Upturning the Rules of the Game: How Young Women Care-Leavers Negotiate Independence through Kinship in Brazil

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose to reflect on the "independence" condition of five young "care-leavers" by analysing the ways in which they experience their affective ties of kinship. The analysis is based on an ethnography carried out between 2010 and 2013, in the south of Brazil, on the de-institutionalisation of young women who, under protective measures, lived part of their childhood and adolescence without a recognised family life. In addition to the possible impact of the institutionalisation experience on kinship relationships, such as the breaking of ties or rapprochement with family members, I intend to explore the ways in which these young women are "powerful agents in the negotiation of parentage." By approaching kinship as a "negotiated transaction", I intend to focus my analysis on the affective bonds that are relevant in the daily practices of these young women. Such "negotiated transactions" will be explored by discussing a process I have called "a turning point in the game of kinship relations", inspired by a native expression.

Keywords: Care-Leavers, Kinship, De-institutionalisation, Agents, Affective Bonds

Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on the "independent" status of five young "care-leavers" (Nicole, Nina, Olívia, Clarissa and Virgínia)[1] by analysing the ways in which they experience their affective kinship bonds. Beyond the possible effects of this experience of institutionalisation on kinship relationships, such as the breaking of ties or reconnection with family members, I intend to explore the ways in which these young women are "powerful agents of

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1 As agreed during the fieldwork, the young women's names as well as those of the other research subjects were changed.

negotiations of kinship" (Schrauwers 1999). The analysis is based on an ethnography carried out between 2010 and 2013 (Cruz 2004) in southern Brazil, which focused on the departure from state institutions of young people who, under measures of child protection[2], lived part of their childhood and adolescence up outside their families. This research, involving the systematic observation of these individuals as well as in-depth interviews, was carried out with 14 young people (11 women and 3 men) who lived in urban areas in the municipalities of the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. In reference to this paper, it is important to clarify that Olívia and Clarissa lived in Porto Alegre (capital of the State of Rio Grande do Sul), while Nicole, Clarissa and Virginia lived in working class and marginalised neighbourhoods of Florianópolis (capital of the State of Santa Catarina).

By approaching kinship as a "negotiated transaction", I intend to focus my analysis on the affective bonds that are relevant in the daily practices of these young women (Schrauwers 1999). Such "negotiated transactions" will be explored by discussing a process which I have called "an upturn in the rules of the game of kinship relations", inspired by a colloquial[3] expression. The "upturn" seeks to account for a reversal in the direction of parental relationships. Most importantly, it allows us to determine a "change of expectations" on the part of young women about what should constitute and strengthen such relationships, and the ways to forge kinship. By employing this expression, I also intend to take into consideration the changes in the young women's positions with regards to the relationships they establish. In other words, the "upturning" inspires me to examine the way they see themselves and others in the process of building their kinship relationships.

To that end, I analyse how young women experience this process of un-

2 According to the guidelines of the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (ECA) [Brazilian Statute of the Child and Adolescent], in particular Article 98, institutional and family care is considered a protective measure and, as such, can be applied when children and adolescents have their rights violated (by omission of society or state), due to lack, omission or abuse of parents or guardians and on account of their conduct. Nowadays, removing minors from their family life for placement in foster care centres is a decision that can only be made by the *Justiça da Infância e da Juventude* (Court of Childhood and Youth), whose primary mission is to look out for "the best interest of the child and the adolescent" (Silva 2004).

3 The use of the expression *"virada do jogo"* (an upturn in the rules of the game) was inspired by one of Nicole's reports. She is one of the young women who gives life to the ethnographic material analysed here. "Now the game was turned around," she said, as a way to explain the change that has been made in her parental relationships after family reintegration. If, at first, such an expression seemed productive to think of Nicole's specific experience, little by little it was possible to perceive that more than a change in the relationship between parents and children, it could give an analytical account of a wider phenomenon that was also present in the reports of the other young women, as I intend to detail throughout this paper.

doing of traditional categories of kinship (father, mother, "relative"), which is accompanied by a "change of expectations" regarding the elements and substance that should constitute and strengthen kinship relationships. Ultimately, this enables us to ponder on what blood relatedness is actually capable of accomplishing. This "upturn of the rules in the game of kinship relations" comes followed by the opening to other forms of connectedness or "relatedness" that stem from affection and choice (Carsten 2000, 2004). Such an opening also goes through a series of individual strategies so that in the absence of blood ties, adoptive mothers and fathers, or even close friends, can become "relatives."

Young women care-leavers: constructing their independent status

Nicole, Nina, Olívia, Clarissa and Virgínia are young women who, under child protection measures, were sent to shelters and/or foster homes, where they spent part of their childhood and/or adolescence away from a family life. Except for Nicole, who was reintegrated whilst still a minor and whose guardianship was restored to her family, all the others left foster care because they were reaching or had already reached legal age. They are young women who experienced physical and psychological violence within their respective family environments, but who were able to take control of their own lives. They learned to subvert the bureaucratic and abusive environments that enveloped them and, above all, they went in search of what they understood as "care." They were able to "escape" in search of help, even from institutions such as the Child Protective Service [4].

In Brazil, the experiences of these young girls are not exceptional. Although institutional care in the country is a measure that is exceptional and temporary (a duration of no more than two years), in 2010 the number of institutional foster care services reached 2,624, which represented about 36,929 institutionalised children and adolescents[5]. Of these, 61% main-

4 The Child Protective Service (*Conselho Tutelar*, in Portuguese) is a public body created in the 1990's after the implementation of the Brazilian law "Brazilian Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA)", with the main objective of ensuring compliance with the rights of children and adolescents.

5 Data presented based on the *Levantamento Nacional de Crianças e Adolescentes em Serviços de Acolhimento* (National Survey of Children and Adolescents in Foster Care Services), an initiative of the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (MDS), carried out in partnership with the Centro Latino-Americano de *Estudo de Violência e Saúde Jorge Careli* (CLAVES) [Latin American Center for the Study of Violence and Health Jorge Careli]/Fiocruz. This study is made up of data pertaining to institutional and family care (SAI and Foster Family Programs/PFA, respectively). In this work, I have chosen to present only the data related to SAI, which include the following care categories: institutional care, halfway house, community foster home and village foster homes.

tained ties with their relatives. However, if on the one hand this statistic reveals an extended possibility of family reintegration, on the other hand the numbers related to the duration of institutionalisation generate ambiguity, since the maximum time of institutionalisation ranged from 16 months to 17 years. "Nonconformists" identified within family groups are the category that remain at the top of the list of reasons for entering into foster care. Poverty seems to continue to be referred to as "family neglect", which ranks first (37%) in the reasons why children and adolescents enter institutional care services. After "neglect", "drug addicted parents/guardians" (20.1%) and "abandonment" (19%) also appear.

This data makes it possible to outline, albeit briefly, the context of the emergence of the independent status of these young women "care leavers." At this point, it must be clarified that I prefer to conceive independence as a condition that is constructed contingently and not as something given *a priori*. These young women are not yet independent, however they have the means to achieve it. In this perspective, independence is closely related to the potential for individual initiative of these young women, bearing in mind that "individual initiative" in this case is not held to be simply as "resistance" or a "result" of a process (Biehl 2016). To this end, it is necessary to consider both the negotiations with these realities and the limits they impose as well as the refusal to engage with the same realities. Recognising the potential of individual initiative of these young women allows us to discuss the idea of vulnerability generally associated with these individuals, especially in the context of care and protection policies. Thus, it would be possible to say that the independent status of these young women is revealed as they recognise their potential for individual initiative and their creative capacity.

In the case of the young women care leavers, the emergence of their independent status firstly depends on the parting from the traditional point of view regarding the experiences of these individuals. The experiences of "care leavers" in re-entering society are commonly perceived to be defined by the consequences that institutionalisation has imposed on their lives, a perception that perpetuates their condition of vulnerability and stigmatisation. However, my proposal is to reflect on the experiences of these young women and their independent status beyond institutionalisation and its effects. It is a question of how they invent new possibilities for their lives based on the ways they experience affective bonds of kinship in a context of departure from state institutions. In this sense, as opposed to thinking about the influence of institutionalisation on kinship relations, since such a perspective would point to an extension of these relations in time and space, I propose to analyse the process of "upturning the rules of the game of kinship relations."

"The upturning of the rules" in kinship relations

In breaking down the expression *virada do jogo* ("an upturn in the rules of the game"), it is possible to think that the "upturning" seeks to account for an inversion in the direction of parental relationships. Additionally, it allows establishing a "change of expectations on the part of the young women about what should constitute and strengthen such relations, and on the ways of "forging kinship" (Vignato 2014). Roy Wagner (2011) employs game (chess) metaphors in dealing with kinship terminologies, adding to the game analogies at the core of this article. Although I do not intend to detail the analogy between kinship and chess in this paper, I am interested in considering this idea of kinship as a game, that is, as a "strategy" used by individuals in the connections they establish. In dealing with strategy, it is interesting to think about how these young women become powerful agents in kinship negotiations (Schrauwers 1999).

By using such expressions, I also intend to address the changes in these young women's positions in regards to the relationships they establish. That is, the "upturning" inspires me to discuss the way they see themselves and others in the process of building their kinship relationships. As such positions change, as in the game of chess, their perspectives on kinship terminologies (and the values attributed to them) and the substances/elements that keep individuals connected also change or are reversed. Thus, I intend to reflect on the ways through which the experiences of institutionalisation that had marked the childhood and adolescence of these young women, within a context of departure from these institutions, ultimately opened possibilities to other ways of being connected or "relatedness."

The term "relatedness" provides an opening to the manner in which native languages view this "being in connection" (instead of starting with a well-defined concept of kinship). The term also allows some distancing from the pre-established and arbitrary dichotomy of social and biological factors upon which many anthropological studies had been based up until the 1970's (Carsten 2000). However, even though the term "relatedness" is susceptible to many criticisms, as Carsten (2000) argues, some of these criticisms are very close to those made about kinship. This allows us to eliminate certain assumptions (especially in terms of what kinship is) and address these issues in a different way. It is, therefore, not a question of discarding the opposition between biological vs. social, nature vs. nurture, substance vs. code, but rather of examining (scrutinising the means of the ethnography of the individuals' reports and practices) the ways in which people from different cultures distinguish between what is held to be pre-established and what is enacted through individual initiative. "What might be called biological and what might be called social, and the points at which they make such distinctions" (Carsten 2004, p.189).

At this point, the reflection proposed by Carsten can be expounded upon, based on dialogue with the Wagnerian dialectic, as the latter allows us to think that the two domains (that of the given or innate and that of the subjects on which individuals can exert control) are important in the construction of kinship relations. That is possible because each one of them can only exist by being elicited by the other, in an infinite series of reversals "of the figure-ground kind in which a figure and a background mutually influence each other." Consequently, the invention of kinship, if one may say so, would be precisely in the manner that these two domains are represented and even subverted. It is precisely this possibility to subvert domains that seems to affect the practices and the reports of the young women. As I intend to show, if in certain contexts blood relatedness remains a given dimension (creating a series of set expectations about its potential to create social ties), in others it ends up being denatured as the inevitable place for the constitution of kinship relations. That is, the meanings of blood ties and parentage, for example, become contingent and variable.

What blood can do

Nicole is a 17-year-old young woman, an only child, blonde haired who, as she says, "looks completely like her father." She was born in Rio Grande do Sul and moved to Florianopólis with her parents when she was four years old. According to her, her mother wanted this change, but her father did not. "Things were going quite well back there in Rio Grande do Sul, but when we got here – it all got worse." It was then, when she was nine, after a big fight between her parents that Nicole's father left home. After her father left, the girl didn't see him again. She alleges that her mother deprived her of this contact, especially after she went to live with her stepfather. "For many years, on my birthdays, I wanted so much for my dad to be there, but how could he be there if my mother deprived him of it? Also, my stepfather, as well, only made things worse. " She didn't like her stepfather from the first day she met him, because, she says, he knew how to turn her life into "a real hell." She never really talked about the reasons that led to her institutional care, although she has hinted at some of the problems she used to face. Unlike the other young women who participated in this research, Nicole remained in the foster home for only three months and 27 days, which, for her, felt as if they were many years.

For this young girl, reintegration came along with a kind of "upturn in the rules of the game" in parental relationships, since the young woman had to learn both to live away from her mother and to rejoin her father, with whom she had no contact for years yet, from that moment onwards, she would share the same home. "Now the game is upturned. Now I am with

my father and I do not know where my mother is. It is very difficult." The "upturning" was accompanied by a denaturalisation of the idea that blood relatedness would be an inevitable place for the production of kinship relations. This denaturalisation was felt by the young woman as a "change of expectations" in relation to the assumption that blood relatedness must produce affection or that it necessarily carries the power capable of constituting and nourishing the father-daughter bond. Although Nicole is biologically related to her father, she no longer felt like his daughter. The substance that seemed to produce affection in her childhood seems to be insufficient to produce social bonds in a context of departure from a state institution, as the young woman observes:

> Since I came to live in my father's place I'm no longer the same person that I used to be with him. The first day I saw him I hugged him and everything, I cried, but it was just at that moment. Ever since I left my mother's house, that they have separated, I do not feel like his daughter. I'm his only blood-and-paper daughter, because he's my father, but I don't have any daughterly love for him.

At this point, it is possible to think that other or even overlapping experiences have been added to blood relatedness, showing her that the ties created by birth or blood were not determining factors in themselves, that other values are "added on" to lifelong relationships throughout life (Lambert 2004). In that sense, blood relatedness functions as a prerequisite, but not as a determinant of the successful affirmation of parentage (Schrauwers 1999). If, on the one hand, reintegration was followed by the beginning of a new life together with the father and the reestablishment of the bonds that had remained temporarily in suspense, on the other hand it established the distancing from the mother, both because of a judicial[6] decision and the will of the young woman's father. The father's desire is for his daughter to obey the judge's ruling and stay away from her mother. However, for the young woman, "a mother is a mother", and however much she has "been up to no good", this is a tie that remains, regardless of any court decision. There is no way she can disown the mother, since this bond will always be marked by care. As a daughter, she needs to take care of her mother: "So, how can I ignore my mother, she made me! I have respect for her, even if she abandoned me when I needed her most. What can I do? She's my mother, isn't she? You have to take care of your mother. "

> When the young woman says "she made me", she emphasises how much the question of filiation is fundamental to establish and keep this bond between

6 Due to the reasons that determined the institutional care of Nicole, the mother lost custody of her daughter and was prevented from approaching her by law.

> mother and daughter. For the girl, nothing could overlap or be added to this bond, even with the "change of expectation" regarding the values associated with blood relatedness (such as caregiving). For her, the place of the mother not only remains, but must also be occupied solely by the person who is, in fact, her mother by blood relation. In this sense, the positions of kinship, for the girl, must be clearly delimited according to the relationships that are established by blood relatedness. The possible meanings associated with the terms of kinship are limited and leave no room for metaphors or invention (Wagner 2010).

The young woman also delimits the inevitable place of blood relatedness in kinship relations based on the impossibility of relation with the maternal relatives. Nicole says, at various times, that they don't like her for having the same blood as her father. "I have his [her father's] blood, it's because of that. If I were someone else's daughter, then I think they would give me more chances." In this case, the change of expectation as to what "blood can do" is in the fact that blood, instead of producing closeness and affection, can eventually result in distancing, as it contaminates those who carry it or inherit it. The young woman, from the point of view of the maternal relatives, would have been contaminated by her father's blood and therefore was not acceptable by the family. In relation to the maternal relatives, blood is also part of what is pre-established, but it brings difference and the consequent estrangement, producing the impossibility of a relationship.

"Invented" kinship

Even though in situations of departure from state institutions blood relatedness continues to unavoidably hold priority for some young women (as in the case of Nicole), for others this process is associated with an "invented" method of establishing kinship bonds. Even after reaching legal age, some young women experience adoption without actually being legally adopted.[7] This is what happened to Nina and Olívia.

Nina is a 22-year-old girl. With a carefree demeanor, she is always surrounded by friends and people she "can count on." Nina was raised by her mother alone during much of her childhood, since her father abandoned her mother (Antonia) while she was still pregnant. However, at that time Nina's mother was not able to raise a daughter and thus she was sent, as an

7 The most important question is not whether it was an official adoption or not, but rather what that expression means for these young women. That is, both Nina and other young women employ the word "adoption". Moreover, as Cardarello (2009, p. 195) points out, "adoption" has a great prestige among many social workers, which ends up feeding the maxim that "nothing is better than a family" (where it is implicit "foster family", with good economic conditions).

infant, to foster care. After a month, her mother, afraid that Nina would be adopted, arranged a house to live in as well as a job to show that she could take care of her daughter. Nina stayed with her mother until she was nine years old, after which she went to live with her grandmother, who had raised her mother, for a year and a half. Mother and daughter were separated during this time in light of the girl's bad behaviour, not for financial reasons. "My mother could not stand me anymore, she said I was very nasty and drove her crazy, and that I was a pest." At first, Nina's mother thought of leaving her daughter with her grandmother: of abandoning her permanently. However, she changed her mind when she learned that her daughter had been beaten by her grandmother and locked in a room for days. After a year and a half, she went back to claim Nina and held guardianship until she was 14, when she eventually kicked her out of home.

During the four-year period of her institutional care (14-18 years), Nina developed expectations that her mother would come and claim her, just like the first time she was abandoned. "I thought that this time, after I left foster care, it was going to be the same way, she would end up giving up, but she did not give up..." There were other reasons this time, it was different, and other institutions and agents mediating her relationship with her mother. On the eve of leaving the foster home, a week before she was 18, a lawyer, Lena, who financially helped the care institution and visited the girls regularly, chose Nina as her daughter and took her to live with her. The young girl gained a new family and a different life from the one she was accustomed to: with money, a private school and no need to seek employment. At first, it seemed she had everything a young woman her age could wish for, but she did not adapt: she wanted her freedom. She eventually left the family home and went to live alone in a boarding house in downtown Porto Alegre. Even while maintaining contact with her "adoptive mother" (Lena), the desire to reestablish the bonds with her biological mother (Antônia) was still strong; after all, as she herself once said, "a mother is a mother, that's the truth." In Nina's case, it is possible to conceive at first glance that even if the girl had no relation to the biological mother and her "original environment", it is, "in fact, a phantom kinship they are keeping alive" (Vignato 2014).

The last time Nina spoke to her mother, her mother had asked her to "forget she existed." However, the desire to rediscover her "true mother[8]" was stated by the young woman in one of our conversations. At that time, I proposed that we go together to the address that she had for her mother. However, she did not accept the invitation, arguing that her mother would

8 The oppositional relationship of "true mother" and "fake mother" was established by the young woman to differentiate the biological mother from the adoptive one. This was undone as soon as Nina gave up maintaining contact with the biological mother and began to consider the one that, until then, had been her adoptive mother as a true mother figure.

not receive her. In view of her refusal, I eventually suggested that I go alone and, depending on how the event unfolded, she could try to come afterwards. This opportunity seemed to open a new perspective, the possibility of a relationship after much silence, misunderstanding and sorrow.

Nina's mother smiled when I arrived at her apartment. I introduced myself and stated I had come looking for her at the request of her daughter. "My daughter? How did you find me here?" the woman replied, visibly upset. I explained that her daughter had found her address on the internet and had given it to me. "Come in," she said, in an annoyed tone of voice. "Wait a minute... I need to take care of him [probably Nina's younger brother]." I remained in the living room as she headed into the room with the boy, bemoaning the situation: "Why am I not surprised about Nina?" When she returned, she looked as upset as before. As a way of establishing some personal connection with her, I told her that Nina longed to meet her brother and live with her family. At that, the woman began to cry, she could barely speak, with tears streaming down her face. She got quite emotional when remembering all the hardships she had endured in order to stay together with her daughter. Unlike the experience she had with her mother, Antônia says she never abandoned her daughter and, on the contrary of what one might think in face of their separation, she and her daughter had a relationship.

> My daughter was taken from my arms when she was three months old. They took her away from me because I didn't have the money to support her. I slept under bridges and under cars, but I always provided for her in everything she needed. I was also separated from my mother when I was a child, but the difference was that my mother abandoned me, and I never left my daughter. She and I had a relationship. I didn't have one with my mother; she was a stranger to me.

Even though she maintained her distance in the period of institutional care, Antônia says that she never left Nina in need of anything and that she always visited her. "I suffered from hunger, but I never let Nina be in need of anything. She is my daughter," she justifies, emphasising the bond established through blood relation and which, by itself, could justify her duty to care for her daughter. However, this lost its value as soon as the mother was obligated to pay her daughter's allowance during the period she was in foster care. "Nina took me to court, forcing me to pay her a pension, she stabbed me in the back. I almost got arrested twice because I didn't have the money to pay her." Antônia views any attempt by the daughter to return and ask for help in financial terms. In this respect, it is interesting to think of kinship as "a form of strategy" insofar as it can be triggered either when it is appropriate for the individuals (to secure relationships and the things that circulate through them) or as easily denied when this parental relationship

implies, in the case of Nina's mother, a financial loss (Wagner 2011). Additionally, it is important to analyse to what extent money establishes a polarity in terms of affection between Nina's mothers. If for the adoptive mother (Lena) care-giving involves providing monetary support, which strengthens the mother-daughter bond, for the biological mother (Antônia) money becomes a stumbling block for the relationship, resulting in separation.

At the end of my visit with Antônia, as I was returning back home, some scenes from our meeting came to my mind, especially those in which she tried to demonstrate that she had started a "new life" with her young son and partner. In the new life, her son, as she herself said, is her "reason to live", "her reason to smile." It was as if she tried to do things differently, as if she had been given a new chance to start over. It remained to be seen whether there was any place for her daughter in this fresh start. Contrary to what the young woman expected, however, the attempt to reconnect with her mother came together with the greatest frustration of her life. Not only did Antônia no longer want Nina around, but she also threatened[9] her, saying that she would file a police report if she insisted on disturbing her family. According to the young woman, her mother's attitude was most likely motivated by her new partner, and also by the fear of losing custody of her second child. For her, this could be the only explanation, but not a justification, for a mother not to want to be with her daughter.

The Nina's reports allow us to observe that blood relatedness, which until then had been an unavoidable prerequisite for the constitution of kinship (to the extent that it accentuates the distinction between "true mother" and "fake mother"), needs to have other values added to be maintained, such as affection and care as well as proximity. The absence of these elements would make the mother-daughter relationship susceptible to the changes and separation that happen over time. Time, according to Nina's experience, causes blood relatedness to lose its strength.

> I wonder if after such a long time without seeing her I will not end up forgetting that she is my mother, forgetting the way she looks. I don't know if I would be able to, or whether it's possible, you know? I think that's what will happen, because I don't remember the way my father looks anymore.

That is, little by little, Nina realises that blood relatedness alone is not enough to sustain a relationship (by living together). Over time, she realises that kinship relationships and even the ideal of "maternal love" need other elements that enable connections to be made beyond blood relatedness. These elements need to be strengthened every day. There are ties that may very well

9 This message, in a threatening tone, was sent to my cell phone the night after my visit to Antônia.

overlap, as she will come to understand, to those constituted *a priori* by consanguinity. In light of all these events, she began to love the adoptive mother as a mother and, gradually, the difference between the mothers – "fake mother" (adoptive mother) and "true mother" (biological mother) – disappeared. "I know she's the only person close to me, besides my friends. She is like my mother, she's always helped me, and she cares about me." It is important to notice, from Nina's experience, that even after many ups and downs the mother does not lose her place within Nina's morality. Even in the absence of the physical presence of the mother figure, due to various circumstances, "the value of this place is not lost" (Gregori 2000). Therefore, when Nina says that Lena is "like her mother", it is the value of this place within her morality that she is referring to. That is, a place marked by the possibility of care, of getting help in difficult moments, as well as closeness and affection. Until then, these values only seemed to be achievable when associated with consanguinity. The relationship she has established with the adoptive mother allows her to reconfigure the conventional values associated with blood relatedness, as well as providing her with an opening to connect in other ways.

The importance of the mother figure also appears in Olívia's story. Olivia is a black, 23-year-old and extremely communicative. Olivia doesn't know who her biological mother is because she grew up believing that her grandmother was her mother and her great-grandmother was her grandmother. Yet, this is not a central issue in her life, because she believes motherhood involves many more facets than simply having given birth. She says she has three mothers. The first mother is the owner of the day-care center where Olivia was sent shortly after leaving the first institution where she was in foster care; the second is the caretaker of one of the foster homes where she was received; and the third is the mother of a friend. The three of them fostered her at different times of her life and each played a crucial role in times of difficulty.

In the context of anthropological studies, the Olivia's perspective is nothing new. It often appears in the reports of Fonseca (1998, 2009), in his reflections on the movement of children[10] in working-class neighbourhoods of Porto

10 In examining the theoretical and methodological interpretations of the expression "circulation of children", it is possible to observe that in general terms and from the vantage point of complex societies it reveals the displacement of children, from an early age, from the their parents' home to other spaces of care and cohabitation, such as the homes of extended family and even through a larger social network involving neighbourhoods, friends and even state agencies (such as foster care services of varying types). In social and legal systems within the English-speaking tradition, as Lallemand (1993) points out, there are two terms that refer to the circulation of children: adoption and fosterage. While in fosterage circulation does not imply a change of identity or even in geographical location, in adoption the transfer of the rights of the parent to the guardian is definitive and implies a change of status and even the child's identity. According to Lallemand, the opposition between these two terms

Alegre-RS. What characterises Olívia's experience, however, is not the fact that she has three mothers, but rather that specific moment in the young woman's life when she acknowledged the three women to indeed be "mothers" and the reasons behind that perception. When Olívia talks about her mothers, she is not discussing different experiences of being cared for in her childhood. During her childhood, when Olívia found herself circulating through different foster care institutions, the possibility of "forming a family[11]" was not relevant to her (Lobo 2013). This concern only begins in her adolescence and remains in her adult life. For Olívia, it is no longer a question of "who raises and cares for her", but rather the people she knows she can "count on wherever she is."

The issue of blood relatedness, especially in the change of expectations surrounding values and the affective ties that it can produce, also mark Clarissa's kinship experiences, a white, 27-year-old. Very articulate, she told me, when we first met, that her life could be read as "a bestseller." As a child, she learned to take risks for the sake of a lifestyle other than the one she experienced in the family environment. Indeed, her institutional foster care experience was not an external intervention on her life story, but a choice of her own. "I left home on my own will. I went out on the streets because I wanted to, because I did not want to live at home with my mother anymore." She wished to escape her mother's abuse and exploitation, which forced her and her sister to panhandle to bankroll her mother's habits. The practice of panhandling became a form of control, bringing along with it every imaginable disciplinary rigour and whose guiding principle was to obtain as much productivity as possible. Panhandling triggered a series of other daily obligations which, when not met, would cause their mother to beat her. After her stepfather left home – a man who Clarissa recognises as her father – the mother-daughter relationship became even more complicated. Nonetheless, it still took her a week to gain courage and run away from home. While she was on the street she heard of Child Protective Services for the first time, and she went to ask for help to enter foster care.

During the foster care period, the head of the institution sometimes tried to encourage Clarissa and her mother to become closer, arguing that when Clarissa became a mother she would better understand what occurred. However, contrary to her expectations, when Clarissa had her first child she asserted that the business of being a mother is not simply an "affectionate love for family,"

– which emerged from the 1969 publication of J. Goody's article – gradually gave rise to a conception of a continuum between these two notions, since it seems more productive that these conditions be merged on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the specificities of the society or the social segment studied.

11 According to Lobo (2013, p.65), this expression can assume two meanings: the first would be to strengthen and maintain the bonds of affinity and consanguinity, and the second, which I use currently, refers to the construction of kinship relations where they do not exist biologically.

but rather a financial issue. It was just when her mother most needed here, that Clarissa understood that "her mother's place in her heart" had dried up:

> When my daughter was born we went through financial problems; our arguments were motivated by financial reasons because she asked my husband for checks and did not pay them. Then she came into conflict with us because of money, because my husband did not want to lend her more money. Then she walked away.

The attitudes of Clarissa's mother contributed to the deconstruction of a tie that, for the young woman, would be permanent and key to establish kinship relations: blood relatedness. Notwithstanding, in Clarissa´s view, from the moment this blood tie is broken, the very "cognatic love" that should be able to unite people of the same blood also weakens or even disappears. The highlight of this "turnaround" in the mother-daughter relationship is mainly due to the presence of money, or, more accurately, as Luna (2004) suggests, when the girl realises that the relationship between them starts to be measured in financial terms. Unlike the cognatic love, this relationship is devoid of mutual admiration, emotional ties and morality (Luna 2004, p. 132). In fact, whenever Clarissa had to mention her mother during all our conversations, she avoided calling her as such, choosing to say "my sister's mother" or simply "that one."

It is important to note that for both Clarissa and Nina the change of expectations associated with the power of blood relatedness is mainly due to the relationship between mother and daughter. When Clarissa says that she did not reconnect with her mother because the latter was "not born to be a mother", she is assuming that the relationship between mother and daughter must be based on a mystique surrounding the mother-daughter bond and maternal love (Fonseca 2006). Just like in Nina and Nicole's experiences, the idealisation of this bond is also recurrent in Clarissa's reports. The three of them use the expression "a mother is a mother" in several moments of their reports and such reoccurrence conveys much more meaning than simply a "mother-daughter relationship" (Fonseca 2006). This relationship reveals ways through which these young women are formed as individuals. Hence, their expectations surrounding the mother-daughter bond, especially in regards to the concept of care-giving that is involved in this relationship, will be present in the relationship they seek to establish with their own children – in general, running counter to what they experienced in their respective childhoods. In their own personal ways, each one of them tries to overtly show how careful and motherly they are with her children.

However, if on the one hand this "upturning the rules" in kinship is usually marked by the deconstruction of the "naturalness of blood ties", on the other hand this process opens up space for the recognition of "choice and

affection" as elements equally important in establishing such relationships. That is to say that leaving care institutions may lead to openness to other ways of connecting, allowing these young women themselves to become "the weavers of this 'culture of relatedness'" (Vignato 2014). This is very evident in the story of Nina and Olívia, for whom this "openness" was accompanied by the experience of having more than one mother and in whom they can count on at all times. In other words, such help does not result from blood relatedness, but from choice. Olívia says she has three mothers chosen by her at different times in her life. The young woman is not concerned in establishing a hierarchy of "affection" among the three mothers. All of them are her mothers in the same way, with the same intensity. In this respect, Clarissa's experience is somewhat closer to that of Nina and Olívia not because of her mother, but because of her father. If in a context of leaving a care institution the young woman's reports are characterised by virtually denying the maternal figure, this place of the "maternal figure" will not be occupied again, as in the experience of the other two young women: there are no other mothers, but a father (the former partner of the young woman's mother). A father with whom it is possible to establish "immense love of affection," as Clarissa wishes to emphasise.

This paternal figure appeared while the young woman still lived with her mother, before she was admitted to foster care services, and little by little became the focus of what she understood as a "family." Differently than her mother, Clarissa argues, her father never abandoned her, even though she is not his daughter. That is to say that the relation with the father is established and fed by this opposition to the young woman's experience with her mother. Where there should be care and protection, since it was an unavoidable relationship characterised by blood relatedness, only abandonment (a major symbol of this rupture of the mother-daughter bond) remained. Conversely, care and the establishment of a "strong bond" emerged from where the young woman least expected: from a relationship marked by affection. Such a bond, which was not established by blood, but by affection, was enough for Clarissa to consider her stepfather as a father. Proof of that is that even suspecting that he could really be her biological father, she never wanted to take a paternity test to have formal evidence of what the coexistence had already shown her: "Regardless of a confirmation or not, he is my father. I never felt like looking for a biological father or anything like that."

In a sense, the young woman also does not see the need for paternity testing (somewhat against the motivations that create increasing demand for such tests) because her conception of her family has been, to some extent, reconfigured due to the relationship she established with the father. It is not a matter of blood relatedness, but of knowing who the people that you can count on are, even in the most difficult situations. This means that for the young woman "there are no relationships with blood relatives" as if it was

impossible, as pointed by Sarti (1994, p. 91), "to establish the three fundamental obligations that make up the moral universe based on the principle of reciprocity": give, receive and reciprocate.

In a context of leaving care institutions, according to Clarissa and Virgínia, kinship relationships are defined by the possibility of having someone you can count on. Virginia is a 27-year-old white girl of medium height and long black hair. The young woman left her mother's home at the age of 11. From that moment on, her life was always as follows: "leaving and returning." She came to live at her aunt's house in Florianopolis to study, but this never happened. In addition to her aunt never letting her go to school, she was forced to do all the housework. It was in an attempt to flee her aunt's house, which was "very bad", that at the age of 14 she was taken in to foster care for the first time. Virginia's experiences, including those in institutional care, were marked by comings and goings from her mother's home: whenever she did not fit in somewhere, it was for her mother's place that she would go back to, without ever staying long. However, the bonds between mother and daughter were strengthened as they began to be established upon the caring for their children, or, according to Lobo (2013), from the effective exercise of maternity. Virgínia's mother, who during the infancy of her children was unable to care for them for a period, today helps out in her daughters' home, taking care of her grandchildren and doing housework. In view of the number of the young woman's children (seven), Virgínia depends on her mother's support to be able to leave home once in a while. In view of the young woman's experience, it would be possible to both motherhood and parentage, which in principle are experienced as dyadic (mother-child) relationships, become a "triangular relationship" mediated by the actions of a third party (in this case, the maternal grandmother), which assumes a fundamental role in the construction of the meanings "of being a mother and of being a child" (Lobo 2013). Taking Lobo's proposal (2013) as inspiration, but simultaneously somewhat reversing it, it might be possible to say that this exercise of motherhood, which is only fully accomplished with the presence of two women so that one can raise and provide for a child, ends up producing this "turning point" in the consanguinity bonds between Virgínia and her mother.

Final considerations

Throughout the article I have tried to reflect on the status of independence of young women care leavers based on the ways they experience their affective kinship bonds in a context of departure from state institutions. Such status of independence was revealed as the young women became agents in kinship negotiations. These negotiations, which "are ongoing and always

subject to review and failure," have been described based on the problematisation of the process of "upturning the rules of game of kinship relations" (Schrauwers 1999, p.320).

One first aspect of this "upturn of the rules of the game" was related to what I called a "change of expectations" as to what should constitute and strengthen parental relationships and the ways of forging kinship. It was possible to observe that blood, as a shared substance, can establish hypothetically unbreakable bonds between relatives, but such bonds also carry moral imperatives that motivate individuals to act in specific ways (Schrauwers 1999). Thus, for some of the young women, blood lost its meaning (by different events) as the exclusive place for producing kinship relations. Such loss of meaning was felt as a real "change of expectations" about what blood relatedness is truly able to produce, especially in terms of affection. Nicole experienced this "change of expectations" in relation to her father, inasmuch as she can observe that even though she had her father's blood, she no longer felt like his daughter. For her, blood relatedness had become insufficient to maintain a "connection" and create social ties. If on the one hand it deconstructs the myth of "daughterly love," on the other hand it seems to be a more complex task to have the same attitude towards "maternal love." The "maternal love" is pre-established and characterised by birth and, therefore, something that could not be changed by her individual initiative.

The "change of expectations" experienced by Nicole towards her father was also felt by Nina and Clarissa in relation to the maternal figure. Nina realised that blood relatedness, over time, could lose its dynamism and potential to nurture certain relationships. For Clarissa, blood relatedness not only lost the power to produce a "connection", but could even be undone or dry up (in the sense of ceasing to produce affection). In Clarissa's experience, the deconstruction of the "myth of maternal love" (Badinter 2011) was accompanied by an inversion of the maxim that "a mother is a mother" (as found in Nicole and Nina's reports). As a way of minimising the importance of pre-established "natural" factors, this maxim is replaced by another: "she was not born to be a mother."

Unlike Nicole, for whom blood relatedness remained inevitable, Nina, Clarissa, and Olívia changed this into "building kinship" from other elements. For these young women, leaving care institutions was also accompanied by what would be a second aspect of the "upturn": openness to other forms of "relatedness" (Carsten 2000). For the three of them, kinship has become a matter of affection and choice: kin are those in whom one can count on. Thus, if for Nicole there are no other mothers (other than her biological mother), for Olívia it is truly possible to have three mothers. For Clarissa, it is possible to have a father, with whom she could establish a bond of "affective love," whose value and intensity cannot be measured by a paternity test.

Another point that is part of this "upturn" is the inversion in the direction

of parental relationships, which I could observe in Virgínia's relationship with her mother. If during motherhood and adolescence the mother-daughter relationship ended up in the institutionalisation and the impossibility of her mother raising her, in the context of departure from the same state institutions her mother becomes fundamental to her own experience as a mother.

Finally, with the "upturn in the rules of the game of kinship relations" I attempted to show that simply thinking that foster care services result in the separation or bringing together of young women and their relatives does not tell the whole story. Rather, it is something more complex that involves the transformation of the individuals themselves and their own conceptions of what family is. Thus, every time they build on kinship relations to achieve new possibilities in life, the young women activate their individual potential and find possibilities to become independent individuals.

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