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How Does the Family Influence the Process of Transition to Adulthood? A Comparative Study of Young People with and without Family Ties in Spain

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Abstract: The transition to adulthood is a process that brings childhood to an end and turns the individual into a young adult. This process is characterised by the acquisition of new roles for young people, roles linked to the development of personal autonomy that culminate in their emotional and functional independence. The aim of this study was to ascertain how young people with family ties and youths without family support perceive and understand their emancipation process. The study also sought to identify the extent to which family provides support during the emancipation process. The research design was qualitative and used the focus group technique for data collection. The total sample consisted of 12 participants (seven males and five females) with an average age of 18. Five of them were minors in the custody of the State, and seven were young adults in a regular family environment. The information collected was analysed using Atlas.ti software. The results highlighted the existence of difficulties and barriers among young people (with and without family ties) related to psychological problems, difficulties in choosing training, finding a job and, in short, emancipation. However, young people with healthy social ties and family stability during their childhood had more support for an effective transition to independent adulthood compared to young people without family ties.

Keywords: emancipation process; family support; transition to adulthood; young people; ex-ward youths

1. Introduction

The support provided by the family system seems to be one of the most crucial aspects that conditions the transition to adulthood. In this regard, children, adolescents, and youths with a regular family system tend to experience fewer difficulties than those partially or fully devoid of this support [1,2]. Research has identified the consequences on the adult due to a complex, prolonged, and difficult (psychological, economic, and social) transition to independence [3]. However, less is known about this process in people in more vulnerable situations, such as ex-ward youths [3,4].

Considering previous research, the transition to adulthood has become increasingly complicated, mainly due to the impact of socioeconomic factors. This is especially challenging for children and youth in vulnerable situations, such as those devoid of family support and those under the tutelage of the State [5,6]. Jackson and Cameron [7] found differences between youths growing up in a stable family system and those who lived under the protection system during childhood and adolescence. The latter experienced a more complex transition not only due to the lack of family support, but also due to other transitions they had previously undergone. During their stay in the foster centre, children

and adolescents have to undergo a hard process of personal, cultural, and social adaptation. Therefore, these young people must initiate their transition to adult life even before previous stages are completed [8,9]. By contrast, a stable adaptation process facilitates the creation of social networks, improves academic performance, and aids in the possibility of finding a job [10,11].

The difficulties increase as adolescents under protection leave the system once they reach legal age. López et al. [12] indicated that their transition is shorter, compressed, accelerated and riskier when compared to that of non-risk youth. Gallego et al. [13,14] noted that this transition to adulthood without family support complicates the process, especially due to the lack of the positive effect of family support during the frequently stressful events characterising this period. In addition, physical and mental health (depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, etc.) decreases as a direct effect of the multiple challenges they have to confront [14,15]. Barriers accessing the labour market have also been found, mainly associated with previous failures in the academic performance of children in care [15–17]. Moreover, young people in exile, despite coming from dysfunctional families with numerous problems (e.g., inter-relational conflicts, mental health issues), continue to maintain relationships with them [18,19], which contributes to the destabilization of their process of maturation and adult independence.

In sum, research in the field has found that family support is important for the proper development of young people in terms of health and educational or job opportunities during the transition to adulthood. However, not every youth has stable ties with the family, which impacts their transition to autonomy. In an effort to contribute to the topic, this study explores the transition of young people to adulthood in the south of Spain, considering two goals: 1. To ascertain the perceptions and meanings of young people with no family links with regard to their emancipation process; 2. To identify the extent to which a family provides support during the process of transitioning to adulthood. To achieve these goals, focus groups were carried out involving (a) youths with a regular family system (family-youth group), and (b) youths who were under the care of the State (guardianship-youth group).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

In order to explore how the family influences the emotional well-being and opportunities of young people, we collected information through two groups of informants. The common selection criteria for the two groups were the following: young people (close to 18 years old), men and women, studying or in similar situations. The differentiating criterion was having stable family support or not. Accordingly, one group consisted of young people with family ties and stable material and emotional support from their parents ($n = 7$). The other group was made up of young people with no stable family support and whose protection and guardianship were managed by the State ($n = 5$). The total number of participants was 12. The average age of the participants in the two groups was 20. Regarding their gender, seven participants were male and five were female. Eighty percent of the participants were Spanish nationals, with 20% of the participants being of foreign origin. Eleven of the 12 participants were students and were doing paid internships in companies, and only one participant was unemployed.

2.2. Research Methods

The technique used to generate and collect the primary data was the focus group (FG). This technique was chosen because it promotes an exchange of opinions, which are enhanced and defined as they are discussed among the group's participants. While participants create opinions based on their own personal experience, in an FG, the participants try to reach a general consensus whose conclusions can be extrapolated to other young people in the same situation [20].

The FGs were structured around the following topics:

1. Institutionalisation (questions for ex-ward youths). In this block, they were asked about their stay in the youth protection centre.
2. Support figures. The questions were related to their closest social networks and the type of support they provide them.
3. Young people's desires and hobbies. This block considered different questions involving their leisure time practices.
4. Transition to adult life. In this block, we sought to identify the barriers participants encounter to their independence, emancipation, and stability in their adult life, as well as their expectations for the future.

In addition to the FG questions, an individual socio-demographic data document was drawn up in order to collect the following data: sex, age, description of the family unit (number of members and relationship), educational level, occupation (student or worker or both) and hobbies.

In relation to the exploitation of the primary data, the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti [21] was used. The data were coded following a process that started with open coding, in which the information was examined as a whole and conceptualised. After that, the categories or codes were created. From this phase, the central category emerged: transition to adulthood of youths with and without a family support network. Secondly, axial coding was carried out, in which the relationships among the categories were identified. This process, being particularly complex, required the identification of conditions, interactions, and consequences associated with the phenomenon. Finally, during selective coding, the central categories (units of analysis that concentrate the set of categories and subcategories) were defined. After that, the transcribed text (participants' discourses) was divided into paragraphs by themes corresponding to the codes (Table 1).

2.3. Procedure

Once the objective of the study was clear, we proceeded to search for entities that could put us in contact with the key informants of the research. In parallel to this, the request of the approval for research involving human beings was done (see Section 2.4). Subsequently, the key informants were contacted through the snowball method and the object of the designed research was put into context. Next, the methodological tools of the FG script were designed, using a preliminary sample to check its effectiveness. For the sample size, the methodological recommendations of Escobar and Bonilla-Jimenez [22] were followed, which specify between 6 and 10 participants for each FG. As this was an exploratory study, the data were not saturated. The discussion on limitations considers this issue further.

Five participants formed the guardianship-youth group that participated in the FG session, which did not exceed 60–70 min. As an introduction, the objective of the study and the methodology of the technique were explained. Participants were given a consent form in which they agreed to participate after reading their rights (e.g., the freedom to leave the interview at any time they considered, the anonymization of data). Participants were asked to record the session. In addition to the consent form, they filled individual socio-demographic data (e.g., sex, age, childhood and family conditions). Once the information stage was complete, the questions were formulated. The same procedure was followed with the participants assigned to the family-youth group.

The statements provided by the youths were transcribed using Express Scribe, a free audio playback software system. The data were analysed using the Atlas.ti Created in 1993 by Thomas Muhr at the Technical University of Berlin, Germany [21] software, a qualitative analysis programme used to obtain the most relevant data from the most significant statements.

Table 1. Description of the analysis data process: codification, category extraction, and speeches.

Extract from the Focus Group	Tag	Code	Central Category
<i>"I have strong relationships with my family. I tell them everything, so my support is from my parents, my sister, my cousin, and outside I have my friends, who also support me"</i> RJN3-F	Family-YG ¹	Supporting figures	Social and family support
<i>"Although if I have any doubts I ask. But if I'm sure, I make the decision by myself"</i> MJX1-G	Guardianship-YG		
<i>"Yes, if we need school supplies, they buy them for us, now they tell us to find our own way"</i> MJX1-G	Guardianship-YG		
<i>"First of all, they have helped me a lot in terms of work, then they are always there to support me emotionally, during the lockdown I spent a few days in their house because we had to be confined together and everything"</i> PJN4-F	Family-YG		Other types of support
<i>"... but sometimes you try to work and they don't let you, now I have tried to go to work in the olive grove and they have told me no, I am not going to leave a course to start working"</i> KJX4-G.	Guardianship-YG		
<i>"Not at all, because for example, I moved to another city to study what I wanted, I think that in the case of children under guardianship, they have that opportunity, to do what they want to do. If they are in a centre in Madrid, and you want to study in an art school in Barcelona, they are not going to move them to do it"</i> RJN3-F	Family-YG		Learning opportunities
<i>"I think that if many of them already have problems accessing education, they will be even more limited in finding a stable job or a job that they want"</i> VJN2-F	Family-YG		Employment opportunities
<i>"What we think is that where we are is going to end one day and that we have very little time and it will end. One day they're going to throw us out, and you have to do everything by force, and sometimes, even if we do everything, they tell us it's all for nought, our time here comes to an end and we find ourselves on the street with no work or anything and we have to leave. Most of them lose everything and have to put up with it"</i> AJX2-G	Guardianship-YG	Autonomy	Time pressure
<i>"I'm afraid of not finding a job, of reaching a certain age and still being unemployed, that's my biggest fear, otherwise I don't have any problems at all"</i> RJN3-F	Family-YG		
<i>"We pretend that we are strong, that we can bear the burden and keep going, but there comes a point when we can't go on any longer, and you can't, and it's hard to breathe, you lack oxygen, and when you try to unburden yourself, you fall. That's why I prefer not to say anything"</i> MJX1-G	Guardianship-YG		
<i>"...To have a partner, a house, a family, a pet, a job"</i> KJX4-G	Guardianship-YG		Psychosocial well-being
<i>"... to work at my job as long as I can and to work my way up as much as I can and at the same time enjoy travelling and getting to know many cultures. I have no expectations for a partner or children"</i> PJN4-F	Family-YG		Personal aspirations
<i>"Doing sport, reading, watching films and meeting friends. I do think they are healthy"</i> RJN3-F	Family-YG		Free time
<i>"...going outside, running, I like sport"</i> TJX3-G	Guardianship-YG		

¹ 'Family-YG' denotes that the statement was taken from the family-youth group. 'Guardianship-YG' denotes that the statement was taken from the guardianship-youth group.

2.4. Research Ethics

In order to comply with ethical standards, approval of the study was requested from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Jaén. The consent form was provided to participants. The document contained information about the purpose of the study, the data collection procedures, the person responsible, as well as the rights of the participants: anonymity and confidentiality in data processing and the right to leave the research at any time. Consent was expressly requested to record the participants' voices in the FG. Only after they signed the consent form and agreed with the recording, the data generation started. The information collected was processed confidentially and was subject to the ethical standards that govern scientific research, in accordance with Organic Law 3/2018 of 5 December, on the Protection of Personal Data and the guarantee of digital rights.

3. Results

Findings were grouped according to the codes (supporting figures and autonomy) and their related tags, as described in Table 1.

3.1. Supporting Figures

Differences in family support were found between the two groups. While youths from a stable family environment received positive and continuous support (provided by parents, siblings, and cousins), those from a care centre experienced a lack of support.

"In my family, I really interact with them a lot and I always tell them everything, so my support is from my parents, my sister, my cousin, and outside I have my friends, who also provide support" JN3-F.

"Most people have support from their family and we have nothing, zero" KJX4-G.

The participants described the consequences of having, or not having, family support. Young adults with a regular family system experienced emotional well-being and easier decision-making. According to ex-ward youths, the deficit in family support negatively impacted their educational and job opportunities.

"There are people who have it easier because they have family help. For example, your family has advised you that it is good to study. We don't have that, since we are young looking for life alone. At 16 we started working, we left school, which makes studying and finding work much more difficult" MJX1-G.

Ex-ward youths quickly identified other resources of social support. They mentioned the institution as a source of instrumental support and the educators as a source of expressive support. The affective link with the professionals continued after they left the resource.

"I go to the people from the foundation when I have a problem" HJX5-G.

However, there were time limitations and other conditions attached to the support received from the institution.

"They get money from the government for us and the less time we are there, the less money they spend on us" AJX2-G.

"In the support center for ex-wards, they force us to do company internships that sometimes provide no way out, or you don't like them, but if you don't do them, they throw you out" AJX2-G.

Beside the foster centre, ex-ward youths highlighted the role of mentor families as a complementary source of support. Specifically, these figures helped them make the transition to adult life, and increase personal and social opportunities. A need for more mentors or foster families was mentioned by participants.

“The mentor family tries to help you. For example, they give you confidence in yourself, they introduce you to their family, their children, they plan activities and treat you like one of the family . . . A mentor is what every child would have needed” MJX1-G.

“There are not collaborative external families for every youth” MJX1-G.

Youths who had support available from their family mentioned certain educational agents as other sources of support. Ex-ward youths did not refer to this type of support in their comments.

“My teacher was a role model for me, and I met her in vocational school. We interact a lot with her, and whenever there’s a problem, she is always there to give us all advice” VJN4-F.

A summary of the descriptive and comparative results of the codes in the “supporting figures” tag is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences between youths in the guardianship group and family group in the supporting figures tag.

Code	Guardianship-YG	Family-YG
Social and family support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conditional and temporary support (administration) - Emancipation without support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unconditional support (family) - Emancipation with support (emotional, time, training)
Other types of support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demand support during institutionalization (e.g., mentor family) and emancipation (e.g., financial and training support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They have sufficient support (not just parents, but also a support network made up of older siblings, educational mentor, etc.)

3.2. Autonomy

Topics involving learning and employment opportunities, time pressure, psychosocial well-being, personal aspirations, and free time, emerged.

First, the problems encountered in school and when joining the workforce differed in both groups. The limitation in academic choices experienced by ex-ward youths, which in turn conditions their job opportunities, together with the insecurity associated with the lack of family support, are keys to understanding said differences. While the youths from a stable family system chose their studies and professional careers, the other youths followed the guidance of educators and other professionals.

“ . . . but sometimes you try to work and they don’t let you, now I tried to go work in an olive grove and they told me no, I’m not going to drop out of school to start working” KJX4-G.

“moved to another city to study what I wanted” RJN3-F.

Academic success and the insecurity prior to finding a first job were associated with family support. According to participants with stable family ties, their parents assumed the expenses associated with education and gave them economic stability during the first years of job searching. In the absence of family support, according to ex-ward youths, they felt pressured by financially stressful conditions (being fired, unemployed, etc.). Another determining factor mentioned regarding the difficulty of finding a job was their low educational level.

“In my case, the transition involved job placement, I have had no problem finding work, it is true, it was very natural for me” PJN4-F.

“No, we do not have the same opportunities, that much is obvious” MJX1-G, AJX2-G, TJX3-G, KJX4-G, HJX5-G.

“We stop studying and start working very early, there are others who were not in a protection center, and even if they didn’t think so, they needed to be because their families are broken, it is much more difficult, because who helps these people find work” MJX1-G.

Second, and related to the above, intergroup differences involving the time pressure needed to reach independence were found. While it was not easy for the Family-YG, despite having family support, it was much less so for the Guardianship-YG. Ex-ward youths, aware of the temporary nature of the State’s protection, experienced extensive time pressure in several areas: finishing their training, finding a job, being fired without having another means of support.

“Not finding a job, reaching a certain age and still being unemployed, that’s my biggest fear; other than that, I don’t have a problem with anything” VJN2-F.

“Now the problem is the day we have to leave the flat, because they are rushing us” MJX1-G.

“We realize that our time here is limited and that one day soon it’s going to end. One day they are going to kick us out, and then you’ll have to do everything by force” AJX2-G.

Third, the psychosocial well-being of the youths was influenced by the family dynamics. Although participants from both groups spoke about certain similar concerns (finishing their studies, finding a job, etc.), the impact of these problems and its causes differed. Ex-ward youths experienced problems during their childhood (abuse, neglect, separation from their parents, etc.) that influenced their current well-being; moreover, due to their lack of healthy ties, they felt more anxiety than youths with a stable family system facing the same problems.

“My problems have been anxiety and stress due to the academic issue, mostly due to the amount of homework, which takes a lot of time away from my leisure activities, so that ends up causing me stress and a bit of anxiety” AJN5-F.

“I have had many problems with my family and they can’t help me at all” MJX1-G.

“We pretend that we are strong, that we can bear the burden and keep going, but there comes a point when we can’t go on any longer, and you can’t, and it’s hard to breathe, you lack oxygen, and when you try to unburden yourself, you fall” MJX1-G.

“We think about how we’re going to get out of here and what I’m going to find, and how I’m going to pay the rent and pay for the house, and if I’m going to have a job. Mainly, if I’m going to have the resources to get by” MJX1-G.

Fourth, the aspirations of both groups differed to some degree. While ex-ward minors expected to find a job and create their own family, youths from a regular family system, besides starting a family, also hoped to advance in their careers, travel, and have a stable and entertaining life.

“I want to have a job and make a living” TJX3-G.

“The main thing for us is work, that’s the only way to get by” AJX2-G.

“I really enjoy my job, so I work at it as long as I can and work my way up as much as I can, and at the same time I enjoy travelling and getting to know many cultures. I have no expectations for a partner or children” PJN4-F.

“When I get a job, I would like to get married and start a family” TJX3-F.

Finally, leisure-time activities and hobbies differed in terms of type and variety, as did the amount of time available. These differences were mainly due to the environment during their childhood and adolescence. The absence or presence of a network of friends influenced the type and variety of leisure activities. Ex-ward minors mentioned mainly sports and solo hobbies as a way to “escape” their problems, while youths from a regular family system played sports and videogames and did cultural activities and the like during their free time. In addition, children in residential care had less leisure time, due to their supervised residential care flat schedules.

"I'm good at dancing and I don't know how I discovered it. My parents enrolled me in an academy when I was little. I've been doing it all my life and I think I'm pretty good at it" RJN3-F

"I do theatre in my village with various groups and play video games, I like to sing and listen to music, and write poetry" AJN5-F.

"I like writing poetry, I'm not a poet or anything like that, [. . .] I write as a hobby. Then I like reading a lot and music too, I play the horn and the piano" EJN1-F.

"I have been doing sports since I was a child, different sports and in my free time I do sports and I also play the trumpet when I can" VJN2-F.

"Sometimes to play sports I need to meet up with people, and they can't, but even then, I want to go out" AJX2-G.

"They set the schedule for you without asking. For example, they give you two hours a day and they don't ask you which hours you prefer. They tell you, for example, from six to eight you can go out, but maybe that time isn't good for you" AJX2-G.

Table 3 contains the description and main differences regarding the tag labelled "autonomy".

Table 3. Differences between youths in the guardianship group and family group in the autonomy tag.

Code	Guardianship-YG	Family-YG
Learning opportunities	Imposed academic training	They choose their academic training
Employment opportunities	- More difficulties - No support - Less academic training	- More opportunities - They have support - Academic training
Time pressure	- Little time for emancipation - They don't have enough support - Very concerned about the pressure to be independent	- They have time - They have support - Moderate concern about the pressure to be independent
Psychosocial well-being	- More risk factors that decrease their psychosocial well-being - Problems that contribute to an inadequate transition to adulthood	- Fewer risk factors that decrease their psychosocial well-being - Not involved in the transition to adulthood
Personal aspirations	Simple aspirations (to have a job)	Higher aspirations (travel, career advancement)
Free time	- More problems - Less free time and less variety - Reason: escape	- More leisure possibilities and free time - Reason: fun or additional education

4. Discussion/Conclusions

This study yields different conclusions regarding the transition to adult life, taking into account the condition of "having family support" and "not having family support". As our research has shown, youths who had stable and durable social networks during their childhood and adolescence were able to access their independent life more effectively. This finding was in the same line as previous research [23]. By contrast, the group of young people without a social network encountered more barriers along the way.

In relation to the use of free time, significant differences were also found, with the Family-YG expressing a different idea of leisure than the Guardianship-YG [24]. Young people who had difficult stages in their lives used leisure as a form of escape, but the group of young people with a stable childhood used leisure for entertainment. They also

preferred healthy and cultural leisure activities. We also observed that the opportunities that each group had limited the types of leisure activities they engaged in.

Next, when young people explained their access to the labour market, we can clearly see the differences in terms of the limitations that apply to young people in exile. Due to the notions that have to do with their childhood and family problems, their adequate academic performance has been inadequate, which has an impact on their subsequent access to employment [25]. In addition to poor academic performance, the lack of support they have is also influential, which adds to their problems. However, there is also the extra pressure of time. The young people interviewed were in emancipation flats, and had no more than two years to finish their training and find a job; once this time passes, they were required to leave the facility to start their independent lives. However, young people from “normalised” families have the support of their family for any issues that may affect them in the future [26].

Therefore, we conclude that having an adequate social support network is fundamental to partaking in the basic opportunities and rights of the person, such as access to education, properly using said education, access to the labour market, opportunities for healthy leisure, etc. Having a stable life trajectory facilitates personal success.

The difficulties encountered by young people in long-term care are detrimental to their psychological health, and their psychosocial well-being is not of the same calibre as that of “normalised” young people. Good psychosocial well-being facilitates the development of social skills, which are necessary for decision making and for leading a healthy life in terms of employment and social relationships. This is therefore a further constraint for young people who are ex-wards [27].

Finally, it has been observed that the personal aspirations of each group of young people are also different and are influenced by the instability of their trajectory. The group of young people who have been exempted from social security wanted a job and to start a family. It could be said that these aspirations are realistic and simple. Meanwhile, the other group wanted to have a life of leisure, entertainment, to advance in their job, to be able to travel, and do other kinds of activities.

The study exhibits some limitations, one of which is related to the low number of participants. This issue may prevent us from capturing the complexity of the results; however, due to the exploratory nature of the study, our results may be relevant and justify continuing this line of research. In addition, no quantitative methodologies were used to triangulate the data, which makes it impossible to generalize the results, thus reducing the consistency of the conclusions. Considering the limitations, future research could expand the sample and combine it with a quantitative methodology, which will result in a more complete mixed-method approach.

The results provided in this study contribute to the increasing of our knowledge of the features, needs, strengths, and challenges of young people transitioning to adulthood. This research provides several keys to understanding the problems of young people with family support, and those more vulnerable youths who, as ex-ward youths, grew up with no solid social support. Therefore, the information collected may be useful for designing programmes and resources to support young people and their emancipation, specifically those in disadvantaged conditions. Policymakers could consider research such as this to improve the effectiveness of their actions involving young people. According to our results, in order to reduce social inequality, it seems appropriate to increase the resources directed at ex-ward youths, given that they exhibit greater deficiencies compared to youths with a regular family system. Their comments revealed the need for financial support and housing after the age of 18. In addition, young people under the care of the State need to have more educational support and the option to choose their study programmes for themselves. Finally, more social and psychological support should be provided until they complete their emancipation.

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