These subjects are expert interviewees who volunteered to participate, but we wanted to reduce the risk of an instrumental habitus learned in meetings with professionals, one of telling people what they want to hear. We assumed that participants were also able to position themselves in relation to received narrations during the interview (and this did happen). We wanted to listen to their personal theory and positioning expressed in their own terms. In questioning how stories influence the development of an adult identity in residential care, we were looking for clues of self-fulfilling prophecies, learning processes, and negotiations of meaning, or any sign of transition from vulnerability to agency, from protection to empowerment.

So, we started each interview with an open question: 'This interview is about your experience in residential care... where would you start in order to tell us about that?' We then let the narration flow, but we were also active, asking questions and giving feedback, both verbal and non-verbal. We had a guideline of four topics to inspire further questions:

- Present and future (How is life today? Do you have projects?);
- Education and training (Tell me about school. Any learning project in your future?);
- Relationships (Are you still in contact with those who looked after you? Was anyone, any relationship, particularly important for you?);
- Becoming an adult (Becoming an adult in foster care: what does it mean for you? Do you see yourself as an adult person?).

Our research goes beyond individual interviews, entailing further group meetings with participants and professionals. It involves using participatory inquiry to build a good-enough theory (Heron, 1996) by researching with rather than on people, connecting reflection and action, data and interpretation, and engaging participants in actions, observations and records of their own experience. This is an ethical choice, contrasting the discourse of vulnerability by treating others as adult partners.

## Case Studies: Multiplying our Discursive Frameworks

**W**e present here three stories to show the complexity of leaving care. We realized, as researchers, that we were enacting the discourses we live by, not least, in the ways we were analysing and interpreting our interviews. We are different: Andrea is an early-career researcher in adult education, previously an educator in the care system; Laura is an experienced academic with a long-standing relationship with care agencies and other stakeholders; Mirella has a double identity as an early-career researcher in sociology with a degree in literature. So, we wrote these case studies (and performed the interviews) from different postures, or discursive frames. Andrea took the stance of a researcher and educator who tries to be faithful to the interview as a relational event. Laura is guided by a question that came to her during the interview: how relevant are relationships in sustaining the transition? And what kind of relationships? Mirella fictionalizes her interview in order to celebrate interpretation as a process that can capture meaning beyond the individual story. This diversity reminds us that biographical research is not about objectifying people's lives or narrowing stories down to categories. As researchers, we take a responsibility — and in some measure we take 'care' — of the stories that we trigger, co-construct, and edit. We use these stories to enhance a complex understanding of life.

### 'Sheepdog or Alpha-Dog?': Andrea Describes Meeting Gabriel

**A**t the start of the interview, Gabriel distances himself from his past — 'a bygone record' — and what could be my prejudice: 'I could tell you about old episodes but I will never tell them in anguish... if this is what is expected from me'. He refuses to indulge in the 'negative situation' at home, resulting in his outplacement at ten. He does not remember a lot, he claims, about living together with his mother (normally, coming home from school I found her plastered after an alcoholic morning [...] as it turns out, she wanted to commit suicide and she was going to kill me too'), father ('I remember fighting, the rare times he was there'), and sister ('she also had her slot in my memory but for a shorter time'). He describes it with a sort of detachment. 'Objectively, I had my problems, but I guess you do too, don't you?'

A dominant topic in our interview concerns what an educator should do in a child residence centre. Gabriel regrets that too many professionals seem not to be interested in listening; instead, their questions are aimed at interpreting or explaining a child's behaviour: 'sometimes for professional reasons they forget they are dealing with children, not with other professionals [...] I felt psychoanalysed more than listened to'. Professionalization bothers him: he believes educators should not have a degree but behave as an 'older brother' endowed with enough life experience to cope with distress. It is a matter of 'vocation', not profession.

Gabriel tells stories of young educators who were unprepared to face reality in a child residence, to meet someone like himself who 'stayed in hell and outlived it'. However, beside criticisms, the attention of professionals was highly desired, necessary, and sought out. This was a titanic endeavour: another seven young boys were living in the same place, crying out for attention, sometimes by breaking down doors or coming back late at night, stoned. How did he manage to get attention? 'I always tried to be part of you [the educators] and not the little one to be looked after. I still have the keys of the place; I knew all their shifts, the amounts of money that were given to the other boys... that was my way to get attention.' His efforts to create a horizontal connection with the adults around him often resulted in violent quarrels: 'Sometimes I provoked the other [the educator] just for the taste of it, just to face up to him and hold my head high, just to prove that I am not a young boy but *your* equal, even if I wasn't like that. I felt myself growing up through this feeling of being equal with adults.'

Gabriel's self-narrative is mostly centred on his capacity to face up to other people, namely adults, and to know how they should help the children in such situations. But he is able to reflect on and criticize his own behaviour: 'I was so focused on myself and the need to show my iron hand... that I forgot those standing in front of me... those persons deserving my attention...'. He does not feel ready to be an educator: 'I know that I am not ready to take care of another person... it is probably related to my experience... I still feel like the one to be taken care of.' And 'I was never taught to take care of others'.

Now, aged twenty-five, seven years after leaving care, Gabriel is engaged to a man of forty-three: 'for me this is the best choice as he is

youngish, we do the same identical things, and at the same time he has those past experiences that allow him to be my mentor and my guide'. He makes a connection between the way his partner relates to him and the way a good educator should behave: 'I am happy when he simply hugs me. But the little one in the care centre feels the same desire... he's just not interested in someone sitting on the other side of a desk and trying to understand him'.

Before meeting his partner, Gabriel had to learn how to survive outside the care centre. It was difficult and painful: 'when you go back home you receive everything at once...'. He realized that he had lived in a 'bell jar', not preparing him for the future, for going back to his father, disconnected from relationships, in a new territory, unable to find a job, poor. And very naive about 'paying the bills', 'what you should and should not buy', or how to 'manage your time, your rhythms of working and living'. He worked these things through, however, thanks to significant others who were helpful: his grandparents, who bought a car for him to enable him to move, and a neighbour, who found him a job to help him keep going.

The complexities of this transition made him critical of the way he had been looked after: 'you have this place with eight young troubled boys and do nothing but keep them in check? You are a sheepdog and not the alpha dog! You are keeping us at bay; you are managing! That's not how it should be! You do not make sure that I don't jump over the fence. You teach me what is there outside the fence and how to manage the fence itself'.

Towards the end of the interview, when asked, Gabriel says that he does not feel like an adult now, as he 'is not yet facing the world all alone'. Living with an older partner and his mother, he does not need to care about fundamental things: 'I still have to learn how to manage with bills and rent payments...'. This is an advantage with a drawback: 'after twenty-five years, I still don't have a place that I consider my own'. However, he feels different now, when considering his life: 'I'm really proud that I didn't let my life break me up... I didn't defeat my life and was not defeated by it... I just made it a part of myself... I might live it coldly, but I remember it warmly. I don't see my life as a tragedy; I see it as neither happy nor sad. It is the route I made to get to be myself, as I am now.'

Gabriel positioned himself actively during the interview, in many regards. He is very clear in defining our relationship: ‘This is not a dialogue; it’s me telling you, totally one-sided’. He is able to criticize the discourses and, even more so, the practices he lived by. He is developing his own ideas about the transition from being looked after — in a way he considers inadequate today — to adult life. He is able to recognize his feeling of being unprepared to live alone, to take care of others, and his dependence on his partner about practical things. He also regrets that many of his ‘brothers’ failed somehow. His interview is a gold mine for educators and professionals working in fostering.

### ‘No Bed of Roses, If You Go Against the Tide’: Laura and Issa’s Story

When I meet Issa, I get a surprise: I expected an Egyptian or Moroccan Muslim but the person in front of me is a tall Black Ivorian with a strong handshake, direct gaze and unlikely accent from Bergamo, the city where he has lived for half of his twenty-seven years. He has a rich vocabulary and the eloquence of an educated person. I know that he works in a bakery, so I find myself wondering about his education. I then discover that he has talked about his experiences on previous occasions, e.g., when he was invited to do so by the University of Bergamo, and this could have fixed his narrative as a polished master story. Regardless, his reflectiveness is amazing. He has developed a clear view of himself, of the many tensions and dilemmas he has had to face, and the trajectory towards the person he is becoming.

His story contains many plots but one emerges with more force: it is the story of an ordeal, of many and difficult challenges, and literal struggles for life. It is a story of redemption, but with no sign of mythical build-up or a hero story. It is also a story of violence. Our contact person described him as a difficult boy when he was looked after. ‘Once, he sent an educator to the hospital with a broken arm’.

‘Going against the tide’ is a frequent expression he uses to describe himself as a difficult adolescent with a complicated family, featuring ‘quarrels, disease’. ‘They did not realize ... for them I was a little boy ... but I understood and lived those experiences on my skin. When I saw my mother crying, I rebelled.’ He was a rebel but ‘for an adolescent,



it's normal'. At eighteen, Issa decided to leave care and refused the administrative extension programme. He expected 'to have the world at his feet, a job, a car' but soon realized that 'out there, there were no more educators, I had no reference points'. Nowadays, Issa defines as 'tantrums' his outbursts in the children's home, prior to meeting 'real facts', which was a 'devastating experience'.

When you become 'legally adult' after fostering, you have to 'restart from zero'. So, when Issa realized that his family was stuck in the same situation that had brought about his institutionalization five years previously, he decided to transfer to another city:

I went back home. I thought the situation would be different. During the meetings with social workers I had seen my parents close ranks but all of it was about staging things and lying... I was grown enough at that point and able to understand the situation and the only solution for me was to go off. Distance myself from this situation, which had hurt me so much in the past. Find a job... leave the school...

He was alone, with no frameworks but a well-paid job. 'I thought I was filthy rich. Only a few months ago I had fights with my educators for the 20-euro handouts they gave to me, and now I come to take 1200 euros with no one there to say how I should spend them or do like this or like that.' He soon lost his job, due to his unreliability. Then, the financial crisis limited the job opportunities in the region: 'a sort of catastrophe. I didn't even know where to go. I stayed around at friends' places for at least 3–4 months ... they hosted me very kindly, then I got away... I enrolled in the Foreign Legion'.<sup>4</sup>

Laura: 'How come?' The pitch of my voice, its register, reveals my astonishment. Decidedly, this is a man of surprises!

'I felt useless... I was very young and very naïve and I had nobody to answer to.' These words reveal what may happen to a young man who is alone, who finds no recognition or love in the eyes of the 'other' (Honneth, 1996) and is overwhelmed by a feeling of unworthiness: Issa found an extreme solution. If this was happening today, he might embrace some form of radicalization or even terrorism (West, 2016). Hopelessness and solitude lead you to search for meaning and often you can find it in communities where you belong. But in the Foreign Legion, Issa met brutality: 'The idea of hurting or killing someone for

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4 Military unit of the French army staffed by foreign volunteers.

money', 'that world, so manly and brutal at the same time', 'they change your life, you lose your identity, if you die nobody cares, you are a name on a list'. His comrades were stragglers and losers with stories of failure, escaped from war. 'I understood immediately, that world was not mine', but it was impossible to leave as he had signed a contract for five years. He feared that he would not make it, but, unexpectedly, he received help within the Legion — 'they took me under their wing', 'it's like brotherhood' — and eventually found a diplomatic way out, one year after recruitment. Italy was the only place in the world where he had once felt a sense of home. So, he came back. But he had lost everything. He was homeless and desperate.

Issa reflects: 'That experience was of service, indeed, since prior to that... I was an overheated boy, almost violent, but that world changed me, since I met people who were far more violent than me, far more [he heaves a sigh] it's a human experience that cannot be cancelled'.

The details of his story are difficult to bear but he does not over-emphasize them. He appears calm and reflective while he tells me about the brainwashing, the extreme control and severe punishments: 'so tough and devastating that you could lose your life'. It is evident to me that he has thought a lot about those times. Eventually — he says — he took a position: 'if something doesn't kill you, it fortifies you'. He grew wiser: 'in such a context, you reason, since you could end up dead'.

Then another phase in his life began, characterized by nights at the train station and charity soups, until someone recognized him, and it was a punch 'like an arrow in my heart'. 'Is it you, Issa?' 'Well, I had a long beard, I was so different...'. She was a schoolmate, volunteering at the charity centre. A long time ago, Issa had wanted to become an educator, like her. He was ashamed. But this encounter brought hope in his life and drove him to look for solutions; he carved his path, he asked for help, from the educators and social workers who had once looked after him. 'From time to time, I went there to talk'. The unravelled fabric of his life, slowly but steadily, was re-woven. Relationships were reactivated. He began to work: 'I rolled up my sleeves'. He liked making bread. His patron did not know, for months, that he was still homeless. Then he was put forward to enter a social housing project. In the residence, many young Africans kept arriving and he offered to help with translating

paperwork for asylum seekers — and he talked. He knew that talking was important.

Multiple transitions, crises and relational factors emerge from Issa's story: they form a complex picture that illuminates the power of relationships and lucky circumstances in creating possibilities, but also Issa's capacity to think, his sensitivity and force. Immediately after leaving care, he was left alone and without any reference points. The crises arrived unexpectedly and Issa had no resources to turn to. Bad choices left him homeless, literally at a dead end, his possibilities dramatically narrowed down. Relationships helped him to find a way out, but he had to decide that he could trust them. He found people who cared for him, who saw the good in him (even in the Foreign Legion) and recognized him as worthy. He used his knowledge and previous experience of the care system to rebuild his life: a life where solidarity and a new paternal role are crucial now. As he says: 'I like the person that I have become!'

### ‘I Smile but It’s No Smiling Matter’: Mirella Re-Telling Nello’s Story

**N**ello is not used to the beauty of the countryside. Grace, balance and harmony are new to his life. He loves his solitary strolls and the feelings in his body: embryonic emotions, hardly discernible at the threshold of his twenty-four years, after a story of conflict, violence, loneliness. Walking to the underground, headed home, memories come to his mind.

I remember that day, one like any other, I got a swollen eye and her ankle was bruised. It was not normal; it was not an argument between teenagers looking for trouble. That was the usual mess with my mother. I punched her; she punched me. Day after day, things went on in disarray. Since birth, my parents always beat me. When I grew up, I did the same. I rebelled, making the most of my imagination, using knives and other tools, anything I could get. And any excuse was good to start.

Police often came in. That day, they swooped home in the thick of it, when I had just got heated. I was sixteen, and there were no more excuses. A rigmarole of denunciations began. I reported my mother and she reported me. We liked to denounce each other, until that damned and lucky day, when I had to choose. I was eighteen and I had already been

reported so many times to social services. I was found guilty, so I had to choose — jail or residence? I chose the latter. Happy choice. If I had not, I would not be the person I am now. My brothers followed a different path: neither of them was removed from our home. Nevertheless, my sister Daniela is fragile and too keen to abandon herself to her own weaknesses. Gigi, my brother, is the pride of our family, with a degree in agronomy and working in some gardening centre.

I was the one who went to a children's residence. But it worked for me! I was living in the midst of threats, shouts and quarrels, and — incredible to say — I saw the gleam of quiet. I feel so lucky; my family come from the old school: they always believed in solving problems with beatings. They were inflexible and old-fashioned, and I was violent.

Nello walks to the subway. A deafening noise catches his attention. It comes from a building site: people cutting marbles to pave the square. The screech of the sawblade on stone is ear-splitting. The sun heats his neck and the jumper that his brother gave to him itches. Inexpressible impatience drives him downstairs to the subway. He thinks back to adolescence and psychological treatment, those Tuesday afternoons spent in the company of the lady. A friendly presence; she was quiet; he could tell her everything. Her house had a cocoon-like atmosphere. 'When I grew up, I realized that I had told her so much! I really like that kind of job!'

The metro stops. While getting off, Nello's eye is caught by black-blue stripes: an advert for his favourite soccer team, Atalanta. A passion, 'like falling in love for someone. That takes me back!' He climbs the stairs. Gets in the elevator. Sticks the key in the lock. He is in now. Memories are gone. A comfortable silence washes the house.

## Conclusions

**W**hat is discursive multiplication? How does it work? In this chapter, we introduced different discursive levels to explore leaving care and the transition to adult life.

At a macro level, institutional discourse tends to define, categorize, offer solutions, make previsions. It is structured by professional expertise, rules, laws, hierarchy. Welfare agencies make their decisions based on categorization (diagnosis, assessment) and the available resources are always deemed insufficient (for what, you might ask?). This level is blind

to meaning, emotions and perceptions. As our participants told us, they were put into residential care because of difficult family relationships (as we said, this is not always the case). Their families were stigmatized as inappropriate environments for them to live in.

The discourse at a meso level touches family myths and scripts, attitudes and behaviours among peers, the role of mentors and educators, as multiple voices that define reality, that offer listening or recognition or solutions in a way that is always coherent with the context and the reciprocal definition of identities within the ongoing relationship. These processes may be inadequate, hopeless, or stigmatizing. Yet, they are always relevant, for better or worse. Our case studies explore how relationships and interactions shape lives, offer models, open possibilities, sometimes on purpose, but in most cases working at the edges of consciousness. These relationships need special care and attention, since a child or an adult can be unprepared to ask for help, to accept love, or to invest energy in them. This is the level and role of education and good educators.

The participant's voice, at a micro level, struggles to find a way forward, drifting among different discourses. Voice is local, unique; it changes over time, with emotions, even during an interview. It must be clear that we have a version of the stories here: some of their aspects might have crystallized beforehand, while others are co-created during the interview. They are changing.

The researchers' gaze brings forth another level of discourse. In our analysis, we tried to show that our interpretation is not neutral: as a re-storying of the interview it is a selective process, a (re)presentation of the researcher as well as the subject. We are three, and more interpreters will be involved in cooperative phases of this research. The multiplication of perspectives never ends.

A meta-discourse is also present in our study: the conventional perspective proper to western culture demands an adult to be autonomous. The 'cybernetics of Self' (Bateson, 1972, pp. 309–37) that dominates our epistemology is a sort of addiction hindering our capability to surrender and accept vulnerability. Our case studies show that, at some point, being able to ask for help, to accept one's own limits and trust dialogue are necessary to cope with transition (in this case, from care to adult life). Our stories describe the struggles of three



young men to become 'relatively adult' in a world where employment, housing, well-being, worthiness, and meaning depend on relationships with significant others. All of them described being alone, left with no reference points, lacking crucial experience, learning and competences, or receiving misplaced help, and yet finding the inner and outer resources to keep on keeping on. They experienced significant danger, literally risking death, or killing people, or embracing fundamentalist ideas; the most dangerous discourses of our times. Any practice of education with care leavers should take into account these risks and multiply discourses to overcome them.

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