

Living an unstable life: exploring facets of instability in the lives of care-leavers in Denmark

Anne-Kirstine Mølholt

Introduction

Social policy, research and social work practice often emphasise that vulnerable young people, such as care-leavers, live unstable lives and that this instability limits their possibilities of reaching long-term goals (Schoon and Bynner, 2003; Wulczyn et al, 2003; Stein, 2008; Ward, 2009; Clemens et al, 2017). The young people's lives are often characterised by fluctuating circumstances and life-changing decisions are made swiftly, such as prematurely leaving school or causing changes in employment, education and relationships (Schoon and Bynner, 2003; Antle et al, 2009; Mølholt, 2017). Ward (2009: 1113) highlights that experiences of instability are one of the primary reasons why welfare outcomes such as educational achievements and emotional wellbeing for children in out-of-home care often are disappointing. She emphasises that instability affects care-leavers not only while in care but also after they have left care to embark on their independent lives. However, there is limited knowledge on how care-leavers experience instability, incorporate it into their lives and assign meaning to it.

The aim of this chapter is to explore facets of instability in the lives of care-leavers by examining their experiences of everyday life. Theoretically, the chapter is inspired by the concept of a 'habitus of instability' as formulated by Justin Barker (2016). Based on his studies of homeless young people, Barker (2016: 680) emphasises that the habitus of vulnerable young people is shaped by precarious and unstable conditions of existence and that they can recreate these conditions in different contexts. Thus, many of their strategies and actions are ways of adapting to the uncertainty and instability in their past as well as their present lives. Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative longitudinal study that follows a group of care-leavers over a two-year period (Mølholt, 2017). The qualitative longitudinal study makes it possible to follow the care-leavers' experiences of instability prospectively.

The first section of the chapter introduces the field of instability in the lives of care-leavers and presents the concept of a habitus of instability. In the second section, the qualitative longitudinal methodology used to analyse the everyday life among a group of care-leavers in Denmark is introduced. The third, fourth and fifth sections, respectively, present facets of how the young people position themselves in relation to experiences of instability in their everyday life. These findings are analysed in relation to the theoretical framework of a habitus of instability. The chapter closes with a discussion about the facets of the care-leavers' experiences of instability and points to new fields of research to be explored.

Instability as a circumstance in life

Instability in life is often emphasised as a characteristic of youth in general, but whereas the instability of young people in general is often framed by concepts such as 'identity development', 'exploration' and 'possibilities' (Arnett, 2000), instability in the lives of young people in vulnerable life circumstances is framed by concepts such as 'insecurity', 'marginalisation' and 'short-term life planning' (Ward, 2009; Barker, 2016). In a similar vein, the transition for young people into an adult life is in general framed as 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000), consisting of possibilities to explore adult life before taking on the responsibilities associated with adulthood. However, the transition of young people leaving care is framed as 'instant adulthood' (Antle et al, 2009) as when leaving care, young people must take on adult responsibilities immediately, thus missing out on the preparatory and exploratory opportunities within this transition stage. Consequently, conditions seem to differ depending on the young people's social status. These different conditions not only affect and determine the lives of the young people while young and in the phase of transitioning into adulthood but seem to affect their life in a long-term perspective.

Research highlights that experiences of instability in the lives of care-leavers are connected to factors such as insecure attachments and a lack of stable relationships during their upbringing; frequent changes of household before entering care, sometimes while in care and often after leaving care; frequent changes in social workers; and disruption and discontinuity regarding their education, training and employment (Ward, 2009; Emond, 2014). These factors collectively result in the young care-leavers experiencing a lack of connectedness and belongingness (Ward, 2009; Bengtsson and Møhlolt, 2018).

Not all care-leavers live unstable lives. Stein (2012) presents three different outcome pathways for care-leavers, distinguishing between the 'moving on' group, the 'survivors' and the 'strugglers'. The moving on group is likely to have had stability and continuity during their upbringing as well as secure

and supportive relationships. They have achieved some educational success before gradually transitioning out of care to live independent lives, often with support from former carers. For the survivor's group, the time in care has been characterised by instability, movement and disruption, and they have likely experienced breakdowns of placements and have, to a lesser degree, obtained educational qualifications. After leaving care, they are likely to experience periods of homelessness, short-term job affiliations, unemployment and disconnected relationships. As for the strugglers, they tend to have had the most destructive pre-care family experiences, for which care is unable to compensate. Their time in care is often characterised by a high degree of placement moves with an associated disruption in relationships and education. After leaving care, they are often unemployed and have great difficulties in maintaining accommodation. Additionally, they are likely to be isolated and experience mental health difficulties.

Bengtsson et al (2020) add additional knowledge to the transitional pathway groups by focusing on the care-leavers' experiences of agency and use of time horizons. Their first group, 'from care to societal insiders', is comparable to the 'moving on' group and is characterised by making long-term-plans that they can follow. The second group, 'from care to societal in-betweeners', is comparable to the survivors. They represent the most inconsistent transitions as they emphasise an ability to exercise agency with goals for the future but at the same time are under pressure from social and psychiatric problems that force them to give up plans and goals. The third group, 'from care to societal outsiders', is comparable to the strugglers. They experience being forced into situations that they have no control over. They act according to a pragmatic agency considering the here-and-now, with little consideration of long-term consequences. These actions often have a negative impact on their lives and further their exclusion from relationships, accommodation and employment.

Thus, there are different pathways for care-leavers when transitioning out of care and into adulthood depending, among other things, on their experiences of instability before, during and after care. As highlighted, stability in life is a central component in the experiences of the 'moving on' group, and experiences of stability thus seem fundamental as to whether the young care-leaver becomes a societal insider or outsider. Care-leavers characterised by instability through their upbringing and during their transition out of care can develop a 'pattern of transience', where they extend the instability into their everyday adult lives (Ward, 2009: 2514). This compromises their life chances and enhances their vulnerable life situation.

This pattern of transience can be elaborated through the concept of the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus refers to a person's taken-for-granted and unreflective ways of thinking and acting, which are formed by accumulated experiences through their upbringing and social relationships, thus mediating

between the past and the present. It places each person in a social field of differentiated logics and possibilities, and thus the concept of habitus consists of a dispositional theory of action that considers the person's social position.

Inspired by the concept of habitus, [Barker \(2016\)](#) develops the concept of a 'habitus of instability' to give insight into how former patterns of instability in everyday life during their upbringing can be internalised and recreated in the everyday lives of young people. The concept outlines how conditions of existence are internalised and how instability and uncertainty become an organising theme in their lives. Consequently, this affects their life chances in the present and in the future. The concept is based on ethnographic research into the experiences of homeless young people and, as emphasised by [Barker \(2016\)](#), a large number of homeless young people have former experiences with out-of-home care. The concept addresses the internalisation and naturalisation of experiences of instability, insecurity and marginalisation, and how people can come to subjectively aspire to what 'they are socialised to see as objectively probable or "for the likes of them"' ([Barker, 2016](#): 665). The concept of a habitus of instability thus accounts for the regularities of social action while also accounting for individuals' capacity for and experiences of agency. Moreover, these are united as a group habitus when individuals share common conditions of existence and thus share social position. Changes in habitus are most likely to happen when there is a disjuncture between the expectation of the habitus and external opportunities and conditions. Thus, to enact change there must be supportive and resourceful conditions present ([Barker, 2016](#)).

A study of the everyday lives of care-leavers in Denmark

In Denmark, approximately 1 per cent of all children aged 0 to 17 are in out-of-home care. Most are taken into care as teenagers, and thus there is not an even distribution across ages. Most young children are placed in foster families, which is the predominant form of placement. However, teenagers are also often placed in residential care ([Mølholt, 2017](#)). Out-of-home care ends when the young people turn 18, but aftercare support can be given until they turn 23. Approximately 60 per cent of young people leaving care receive aftercare support, but the provision of aftercare support decreases quickly from age 18 onwards. The most common form of support is a continuation of placement ([Deloitte, 2017](#)).

The empirical data is based on the author's PhD study conducted in Denmark with eight care-experienced participants ([Mølholt, 2017](#)). While some of the participants had been in care almost all their lives, others were placed as teenagers. Often, they were briefly placed in care as infants or young children and then re-entered care in their teens. As to the placement settings, all participants have stayed in foster families. Two of the participants

have stayed with the same foster family throughout their placement, while the rest have experienced greater instability during their time in care and have lived in foster families as well as residential care. They were between the ages of 17 and 20 when they left care. Those that remained in care after the age of 18 were able to do so because Child Welfare Services supplied them with aftercare support. At the beginning of the data collection, participants ranged from 20 to 33 years of age. All the participants were native Danish, and none was married or had any children.

The focus of the study was the participants' past and present experiences of everyday life and their expectations for the future. To gain an insight into the complexities of everyday life a qualitative longitudinal design was used with interviews being conducted at approximately six-month intervals over a period of two years (Neale, 2019). The findings of the PhD study are presented in four analytical chapters in a monograph-based thesis and relate to experiences of their upbringing, family relationships, social relationships and everyday life (Mølholt, 2017). The chapter presents findings that stem from the insight into and curiosity about the nuances of the instability in the lives of the participants found through the longitudinal data collection. The aim is thus to explore and structure the empirical finding of unstable lives in the contexts of the theoretical concept of a *habitus* of instability.

Five rounds of in-depth interviews were conducted with seven of the participants, five women and two men, and three rounds of interviews were conducted with one female participant as she joined the study a year later than the rest. The first interview was inspired by biographical interviewing and focused on their upbringing and present everyday life. At the subsequent interviews, the starting point was "What has happened since the last time we met?" Different themes such as the experiences of social relationships and perceptions of a good life guided the interviews while facilitating small narratives that are 'the ones we tell in passing, in our everyday encounters with each other, and which I considered the "real" stories of our *lived* lives' (Bamberg, 2004: 267, italics in original). Additionally, the interviews were inspired by interviews that focus on everyday life by having the participants elaborate on the previous day (Haavind, 1987). This elaboration gave insight into practices that often are not articulated as they are seen as common-sense and generalities.

The interviews ranged from one to two hours in length and were conducted either at the participants' homes or, more frequently, at an organisation for care-leavers. This organisation was founded by care-leavers with the aim of supporting other care-leavers. It was also through this organisation that the participants initially were recruited. The study was conducted in accordance with national and university guidelines regarding ethical conduct and data protection (for elaboration on ethical considerations when conducting the

PhD study, see [Bengtsson and Mølholt, 2016](#)). To ensure anonymity of the participants, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Facets of instability

Care-leavers are characterised by different pathways but, nonetheless, are, as a group, characterised by unstable lives that challenge their ability to engage in successful long-term and life course planning ([Ward, 2011](#)). However, research exploring the linkage between past and present experiences of instability among care-leavers and experiences of everyday life and agency is limited. The following three sections examine facets of how a habitus of instability is presented and incorporated into care-leavers' experiences of everyday life. The stories of care-leavers in the three sections are chosen to give insight into how the young people either adapt to a life characterised by instability, that is, they perceive instability as an uncontrollable circumstance in life, or actively strive to change an unstable life to make it more stable. The focus is on how unstable circumstances affect the everyday lives of care-leavers and how instability in life is a dominating factor in their experiences of the past and the present as well as affecting their plans for the future. As presented in the following sections, the unstable nature of everyday life among the care-leavers is associated with different forms of meaning-making and experiences of agency in life.

Adapting to an unstable life

Mette is in her early 20s at the first interview. She came into care the first time when she was age six, then she moved back home to her parents at age 12 and then returned into care when she was age 14. She has mostly been placed in residential institutions and at a boarding school, but at the end of her placement period she lived with a foster family, with whom she still was in contact at the time of the interviews. She left care when she was age 19 and received aftercare support. She has contact with her biological mother, her father is deceased. During the two years of data collection, Mette maintained a relationship with the same partner but during interviews she was always unsure whether they would still be together at the next interview (six months later). She was the participant with the highest degree of instability in life during the interview period as she changed both living arrangements and affiliation to educational training or employment between each interview.

During the first interview, Mette talks about how living an unstable life has become a part of her self-image, thus pointing to a habitus of instability:

Mette: I'm beginning to accept that this is how my life is. I like stability, but I can't ... I can't figure it out, I guess. And

a situation like I'm in right now, where I don't get any money by the 1st. It's freaking unpleasant, it freaking frustrates me, but ... if I must be honest, I think it is a feeling that I like. I like that I must take action to work it out and that I'm afraid that things won't work out. I like being on shaky ground.

Interviewer: Why?

Mette: It's how it's always been. Unpredictable. Especially, when I lived at home but also at the residential care. (Mølholt, 2017: 273, all translations in the chapter by author)

Mette has accepted that her life is and always has been characterised by a high degree of instability and, in her present life, she even partly prefers her life as unstable. She has become accustomed to the fluctuating circumstances of life and the unpredictability. Later during the same interview, she nuances her experiences of instability:

'I'm glad that no one moves me around anymore because it was unpleasant to be moved around all the time, but it is also something that I have become addicted to. I mean, I don't like when things stand still because then I become insecure and think, "something terrible is about to happen".' (Mølholt, 2017: 274)

Mette experiences an ambiguity. Unstable living conditions threaten her fundament of living, such as being thrown out of her apartment as she does not have the money to pay the rent. At the same time, however, stability in life causes her to feel insecure and unnerved as stability is unfamiliar to her. It is in the fluctuating and unstable patterns of everyday life that she finds familiarity and a sense of recognition. In her stories of an unstable everyday life, she draws on stories of the past where she was brought up with fragile family relationships as her parents had an alcohol addiction and were mentally ill, so she was placed in different out-of-home care settings. In her present life, she has incorporated these often-shifting circumstances in life, and she is even herself causing changes if life becomes too stable. This illustrates how her habitus of instability is not only characterised by her former experiences during her upbringing but also reinforced by her present actions.

During the third interview, Mette again reflects upon the unstable circumstances in her life. She stresses that children taken into care often feel neglected and in trying to better their own self-esteem and create a new position for themselves, they move physically. Changing the outer context thus becomes a way in which they seek to change the inner context of feelings: '[Y]ou always move around your physical surroundings in trying to get closer to something else. I think that's the primary consequence of being

a residential child' (Mølholt, 2017: 275). Changing the physical surroundings can thus be a way for the young people to try to change their circumstances in life through the given possibilities and from their social position. Another participant, Camilla (early 30s), highlights a similar point during her third interview as she stresses that the unstable circumstances during care-leavers' upbringing, with many changes in their care environment, lead to difficulties relaxing and finishing things they have started. To move physically is also a way for Camilla to move mentally and to 'move on in life' (Mølholt, 2017: 275).

During the last and fifth interview, Mette stresses that it is important to be in control in life and, to her, this means creating the unstable patterns in her everyday life. By creating her own unstable living circumstances, she controls and defines the instability she experienced through her upbringing, but which was caused by external factors:

'During my childhood, I often had no say in things. I was moved to one place, then I was moved to another place. And when a social worker had to go on maternity leave, I was assigned a new contact person without any say in it. You know, all the time.' (Mølholt, 2017: 275)

Mette touches upon the central point that even though her life appears unstable and with ever-changing circumstances, she feels that she is in control, and she finds a familiarity and security in these ever-changing patterns of life. Stability is unnerving for Mette as it creates in her a pervasive sense that the stable conditions are not going to last, and therefore she causes changes to gain control over the instability and uncertainty characterising her life. By gaining control over the instability in her life, Mette demonstrates agency, and she usually predicts the changes in her life between each interview. For example, at one interview she would state that she would not be living in the same place by the next interview. Instead, she would live there and do this, and typically she was right. By the following interview, she would be living where and doing what she had predicted.

Barker emphasises that stability to young people with a habitus of instability can be experienced as 'ironically unsettling' (Barker, 2016: 675). For Mette, taking control and causing instability in her life is to her a sensible and pragmatic practice framed by how things have been in the past. This gives insight into the strategies and actions developed through her experiences of living an unstable life during her upbringing and the extended influence of a habitus of instability.

Instability as an uncontrollable circumstance in life

Trine is in her early 20s at the first interview. She comes into the study a year later than the other participants and thus the data consist of three interviews

with Trine following her over one year. When she was age 14, she was taken into care. At first, she was placed in kinship care, but after a short while, she moved to a foster family where she stayed until she was age 20, thus receiving aftercare support in terms of prolonged placement. During her time in care, she also lived at a boarding school. Trine has limited contact with her mother and no contact with her father. During the data collection period, she lost contact with her foster family because of disagreements. She received financial support in the form of governmental cash benefits at the time of the first interview, but by the next interview, she was enrolled in a bachelor's programme in social education. She lived at the same place, and she did not have a boyfriend at any point during the interview period.

Characterising her life before the interview period, Trine stresses in the second interview that it was 'very unstable. I have never been engaged in the same thing for more than five months maximum' (Mølholt, 2017: 276). She emphasises that her life until recently had been unstable and that she had no money and was at risk of losing her apartment. Being enrolled in the bachelor's programme, she receives educational financial support, and she experiences herself as having 'the best possibilities for the future' (Mølholt, 2017: 276). However, when she is asked what her status will be at the next interview (six months later), she answers: 'I hope I'll still be engaged with the bachelor's degree. And that I like it. Now I'm becoming a bit nervous because I've dropped out of so many things, and usually early on. But I don't know. I try not to think about the future, because it stresses me' (Mølholt, 2017: 276).

Trine experiences her life as becoming more stable, which pleases her since she feels that it betters her life chances, but she is uncertain whether her life will remain stable and whether she can adapt to the stability. When asked how she feels about her life becoming more stable, she explains: 'I think it's important. Because it isn't pleasant not knowing where I'll be in six months. I've often been in that situation in my life. Also, when I was taken into care. So, I think it's important because it provides me with a sense of security' (Mølholt, 2017: 277).

Like Mette, Trine refers to her upbringing when emphasising the unstable nature of her life. When asked about her plans for the future, Trine chooses not to answer as it is her experience that plans for the future and her present life can quickly change. Unlike Mette, Trine seeks a higher level of stability in life and to limit the instability, but it seems somewhat out of her hands to create a more stable life as she emphasises that she is unsure what the near future will bring and whether she will remain in the bachelor's programme.

At the final interview, Trine was still enrolled in the bachelor's programme, which surprises her as she often changes plans and gets new ideas. Like Mette and Camilla, Trine stresses that she has created a behavioural pattern where she seeks new physical surroundings as a way of changing her psychological

wellbeing. Getting a bachelor's degree is for Trine a way of getting rid of the social services and moving on in life. However, it is obvious from Trine's stories that she does not experience herself as being in a position where she can control the stabilising factors. She is insecure about whether she can finish her bachelor's degree as her experience tells her otherwise, and she is constantly debating with herself whether she will continue.

Her experiences of instability are characterised by an ambiguity towards a stable life as she believes that a more stable life will better her life chances, but, at the same time, she usually seeks new possibilities to create a different life for herself in the present. Therefore, she seems to a greater extent than Mette to 'go with the flow', and thus there is a lack of agency in Trine's stories of her everyday life. When she is asked whether she will still be enrolled in the bachelor's programme at the time of the next interview, she is unsure, but she hopes so. Her stories consist of a constant attempt to balance a focus on future plans (for example, achieving a bachelor's degree) with a focus on the here-and-now, where she usually changes her educational enrolment because she gets restless. She wishes to live in accordance with the normative expectations of young people getting an education. It is, as she emphasises, extremely important to better her life chances in a society focused on educational performance. However, she is characterised by a *habitus* of instability, which limits her ability to make long-term plans.

Christian (in his mid-20s) is another participant who seems to lack control over his life and its circumstances. He experiences his everyday life as depending on the status of his surroundings as he highlights that circumstances such as his mother's wellbeing, his relationships and his finances affect the stability, or lack thereof, in his life. There are frequent changes in these circumstances, thus causing Christian's life to change as well. When characterising his life, he emphasises that it is ever- and quickly changing. Therefore, he stresses during the first interview that what he says about his everyday life during one interview might have changed two months later because 'it depends on how things develop as to family and money and relationships. But in general, it is probably a bit more unstructured than other people's lives' (Mølholt, 2017: 272). Whether or not his life has changed by the next interview is not the point in this story but rather that Christian experiences his life as consisting of a high degree of instability and that this is an instability that he himself cannot control.

Seeking to stabilise an unstable life

Line is, like Trine, seeking a more stable life. She is in her mid-20s at the beginning of the data collection. Her care experience started when she was placed first in residential care as an infant and later in a foster family. After that, she moved back to her mother at age nine but was then taken

into care again at age 12. She characterises her family as a nomad family, moving from place to place, often to avoid social authorities, and during her time in care, she lived with three foster families and in two residential institutions. Both her parents are deceased, and she has no contact with any of her former foster families. For the first three interviews, Line was living in a different place each time, she was in unstable relationships and was engaged with different educational and training situations. At the last two interviews, she lived in the same place, was not involved in any relationships and was enrolled in and about to finish her public-school examination.

In the stories of the behavioural pattern in her family, Line stresses nomad tendencies and that her mother moved locality each time she had to deal with challenges in life. Line has adopted these patterns, and she describes during the fourth interview how she has a 'throw away and get new' mentality, whether concerning an apartment, boyfriend, friends or educational engagement.

'I have never thought that I should have friendships that lasted for years, but now I've had some that have lasted for 10 years. It's impressive because I've always had friends for one year, and then I had to move, or something happened in my life which made me throw away my friends. I've done that for years, met someone and then pushed them away after approximately a year because that's what I've learned. That's what I know of and have done through my childhood, so where should I have learned to hold on to something and fight for it, also through difficult times?' (Mølholt, 2017: 278–279)

Even though her experience reflects that she has friendships that have lasted through half her lifetime, she emphasises instability as the dominating behavioural pattern in her life. It is a pattern of transience, which she highlights has been taught to her through her upbringing and therefore is the only way of acting she is familiar with. Thus, a mediation between past and present experiences in a habitus of instability is accentuated, and as Barker emphasises: 'People can come to see their circumstances as natural and inescapable, habitual, rather than blame the objective order for their disadvantage, unable to conceive the change in the social order which could abolish the cause of their suffering' (Barker, 2016: 681).

However, at the end of the interview period, she finds that her life is changing towards a greater degree of stability as she has realised that the behavioural pattern of 'throwing away and getting new' does not solve her problems in the long run. She actively seeks to change the instability in her life, thus demonstrating agency. For example, she describes at the fifth interview how she is close to achieving her public-school graduation: 'I'm

so close at accomplishing something, and I think, I'm doing it. I mean, I *am* doing it. There is no way out. Usually, I would have stopped by now on everything I've started the past years' (Mølholt, 2017: 279, emphasis added).

To change her self-image from one whose behavioural pattern is characterised by instability to one whose life is characterised by stability is a long and difficult process. For Line to take control over and change her behavioural pattern from instability to find peace with stable living conditions also means changing her perspective from an ad hoc perspective to more long-term life planning. However, to assist in this change in habitus, Line must experience herself in a position to change the unstable circumstances in her life through changed structural conditions and opportunities. Barker (2016: 680) argues that 'the habitus of instability reminds us that human action is the culmination of personal histories, external environment and living conditions'. For example, in Line's case, it is relevant not only to examine her motivation for going to school and getting an education but also to consider the general rise in required grades and curriculum to get into education and training. These requirements can limit the possibilities for young people who are older than the general population before getting on an educational pathway.

Another participant, Thomas (in his mid-30s), highlights his wishes for the future, which are formed against the background of his experiences. He wants to find peace and live a quiet life. When asked during the third interview what his future dreams are, Thomas reflects:

'So far, my dream is to get a decent job and own a house or something like that. Get a small family. Actually, not a whole lot. I mean, relax. Enough has happened in my life. It's been disquieting times, so not a whole lot has to happen. I want to relax with people surrounding me.' (Mølholt, 2017: 296)

Thomas's and the rest of the participants' dominating wish for their future lives is to find peace in terms of accepting their care background and to experience that their background is accepted by others so that they feel comfortable revealing their background without the risk of experiencing social stigma. Their wish for a peaceful life also entails the acceptance of a stable and quiet life in which they stand strong and are not easily affected by, for example, their parents' troubling times or other forms of distress in their social surroundings.

To find peace in life is a wish most people can relate to. However, in the stories of these young people with their care backgrounds, the wish for a quiet life is formed in opposition to how their life has been (and perhaps still is) and especially how it was during their upbringing. Thus, the wish for a quiet life is clearly formulated based on their habitus of instability.

Conclusion

Initially, it was emphasised that unstable living conditions and experiences of instability are one of the primary reasons why welfare outcomes are so disappointing for young people who have been in out-of-home care (Ward, 2009). However, as illustrated through the story of Mette, living an unstable life can be a way to demonstrate and experience a sense of control in life. Mette evaluates her life to be founded on unstable living conditions but instead of the instability being caused by external influences, she herself defines and creates the unstable circumstances. Thus, her actions might be evaluated as counter-productive regarding long-term planning and achieving goals, but they must be understood as strategies derived from accumulated experiences. ‘Habitus reminds us that what appear to be the choices or practices of individuals can obscure what is actually the structural conditions and limitations from which they have emerged and exist. It reminds us that structural and institutional settings have an impact on decisions and practices’ (Barker, 2016: 681).

The young people try to better their lives through the given opportunities for example by moving around in their physical surroundings to experience a change in their psychological wellbeing. Nevertheless, as discussed throughout the chapter, a habitus of instability challenges their possibilities of reaching long-term goals and life course planning and thus adds to their vulnerable living circumstances while in care and in their life after leaving care.

A habitus of instability is relevant to discuss in relation to young people who have been in out-of-home care. The findings reflect that even when they tell stories of stability and continuity in their lives, whether in their present life or in relation to their hopes and dreams for the future, these stories are based upon what they view as a normal and familiar situation, namely unstable living conditions. Barker (2016: 672) highlights that the young people live with a sense of impending instability and insecurity as their habitual approach.

The findings emphasise how the young people have limited control over the development of a habitus of instability as it develops through their upbringing and is affected by the instability caused by insecure family relationships as well as being part of a child welfare system where they often experience changes in placement as well as in professionals. They come to aspire to what is expected of them and what is probable. Thus, when they tell their stories of a habitus of instability, these stories are personalised, and it is often emphasised as their own defect and lack of competence if they do not manage to live stable lives that follow normative life course patterns and developments.

The stories presented in the three empirical sections illustrate different facets of incorporating experiences of instability from the past into one’s

present everyday life. The young people have better life chances when they do not live unstable lives, which centralises the question of how their lives can become more stable. As [Barker \(2016\)](#) emphasises, a habitus of instability can be changed given the right and supportive stable circumstances. Thus, there seem to be two policy points to note. The first point is that measurements are taken to ensure that care-leavers are given the best possible opportunities based on a knowledge of their habitus of instability. It must be ensured that care-leavers are incorporated into their social surroundings and find security in stable living conditions after leaving care. The second point is to ensure that care-leavers do not develop a habitus of instability in the first place. A habitus of instability is derived from experiences in the past, and thus a crucial question is how their lives can become more stabilised during their upbringing to limit the unstable nature of their lived experiences. This must be done through stable and long-term living conditions during their upbringing both in terms of placement conditions and in terms of social relationships with caregivers as well as professionals. The two points can preferably be discussed from the perspective of ensuring social relationships. [Gilligan \(2012\)](#) emphasises a need to focus on young people's bonding relationships to close and familiar networks as well as their bridging relationships that tie them to their local communities and social surroundings. Strong and weak relationships have different ways of offering support and opportunities.

To analytically conclude on which pathway group each of the young people primarily belongs to is difficult. Trine has, for example, experienced stability during her time in care and she is on her way to educational achievement, but she lacks supportive social relationships, and she is unsure whether to continue her education. The findings emphasise that from a qualitative longitudinal perspective the pathway groups must be viewed as flexible and overlapping. Each care-leaver has different ways of handling and acting upon a habitus of instability. Additional research is needed to investigate how a habitus of instability changes over the course of the lifetime and whether the habitus of instability is reflected differently by care-leavers from different pathway groups. It is important to examine, for example, whether young people from the moving-on group are characterised by a habitus of instability. It could be that experiences of unstable living conditions form their fundamental stance but stable social relationships during their upbringing have supported them in changing these conditions and in adapting to stable living conditions, or perhaps experiences of unstable living conditions have been less of an issue for them.

More research into how a habitus of instability affects young people's lives is essential as the experiences of an unstable life seem to affect their life chances not only in the present but also in their future. A habitus of instability seems to limit their sense of belonging and their possibilities of

creating a meaningful ‘being in the world’ with linkages between the past, the present and the future (Bengtsson and Mølholt, 2018). In future research, it is important to examine how it can be ensured that the young people do not develop a habitus of instability and, if they do, how it is possible to help them feel secure in stable and unfamiliar living conditions – thus, to help them create a life in which they may find peace.

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