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Gender, resilience and recognition: masculinities and transitions out of care in Russia

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ABSTRACT

Research on young people leaving care often points to a clear gendering of pathways, but has hitherto paid little attention to gender. This article uses a gender lens to develop a perspective on the dynamic processes of exclusion and inclusion that mark transitions to adulthood amongst young men leaving care in Russia. It does this by combining insights from the sociology of masculinities with recent theorising around the concepts of resilience and recognition in inter-disciplinary research on leaving care. It argues that, while recognition theory has become central to social and ecological understandings of resilience, its applications have focused on emotional and legal rather than social recognition, which better illuminates the wider social and cultural contexts, in this case surrounding gender, framing young people's transitions and identity construction. In turn, this approach facilitates a perspective on the 'social resilience' of care leavers as a marginalised group in a particular national context. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in 2018–2019, the article highlights the ways young men adopt different versions of masculinity as they experience and perceive forms of recognition and misrecognition both in the present and the future, and the import this has for processes of social exclusion and inclusion.

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Introduction

Young people leaving care are amongst the most vulnerable members of any society. Compared with the wider youth population, they are at significantly greater risk of educational failure, unemployment, homelessness, poor mental and physical health, and involvement in prostitution and crime (Mendes and Snow 2017). Research on young people leaving care has grown considerably in recent decades and is notable for its international breadth, with contributions coming from a wide range of both global north and south countries (see Keller et al. 2023 for example). In addition, after criticism that care

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leaver research lacked serious engagement with social theory (Stein 2006; Glyn 2021), recent studies have sought to apply and extend a range of theoretical frameworks to the processes involved in transitioning out of care, with notable advances in the application of the concept of resilience (Stein 2006, 2008; Van Breda 2015, 2018 for example) and of recognition theory (Glynn 2021; Paulsen and Thomas 2018; Smith, Cameron, and Reimer 2017). Despite this, one critical dimension of leaving care that has remained both under-researched and under-theorised is gender.

That there is a clear gendering of pathways amongst care leavers is self-evident in studies pointing, for example, to the higher probability of young men becoming involved in crime (Tweddle 2007), or to the lower average age at which young women leaving care enter parenthood (Maxwell, Proctor, and Hammond 2011). What is also clear is that these gendered patterns differ across cultural contexts. Hlungwani and van Breda (2020, 916), for instance, argue that the heightened exposure to risks of poverty and dependency linked to early motherhood in South Africa makes the process of leaving care more challenging for young women than for young men, while Stein (2008, 38) points to national data in the UK indicating that young women experience better outcomes. What is also unclear in the existing scholarship is how an appreciation of the gendered patterns and dynamics of leaving care in different cultural contexts might be integrated into current theorising around care leavers' resilience and recognition, and how this might be mobilised in improving care leavers' outcomes.

This article explores gendered dimensions of leaving care in Russia, drawing on ethnographic data illuminating the experiences of young men leaving care in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region in 2018–2019. Russia's child welfare system has undergone significant reform in recent years, with wide-ranging efforts to move away from the problematic systems and practices for looking after 'social orphans' developed during the Soviet era (Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2010). After a period of stagnation during the 1990s, when much of Russia's social welfare system was severely neglected in the context of widespread economic dislocation, child welfare began to benefit from increased social spending and a series of reforms in the 2000s, which enabled the development of more child-centred approaches (Kulmala et al. 2021). Spearheaded by policies of deinstitutionalisation, inclusive education and greater resourcing of the care-leaving process in relation to housing and financial support, Russia has developed a system of alternative care that, on paper, is both well-structured and well-resourced. In a recent comparative study, Strahl et al. (2021) describe Russia as having a well-developed legislative framework for alternative care, and place it among a minority of countries providing care up to the age of 23. However, research suggests significant ongoing problems in relation both to path dependent elements of Soviet era practice and to new forms of dysfunctionality emerging through the reform process (Disney and Walker 2023), from widespread exclusion from secondary and higher education (Chernova and Shpakovskaya 2020) to a lack of awareness of legal rights (Lerch and Stein 2010) and inappropriate housing (Abramov et al. 2016). With regard to young men coming through Russia's care system, while there are those who have flourished (see Mashkova and Gynzhu 2019 for example), criminological research suggests endemic problems. MacCauley's (2009) study of young men in custody in Russian penal institutions, for example, found that the majority had come from care backgrounds, while respondents in Lisovskaya's (2019) research on young men in juvenile rehabilitation programmes in St. Petersburg were all care leavers. The

present study hopes to shed light on the ways that constructions of masculinity amongst young men in care in Russia can lead them towards forms of social *inclusion* as well as exclusion. The article also provides empirical insights into a system that has undergone a 'paradigm shift' in child welfare provision (Kulmala et al. 2021), further illuminating what works in supporting care leavers in the context of global efforts towards deinstitutionalisation (see UNCRC 2019). Before setting out our study, we first address key theoretical advances in care leaver research.

Resilience, recognition and gender in research on leaving care

The concept of resilience has become widespread in research on care leavers. While original formulations of resilience focused on individual traits and capacities, and were consequently open to the criticism that they were in the service of a neoliberal agenda (see Joseph 2013), contemporary use of the concept focuses on how resilience is shaped by broader social systems, and is thus more engaged with matters of power and inequality (Van Breda 2018). In particular, social-ecological perspectives have moved towards a more holistic conception incorporating the environment in which people are located. Ungar (2008), for example, provides the following definition:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity ... resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these ... in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar 2008, 225)

In a review of studies exploring resilience amongst care leavers, Stein (2008) points to a number of key elements that reflect this social-ecological perspective. First, young people's time within the care system is more likely to build resilience if it allows them to form compensatory, secure attachments, provides continuity, and gives them the opportunity to construct a stable sense of identity. These factors are associated with better outcomes in relation to education and the construction of future relationships, thus enabling some young people to 'move on' after leaving care. Second, in a context in which transitions to adulthood have become increasingly complex and prolonged, care leavers not only need adequate preparation for independent life, but also time in making the transition out of care, as compressed and accelerated transitions deny them the psychological opportunity to deal with this adequately. Third, care leavers often require ongoing forms of support from specialist leaving-care workers and mentors, including peer mentors (ex-care young people) to help them with all aspects of life after care. Such services are often critical for those who, rather than 'moving on', are just about coping with life after care, whom Stein designates as 'survivors'. A third group – 'complex' – may have experienced instability and a lack of attachment earlier in their care experience and, even with aftercare assistance, lack the resilience to avoid more chronic forms of support and exposure to risks of various kinds, becoming 'trapped within welfare identities' (Stein 2008, 43).

While Stein focuses on the ways resilience flows from the structures of support surrounding young people in care, Van Breda (2015) draws attention to the interactions through which young people engage with those structures, developing the notion of resilience as process. In research on young people leaving care in South Africa, he identifies four psychosocial resilience processes – 'Striving for authentic belonging', 'Networking

people for goal attainment', 'Building hopeful and tenacious self-confidence', and 'Contextual responsiveness' – that facilitate successful transitioning out of residential care amongst his respondents. While the latter three involve the application of social skills – networking, tenacity, responsiveness – to the situations care leavers are exposed to, all of these are directed towards the former – the need for 'authentic belonging' – which Van Breda describes as 'a genuine experience of being loved and of fitting into a social system such as a family' (Van Breda 2015). This striving is 'foundational', a 'driving force' for young people in care that stems from the lower levels of attachment, or loss of attachment, they have often experienced, and can be distinguished from substitute forms of belonging – attachments to members of peer groups, for example – that may be prioritised by young people in the absence of strong bonds with adults.

In understanding sources of resilience, both Stein and Van Breda draw on attachment theory (Bowlby 1973), which has its roots in child psychiatry and has been central to Western social work practice for more than half a century. However, this dominance has been criticised for leading to what Smith, Cameron, and Reimer (2017, 1614) regard as an undue focus on 'dyadic, familial and essentialised relationships' at the expense of more socio-cultural perspectives on child development. Key amongst these has been work drawing on recognition theory, as developed by German theorist Axel Honneth. Building on Hegel's work on 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*) and the interactional sociology of Mead, Honneth (2001) sees the self-other relationship as fundamental to social life, and regards socialised subjects as moral actors marked by a number of normative claims and corresponding vulnerabilities. He outlines three forms of recognition – or 'patterns of reciprocity' – which are central to the achievement of 'the subjective autonomy of the individual' insofar as they underpin three distinct elements of the 'practical relation-to-self' (Honneth 1995, 94). First, emotional recognition, by which intersubjective relations of love and concern underpin basic *self-confidence*; second, legal recognition, whereby people are seen and see themselves as possessing certain rights and responsibilities, and thus relates to *self-respect*; and third, social recognition, which is about distinguishing an individual from their wider collective according to their particular contribution or value, and which is central to *self-esteem*. In turn, these practical relations-to-self can all be undermined where reciprocal recognition is not upheld: forms of abuse and neglect destroy self-confidence; denial of rights attacks self-respect; and devaluation and misrecognition undermine self-esteem. Thus, reporting on research on young people leaving care in Norway, Paulsen and Thomas (2018) highlight the various impacts of inadequate recognition. The withdrawal of caring relationships with social workers upon leaving care undermined confidence; a lack of meaningful support from caseworkers – the denial of a right – made it difficult to achieve the degree of agency expected of them; and consistently low expectations of them eroded self-esteem and made failure easier. Glynn (2021) similarly found in Ireland that feelings of disrespect were common in aftercare settings, where only those succeeding in education were adequately supported. By contrast, those with 'undeserving' lifeways – experience of drug use or involvement in crime for example – were positioned as unworthy of assistance, a form of 'institutional misrecognition'.

While these and other studies illustrate the value of recognition theory in exploring the sources of young people's resilience (Warming 2015 for example), they still reflect the concerns of critical social work in focusing on care leavers' micro and meso-level relationships within child welfare systems, thus underplaying the ways social recognition is shaped at

the macro, wider societal level. As Ungar (2008, 225) suggests, resilience and recognition stem not only from the resources embedded within an individual's immediate family and community, but from the wider culture that frames perceptions of the lifeways available to young people, their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, Hodkinson, and Sparkes 2013). In this vein, in research among indigenous care leavers in Canada, McLaughlin et al. (2022) highlight the ways their respondents' identities are shaped by a colonial past which has more often been used to pathologise them than offered them opportunities for recognition. They call for a move beyond 'traditional, individualised, micro-level approaches that overlook important social, economic, cultural and historic contexts and realities' (2022, 121).

Gender – intersecting with class, ethnicity, place, sexuality, and (dis)ability – similarly provides cultural scripts for young people and frames their perceptions of whom they can become, and has been explored in a number of studies of care leavers. Hlungwani and van Breda (2020), for example, point to the centrality of motherhood to feelings of success among young women leaving care in South Africa, despite the social risks attached to early parenthood in their locality, and differentiate them from young men in the same location. While thus delineating broadly 'male' and 'female' pathways, however, studies addressing gender in relation to transitions from care stop short of a perspective that fully explores the intersecting inequalities and power relations that young people must navigate across multiple fields, and the ways these can open and close particular doors in different institutional and cultural contexts. Such perspectives have been more central to sociological and criminological studies of youth and masculinity. Maguire's (2021) research on marginalised young men in UK prisons, for example, draws on Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity to illustrate how institutional spaces of learning, care, punishment and rehabilitation act to promote and exacerbate the adoption by vulnerable young men of forms of 'protest' masculinity. These subject positions see crime and violence as the primary route to the achievement of masculinity and, originating in impoverished neighbourhoods lacking legitimate alternatives, are formed at the intersection of gender, class and place. Ward et al. (2017) similarly point to the important role played by 'geographies of masculinity' (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014) in shaping identities among marginalised young men in Western Scotland and South-East London. They argue that versions of violent, hyper-masculinity were ever-present in the background of their respondents' lives, and that their attempts to construct and pursue 'safer' masculine identities were precarious and uncertain:

Family life, street life, individual neighbourhoods, regions and nations all helped produce differential performances shaping young men's masculine identities ... [influencing] who they are and the possibility of who they can become. (Ward et al. 2017, 812)

As this latter example suggests, young men can move between riskier and safer versions of masculinity as opportunities for recognition change across time and place. Maguire (2021) makes a related argument, as his respondents come to associate protest masculinities with childish irresponsibility, albeit after serving time in prison. Similarly, in research with young men who have experienced domestic abuse and subsequently turned to gang violence, Levell (2020) illustrates how her respondents' performances of protest masculinity co-exist with a 'shadow self' of 'vulnerable masculinity', pointing again to the reflexive ways men move between gendered subject positions through the life course.

As well as offering a dynamic perspective on young men's possibilities for social inclusion, exploration of the factors shaping gendered social recognition open the door to a more sociological understanding of resilience in care leaver research, which, despite adopting a broadly social-ecological approach, has tended to focus on the individual level. By contrast, the concept of social resilience (Hall and Lamont 2013; Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013) explores the capacity of groups of people, however connected, to sustain their wellbeing in the face of risks and threats. Use of the concept of social resilience has paid particular attention to the cultural frameworks and imaginaries that shape the ways marginalised social groups respond to stigma and position themselves within orders of worth, not least in the increasingly exclusionary context of neo-liberalism (Hall and Lamont 2013). The group level of analysis offered by a social resilience approach has been used widely in comparative studies, and offers opportunities for advancing research on leaving care, which, according to recent assessments (Strahl et al. 2021), remains in its infancy as a field of comparative inquiry.

This study brings together the theoretical strands outlined above in order to illuminate sources of and barriers to recognition and resilience amongst young men leaving care in Russia, paying particular attention to changing performances of masculinity and their relation to processes of social exclusion and inclusion. The following section outlines our study.

Data and methods

The research comes from a British Academy-funded project on young people's transitions from care in the Russian Federation, which involved fieldwork over several visits to St. Petersburg and the wider Leningradskaya Oblast' in 2018–2019. These field visits were preceded by a workshop involving practitioners, academics and third sector experts to help guide and refine the research design. The project was exploratory, aiming to shed light both on the forms of aftercare services available to care leavers and the outcomes of their transitions in education, employment and housing. It examined different contexts (rural, small town, city) across a singular region to gauge the full range of care leavers' experiences and the services available to them. The rate of children left without parental care in Leningradskaya Oblast' was 156/100,000 in 2020 against a national average of 143/100,000 (Posarac et al. 2021, 9).

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique, approaching practitioners from both the state and third sector as initial gatekeepers and following a snowballing approach thereafter. The research took place in locations across the region, including: a children's home, which had been re-titled a Centre for Family Rehabilitation (*Tsentry po Sodeistviu Semeinogo Vospitaniya*) following recent reforms, and was required to seek family placements for all children; a secondary school taking pupils from the Centre; the offices of social workers at the Centre for Social Support Measures (*Tsentr mer sotsialnoi podderzhki*) within the Social Welfare Department (*Otdel sotsial'noi zashchity nasele-niya*); NGOs working in the sphere of child and family welfare, including a youth centre and hostel, which provided accommodation for young people who had left Children's Villages; a vocational college (*litsei*), which had large numbers of care leavers due to having hostel accommodation. In total the research team interviewed 25 care leavers ranging

from age 18 to 31 who were about to leave care or had done so relatively recently, as well as 16 practitioners.

While gatekeepers facilitated initial contact with care leavers, the researchers spoke to participants separately to explain both the aims and the voluntary nature of the research. Having obtained informed consent, a semi-structured interview technique was used, such that participants were given the opportunity to discuss any topic they wished to relate their experience of leaving care. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, all interviews were led by the participants to set them at ease and respect their wishes to avoid any possible distress. Since interviews were biographical, they included information about a wide range of institutions and care settings experienced by the respondents over the course of their lives that were not themselves a direct focus of the research. For example, several participants had been in and out of foster care arrangements between periods in institutions. With regard to the institutions directly involved in the research, insights into relationships between staff and the young people in their care at the Centre for Family Rehabilitation, the college, the youth centre and the social housing setting were derived both from interviews and from overt ethnographic observations made while visiting them. Interviews were conducted in Russian by the researchers. The names of participants and of identifiable locations and employers have been changed. Ethical approval was granted by the lead institution's ethics committee, application 32162.

Findings: transitions from protest to normative masculinities

Across the group of young men in the study, a dominant theme was the development during their time in children's homes of versions of a protest masculinity, and subsequently, a conscious attempt to move towards more socially-conformist, normative versions of masculinity, and an ability to reflect on this. Here we outline in broad brush strokes these transitions from protest to normative masculinities, before detailing the processes at work in the sub-sections below.

At the centre of Connell's (2005) concepts of protest and hegemonic masculinity are gendered power relations, both between men and women, and among men: protest masculinities seek the power associated with dominant, normative masculinities but lack the resources to achieve it, and so make claims to power in illegitimate, often spectacular ways (Connell 2005, 111). In relation to young men leaving care, while these power relations certainly hold true, and reflect other explorations of protest masculinity (see McDowell 2002), we follow Levell (2020) in focusing on the forms of vulnerability underpinning the changing subject positions occupied by young men. That is, as well as reflecting gendered power relations, the adoption of protest and normative masculinities, and movements between them, reflect young men's changing experiences and perceptions of (mis)recognition and possibilities for belonging. The adoption of protest masculinities resulted from instances of misrecognition and neglect/abuse, and usually involved the young men's rejection of formal channels of social reproduction, and conflict with those charged with their care:

In the children's home it was just that kind of environment where you don't want to go anywhere, so I truanted. It was a mistake. There were times when the director herself drove me to school, sat there until the end of the lesson ... They tried to control us like that, but we still truanted. (Kolya, 19)

By contrast, by the time of the research, a number of respondents talked about re-engaging with education. Kolya again illustrates this, as well as the importance of substitute forms of belonging during that time ('we were idiots'):

We were idiots, we didn't understand that we needed [education]. I understand now that you can't get anywhere without a profession. So now I'm studying, doing well ... (Kolya, 19)

Kolya's reorientation towards education, and the associated plans he was building in relation to employment, are most clearly reflected in the fact that his future plans revolved around a desire to build a family and become a father.

R: I'd like two children. Two boys.

I: And how do you see your family life? Will you be a strict father, or ...

R: No, I'll give them what I didn't get – love. So no, I won't be strict ... I mean, of course you have to have structure, but I won't be too strict. (Kolya, 19)

Following Van Breda (2015), the centrality of family to the pursuit of normative masculinity underlines the role of 'striving for authentic belonging' as a driving force in the young men's lives, 'a key deficit in [care leavers'] families of origin ... [which] continues to play out as a key need and desire as they journey towards adulthood' (Van Breda 2015, 334). Another respondent, Kostya, describes a similar transition from a protest masculinity associated with failure and damage to a normative masculinity centring on family life:

I see myself in a good light. In the children's home I was drinking, but now I try to live well ... do sport. And of course, I want to finish my studies, get a proper job ... meet a nice girl who will really love me, won't drop me, won't lie to me. Have a nice relationship, a wedding, a nice family. Become a good dad. (Kostya, 18)

In the following sub-sections, we explore how our respondents' experiences of neglect, abuse and misrecognition shaped movements towards protest masculinities, and in turn, how opportunities for recognition and the development of resilience in the form of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem underpinned the adoption of more normative orientations. We look in turn at three strands of transitions through and out of care: experiences within children's homes and educational institutions; encounters with the labour market; and transitions into independent housing.

Children's homes and educational engagement

The failure of Soviet children's homes to meet the developmental, health and social needs of those in their care is well documented (Kulmala et al. 2021). These failings were exacerbated in the post-Soviet context (Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2010), and were echoed in the narratives of our respondents, some of whom had clearly experienced forms of neglect and abuse in the care and educational institutions they had attended. Kirill, for example, had been victimised in his children's home and received insufficient support while at college, and reflected on how these environments had shaped his 'harshness':

I: How did you feel on leaving [the children's home]?

R: That finally I won't see these shits anymore, that I can get away from my aggressors ... attitudes towards me at college were also not good. I'd become a bad character by that time. I was too brash, too harsh for them. (Kirill 18)

As well as reflecting on his outward response to abuse and neglect, which ultimately resulted in him not completing his college education, Kirill talked about how his self-confidence had been affected, and how he still struggled to form attachments:

I became more closed. Any relations I had just went into a dead end, because I lost self-confidence. I'm just the kind of person that wants attention, wants to be with people, but it always goes wrong, because I'm just a bit closed. I haven't even thought about family – I don't have a concept of family, because I've never had one. I don't really want my own family. (Kirill 18)

Kirill was able to move on in transitional terms – he had found a reasonably stable manual labouring job through an NGO working with care leavers – and this was made possible by the fact that he had left his 'harshness' behind. However, his inability to form attachments, a common problem with care leavers underpinned by difficulties in developing trust (Van Breda 2015), meant that he was not able to move on from his care experience, and remained 'brittle' (Chernova and Shpakovskaya 2020). Indeed, he was focused not so much on future plans as on day-to-day survival:

I: How do you see your life in five to ten years?

R: I hope I don't die of drugs (Kirill 18)

Experiences such as Kirill's provided the rationale for the reform both of the child welfare system and of educational provision for young people in care, their intention being to create a more child-centred approach (Kulmala et al. 2021). There was certainly evidence in the sites visited that such an approach would be made more possible by the lower ratio of staff to children and more home-like environment of the Centres for Family Rehabilitation. This was personified by the director of the Centre in the study, who was clearly emotionally connected to both the young people in her care and those who returned to visit her. Kolya was one of her former residents and they had established a warm relationship that had continued for two years after he had left. As Newman (2004) finds, this basic-level recognition is likely to have contributed to his self-confidence. In addition to this, his experience in the college he attended after completing school-level education appeared to strengthen his self-respect, as he was made to feel that he deserved his place there:

They were really nice to me, it was even a bit strange. I know they don't usually treat new pupils like that. Even the lads there said 'come on, we'll give you an excursion, show you what's what'. It was fine ... There was none of that, [in disgust] 'urgh, children's home kid' [*detdomovets*]. (Kolya 19)

Nevertheless, the shift towards inclusive education at secondary level, with children in care attending mainstream schools rather than being educated within children's homes, still appeared a long way from achieving the aims of recent reform. Conversations with teachers at the school connected to the Centre indicated that the stigma Kolya noted remained deeply entrenched:

T: Children's home kids ... have absolutely no concept of authority ... They lack basic educational norms that even a typical hooligan would understand. I think there's no way of fixing them ... a large percentage of these kids will die basically from stupidity: one will drink himself to death, another will do drugs ...

I: Would you say ... they're stigmatised?

T: Of course! Teachers will say at the start that they don't distinguish, but they still do sub-consciously ... (Teacher, Secondary School)

Misrecognition and stigma were thus embedded within the secondary schools the young men encountered, such that, as Maguire (2021) finds in the UK, the adoption of protest masculinities had an air of inevitability. Low expectations of the young men were further rooted in the fact that the newly reformed children's homes continue to act as part of a co-dependent, institutional eco-system in which young people are channelled into their local IVET college to learn a manual trade (Chernova and Shpakovskaia 2020). Children in care are entitled to complete 'two educations' in these colleges, during which time they receive a monthly stipend, and even respondents such as Kolya were only planning to pursue higher education after having completed their college education(s) first. Unsurprisingly, then, none of the other young men had educational plans beyond college, and entered the labour market at the first opportunity.

Labour market transitions, the work ethic and normative masculinity

During the Soviet era, care leavers' transitions into work took place through the same institutional eco-system as their educational transitions: they left children's homes to live and study in IVET colleges, then progressed to a workplace (usually a factory) attached to the college, which in turn had its own dormitory (Walker 2011). Against a background of deindustrialisation and economic dislocation, much of this transition infrastructure has fallen apart, both for care leavers and for non-care-experienced youth. Few factories have dormitories, and while some IVET colleges retain connections with their 'base enterprises', in most cases graduates are left to themselves to find jobs. In research in Ul'ianovsk and St. Petersburg, Walker (2011, 2018a) found that many young men at IVET colleges viewed factory jobs with disdain, reflecting the wider devaluation of manual labour and concomitant elevation of new forms of service sector employment. One of the narratives about these young men amongst college staff was that their aspirations for social mobility reflected their unwillingness to work hard (Walker 2018b). This tendency to misrecognise young people was echoed in the present study, although here it was couched in notions of welfare dependency, through which the young men were implicitly framed as criminogenic:

After they leave college they can claim unemployment benefit for six months ... the state constantly offers them jobs, and they do whatever they can not to take them ... They think they're owed something ... 'Why work if the state has to pay me?' (Teacher-Psychologist, Vocational College)

We found no evidence of this 'dependency culture' amongst our respondents, but rather, a strong commitment to finding and remaining in employment. As Macdonald, Shildrick, and Furlong (2014) find in research on socially-excluded communities in the UK, this commitment was all the more notable precisely because it was in spite of the significant setbacks, insecurities and lack of assistance the young men faced. Pasha, for example, had been a victim of the dysfunctionality of the interface between the care and education systems, emerging with no qualifications from his 'two educations':

If I can pay off all my debts, I think I'll save some money and go on some courses ... When I went to college; there were connections [with the children's home], so they sent me there. I wrote and applied to two other colleges, but they just threw me into the one where there was a space ... it didn't work out and I got expelled. (Pasha 24)

As such, Pasha ended up in an unskilled warehouse job he described as 'horrendous' but had to continue with. The lack of meaningful assistance with labour market transitions was further evidenced by the fact that most respondents had had to draw on limited social capital in order to gain a foothold in employment – or to find enough 'black work' to get by:

I got laid off recently so I'm just getting by with odd jobs ... I don't have much experience. After studying I couldn't get a job for about a year because I don't have experience, then I managed to get a job at [fast food outlet] through a mate (Vanya 20)

Another indicator of the complexities of negotiating the labour market was the relative attractiveness to our respondents of careers in the military, which are widely avoided by more privileged young men (Walker 2022):

- R: They didn't take me into military service because of my [specific health problem].
Although I'm allowed to serve as a contractor, so I'm planning to go ...
I: So if it weren't for your health problem, you'd be happy to serve?
R: Yes of course (Andrey 21)

Thus, rather than aspiring to the upwardly-mobile masculinities that appealed to their less marginalised counterparts (Walker 2018a), respondents wanted to position themselves as 'normally' as possible, emphasising a simple desire to earn a wage and be independent:

I just want to work and earn money. I know that everyone wants a car, a flat, mountains of gold! But at the moment I just want a stable job, to pay off my debts, and then maybe save something. Maybe buy myself a car. Everything in time. (Ruslan 20)

The young men's commitment to a normative, wage-earning masculinity was also achieved by morally distancing themselves from a number of abject others. Oleg, for example, wondered whether enlistment into the army – a pathway he was considering for himself – could 'fix' his former roommate:

He smoked drugs, and got caught all the time for it ... He's just come back from the army. It'll be interesting to see if it changed him, but I doubt it. You can't fix people like that. (Oleg 19)

Similarly, Ruslan contrasts his own plans to the figure of an absent father, whose claims to normative masculinity – as a 'daddy' (*batya*) – rang hollow:

The most important thing is that your head's screwed on. Because you can live, like, poor, but look after your family, keep them clean and fed. I know this guy, he slept with a girl, had a kid, the mum has already gone to another guy with the kid, in another town. So he's, like, a daddy, but doesn't even see his daughter. The new guy also doesn't know what to do, doesn't work ... (Ruslan 20)

Ruslan's approach of 'living poor but looking after your family' epitomises the men's ability to confront precariousness with a commitment to future forms of recognition and attachment as breadwinners, partners and fathers. In addition, this resilience also reflects the wider availability of cultural frameworks of self-evaluation outside of dominant

neoliberal narratives, what Skeggs (2011) refers to as ‘values beyond market value’. Hall and Lamont (2013, 3) see such narratives as a key component of social resilience amongst marginalised populations, pointing to the need to consider the ‘self-concepts, orders of worth and criteria of evaluation linked to social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion’. In the Russian case, a number of studies point to the salience of moral repertoires in the life narratives of older working-class men (Walker 2022) and working-class communities (Vanke 2024), and these are echoed in our respondents’ attempts to construct positions of value despite lacking ‘marketable resources’ (Hall and Lamont 2013, 18).

Overall, then, the young men were seeking to overcome their precarious position on the labour market and pursuing forms of social recognition both in the present and the future. This was despite their lack of legal recognition in the form of assistance and the fulfilment of their rights, and their social misrecognition as irresponsible and welfare-dependent.

Housing transitions: rights, responsibilities and realities

Obtaining a flat – resolving the ‘housing question’ – is one of the most onerous tasks facing young people in Russia due to a chronic lack of supply and affordable finance in a context of widespread employment insecurity (Walker 2018b). From a gender perspective, the responsibility for dealing with housing when couples begin to co-habit tends to fall to men, and was a significant source of stress for many of the young men in Walker’s (2011, 2018a, 2018b) research in different parts of Russia. With regard to care leavers, then, the state’s obligation to ensure that they have adequate housing upon leaving care, either through their family of origin or local government, *de jure* places them in a position of relative security compared with non-care experienced youth. Indeed, Ruslan’s strategy of ‘living poor but taking care of your family’ was predicated on the fact that he had been awarded a flat, and could live on relatively few resources. In this way, the young men’s right to housing – part of their legal recognition by the state – was central to their commitment to the achievement of a normative masculinity and the forms of social inclusion this entailed.

As Abramov et al. (2016) also find, the housing offered to our respondents was far from ideal, as the local authority had resolved to offer care leavers *en masse* properties within the same blocks of flats, resulting in a ghettoisation of young people leaving care alongside other recipients of social assistance. While this was described by care professionals as ‘a tragedy for the city’, respondents themselves were positive about the prospects home ownership opened up. Kolya, for example:

After five years it’ll become my property officially ... Right next to it they’re building new flats, not too expensive. I could get a 2-bed on a mortgage for 23 thousand, rent out the 1-bed for 20, then I could pretty much keep all my salary. That’s the plan. I like everything about the neighbourhood. (Kolya 19)

Kolya and numerous others had received assistance from social workers in navigating the housing question:

I was given a room. I had a share of a room but there were eleven people in a 3-room flat. So, basically, I had five square metres, which is [legally] not enough for one person, so they gave me a room. A social worker helped me ... gave me a document, told me where to go.

However, in other cases, practitioner error and systemic dysfunction prevailed. As we explore in detail elsewhere (Disney and Walker 2023), some were placed in a position of vulnerability as they were directed back towards families of origin. Others were simply not assisted in realising their rights at the critical juncture when this was required:

- I: Shouldn't you have your own flat from the government?
 R: I should, but I sort of messed that up. I mean, it would be great if it happened. Maybe it will.
 I: Don't you have a social worker who can help with that?
 R: No
 I: Are you entitled to a flat?
 R: Not anymore. I could have done this up to the age of 23, but ... I just didn't bother to do it. I'm a lazy person by nature, I didn't get taught to be hardworking, it just wasn't instilled in me from childhood. (Pasha 24)

In Pasha's case, a lack of legal recognition to realise his rights is compounded by the internalisation of a form of systemic misrecognition as lazy and irresponsible, further undermining his resilience and the possibility that he might realise his aspirations, and leaving him in a precarious position.

Conclusion

The stories of young men leaving care in Russia in many respects echoed those documented elsewhere in the world (Maguire 2021; Van Breda 2015, for example). We have shown how their resilience to tackle transitions through and beyond out-of-home care was shaped by different forms of recognition and misrecognition in the past, present and future, from neglect and stigmatisation in children's homes and schools to strivings for authentic belonging in imagined families and new-found stability in their own homes. Building on existing work, the approach we have taken in this article illustrates the value of combining theory from the sociology of masculinities with a greater focus on the social dimensions of resilience and recognition theory in research on young people leaving care. This approach has allowed us to illuminate how the experiences of our respondents were reflected in the adoption of different gendered performances and identities, from protest masculinities associated with educational failure and other risks, to more normative, albeit still subordinate, masculinities oriented towards family and mainstream channels of social reproduction. Our analysis echoes Levell (2020) in emphasising not only the power relations that produce instances of protest masculinity, but also the vulnerabilities underpinning them, which in turn highlights the possibility of new forms of recognition and inclusion amongst socially-excluded young men. In this, the study also builds on research on changing orientations toward masculinity, which has previously focused on areas such as crime (Carlsson 2013) and aging (Mann, Tarrant, and Leeson 2016), where changes associated with the life course similarly result in reassessments of men's priorities and their location within hierarchies of masculinities. Furthermore, and in contrast to current claims about the democratisation of gender and sexuality in studies of masculinities (see Nayak 2023 for a discussion), the present study shows the ongoing significance of normative forms of inclusion, recognition, and ultimately, masculinity, for understanding how young men imagine and navigate transitions to adulthood.

As well as providing a more dynamic perspective on orientations and identities amongst young men leaving care, our focus on the social dimensions of resilience and recognition opens up new possibilities for comparative research. As we have shown, in exploring forms of recognition amongst care leavers, linking the macro level of the wider society to the micro and meso levels of individuals and institutions illuminates how the subject positions available to our respondents are necessarily shaped by the social and cultural context in which they are becoming young men. In particular, the availability of moral narratives and cultural repertoires in wider Russian society were an important source of social resilience (Hall and Lamont 2013) for a group of young men beginning life from the margins. Our approach thus moves beyond the tendency of much international research on care leavers to focus on the micro and meso levels of young people's lives, which commentators have seen as producing descriptive accounts that have left attempts to build comparative approaches in their infancy (Strahl et al. 2021; Walther 2017). Studies drawing on a comparative welfare states model have attempted to remedy this, but have been hamstrung by the lack of appropriate statistical data on care leavers (see Cameron et al. 2018 for example). In this context, the main comparative contribution of international studies of care leavers has been to gather evidence of similar forms of policy failing in a range of national settings. Our focus on the social dimensions of resilience and recognition suggests a way forwards in relation to understanding the ways care leavers are stigmatised and the forms of identity and inclusion available to them – not least in terms of competing versions of masculinity – in different cultural, economic and policy contexts.

While possibilities for social recognition were shaped within a wider cultural context, the forms of emotional and legal misrecognition experienced by the young men were products of Russia's care and aftercare systems, and we concur with the findings of existing comparative work (Strahl et al. 2021 for example) that *de jure* protections and entitlements are not upheld (see also Disney and Walker 2023). A recent study of leaving care in Russia by Chernova and Shpakovskaya (2020) made a thoroughgoing critique not only of institutional failings, but of Soviet-era holdovers marking the care system, arguing that 'the standardised, normative model of transition being prescribed to care leavers contradicts the contemporary tendency of the pluralisation of youth lifestyles'. Indeed, our findings confirm that there is an ongoing expectation that young men from care backgrounds will enter vocational colleges and go on either to low-skilled manual work, to the army, or both, rather than realising the wider aspirations of Russian youth to pursue higher education and professional careers (Minina and Pavlenko 2023). However, while some of our respondents would have benefitted from a greater plurality of pathways, it is clear that others wanted to shelter from the market economy and pursue more modest options. Reflecting this, our study suggests that the dysfunctional components of standardised, normative transitions should be given as much attention as diversifying choices after care. Nevertheless, given the growing authoritarianism that has emerged in Russia since the research was carried out, the impact of the present article is likely to remain at the level of the broad theoretical contributions outlined above for now. Indeed, the risks facing our respondents have multiplied as they, alongside thousands of other marginalised young men, become targets for recruitment into Russia's war with Ukraine. We can only hope that peace and the potential for positive forms of policy impact and engagement in Russia return soon.

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