Family perspectives for young people growing up in child protection care

IBOLYA CZIBERE[1] – GABRIELLA NEMES-ZÁMBÓ[2]

ABSTRACT

The study examines the factors of family perspectives among vulnerable youths – children and youth living in alternative care – with qualitative method. The target group is children who live in the Hungarian child protection system as juveniles. Children and young people experiencing different family substitute arenas may result in various family perspectives. These family perspectives are examined within a theoretical framework of family sociology and human ecology.We used a complex approach to describe the experiences and changes of these structural and family-replacer dimensions together with their impacts on the family perspective. We have found that the family perspectives of the young people are diverse and their narratives about their visions of the future are often linked to dominant family and life events previously experienced in family milieus and forms of care. At the same time, the complexity of life events and the diversity of future plans are not necessarily reflected in the institutional background and the professional-young relationships that could support young people's autonomy. Based on the interviews, the family and community levels of the human ecology model can also be a significant factor in young people's family perspectives, so cooperation between family and community, institutional actors can be one of the keys to providing adequate support for young people. In order to realize future plans for family perspectives, professionals need to focus more on individual needs and the diversity and variability of family perspectives.

KEYWORDS: family perspectives, child protection, youth, family structures, family ideas

ABSZTRAKT

A tanulmány kvalitatív módszerrel vizsgálja a családi perspektívák tényezőit a veszélyeztetett fiatalok – gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban élő gyermekek és fiatalok – körében. A különböző családpótló színtereket megélő gyermekek és fiatalok életében különböző családi perspektívák kialakulását eredményezheti a változó környezet. Ezeket a családi perspektívákat a családszociológia és a humánökológia elméleti keretein belül vizsgáljuk. Kutatásunk során komplex megközelítést alkalmaztunk e strukturális és családpótló dimenziók tapasztalatainak és változásainak leírására, a családi perspektívára gyakorolt hatásaikkal együtt. Azt találtuk, hogy a fiatalok

[1] University of Debrecen, Department of Sociology and Social Policy; e-mail: czibere.ibolya@arts.unideb.hu

[2] University of Debrecen, Department of Sociology and Social Policy; e-mail: nemes.zambo.gabriella@arts.unideb.hu
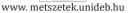
KÖZELKÉP

családi perspektívái sokszínűek, és a jövőképükről szóló elbeszéléseik gyakran kapcsolódnak a családi miliőben és a gondozási formákban korábban megélt domin..ns családi és életeseményekhez. Ugyanakkor az életesemények összetettsége és a jövőbeli tervek sokfélesége nem feltétlenül tükröződik az intézményi háttérben és a szakember és fiatalok kapcsolataiban, amelyek támogathatnák a fiatalok autonómiáját. Eredményeink szerint a humánökológiai modell családi és közösségi szintje is jelentős tényező lehet a fiatalok családi perspektíváiban, így a család és a közösség, az intézményi szereplők közötti együttműködés az egyik kulcsa a fiatalok megfelelő támogatásának. A családi perspektívákkal kapcsolatos jövőbeli tervek megvalósítása érdekében a szakembereknek jobban kell összpontosítaniuk az egyéni szükségletekre és a családi perspektívák sokféleségére és változékonyságára.

KULCSSZAVAK: családi perspektívák, gyermekvédelem, ifjúság, családi struktúrák, családképek

Introduction

In our study, we examine the family-related perspectives of young people aged 15 to 17 living in child protection care in Hungary, through the family patterns they have experienced in their biological family and the care system. The Hungarian child protection system is based on the 27 years old Law (1997. XXXI. law on the protection of children and the administration of guardianship) of the children's protection. The state provides alternative care for children from age 0 to 18. Children under the age of 12 are primarily accommodated in foster families. The main provision is foster care in families, nearly two-thirds of the children live in this type of care. Others live in institutional care within residential homes (KSH 2019). Youths over 18 years have the possibility to stay in the child protection system until the age of 25 (in special cases even until the age of 30), in so-called aftercare provision mainly if they are studying. Their separation from their biological family and their inclusion in different home care systems also means that, in addition to their family reference systems, they experience structures, forms of relationship and attachment that are previously unknown to them. Different family-substituting scenes can shape their family image, all the more so, because they are in the most age-sensitive period before the selection of a partner, and sometimes, despite their young age, they even find themselves in parental (mainly maternal) roles. Our goal is to find relationship between the young person's family experiences (birth and foster) and the young person's images of family for themselves in the future. By family perspectives we mean the ideas about the future that young people formulate in their narratives in relation to family experiences, family planning. It is assumed that family perspectives require a complex approach, as young people are exposed to many impressions of family structure, family life and milieu throughout their lives, which can shape their perceptions. In our study, we interpret these aspirations and plans only as possible outcomes for the future, since we do not have the opportunity to examine their implementation. In the following we present the family perceptions that best fit the

topic based on three family theory approaches, and then briefly discuss the most important contexts of family socialization. As a basis for our research results, we summarize the most relevant directions of the child protection research related to our topic and we present our results.
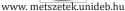

Family theory approaches

According to structuralist-functionalist family interpretations, the family is a subsystem of the system that makes up the whole society, which, as a social institution, performs basic functions for the benefit of society. Family systems are characterized by a predictable system of values, a belief system and a norm system, and according to their functions, they primarily perform socialization, reproduction, and stress-relieving tasks that ensure the stabilization of the personalities of family members. The responsible upbringing of children in this system means that the parents are obliged to provide the children born with appropriate physical care as well as with the socially necessary spiritual upbringing. It is also important to ensure the financial security of children, but also to guarantee their emotional security (Coontz 2005). One of the most accepted ideas of the theory is that "families are social institutions that perform basic community functions" (Czibere – Molnár 2015: 19).

The interactionist approach deals with personal contacts and the relationships of social contacts. Mutual interactions form an independent family, which also includes communication within the family, sign language, and manifestations of family members. Contrary to functionalist theory, the interactionist school represents that there is no standard family structure, every family is a collaboration based on the spontaneous relationship between family members. According to the results of Fiese et al. (2002), family identity and traditions, which form the unity of families, are formed primarily through interactions, i.e. they are based on the ever-expanding system of family relationships and the rituals formed in the family.

The systems theory approach of the family seeks to answer how the family, as a system, handles information, how it responds to problems or crises, and how it regulates its relationships with the outside world. Kantor and Lehr (1975) interpret the system from the direction of family boundaries, but they also consider the issue of proximity and distance between family members as an important aspect. Broderick (1993), as one of the most prominent representatives, also considers it important to systematically examine how family rituals can maintain family identity consciousness. Crouterand Booth (2003) consider the latest trend in systems theory to interpret families that it can analyze not only the effects of parents on children but also the effects of children on family functioning.

KÖZELKÉP

The family is the medium of 'belonging somewhere' for the individual. It preserves traditions and family memories, gives a sense of identity and is an unavoidable scene of self-awareness and self-image development (Czibere – Molnár 2015). An individual's family experiences and relationships have an extremely strong impact on their sense of identity. For young children parents, but also siblings and kinship, play an important role, they play the most influential role, and the responses they receive from them determine the development of their self-image the most. Family is the most effective personality-shaping medium, whose mechanisms act through personal attachment, and which is the main source of intimacy and love. Secure attachment, interpersonal relationships that develop in the early stages of life are decisive throughout an individual's life, establish self-confidence, and develop a need for contemporary relationships, friendships, and intimate relationships (Czibere – Molnár 2015). For most people the first relationships of trust develop in the family, the quality of the parent-child relationship and early intimate relationships can serve as a model throughout an individual's lifetime.
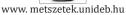
Family socialization is a process happening on a socially differentiated basis in the process of children growing up, which is influenced by several factors together. The standard of these is not determined by the individual but by society. According to the results of Mollenhauer (1996), several such standards have effects: (1) the behaviour of persons important to the child, which can be observed in different situations and roles in the social field; (2) norms and values governing social interactions perceived by the child; (3) the place occupied in the social structure in the daily practice of parenting and the phenomena observed in the unique style and behaviour represented by norms and roles.

But not only systems of relationships within the family but also relationships with external social groups play an important role in the process of childhood socialization. Parents play a mediating role between external social systems and their children (Mollenhauer 1996), the quality and quantity of which largely depend on the social status of the family. It is the early care relationship between the child and the parent (or the person caring for the child) that is of the greatest importance in the socialization process, no matter what social class the child and his or her family belong to.

Welch's human ecological model

Welch (1987) in his human ecological approach starts from the lifestyle of the individual as the smallest unit of society. His model is an outstanding theory in the field of social work that has found widespread acceptance and application. It focuses on the person who, through his relationships, interacts with his natural and social environment, building harmony and mutual support with them. These interfaces
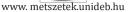
can be examined and interpreted at multiple levels, which also express on how many levels and based on what opportunities individuals can organize their lives, including current life situations, strategies, needs, and meeting them or expresses the lifestyle as well. Welch's model examines the system of interactions between the individual and his social environment in the context of different integration methods, personal success, social well-being, which he interprets primarily through the resources surrounding the individual in two categories: natural and artificial support forces. The author defines seven levels in the close interaction of the individual and the environment, starting from the micro-world of the individual, towards the macro-social levels expanding circularly: physical; intrapersonal; interpersonal; family; local communities; cultural; state, nation. Malfunctions can cause problems at the individual, community, social, and societal levels. To interpret these, Woods (1994) associated functional and dysfunctional operational characteristics. The most important factor with a view to our topic is the level of the family. Interpreting the supporting pillars at this level, in the author's interpretation, it works well when the family provides a sense of belonging and acts as support during difficult times or problems. The family is not well-functioning support if there is a lack of a medium that would provide a sense of belonging, or the human relationships that characterize them are destructive, and the individuals have nowhere or no-one to turn to with their problem.

Directions of child protection research

Children and young people raised in child protection system, as one of the most vulnerable social groups, face several disadvantages in their upbringing, which not only largely determine their years in the care system, but also the time as they become adults and the time of their adult social integration (Ismayamala et al. 2006b, Xie et al. 2014). According to international estimates in 2017, 2.3 million children aged 0 to17 lived in alternative care worldwide. More and more countries are recognizing that compensating for and mitigating the negative effects of institutional care is a key factor in children's well-being. International results show that institutional placements are increasingly marginalized as opposed to home care and close-to-family care forms (Petrowski et al. 2017). In 2022, there were 23,473 people in child protection care in Hungary, including minors and young people over 18 in after care. Almost 70 percent of children were living in foster care (STADAT 2023a). In that year, 6392 children and young people (aged 14–17) were on the road to adulthood or on the verge of it (STADAT 2023b).

International studies on the successful change into adulthood of young people and the effectiveness of their exit from the system place special emphasis on the analysis of young people's attachments and resources, which appear not only as one
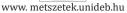
of the basic areas of resilience studies (Ismayilova et al. 2014, Stein 2006) but also form the basis of policy proposals and guidelines.

One of the key areas of child protection research is the identification of the vulnerability of children and young people, and the main risks of entering the system. Vulnerability factor models converge at several levels to examine the links between potential risks and child protection interventions. The scientific paradigms of vulnerability in the United States include models that emphasize individual factors (parent or child characteristics), there are theories that focus on interpersonal relationships (e.g. family structure, child rearing, social problem solving), and sociological and ecological approaches that focus on economic and social conditions, cultural factors and social perceptions of deviance (Szöllősi 2000). International research shows that besides of individual and interpersonal factors, also economic and social circumstances can be identified as risk factors (Chipungu – Bent-Goodley 2004, Harden 2004, Pecora et al. 2006). Bai et al. (2022) examined the relationship between families' housing insecurity and child protection interventions and found that although housing insecurity alone is not a sufficient factor in removing a child from a family, it is often a factor that is combined with other problems and often becomes a factor in child protection decisions. Research on changes in the financial situation of families has also confirmed that direct or indirect financial support to families can reduce the risk of children being removed from their families (Wood et al. 2022). In Hungary, the Central Statistical Office identifies four main groups for the causes of vulnerability: (1) *environmental main group* (factors arising from the child's immediate environment, such as housing-related problems, parents' lifestyle, abuse), (2) *behavioral main group* (problems due to the child's behavior or addiction), (3) *financial main group* (financial problems can be attributed to lack of income and it is not mitigated by the aid), (4) *health main group* (child health problems, learning difficulties) (KSH 2016: 2). In 2014, the highest proportion of children (62%) became at risk due to causes from the environmental main group, so the immediate environment was dominant (KSH 2016: 2).

An equally important area is the study of traumatic events related to young people's personal stories and life paths, as they determine, as one of the foundations of adulthood, later adult life and the success of adult social integration due to having experienced and the knowledge of personal stories (Lőrincz 2017, Rittner et al. 2011, Stein 2006). Research considers the phase of adult-age exit, i.e. exit from the system, as one of the most significant milestones, which also reflects the efficiency of the operation of the system (B. Aczél 1994, Spitzer 1994). Adult social integration is simultaneously determined by two phenomena: social exclusion and the need for care in the social system (Burgund – Rácz 2015). Accordingly, much of the research is aimed at exploring the background of failure and failed exits. An explanation for this is that there is a connection between the reasons for entering the child protection system and the effects of being brought up in the system and the

dysfunctional operation of adult life segments. Also included in this line are housing difficulties, homelessness, impoverishment, substance use, and crime (Barth 1990, Collins 2001, Pecora et al. 2006). At the same time, being prepared for and preparing for independent living can help and facilitate adult well-being as a protective factor (Reilly 2003). Preparing young people for independent living may not only be justified from the professional point of view, but some research also raises it as a need articulated by young people growing up in the system (Barth1990, Pecora et al. 2006, Schofield – Beek 2009). Professionals working in the child protection system in Hungary consider aftercare services (over 18 years of age) available in the Hungarian system as an important support option in this process of preparing young people for independent living (Rácz 2009a). Stein's (2006) resilience-based study identified three different groups in terms of exit from the system and transition to adulthood: (1) victims, (2) survivors, and (3) successful. Based on the former work, qualitative research with young adults growing up in Hungarian child protection alternative care reported (Rácz 2012) on two main life path variants: the group of the successful and that of the survivors. The subtypes found within the two categories (7 subtypes) shows that preparing for independent living and adult roles can play a significant role in the development of the life path, the shortcomings of which have been formulated as criticism by young people (Rácz 2012). Based on the research of Wyn and Dwyer (2006), Nemes-Zámbó (2017) used a qualitative method to investigate the life course patterns of young people living in institutional care (small group homes) in Hungary. The research shows that both normalized life path and life path of choice patterns are found in young people's future planning. Among the normalized life paths – the sequence of life events based on linearity – the "vocational training-focused" ones emerged prominently, while in the case of the life paths of choice (temporal and content diversity of life events) the contextual type emerged, with a family focus. However, given the age composition of young people (15–16 years old), these life path patterns can only be interpreted as plans and aspirations.

Although research questions are focused on the family experiences of children in protection care, there is a few literature related to certain topic. The vision of the future for young people growing up in the system is often surrounded by doubts and uncertainties (Kálmánchey 2001, Szikulai 2003), the main reasons for which are to be found in the challenges of adult life related to leaving the system (Rácz 2006). According to Iglehart (1995), the challenges are mainly dominated by employment difficulties. The vision of the future for the young people is a complex concept, an integral part of which is the diversity of family images that frame young people's lives, systemic family ideals and individual family image experiences. Rácz (2020) explored the concepts of family image in the Hungarian child protection system. According to child protection experts and decision-makers, the child protection system mainly focuses on the ideal image of the nuclear family, which is at the
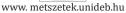
same time coupled with normal needs and appropriate child behavior. This family picture, however, does not properly integrate the variability and instability of 21st-century families, it does not reflect on individual needs. The prevailing view among professionals is the community and emotion-based approach of the family, besides these, the economic function appears only secondarily. In the case of young people living on the border of child protection or in child protection care, duality can be perceived, two different family concepts can be grasped among them: the biological family and the actual family community. These two forms are significantly different from each other, the latter is based on emotional attachments, a relationship of love. Emotional elements dominate in their family image, the parental role is considered a long-term, lifelong task, in the absence of these the parental role is dysfunctional (Rácz 2020). Whether confrontation with the biological family as a natural process (Kálmánchey 2001, Rácz 2020) determines the future, or in the absence of the family, the institutional care or foster family, which functions as the primary socialization medium (Rácz 2006), the future perspectives are diversified.

Research methodology

In our research, we aimed to explore the family patterns of young people aged 15 to 17 growing up in the child protection system and their future family image. Family perspectives were examined using a qualitative method, semi-structured interviews were conducted. 29 interviews were conducted with 18 young people and 11 professionals. In favor of the empirical research of family experiences the 11 professional interviews have been used as grounded method. The field experts consisted of two positions related to the child protection system (foster parents, child protection professionals). All professionals have everyday contact with children in institutional or foster care. These interviews revealed the main dimensions and orientations of the theme, which we wished to investigate. Based on these interviews we were able to develop our target group sample. The young interviewees were selected by expert sampling, mainly from young people living in alternative care in Hajdú-Bihar county, east part of Hungary. The region in which the county is located (Northern Great Plain) plays a very important role in the institutional system for child protection in the country. It ranks among the top regions in terms of both the rates of care of under age children and the number of places in institutional care (Balogh – Gregorits – Rácz 2019). To conduct the personal interviews, the primary consideration in the selection of the young people was to include young people aged 15 to 17 without special needs. As a result, 18 young people were interviewed, 11 of them being raised in small group homes, while 7 were in foster care families. The interviews were authorized by the child protection institutions and the guardians as well. The majority of the participants were females

(13 people), three of whom were unmarried mothers, and five males were included in the sample. The interviewees had at least one year of professional care experience, most of them being raised in the system not alone but with their siblings. By their age, they were typically students in the upper grades of primary school or the lower grades in high school. The lowest grade was 7th grade while the oldest was 10th grade. However, age and school grade did not cover the traditional pattern of school progress in several cases, there were several repeaters among them. For the interview data collection, we defined 4 main dimensions: (1) family-demographic characteristics of young people; (2) a comprehensive presentation of the current situation (3) vision, future plans and (4) conditions for achieving their goals.
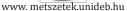
Research results

FAMILY EXPERIENCES AND LIFE EVENTS BASED ON THE NARRATIVES OF THE YOUNG

We examined the family perspectives of children and young people living in child protection care in a complex approach, which allowed us to explore some influencing factors arising among them examined concerning the desired family ideas and family attitudes. According to our observations these factors can also be interpreted as impact factors, we named them as dominant family and life experiences. It is not worth interpreting the categories on their own, independently of each other, as the diverse life events and family structures and the displacements between these can only be understood with each other. Based on the interpretation of our findings, heterogeneous life paths form a complex system together with different family experiences, life events and different versions of displacement within the child protection system.

DISPLACEMENTS WITHIN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Besides, however, not only the experiences of young people during their lives came to the fore, but we also identified *displacements within the child protection system* representing one of the most important arenas for young people's family and social environment as a significant dimension. *The displacement of young people within the child protection system* can be divided into several variants, the development of the displacements is influenced by a large number of both external and internal factors. In terms of family perspectives, what we consider to be a fundamental category is what family structures the young person encounters in the system of primary and alternative childcare, how much time they spend in these family-replacement arenas, and what experience they gain not only in family attitudes but also in life management and social environment. In the framework of the present research, we can outline
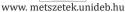
only a few typical displacements, however, these were the dominant one's according to the young's narratives. In the series of displacements, in the most ideal case the young can return to the biological family (1), but for many young people alternative care remains a temporary state. Accordingly, we cannot be sure that for the young person, the blood family milieu is the dominant family experience. A significant group of young people is those who (2) have both child welfare and alternative care experience. In this case, an intervention aimed at improving family life and ensuring the care and development of children can be assumed before removed from the birth family, which may indicate to the young person the dysfunction of family functioning even before alternative care happens. Displacements within alternative care can be (3) linear (e.g., long-term care without relocation) or (4) variable (multiple forms of care, multiple care locations). In the case of the former ones (3), we found that both long-term foster parent care or small group home care can result a problem-free and trust-based relationship. Due to this the young person can feel safe in the family-replacing arena and there is no need coming up for a change of care location on either the care side or the client side. In contrast, as a result of external circumstances, temporary home care, or problems in the care location, variable pathways represent multiple foster families or small group homes, and thus several professionals who come into contact with the young person. This displacement within a diverse system has little ability to create a family sphere meaning home to the young person, which could become the basis for family perspectives.

NARRATIVES OF THE ENTRY TO THE SYSTEM –
DOMINANT FAMILY AND LIFE EXPERIENCES

We became familiar with the family system and family experiences of the young people through the narrative of the story of their entry into the system, all of which could be analyzed by supplementing the exploration of the dimension of contact with the biological parents and family. Among *the dominant family and life experiences*, the determinant is disruption of family life. We found several cases when the parents were not able to care about the child or the child was in an abusive family. In some of these cases, different deviant parenting lifestyles (crime, alcohol or gambling addiction) appeared. In other cases, we also experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse.

> *"I've been here for 4 years. I used to live with my parents before that. Where we lived, the conditions were not good."* (15-year-old girl, has 5 siblings)

– "And why did you get into the home?
– Because our mom was an alcoholic and kept beating us constantly, she didn't give us food, and things.
– And your dad?
– Well, my dad… he's been drinking quite a bit lately, but they've been apart for a very long time.
– You don't keep in touch with them, your parents?
– Not with my mother, but with my father yes, we do." (16-year-old school-girl)

These experiences are sometimes related to getting into early parenthood (sibling care). Getting into early parenting arose in the context of the new role and burdens of caring for siblings closely related to the previous family experience along with a break in parent-child attachment. For the young people, all of this appeared as a stressful experience in their recollections.
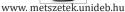
"Because my mom and dad were alcoholics. I had a brother born who was very ill. And the doctors said he wouldn't have survived if they hadn't brought us away. (…) I was prepared at an early age to have a child. Because when Mom gave birth to the little boy, the youngest, she left him. And I had to bring him up. That's why I failed the first year at school, I did it twice. I was forced to do so, for sure." (16-year-old girl, currently raising a child)

These experiences indicate the dysfunction of the biological family arena. A similarly defining family experience was the early childhood separation and entry into the system, which also raises the issue of lack of connection to the blood family. As a result, there were some of them who were experiencing foster parents and small group homes as a primary family experience; for them, these family replacement arenas are the primary experiences.

In a few cases, due to the diversity of displacement within the system, the variability and instability of family experiences were dominant. In some cases, the existing place of care served as a benchmark for young people, but it also occurred that the previous family experience within the child protection system was considered to be decisive, irrespective of it being a positive or a negative experience. In many cases, dominant family experiences also function as reasons for entry, but in addition to problems within family life, environmental factors also play a role. Previously, we also considered placement from the family due to child behavior to be one of the significant elements of these categories, however, during the interviews we did not come across an admission narrative that would confirm this.

During the narratives the young did not exclusively mention the moment of being removed from the family but also viewed it as a process. Therefore, partly moving on

from the entry to the system, some additional dominant family and life events were also revealed in the young people's narratives. In this sense, the transition period before and after being removed from the family, together with its difficulties and doubts, was linked to this event. This process-focused approach showed most that the young person was left alone, and its difficulties were further exacerbated by the compulsion to adapt to the new situation. Some of them decided to leave the birth family and became voluntary leavers. In these cases, the young people themselves indicated to their environment that they had not been properly cared for in their blood family or later they did not return to the blood family at the time of possible home care.
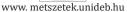
> – *"How did you get here?*
> – *Well, my two elder brothers had themselves brought in and I came, too.*
> – *Because it wasn't okay at home?*
> – *Well, no.*
> – *Have you been in touch with them since? Do you usually meet your siblings and parents?*
> – *Of course, yes-yes.*
> – *How long have you been here?*
> – *Well, it's been about 8 years."* (16-year-old boy, successful sports person)

We defined unmarried motherhood also as a dominant family and life event. This event, as the one before (voluntary leavers), puts rather the individual in the center, focusing on the tasks and solutions associated with having a child. Of course, these experiences are inseparable from the family scene, but the experiences are more related to the young person's staying alone than to the blood or foster family or residential home.

Family perspectives of the young people

After interpreting the dominant family and life experiences, we describe the family perspectives for the young people (Table 1). We observed that, typically young people wanted (1) a nuclear family, which they imagined with or without a marriage bond. The young in this category mentioned explanatory factors related to their desired family image such us the birth family or foster family as a role model, the birth family as a negative example and creating and maintaining financial security. This family structure appeared in young people's narratives both as an exemplary trajectory resulting from the structure of the biological and foster family, but also as a contrast to biological families with a different family structure. Moreover, in the narratives of some young people, this family size and family structure was the basis for the emotional, social and material well-being of children growing up in the family.

"I don't want to get married, but I want a baby. That is, I want to have someone I am attached to. And I want a child from him too, but not to get married because I don't think it's worth it, if we fall out, it's a lot of paperwork and things." (17-year-old girl, lives with foster parents)

"– What kind of family do you imagine for yourself?
– We want two children, preferably a girl. Well, I'd like to live in a medium house.
– What kind of parent would you like to be?
– I want to be a good one. I want to give him everything. What I couldn't get."
(15-year-old girl living in a small group home)

Therefore, the ideal future family can symbolize the confrontation with the blood family structure and family experiences (abuse, neglect), but it can also serve as an example to follow.
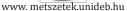
Well, I don't know, I don't want more than two kids. I don't want more than two. (…) I don't want to be similar to anyone. I mean, I don't have a role model. I just trust myself, that's all. I just live on my own account." (16-year-old girl living in small group home)

A similar example to follow was the foster family milieu, which mostly appeared in the case of young people living for a longer time with the foster parent family.

– "Well, now I don't know. Since I'm close to age 30. What you call it, you should start working now to make a small investment. And then a reliable job and then on.
– Who would you look like?
– Well, here's my foster father. He is also very good. So, I've already achieved within myself, that I'm already doing pretty much the same thing. That's just fine for me. " (16-year-old boy, lives with foster parents)

"Well, I would have a good job, well paid. And at the age of thirty, I would like a family whatever happens, with two kids. Although I do not know how compatible the career and the child will be, it will turn out with time. And I want to keep in touch with my foster parent as well as the girls, my friends. I want to have a life of my own, so to speak. That it is up to me to shape it for myself. I don't want to be dependent on anyone but me. That would be so good." (16-year-old girl, lives with a foster parent, wants a degree)

KÖZELKÉP

The image of (2) a family with more children was mainly associated with the experience of the birth family or the foster family. On the one hand, foster families typically take care of several children at the same time, so for these young people this family structure can become a basic experience and a model to follow. On the other hand, there were some youngsters who came from a family with more children and were waiting for the family reunion which confirmed to them that difficulties in the family can be solved.

There were some interviewees who imagined their future (3) without a partner and or children. In these cases, perspectives were associated with negative role models of the biological family (not able to take care of the children), early parenthood (the need to care for siblings) and the preference for living without a partner.

> *"I don't want a child. Husband? I don't want, either. But I love the little ones, I have already raised a sister, a brother. But I won't change my mind later, either."* (15-year-old girl, has 5 siblings)

(4) Family perspectives were uncertain in some cases in relation to experiences in the birth family or foster family. Young people who prefer a linear life path seemed to see starting a family as a project of a life path following employment and housing security. Therefore, at the planning stage, family perspectives are not yet an integral part of their thinking about the future. For young people who are displaced a lot within the system, the idea of a desirable family has often been hampered, some have not thought before about what kind of family they can imagine, others have identified shortcomings in the implementation of family foundation (e.g. no prospect of adequate housing).

> *"– At what age do you want to have a family?*
> *– Well, I don't know now. So, when I'm approaching 30. What do you call it, I'd rather start working now, so that I have some investment. And then a steady job and then after that. And I am going to be 20 years old, so I've got a bit of my youth to live out."* (16-year-old boy in foster care)

> *"– Do you want to get married?*
> *– Well, later. Not when you're young. When you have everything, house, car, money, then after. I'm not starting any sooner.*(16-year-old boy living in a small group home)
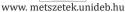
KÖZELKÉP

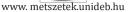*Table 1.* Future family perspectives with explanatory factors

Family perspectives	Explanatory factors which emerged in the narratives related to dominant family and life events
nuclear family (based on marriage or partnership)	birth family or foster family as a role model birth family as a negative example creating and maintaining financial security
family with more children	birth family or foster family as a role model
rejection to have children and/or a partner	birth family as a negative example early parenthood (sibling care) preference of living without a partner
uncertain family perspectives	birth family or foster family as a negative example the idea of a linear life path, in which employment and housing precede the idea of starting a family more changes of care places

Source: own editing (2023)

For most of them, proper contact with the blood family helped to form the image of the ideal family and fill it with content, and also to acquire family attitudes, for others, this factor emerged rather as an inhibiting factor. We assumed that the link between different pathways and different perceptions of family can be demonstrated through our sample. However, the complexity of each life stories did not allow us to outline typical links or patterns in this sense.

At the same time, we were able to identify that, however coming from dysfunctional family arenas with different family structures, the vulnerable group studied typically had varied ideas about future family perspectives among which nuclear family was dominant. We attribute a significant role in this to the dominant family and life events studied, some of which are also entry points that can influence future planning as a defining family experience, life event or as a result of shifts in the system. Whether they are just ideas or realistic aspirations, young people's family perspectives and attitudes are influenced by a number of factors, of which we consider the above events to be crucial.
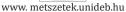
Discussion

Based on Welch's human ecological model, considering the limitations of our research, we do not attempt to analyze all levels of the model, we interpret our results only at the family level and the local community level. In the analysis, we encountered conceptual obstacles, as the family level in our case meant several family structures and family milieus, among which there were dominant family scenes though, but in the case of the young people studied we cannot think only of one family level experience. Thus, we examined the family level in a complex way, in the context of the diversity of family structures. Separation from the family in many cases also means the loss of the function of the blood family and inadequate care. In this sense, belonging to the family and functioning of the family as support become partially or completely impeded. Although at the family level several dysfunctions may appear according to the human ecological approach (lack of experience of belonging, lack of support, destructive relationships), these deficiencies and problematic functions do not necessarily go together among the young people studied, their perception and experience may be different. There are blood family experiences in the lives of young people that can ensure the young person's sense of belonging, even if the family is not able to properly care for the young person according to its function. Thus, the young people include both those who have perceived deficiencies in the performance of the functions of the blood family, but also those who have experienced functional operation in the medium of the blood family in some respects. Therefore, in the context of family perspectives, it emerged to be seen that the dysfunctional operation of the blood family can not only be interpreted as a counterexample but in some cases, presumably along with the experience of belonging, could even serve as a role model for young people. In addition to physical care, to correct these shortcomings among other things, the system of child protection care appears in the lives of children and young people, which tries to fulfil the functions in the form of foster care or apartment homes.

There are overlaps between the levels of human ecology in the situation of young people living in alternative care because while we identify forms of care as a family-substituting arena, we also enter the local community level via the child protection institutions and their actors. This is particularly relevant in the context of shaping young people's perceptions of family life, as there are both family and local community-level effects. At the local community level - in our case, from the point of view of the actors in the child protection system and the institutions providing care - it is important to ask how the ideal family image and ideas of the family are articulated in the structural framework that provides the environment for young people to grow up in. Based on Rácz's (2020) research, the narratives of child protection professionals include an ideal of the nuclear family in the child protection system, which can serve as a model for young people. Thus, the emphasis
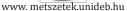
on the nuclear family image among the interviewees can also be interpreted in the context of this idealized family image that pervades the child protection system. In the present research, it was not possible to examine this context, but it is assumed that this phenomenon may play a significant role in future perspectives. As a result, we consider it relevant that the complexity of the family perspectives identified among the young people we studied and the explanatory factors associated with them should be reflected in the professional support and care work with young people. We believe that this requires acceptance and support so that they are able to realize the future they have planned, based on their individual needs and ideas.

In this complex situation, another relevant question may arise as to whether the institutional structures have the ability to substitute the family milieu, i.e. to compensate for the problems and difficulties arising from separation from the family. When examining the role of the state as a parent, Rácz (2016) draws attention to the over-regulatory, paternalistic nature of the state and the shifting of responsibility to lower levels (family, school, individual), which does not allow for the implementation of child protection services that reflect individual needs. We believe that the dichotomy of levels (family, local community) can be a resource at the same time, which can help to identify and adequately meet the needs of young people on two levels, providing a comprehensive problem and needs analysis is assumed and levels and actors can cooperate (e.g. at the family level through foster parents, at the local community level through professionals working with young people). However, it can be dysfunctional if the two levels become too intertwined and the aim of full knowledge of the cases is overshadowed.

Conclusions

In our study, we used qualitative method to examine the development of family perspectives among young people aged 15–17 living in child protection alternative care, based on the family functioning experienced by them in the blood family and the alternative care. The contexts of functionalist theories underpin the importance of family functions and draw attention to the importance of family value and norm systems, as well, to the importance of family socialization effects for the growing child. From the context of interactional theories, we highlighted the major factors that deal with social relationships within the family and contribute to the interpretation of the characteristics of cooperation between family members. In the introduction of the context of the system theory, we mainly emphasized the interrelationships that interpret families so that the interpretation of the boundaries between family members and the family subsystems give a deeper understanding of the internal processes of family functions, too. This is all the more important because we later used also the theory of systematic human ecology to interpret the results
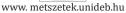
obtained. With the idea of the social differentiation of family socialization, we also introduced the idea of the uniqueness and social structural determination of family internal relations determined by social stratification. However, we emphasized that not only internal systems of relations, but also relations with external social groups play an extremely important role in the socialization of children. Since in this process the parents represent the connecting and mediating role, the quantity and quality of which also depend on status. We highlighted the importance of early care tasks and the processes in childhood socialization effects.

We interpreted our results in two large units. In the first stage of the analysis, we explored and presented the displacements within the child protection system, dominant family experiences and life events of the young people. Among the dominant family experiences and life events, one of the most defining was, of course, the experience of being removed from the family, but not exclusively. The negative-positive experiences before and after it together determined its significance. As second part of the results we introduced the family perspectives of the studied group in connection with the displacements, dominant family and life events arosed in their narratives. In the discussion we also interpreted our results in the human ecology system at the level of families and institutions, and presented its conceptual difficulties, as well as overlaps and blurs between family and institutional levels which interlink the actors at the level of local communities as well, resulting in both functional and dysfunctional operation.

References

B. Aczél A. (1994): A gyermekvédelem dilemmái Magyarországon. *Eszmélet, 6*(*21–22*): 66–78.

Bai, R. – Collins, C. – Fischer, R. et al. (2022): Exploring the Association Between Housing Insecurity and Child Welfare Involvement: A Systematic Review. *Child and Adolescent Social Work,* 39: 247–260.

Balogh K. – Gregorits P. – Rácz A. (2019): A gyermekvédelmi intézményrendszer működési környezetének vizsgálata a 'gyermekvédelem mint szolgáltatás' értelmezési keretrendszer tükrében. *Esély*, 2019/3. 26–47.

Barth, P. R. (1990): On Their Own: The Experiences of Youth After Foster Care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work*, *7(5):* 419–440.

Broderick, C. B. (1993): *Understanding family process: Basics of family systems theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.

Burgund A. – Rácz A. (2015): Comparative Analyses on Youth Care in Hungary and Serbia. *Metszetek Társadalomtudományi folyóirat*, *4(2):* 97–106.

www.metszetek.unideb.hu

KÖZELKÉP

Czibere I. – Molnár É. (2015): „…nem a kortárs családi lét múló aberrációja". Család-definíciók és családelméletek az angolszász szociológiai irodalomban. *Metszetek Társadalomtudományi folyóirat,* 4(4): 19–53.

Chipungu, S. S. – Bent-Goodley T. B. (2004): Meeting the Challenges of Contemporary Foster Care. *The Future of Children,* 14(1): 74–93.

Collins, E. M. (2001): Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Youths: A Review of Research and Implications for Policy. *Social Service Review,* 75(2): 271–291.

Coontz, S. (2005): *Marriage, a History: From Obidience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage.* New York, Viking.

Crouter, A. C. – Booth, A. (eds.) (2003): *Children's influence on family dynamics: The neglected side of family relationships.* Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Fiese, B. H. – Tomcho, J. T. – Douglas, M. – Josephs, K. – Poltrock, S. – Baker, T. (2002): A Review of 50 Years of Research on naturally Occurring Family Routines and Rituals: Cause for Celebrations? *Journal of Family Psychology,* 16(4): 381–390.

Harden, B. J. (2004): Safety and Stability for Foster Children: A Developmental Perspective. *The Future of Children,* 14(1): 30–47.

Iglehart, P. A. (1995): Readiness for Independence: Comparison of Foster Care, Kinship Care, and Non-Foster Care Adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 17(3): 417–432.

Ismayilova, L. – Ssewamala, F. – Huseynli, A. (2014): Reforming child institutional care in the Post-Soviet bloc: The potential role of family-based empowerment strategies. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 47: 136–148.

Kálmánchey M. (2001): Nevelőszülőnél élő gyerekeknél előforduló pszichés problémák. *Család, Gyermek, Ifjúság. 2001/2.*, 45–53.

Kantor, D. – Lehr, W. (1975): *Inside the Family: Toward a Theory of Family Process.* San Fransisco, Jossey-Bass.

Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (2016): *Gyermekesély – A gyermekvédelmi jelzőrend-szer működése, 2014. Statisztikai Tükör.* http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/gyermekvedelem14.pdf.

Központi Statisztikai Hivatal–STADAT (2019): *A gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban részesülő fiatalok. Táblázat.* https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_fsg013.html.

Lőrincz A. (2017). Az állami gondozott fiatalok képe jóról és rosszról. *Képzés és Gyakorlat,* 15(4): 125–134.

Mollenhauer K. (1996): Szocializáció és iskolai eredmény. In: Meleg Cs. (ed.): *Iskola és Társadalom I. (Szöveggyűjtemény),* Pécs, JPTE Tanárképző Intézet Pedagógia Tanszéke, 95–109.
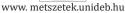
KÖZELKÉP

Nemes-Zámbó G. (2017): Családtervezés és munkaerőpiaci aspirációk lakás-otthonban nevelkedő fiatalok körében. *Metszetek Társadalomtudományi folyóirat,* 6(3): 87–109.

Pecora, J. P. – Kessler, C. R. – O'Brien K. – White, R. C. – Williams, J. – Hiripi, E. – English, D. – White, J. – Herrick, A. M. (2006): Educational and employment outcomes of adults formerly placed in foster care: Results from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 28: 1459–1481.

Petrowski, N. – Cappa, C. – Gross, P. (2017): Estimating the number of children in formal alternative care: Challenges and results. *Child Abuse & Neglect,* 70: 388–398.

Rácz A. (2006): Gyermekotthonokban élő, nagykorúságuk előtt álló fiatalok társadalmi integrációs esélyei. In: Rácz A. (ed.): *A magyar gyermekvédelmi rendszer helyzete, jövőbeli kihívásai.* Budapest, NCSSZI, 1–49.

Rácz A. (2012): *Barkácsolt életutak, szekvenciális (rendszer)igények.* Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó.

Rácz A. (2020): A gyermekvédelmi rendszer szakmaképe, az érintett gyermekek és szüleik családképe egy kutatás tükrében. *Családi jog,* 2020/1., 16–22.

Reilly, T. (2003): Transition from care: Status and outcomes of youth who age out of foster care. *Child Welfare,* 82(6): 727–746.

Rittner, B. – Affronti, M. – Crofford, R. – Coombes, M. – Schwam-Harris, M. (2011): Understanding Responses to Foster Care: Theoretical Approaches. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment,* 21: 363–382.

Spitzer T. (1994): Az állami gondoskodásból kikerült fiatalok családépítési kísérletei. *Esély,* 5(4): 58–62.

STADAT (2023a): A gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban részesülő fiatalok. KSH https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/szo/hu/szo0016.html.

STADAT (2023b): Gyermekotthonokban és nevelőszülőknél ellátott gyermekek és fiatal felnőttek a gondozás időtartama szerint. KSH https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/szo/hu/szo0017.html.

Stein, M. (2006): Research review: young people leaving care. *Child and Family Social Work,* 11(3): 273–279.

Szikulai I. (2003): *Beszámoló a gyermekvédelmi rendszerből nagykorúságuk után kikerült fiatal felnőttek utánkövetéses vizsgálatáról.* Budapest, Nemzeti Család- és Szociálpolitikai Intézet.

Szöllősi G. (2000): Hogy fogalmunk legyen róla… A veszélyeztetettség fogalma az amerikai gyermekvédelemben. *Esély: Társadalom és Szociálpolitikai Folyóirat*, 4: 39–72.

Welch, G. (1987): An integrated approach to social work practice. In: McKendrick, B. W. (ed.): *Introduction to social work in South Africa*. Pinetown, Owen Burgess, 152–176.

Wood, S. – Scourfield, J. – Stabler, L. – Addis, S. – Wilkins, D. – Forrester, D. – Brand, S. L. (2022): How might changes to family in come affect the likelihood of children being in out-of-home care? Evidence from a realist and qualitative rapid evidence assessment of interventions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 143: 1–11.

Woods, R. (1994): A szociális munkások tevékenységeinek egy lehetséges rendszerezése. In: Hegyesi G. – Talyigás K. (eds.): *A szociális munka elmélete és gyakorlata 1. kötet.* Budapest, Nemzeti Család- és Szociálpolitikai Intézet, 32–45.

Xie, R. – Sen, B. – Foster, M. (2014): Vulnerable Youth and Transitions to Adulthood. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 143: 29–38.