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Youths over 18 receiving support from the child welfare service: evolving motivation in the interaction between the youth and the caseworker

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the interaction between youths and caseworkers and how it influences youths' motivation during emerging adulthood. The study is based on qualitative interviews with 10 youths aged 18–23 and six child welfare caseworkers. The interviews were analysed using a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach. In the analysis, we examine which factors motivated youths to evolve in the interaction between the youth and the caseworker. The findings interrelate and categorize into four topics: Interaction to explore youths' desire for independence forms a base for evolving motivation. Secondly, motivation evolves in the interaction to tailor the follow-up to meet youths' wishes and needs. The third topic shows that relationships with support allow motivation to progress. Last, interaction relies on caseworkers' presence and competence. Evolving motivation involves balancing support and self-determination, contributing to youths coping, development and autonomy.

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Introduction

The article concerns youths' motivation when they are over 18 and receive help from the Child Welfare Services [CWS]. In Norway, youths aged 18 to 25 May receive aftercare from the CWS (The Norwegian Child Welfare Act [CWA], 2021, § 3–6). Aftercare either maintains or replaces the earlier offered measures and aims to support and facilitate a safe and predictable transition to adulthood (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion [Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion 2011]). The most common measures in 2003–2020 were financial support, housing with follow-up from a social worker, and foster care (Oterholm and Paulsen 2022). Aftercare is voluntary and depends on youths' consent. The article explores how the interaction between the youth and the caseworker influences motivation to evolve when they receive help from the CWS. We also provide practical insights on encouraging youths to stay in contact with the CWS during aftercare.

Even though the number of youths receiving aftercare increased from 2003 to 2020 (Oterholm and Paulsen 2022), only 20–30% of the youths who potentially could receive aftercare received aftercare (Paulsen et al. 2020). There are different reasons why youths do not receive aftercare. Some ended contact with the CWS years ago and do not need support. Others are doing fine and have support in their private network. Still, many young people who seemed to need continued support

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did not receive this (Paulsen et al. 2020). In interviews with young people exiting the CWS, we found they were often uninformed about their possibilities for continued support (Paulsen et al. 2020). Some youths were ambivalent about maintaining contact with the CWS because of negative experiences, such as conflicts and disagreements, lack of information, and distrust in the CWS (Paulsen et al. 2020). Young people also turned down or ended aftercare due to experiencing a lack of measures and flexibility and a mismatch between the support offered and their needs.

At the same time, we know from research that youths with CWS experience found the transition to adulthood abrupt and challenging. They felt unprepared for adulthood and left alone without the necessary support (Glynn 2021; Höjer and Sjöblom 2013). Gyphen et al. (2017) highlight that youths need assistance into adulthood, as they often lack the skills to handle stressful events when ageing out of care. Studies show that with support through relationships, youths feel allowed time to mature, providing them space to develop, learn, and experience gradual independence (Glynn 2021; Hedin 2017; Hiles et al. 2013; Riise 2024b). Aftercare may increase the completion rate of upper secondary school and prevent receipt of social security and work benefits (Paulsen, Thoresen, and Wendelborg 2022). This makes it relevant to consider how support through aftercare impacts youths' motivation in the transition to adulthood.

When interviewing caseworkers, they had various views on why some young people do not receive continued support (Paulsen et al. 2020). Often, they considered youths' lack of motivation as a reason for not giving or ending aftercare. This implies that if caseworkers perceived that youths lacked motivation, providing them with the necessary support to transition to adulthood was difficult. The perceptions of motivation vary, perhaps because of varying definitions. The definitions often include persons' drive or motivators or maintaining goal-directed activities. Kirzner and Miserandino (2023) find it problematic that the definitions implicate that motivation leads directly to action and task completion and highlight that action and task completion require more than motivation. In the article, we understand that motivation is factors that initiate and control behaviour (Diseth 2023, 15). Motivation depends on direction components, such as aims and choices, and energy components, such as a person's drive and persistence (Diseth 2023). We explore how the interaction between the youth and the caseworker can contribute with direction and energy components and evolve youths' motivation. The research question in the article is: What factors in the interaction between the youth and the caseworker influence motivation to receive aftercare to evolve in the transition to adulthood?

We understand youths' motivation as dynamically evolving through aftercare, from receiving information about aftercare to interaction, dialogue, and reflections regarding their choice to receive aftercare. The study aims to contribute to knowledge about youths' experiences of receiving CWS support between youth and adulthood and CWS practice. We assume that participation and the youth's experience of autonomy may influence motivation. In the article, we relate the interaction to facilitating youths' right to participate in aftercare (CWA, 2021, § 1–4; United Nations General Assembly, 1989, art. 12), which involves receiving customized information, expressing opinions and emphasizing them by age and maturity Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion (2011). Facilitating youths' participation based on age and maturity includes considering the life phase 'emerging adulthood', characterized by identity exploring and trying out ways of living and their possibilities (Arnett 2014).

Background

Transitioning to adulthood is a complex journey for youths with CWS experience, fraught with several challenges. Research often focuses on the risks of disadvantages across various domains, such as education, employment, housing, economy, health, and involvement in crime (Gyphen et al. 2017; McDowell 2022; Paulsen, Thoresen, and Wendelborg 2022). While this research is crucial for policy and practice development, it tends to overshadow the fact that youths navigate multiple and

parallel transitions into adulthood (Paulsen and Berg 2016). The complexity of these transition processes and how youths address the outcomes of their transition processes are equally important.

Youths are in a life phase where they make decisions about their future and become increasingly independent. However, these responsibilities and expectations can contrast with their earlier experiences of receiving care and support (Jackson and Cesaroni 2021; Paulsen et al. 2020), especially as the transitions are challenged by a lack of emotional support from informal networks (Höjer and Sjöblom 2013; Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman 2018). Studies highlight that young people in state care left care at a younger age than their peers and coped with significant life changes in less time (Stein 2012). Youths with CWS experience needed more time to finish upper secondary high school and education, amongst other factors influencing their transition (Gypen et al. 2017). Additionally, they experienced transitions that were poorly planned and compressed (Höjer and Sjöblom 2013). They felt a pressure to be self-reliant when they were ‘ageing out’ (Cunningham and Diversi 2013), although the alternate between independence and dependence was part of the transition to adulthood (Furey and Harris-Evans 2021; Paulsen and Berg 2016). Supportive, stable and caring relationships with adults were protective factors as they developed resilience and the ability to stay motivated (Jackson and Cesaroni 2021). This contributed to youths finding ways to move forward positively with their lives.

The changes in youths’ lives underscore the necessity of professionals to meet youths’ needs for various support. Goemans, van Breda, and Kessi (2021) emphasize that the desire for independence engaged with developing into adulthood while clinging to childhood. The alternation between dependence and independence reflects that a need for support fluctuates (Paulsen and Berg 2016). Supportive relationships were substantial for youths dealing with challenges in emerging adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman 2018). Mentoring relationships played a role in assisting youths in finding suitable housing (Lenz-Rashid 2018), pursuing and improving education (Garcia-Molsosa, Collet-Sabé, and Montserrat 2019; Katz and Geiger 2020), and engaging in employment (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan 2015; Backe-Hansen et al. 2014; Strand, Bråthen, and Grønningsæter 2015). According to Strand, Bråthen, and Grønningsæter (2015), the motivation for assistance in employment measures increased when youths received help over time and had accessible social workers. Supervisors’ perspectives on the youth as competent and trustworthy supported their self-belief and motivation, contributing to youths extending their goals in work measures (Adley and Kina 2017). The relationship between the youth and the supervisor included a mentor-like relationship in which the young person experienced emotional support and care (Furey and Harris-Evans 2021). Developing relationships and trust by facilitating the mentor’s position and the youth’s coping was crucial for the latter’s motivation (Backe-Hansen et al. 2014). These studies imply support that nourishes youths’ coping and ambitions. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how aspects of support influence motivation.

The volunteer aspect of receiving aftercare makes it relevant to review studies that indicate youths’ interaction with professionals in the transition to adulthood. Studies show that social workers’ facilitation of participation and self-determination through relationships and formal support appeared crucial for youths’ engagement in future-oriented help (Goemans, van Breda, and Kessi 2021; Katz and Geiger 2020; Riise and Paulsen 2022). Hyde and Atkinson (2019) emphasized that continuing relationships strengthened youths’ motivation for adult support and their attitude towards receiving support. The youths appreciated the adult’s availability and personal and genuine support. However, limited and failed follow-up and the absence of meaningful relationships lead to a loss of motivation (Backe-Hansen et al. 2014; Katz and Geiger 2020). In interaction, youths consider the quality of emotional support (Nagpaul and Chen 2019). A former study shows that youths had strategies to regulate contact with the social worker in collaboration and impact aftercare measures (Riise 2024a). Thus, the interaction and caseworkers’ responsibility to nurture the interaction appears essential for youths’ motivation.

CWS caseworkers’ responsibility is confirmed in the law and their professional role. However, youths’ consent and engagement in the help were often based on fear of sudden

lack of material resources, of failing to meet the criteria for receiving help, and the assurance of not being left to manage on their own (Goemans, van Breda, and Kessi 2021; Katz and Geiger 2020; Paulsen et al. 2020). This highlights the need to consider motivation due to interaction. Youths recognize the need for internal psychological resources, such as values and intrinsic motivation, and support from significant persons, which could help them gain confidence and build their self-worth (Nagpaul and Chen 2019). In Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman's (2018) study, care leavers emphasized that self-reliance was a source of motivation and persistence – a quality that helped them cope. An integrative approach, including personal and environmental aspects, can elevate youths' future expectations, which are powerful sources of resilience and motivation (Sulimani-Aidan 2017). This strengthens the impression of youths' motivation as evolving in the relationships in which they interact and the conditions of these interactions. To understand youths' motivation, we need to comprehend the aims in the longer term and consider the interaction within the CWS structures.

Theoretical framework

The article explores the interaction to evolve motivation for youths receiving aftercare in the life phase between youth and adulthood. According to Diseth (2023), 15), motivation is the factors that initiate and control behaviour. We relate these factors to what initiates youths' interaction with the caseworkers and what keeps them interacting with the caseworkers in aftercare. Diseth (2023) divides motivation factors into direction and energy components. Direction components determine that aims and choices are made. Aims and choices in aftercare may concern how to finish education. Energy components initiate behaviour and determine effort and persistence (Diseth 2023). In aftercare, youths' efforts may depend on monthly financial support.

The motivation can be extrinsic or intrinsic, referring to whether activities feel imposed or autonomous. Gagnè and Deci (2005) describe the differences between controlled and autonomous extrinsic motivation in work measures. Controlled extrinsic motivation involves a feeling of imposed or forced activity, while autonomous extrinsic motivation means making decisions and choices without acting with interest or joy (Gagnè and Deci 2005). Autonomy refers to the need to feel volitional and the opportunity to have the experience of choice and exercise free will (Deci and Ryan 2000; Gagnè and Deci 2005) rather than being pressured to follow professionals or services (Kirzner and Miserandino 2023). Intrinsic motivation relies on autonomous activities, as it relates to 'the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore and to learn' (Ryan and Deci 2000, 70). We find the descriptions relevant for youths in aftercare, as they sometimes experience the follow-up imposed because of standardization and lack of individual assessment (Riise 2024a). However, they still find ways to collaborate on aftercare. This implies there is potential within the aftercare context to evolve youths' motivation.

The interaction perspective on motivation is relevant, as motivation for aftercare can be perceived as a process where caseworkers must strive to follow up with youths so that they develop motivation and stay motivated to achieve their aims (Backe-Hansen 2021). This implies that motivation relies on interaction and collaboration between the youth and the caseworker. Backe-Hansen (2021) highlights that motivation work is an ongoing process of searching for the incentives which strengthen and maintain the drive to continue towards aims. In the article, we assume that motivation involves youths' participation and experience of self-determination when emerging adulthood. Arnett (2014) refers to 'emerging adulthood' as the life phase involving several parallel but distinct developmental characteristics and is filled with possibilities and choices that influence youths' futures. Self-determination is a part of the life phase as youths explore their identity between youth and adulthood. Self-determined behaviour is what individuals perceive as voluntary, springing from their interests and values and being regulated by their own choices (Deci and Ryan 2000). For youths with CWS experiences, the transition to adulthood is described as a psychosocial transition, including developing interpersonal competence, self-confidence and safety (Stein 2012). Thus, the interaction evolving youths' motivation may relate to facilitating empowerment,

contributing to youths' coping and development (Riise and Paulsen 2022). As many youths with CWS experience rely on aftercare support when emerging adulthood, it is relevant to consider how motivation relates to the desire to achieve positive outcomes or avoid adverse (Deci and Ryan 1987).

Methods

This article draws on data from a larger research project (Paulsen et al. 2020) and was reported to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), according to Norwegian research ethics conventions. In the research project, we recruited a convenience sample of caseworkers by directly contacting the CWS or by contacting them at the request of employees in allied services, municipalities, and within the researcher networks. The caseworkers recruited youths and conveyed information. With the youths' consent, the caseworkers provided their contact information to the researchers. The interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guides. In interviews with caseworkers and the youths, the interaction experiences in the preparations and follow-up were topics. We became aware of some informants' perspectives and insights into how interaction affected youths' motivation. For this study, we selected interviews specifically themed on motivation in the descriptions of consenting to aftercare and the follow-up. As such, our sample was not representative. However, the study aims to offer perspectives and insights into youths' and caseworkers' experiences. Given the relative novelty of this article's aims and this study's qualitative and explorative nature, we believe the combination of perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding and highlight some implications for practice.

The findings are based on qualitative interviews with 10 youths (seven women and three men) aged 18 to 23 and six child welfare caseworkers (three women and three men) in five middle-sized and large Norwegian municipalities. The municipalities had organized caseworkers with youth or aftercare responsibility or general responsibility who followed up with youths. One youth received help living at home before receiving aftercare, whilst the rest had been in foster care. Two youths had ended or were about to end aftercare, while the rest were receiving aftercare at the time of the interview. The youths were employed in a job, school, or education (apprenticeship, upper secondary, or folk high school). They received aftercare measures such as foster care, housing, follow-up and economic support. Depending on the CWS organization, two caseworkers were responsible for following up on children and families, and four followed up with youths in foster care or aftercare. Even though they all had followed up with youths in aftercare, their experiences varied from working with youths in foster care, institutions, living at home or in their flat. In an analysis of an earlier study (Paulsen et al. 2020), we perceived that the caseworkers were not concerned with motivation. The selection of caseworkers and youths as informants is based on the content of the interviews, where they described aims and interaction.

Aside from two interviews in which two informants were together, all the interviews were conducted individually. The interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed. Their experiences were written as general findings, and the statements were anonymized. The first author, who also conducted the interviews and the analysis, translated the quotes in the article into English. The second author was a sounding board and discussion partner.

Analysis

In the analysis, we were inspired by phenomenology and hermeneutics. For this article, we strived to capture both caseworkers' and youths' perceptions of what contributed to youths' motivation. This can relate to phenomenology, as it seeks to capture life as such, the vital immediate creation of meaning that occurs all the time in a human's individual and social world of experience (Rendtorff 2018). Additionally, we wanted to challenge our pre-understandings to gain new understanding. This aligns with the intention in hermeneutics, where the researcher considers whether distinct parts are helpful, and pre-understandings are confirmed and negated

(Kristiansen 2017). Data reduction was done by reading and marking extracting text sections that thematized youths' motivation and caseworkers' motivation work. Next, we sought themes which included perceptions of youths' needs, wishes, and circumstances, which resulted in a change in motivation.

We analysed the interviews with the youths and the caseworkers separately to gain insight into different perspectives. There were similar and different focuses. They both perceived that professional help could motivate the youth but had different perceptions of regularity and quality. Next, we interpreted the perceptions between interviewees and between the groups of youths and caseworkers. Within the group of caseworkers, there were descriptions of motivating work that contributed to an understanding of how they thought about and facilitated an engagement. Youth informants described how life situations influenced their interaction with the caseworker. Analysing parts of the data material and the informant groups separately relate to the hermeneutic circle, in which we built our understanding on pre-understanding, and it provided new understanding to develop (Kristiansen 2017). Further, we explored the themes by connecting the informants' interaction descriptions. We studied the descriptions and expectations of contact, relationships, and follow-up. For example, youths and caseworkers wanted to find solutions to challenges in the interaction. However, when the caseworker used expectations in the follow-up to motivate the youth, the youths experienced the follow-up as standardized. Studying both youths' and caseworkers' perspectives challenged our pre-understandings from former analysis and paved the way for new understandings.

Empirical findings

The analysis shows that the interaction between the youth and the caseworker influenced and evolved motivation. We find that youths and caseworkers had various experiences of what contributed to motivation in the transition to adulthood. The findings are categorized into four interrelated topics. The first finding reflects that exploring youths' desire to become independent was a base for evolving motivation. In the second finding, motivation is related to tailoring follow-up of youths' wishes and needs. Another finding shows that experiences of support and relationships allowed motivation to progress. The fourth finding relates to caseworkers' presence and competence in the interaction, facilitating evolving motivation.

Exploring youths' desire for independence

We find that youths express a desire for independence. When they received information about aftercare follow-up and measures early on, they had time to consider their need for help towards independence. The consent to aftercare relied upon various considerations. Some thought of aftercare as a backup, temporarily reassuring them of income and practical support, whereas they were self-driven in planning and finding solutions for finishing school and employment. They limited contact with the CWS. Others received various support, which eventually would lead to independence. Sophie (23) said: 'Once I hope to finish with NAV, those caseworkers, psychologists and so on (laughing). I plan to stand on my own, earn money, get a job, an education, and finish my work training'. She hoped the measures would end her reliance on welfare services. Several youths followed the aims and committed to long-term investments to become independent. They aimed to earn wages and broaden their identity beyond being a 'child in the CWS'. Then, the temporary support in aftercare became a stepping stone towards independence.

Some youths described how caseworkers supported them in contact with family and friends. Caseworkers emphasized that they had to listen when youths expressed that they did not want CWS to engage help from their network or family. Several youths had conflicts within their family and friend network but felt obliged to keep in contact with them. The support from the caseworker guided the youths to stay in contact by regulating the contact or distancing themselves. Jenny (20) experienced that the support led her to make a choice:

J: I had several alternatives but chose to live in my hometown or start fresh in the city.

A: What made you choose your hometown?

J: I could not move from my friends. I have my closest friends here.

The support for her decision and the follow-up of her decision reassured Jenny. Other youths needed support to confront and process family relationships regarding their past. Sharing their concerns often became a start to dealing with past challenges and conflicts with their families, enabling them to move forward. The follow-up and support influenced how youths would relate to their family and friends on their way to becoming independent.

Several youths perceived that they were expected to attend school and finish their education. They related the expectations to terms for receiving aftercare but perceived them as appropriate. Those who reconsidered education perceived the opportunity to change their mind as a privilege. They related the usefulness and necessity of the aftercare follow-up to whether they managed to fulfil the aims of becoming independent. However, for some, the responsibility became too much. Eliza (18) described a discontinuity in the follow-up when she moved to live by herself: 'I didn't receive any follow-up. She [the caseworker] once visited me. I asked if she could come back because it was tough. She did not listen to me. It was difficult that she did not understand'. Eliza's request for support in a phase where she was becoming independent was unmet, leaving her feeling misunderstood. Several youths experienced being left to handle situations themselves and feeling misunderstood due to CWS standardization and caseworkers' lack of time and tailoring in the follow-up.

Tailoring follow-up of youths' wishes and needs

Youths and caseworkers referred to youths' wishes and needs and reflected on steps towards fulfilling them. Most youths described the need for a stable income, a residence and access to professional help. Some expressed that they needed professional support through conversations. They settled on aims in an individual plan, such as economic and practical support, regular meetings, and follow-up, because they believed professionals had a position and competence to support them. Christopher (21) described this: 'I have a grandmother who loves me and a father who cares, but I did not know what to do, where to go. I had no money, had nothing. It felt good to have a professional network'. Often, youths highlighted that professionals accessed possibilities other than those offered by private networks.

Youths realized they needed support to handle life-changing situations, such as interruptions in education and moving out of foster care or institution. For caseworkers, exploring and following up on youths' wishes was essential. Caseworker Thomas explained how he reorganized the support to follow up on a youth about to start her apprentice period:

She [the youth] realised it was the wrong choice for her. She wanted to move to another city to attend a beauty education. . . . I said: OK, I will follow up with you if that is what you want. I argued about why it would be wise to finish one education before starting another and the consequences of changing her mind. However, it didn't mean that I didn't support her.

Caseworkers emphasized that, ultimately, it was the youth's decision. Youths highlighted the necessity of experiencing actual choices on their way to independence. When they experienced that the caseworker did not listen or meet them halfway, they related it to the caseworker's lack of time, flexibility and individual assessments.

Youths had various opinions on how close the CWS follow-up should be. Heidi (18) expressed that CWS could not have been 'a bigger burden' in the follow-up, while Sophie (23) wished that the CWS 'was fussier, called a little more and looked after' her. Several youths emphasized that the reassurance of an available and present caseworker was crucial for the contact. At the same time, youths explained that encouragement and information from others within their network were important. Christopher (21) described that he changed focus with

help from his foster mother: 'My foster mother inspired me to go on and get an education. It encouraged me to act. She was strict in a good way. She told me to do my homework as a mother should'. Together with his foster parents, the school, and the apprentice supervisor, he found solutions to finish his education. Peter (18) explained the caseworker's attitude towards cooperation with the family was crucial in his follow-up, as the focus changed with his family involved. With support from multiple helpers, the youths processed and understood the information from the CWS and, thus, found solutions.

Experiencing support through relationships

For youths to be motivated, they needed information and expectations to be conveyed clearly so they could reflect upon their options. Peter (19) described how support and information processed his reflections:

I was strongly encouraged to consent to aftercare. They [the caseworkers] gave me concrete amounts of economic support and specified that they had collaboration partners. . . . The criteria were that I went to school or worked, maintained contact with the CWS, did not drink a lot during weekdays or used drugs. If I behaved, I received aftercare. I remember that it felt extremely good because I was in a situation where I thought that the foster family expected me to move out when I turned 18. I consented [to aftercare], and they gave me more practical information before I turned 18.

With encouragement and information, Peter chose to consent to aftercare. Once the youths had consented, they had more information and conversations with their caseworker to agree upon tasks. The youths found caseworkers' knowledge and coordinated help applicable, enabling them to reflect upon and make choices about their future. However, sometimes it was difficult to proceed. Lots of information and standardized information without the conversations left youths feeling overwhelmed. Eliza (18) said: 'I just thought there was no use in me being there when she [the caseworker] pushed information on me and did not want to listen to me'. For some, there was too much to keep track of, and they felt overwhelmed by the expectations of receiving aftercare. Eliza (18) felt her questions were stupid. Some youths described feelings of not being and knowing enough in the meetings with the CWS. Jenny (19) experienced that the CWS did not listen to her unless she brought her foster mother. With the foster mother present, Jenny experienced that the caseworker listened.

A stable connection with the caseworker facilitated a relationship to establish. Sometimes, youths settled with the regular contact and did not necessarily need more help. Sophie (23) described the contact: 'The last couple of years, the contact has been very good. When I sent her [the caseworker] an SMS, I could immediately come to her office. She helped me with everything: writing applications or conversations when I felt down'. The caseworker's availability and support encouraged Sophie. The predictability in the contact gave several youths opportunities to determine and reconsider the aims of aftercare. Peter (19) said he did not have to know all the answers immediately. That made it easier to confer and ask for help. Several youths highlighted the relationship with the caseworker. Mary (18) said: «I prefer talking to my caseworker. . . . I'm not comfortable with new persons. It takes a while before I manage to express how I feel». For some youths, it was hard to speak up. They emphasized a quality in the follow-up, reflecting that the caseworker cared. A relationship which reflected that the caseworker cared for their future, encouraged them to focus on the aims towards independence.

Caseworkers' presence and competence

Several caseworkers emphasized that working with youths in aftercare demanded specific competence and skills, such as networking, building rapport and system knowledge. Caseworker Elisabeth emphasized that professionals are responsible for using their

communication and tuning-in skills to interact and gain trust: ‘Caseworkers should be able to adjust to the youths’ personalities. When I speak with youths about something we have in common, they open up, and we establish a relationship’. Both youths and caseworkers highlighted the need for time and flexibility to form relationships and spend time together. Still, two caseworkers found it hard to motivate youths with complex needs to consent to aftercare and meet with them during the follow-up. In preparations for aftercare, caseworkers guided youths through conversations and time to identify their needs. Caseworker Alice explained: ‘Consent must come from youths’ needs. It is important to have conversations to listen to them’. By hearing out the youths, they could consider their choices and structure a plan towards independence. Youths said the information and conversations were a first step towards considering aftercare. Whether their consent was initiated by the need for a backup or closer follow-up, it initiated further planning. Caseworkers expressed the necessity of agreeing upon the follow-up. Caseworker Alice: ‘We must agree. We can’t have measures that the youth doesn’t agree with’. The caseworkers with specific responsibilities towards youths or aftercare highlighted the importance of flexibility in time and arenas to meet.

Several caseworkers were concerned with direct contact and availability in the follow-up to encourage youths. Caseworker Elisabeth described it like this:

When they ask, they need answers straight away. In my opinion, we are available. I try to be compliant with them because they must not perceive that the welfare state fails them. Then, they lose motivation. . . . Thus, when they finally make that call, it is essential that they get to talk to someone, or they lose their courage.

Elisabeth’s reflection on her availability and presence reveals a concern about failing the youths placed on her professional responsibility. Caseworkers highlighted that they helped youths understand the services and the measures, and youths perceived that caseworkers’ system knowledge was necessary, especially in challenging situations and when they needed coordinated help. Caseworkers guided and trained youths to prepare for living independently or receiving measures from another service. Caseworker Alice described the follow-up as ‘teaming up with youths’. Others related the follow-up with supporting youths they had a relationship with.

Caseworkers were aware of the standardized approach to the follow-up in aftercare. Caseworker Isac said:

When you work in a system, you immediately see the standard solutions. Often, I must put in extra effort. Youths might say no, they don’t want [help], and you must push them, maybe bring them back in. There’s a lot of resistance and anxiety.

Isac’s quotation reflects that he tried to avoid standardized follow-up. All caseworkers highlighted the importance of youths’ participation in aftercare. Caseworker Alice: ‘We can’t offer aftercare without youths participating’. Their practice included listening to youths’ needs, being available for conversations, and guiding and supporting them in decision-making. Still, both youths and caseworkers described that routines were challenging. Sometimes, youths were considered self-reliant and in no further need of help. Caseworkers felt obliged to end aftercare despite the youths’ requests for support. Youths described that in this situation, they argued that they needed help and got it.

Discussion: evolving youths’ motivation

Findings show that motivation varies and evolves during aftercare follow-up, depending on the youth’s situation and the interaction between the youth and the caseworker. In preparing and establishing aftercare, they interacted to explore youths’ desire for independence. It was crucial to identify youths’ need for support, clarify expectations and agree upon aims in a plan. According to Manger and Wormnes (2022), aims are decisive for motivation and coping because they refine the

tasks, making them precise and feasible. Caseworkers strived to base the plan on youths' needs and guide their decisions. Thus, they were supporters in forming aims and in the process towards fulfilling them. Youths who called aftercare a backup related their needs to a stable short-term income on their way to finishing education and becoming independent. They limited their contact with the CWS to follow up on the regular meetings in case they needed help. Their interaction implies extrinsic motivation because their behaviour aimed to achieve benefits (Diseth 2023), such as financial support and access to help during aftercare. Their motivation relates to seizing the possibilities, which is part of emerging adulthood. Emerging adults look towards their future and are often optimistic and eager to fulfil their hopes and wishes (Arnett 2014).

For youths with limited contact with the caseworker, the motivation appears autonomous but extrinsic because their actions were without joy (Gagnè and Deci 2005). They benefitted from the contact where caseworkers facilitated the support by offering their knowledge and assistance. When youths followed up the contact in aftercare despite experiencing being unable to influence standardized measures, their motivation appears controlled and extrinsic. They seem to regulate their behaviour to energize approval or avoid shame (Deci and Ryan 2008), which is related to meeting the expectations of receiving aftercare. Even though caseworkers strived to tailor the follow-up, youths and caseworkers noticed that lack of time and assessment of youths' needs were barriers to interacting. This aligns with research showing that time allows youth the space to mature (Glynn 2021) and youths to experience participation processes where they can explore their opinions (Riise 2024b). Thus, the lack of time to interact and space to explore together with the caseworker influences evolving motivation.

Youths explained that when professionals shared information early on, they had time to consider the measures' usefulness towards their independence. Caseworkers' support is recognized as support to form opinions, where adults offer youths tools to understand (Gulbrandsen, Seim, and Ulvik 2012). While exploring and tailoring youths' needs, youths could consider and express their needs. This aligns with findings in an earlier study, showing that youths had participation processes through information and expectation exchange (Riise 2024b). In tailoring the follow-up, the interaction becomes an energy component in youths' motivation because it helps them determine the aims of aftercare by initiating youths' behaviour and effort (Diseth 2023). Youths' engagement in the conversations and tailoring of the follow-up reflects that youths experienced self-determination and autonomy. Tailoring follow-up on youths' life-changing situations offered youths options. Furrer et al. (2023) study substantiates that having a say and choices in the child welfare case supports youths' genuine preferences.

Youths' follow-up on the aims and commitment to long-term investments to become independent reflect motivation. The professionals' support is an energy component to youths' motivation, while the needs, identified and processed into aims, are direction components which motivate youths to commit to the plan. Care leavers in Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan's (2015, 187) study described similar motivation when youths applied for their first work. Their motives included earning wages, gaining independence, and broadening their identity beyond being a 'young person in care'. For the youths in aftercare, time and support to consider their options while receiving aftercare evolved motivation. Despite bad CWS experiences and ambivalence to receiving aftercare, the structures of guidance and an available and present caseworker influenced youths' motivation. Their ambivalence may reflect the instability and feeling of being between adolescence and adulthood and adult responsibility, which is recognizable for 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2014). However, for youths with backgrounds of instability and stress, the motivation can relate to leaving their current lives behind. They put in an effort and were persistent in contact with CWS. The interaction can relate to meaning work because caseworkers contextualize the youth's wishes (Gulbrandsen, Seim, and Ulvik 2012), acting as an energy component to youths' motivation. The follow-up appears crucial for motivation, as most emerging adults regard entering adulthood as an achievement and take pride in fulfilling the responsibilities

necessary for independent adult life (Arnett 2014). Then, independence and the interaction to cooperate become direction components in youths' motivation. The youths benefitted from the interaction where caseworkers facilitated the support by offering their knowledge and assistance. A study of youths' cooperation in aftercare shows that securing predictability and stability in life situations was an aim, initiating youths to continuously consider their need for support (Riise 2024a). For the youths, the temporary security became a stepping stone towards independence.

The caseworkers' tailoring and support in the interaction on several occasions substantiated motivation to evolve. If a relationship between the youth and the caseworker could develop, the cooperation and quality in the relationship appear as energy components to the youth's motivation. Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen's (2018) study underlines the importance of support through relationships for youths with limited backing in networks because it enables them to reflect self-consciously on their behaviour as part of self-determination. Some youths processed experiences from the past and conflicts with their families in their relationship with the caseworker. This aligns with Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan's (2015) study, which elaborates that support from carers and relations with employers and colleagues influenced insights into care leavers' history and led them to move beyond the identity of being in care. As such, the youth's motivation evolves to intrinsic motivation because they are interested in sharing and developing the relationship. Ryan and Deci (2000) highlight that individuals' feelings and opportunities for self-direction are acknowledged through support. Adults who knew the youths' backgrounds and advocated for them contributed to their participation in the meetings. Research highlights the importance of having trusted and caring adults as allies (Furrer et al. 2023; Riise 2024a). Several youths stated that the support, information and presence of foster parents, siblings and grandparents motivated them to speak up and claim their rights. The finding is consistent with Furrer et al. (2023) study, showing that listening to and responding to requests engaged youths. Caseworkers' practice of encouraging participation implies facilitating energy components, including listening to youths' needs, being available for conversations, and guiding and supporting them in decision-making. The practice relates to empowering, which, according to Manger and Wormnes (2022), means increasing a person's control, power, and activity to influence the life situation.

When youths distanced themselves or managed by themselves, their actions may appear autonomously motivated. However, their experiences of caseworkers not understanding their situation or a discontinuity in the follow-up may reflect a discontinuity in increasing the youths' control over their lives and, thus, empowerment. Their motivation is extrinsic if the action of managing the situation themselves is directed by pressure. There seems to be a delicate balance in these situations when interaction acts as an energy component to facilitate support, learning and independence. Berk (2013) emphasizes that in circumstances where youths allow the exploration and acquisition of new skills, they become autonomous. Emerging adults often experience a paradox of greater stress and greater freedom (Arnett 2014). However, the paradox includes having abilities to deal with stress. To deal with stress and the increased responsibility, caseworkers' practice relates to facilitating empowerment through contributing to youths' coping and development (Riise and Paulsen 2022), giving attention to their resources, knowledge and individual self-awareness (Manger and Wormnes 2023). When given time and flexibility to build rapport, the supportive relationships energized and evolved youths' motivation to handle ambivalences and adversities.

Conclusions

The study shows that the interaction between the youth and the caseworker influenced youths' motivation to evolve. The interaction involved exploring youths' desire for independence, tailoring the follow-up, facilitating support and a relationship and caseworkers' presence and competence. The study argues that motivation is not an individual

responsibility but a joint responsibility in which caseworkers have a crucial role. This calls for practice facilitating relationships and youths' access to support during emerging adulthood. In aftercare, caseworkers' practice should allow and endure motivation to fluctuate and evolve, as youths are in a life phase of exploring their possibilities and identity through experiencing self-determination. This calls for practice to be flexible and adjustable within structures that support participation and self-determination. Then practice might respect youths' autonomy by embodying them as both independent individuals and dependent on support.

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