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Purpose and Mattering as Dimensions of Meaning for Young People in Residential Care from Romania

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Abstract: The study follows the interaction between the individual and the social context regarding the development of adolescents protected in residential houses from the child protection system in Iasi County, Romania. Starting from the evidence that in situations of providing relatively identical material and social resources, the results obtained by these children vary greatly, we examine how the meaning (understood mainly as purpose and mattering) can constitute a developmental resource. Considering theoretical models and previous research, the study aims to describe, through a qualitative approach, how these young people see themselves and the external environment (family and residential care), how they project their future (their purpose and objectives), and how these constructions and perceptions can influence their quality of life and social integration. We conducted three focus groups with 35 young people (the ages 13–21) protected in and for different periods in residential houses (period 1–20 years). The results highlighted that a specific meaning is reconfigured as compensatory when affected by a trauma or adverse external event and thus can be a resource for resilience. On the other hand, the research highlighted that the existence of goals alone is insufficient to generate action, and the unrealistic meanings given to own persons, experiences, and resources can be dangerous because it risks accentuating some social vulnerabilities of these young people.

Keywords: meaning; purpose; development; residential care; child welfare system; resilience

Citation: Bunea, O.; Cojocaru, D. Purpose and Mattering as Dimensions of Meaning for Young People in Residential Care from Romania. *Adolescents* **2023**, *3*, 594–612. https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents3040042

Academic Editor: Larry F. Forthun

Received: 19 June 2023
Revised: 28 August 2023
Accepted: 4 September 2023
Published: 1 October 2023

1. Introduction

The success of interventions in social services, including residential care for young people facing difficulties, depends on the collaborative involvement of beneficiaries and the services themselves [1,2]. In this case, involvement goes beyond the mere provision and receipt of resources; it encompasses a collaborative process and an alignment of the meanings both actors attribute to the intervention experience [3]. From this perspective, meaning-making operations can become a resource in themselves [4,5], and the interest in understanding how some adolescents and youths in residential care manage to overcome vulnerabilities and adversities through such strategies can offer insights that can enhance intervention methods.

In Romania, public policies are concerned with improving the situation of beneficiaries within the protection systems, but this intention is not always a success. In recent decades, authorities have been directed towards deinstitutionalizing children and youths from residential houses and integrating them into their biological families or adoptive families. Although in a continuously decreasing number due to economic progress and demographic decline, many children in Romania continue to enter and live in the child protection system due to the risk situations in which they find themselves in their biological families.

The vast majority (88.6%) of individuals placed within the (public and private) residential care system in Romania are over 10 years old: 25% are between the ages of 10 and 14, 47.4% are between 14 and 18, and 16.2% are over 18, out of a total of 11,629 individuals (data as of 31 December 2022) [6]. After leaving the protective system, youths from residential care are on their own; they no longer have the safety net provided by families or

communities, as is the case for those raised in biological families. As a result, the societal priority should be the interest in their choices, values, aspirations, and the directions they project in their lives while considering the challenges they have faced. Furthermore, their situation is of interest because they, in one way or another, find solutions to their problems and difficulties. Their experience is valuable because it gives us data and insight into what it is like to succeed when resources and prospects are poor.

Unfortunately, specialists in this field note that outcomes related to youth social integration (academic achievements, duration of schooling, entry into the job market, or quality of first employment) remain modest. This situation arises due to multiple factors, primarily economic (insufficient financial and personnel resources), but this is not the sole determinant. Even when funds are available, there are instances where their allocation fails to consider the actual needs from the beneficiaries' perspective in terms of how they perceive assistance, support, and intervention.

A theoretical explanation for this situation can be found in the socio-ecological model of resilience [1], which posits that succeeding in adverse conditions depends not only on individual characteristics but also on "the developmental pathways adopted depend on the availability and accessibility of health-sustaining resources and the meaning that is constructed for each within the child's culture and context" (p. 11). As a result, a match between the meaning attributed to these resources by the providers and the meaning assigned by the recipients is desirable. Without it, there is a risk that the funds will be spent inefficiently, and, more importantly, the social intervention will be missed.

In the specialized literature, relatively few qualitative studies address how youths in such situations interpret and evaluate their experiences within this environment, and this represents a gap in this topic. However, the few studies we identified can provide insight into the researchers' concerns within the field.

From a process-oriented resilience perspective, Drapeau et al. [7] conducted a qualitative study involving 12 boys and girls in placement, aged 14 to 17, with an average placement duration of 7.3 years. The author identified among these youths a series of turning points experienced (action, relation, and reflection) and four processes directly or indirectly linked to them: perceived self-efficacy growth, distancing from risk, new opportunities, and the multiplication of benefits (identifying positive aspects after passing through the turning points).

In another study encompassing 43 youths, 21 of whom were beneficiaries of a mental health clinic and 22 participants in a young offender retention program, Ungar [8] described how they construct identities using two strategies: maintaining continuity based on the need for acceptance ("Accept me for who I am"), or defining a new identity based on the need for power ("This is who I am"). An essential part of this process is the integration of their vulnerability, which becomes a component of resilience that aids them in facing their situation.

Schofield et al. also examine the identity-building process [9] by analyzing 20 narratives of youths who have left placement centers. These narratives describe the transition from the status of a "victim" or a "troubled child" to that of a "survivor". The focus is on the meanings attributed to their experiences, which affect identity construction, resilience, and the need for support.

Research conducted in Slovakia on a sample of 34 youths in residential care [10] identified 13 personal strategies to cope with adversity from their past and present. These strategies include looking forward, being motivated by past experiences, proactive adaptation, a power strategy, self-fulfillment, avoidance, compensatory behaviors, and more. Each of these strategies can be considered a mechanism for dealing with adversity and facing it. The author acknowledges that none of these strategies alone has proven sufficient, leaving many other unresolved issues.

Although not specifically related to individuals who have undergone the child protection system, a study by Hakkim and Deb [11] is essential for assigning meaning to negative experiences. The two researchers examine how three participants (an 18-year-old

victim of sexual abuse, an 18-year-old, and a 20-year-old victim of emotional abuse) influenced the therapeutic intervention process through the meaning-making processes of their experiences, contributing to their overcoming.

Examining these studies shows that when questioned, subjects often do not mention resources themselves but rather frequently discuss the construction of a (new) identity, processes of self-transformation, relationships with specific individuals, significant turning points for them, and processes of meaning-making. In this space of subjective and intersubjective perception and interpretation, we believe that there may be room for improvement in social intervention.

Meaning and Development

Positive youth development occurs when opportunities are made available to youths in meaningful ways and when the people around adolescents support them to develop their unique capacities and abilities [2] (p. 41). Thus, there also is a problem with the presence of internal and environmental resources and the importance of the meaning the individual attributes to his experiences. How individuals understand and interpret what happens to them (intentionality) can influence how they adapt to adversity. Further, positive experiences are associated with a strong belief in their ability to control their lives and, therefore, to plan their lives (purpose), particularly their professional ones [7]. Intentionality and purpose are, moreover, two characteristics of meaning [12], not the philosophical concept to concern scholars in its "meaning of life" form but the psychological form of "meaning in life" [13]; the term can explain how individuals give meaning, purpose, and value to what happens to them.

The meaning is associated with beneficial effects on development, maturation, and health with variables relating to well-being, psychological distress, and spirituality [14]. The idea that meaning is omnipresent and beneficial is challenged by research [4] that shows that meaning making is difficult to reach in some contexts. If it does happen, it can sometimes harm the individual, leading, for example, to deepening depression.

The source and dimensions of meaning remain debated among researchers, but there are also elements common to several models. Two of them, purpose and mattering [13,15], help us understand social service intervention's effects on youth development in residential care.

Some authors use the terms "meaning" and "purpose" interchangeably [16], while others consider purpose a component of meaning [13,15,17]. Others argue that pursuing one or multiple purposes directs meaning by directing attention and selecting resources available to the individual [18]. The existence of a purpose—understood here as the cognitive process that defines goals in life—is the condition for the emergence of personal meaning: "Purpose gives direction just as a compass gives direction to a navigator" [19] (p. 242). Thus, the goal is the one that can generate both understandings (depending on the goals, the perspective on oneself, and things that want to be changed) and also the value and significance of one's person (when the objectives pursued are socially valued).

As a dimension of meaning [13,15,17], the purpose is the mission everyone believes they have to accomplish and for which it is worth living. Purpose consists of long-term aspirations, self-concordant and motivating relevant activities that one carries out [14], giving a specific direction to one's life and particular activities. The motivational force of the goal would lie in the fact that the activities of the present are related and connected with the projection of future events [20]: "I study to get a degree", "I work for the promotion" planning that involves the mobilization of resources and an orientation of activities [18]. The goal can also refer to one's person, not only to external projects. Individuals project images of the people they want to become in the future or who, on the contrary, they do not want to be, and these images can represent landmarks in the paths they choose to follow or avoid at a given moment [21]. In a comprehensive definition that also refers to the self and its projects, "purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something

meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspects of the world beyond oneself" [22] (p. 32).

The presence of purpose in life would act beneficially through several elements [19]:

- It determines, through motivational mechanisms, a greater consistency of behavior that manifests itself through the determination to overcome obstacles, search for alternatives, and maintain focus on objectives despite environmental changes;
- It encourages psychological flexibility;
- It encourages efficient resource management and leads to more productive activity;
- It encourages higher than basal cognitive processing (such as procuring food, safety, and pleasure).

Research conducted among young people has highlighted [23] associations between the perception of having purpose/goals in life and increased social well-being, courage, and desire to acquire adult status. At the same time, a goal constitutes a resource for supporting resilience in overcoming some adversities. The purpose can provide youth with a protective buffer that mitigates the negative outcomes associated with poverty, strengthens motivation and sense of participation, and facilitates identity development.

The second dimension of meaning, mattering, refers to valuing one's life as meaningful and valuable, that it matters because it adds to the world. It is expressed by the feeling that the individual lives a life worth living [13] and that what you do is relevant to others. Those with a low sense of significance believe their existence has little relevance and their disappearance would make a negligible difference in the world [15]. Those who experience such situations are motivated to do almost anything to matter to others. Likewise, those who act in reprehensible ways may do so out of a desire to account for those who ignore them [24]. Importance is a form of mattering linked to social support, not so much objective support as the perception of this support. The connection between the sense of support and importance is direct, the former being the precursor of the latter: if we believe that others are available to provide us with the support that we need, then we understand that we are important to them; we know that we matter [24] (p. 342).

Our research aims to explore two dimensions of meaning for adolescents and young people who are in or have grown up in the protection system from Iași County, Romania, particularly in the way they perceive themselves and the value they think they have and on the other hand, how they design their future through the goals and objectives. If, as the specialized literature [1] suggests, an important role is played by harmonizing the meanings of providers and beneficiaries of social services, in-depth knowledge of the latter's perspective would undoubtedly help to increase the quality of interventions in this field.

We consider these dimensions of meaning (purpose and mattering) outputs of social service intervention and the processing of complex, sometimes traumatic, past experiences. The approach is motivated by the fact that little research focuses on the perspective of this category of social service clients; we believe that such an approach can bring relevant information regarding social intervention and the construction of young people's identity in residential care. A qualitative approach can contribute to a better understanding of how those in this situation make sense of what happened to them and how these components of meaning have been influenced by experience in the protection and the social integration efforts in their case.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is part of more extensive research carried out in 2023 that follows the mechanisms of interaction between the individual and the environment in the case of adolescents and young people who grew up for different periods in residential homes in Iași County, Romania. The county is in the northeast of the country, in Moldova, the country's poorest region, with approximately 700 children and young people protected in public residential care and approximately 1500 children in foster care. Currently, the national policy is to make efforts to keep children in the family of origin, but this is not

always possible. However, the number of those cared for in the residential system has fallen dramatically, from a few thousand in the 2000s to a few hundred today.

2.1. Study Setting and Sample

Data were obtained during three focus groups attended by N = 35 adolescents and young people between the ages of 13 and 21 (M_1 = 17.27 years). The periods in the protection system vary from a few months (one person from FG1) to 20 years (M_2 = 10.35 years). On gender, 21 (60%) respondents were girls, and as for their studies, most (57%) attended school courses while the rest were (15 youth from FG3) working or looking for a job. The detailed structure of the sample appears in Table 1.

Table 1. The structure of the sample.

Group	Number of Participants	Gender		Average Age	Average Time in Residential Care
		M	F		
FG1	10	4	6	14.5	6.6
FG2	13	4	9	16.9	8.8
FG3	12	9	3	20.4	15.5
Total	35	17	18	17,2	10.3

The respondents came from residential protection and post-protection services in the Municipality of Iași (approximately 350,000 inhabitants), the capital city of the county: two residential houses (FG1 and FG2) and two multifunctional centers (FG3), and post-residential service where there were young people who left the protection system, being, at the time discussion, engaged or looking for a job. The interviews unfolded in the respective organizations, and the selection of the interlocutors was based on their availability at the time of the research and was voluntary.

The selection of the sample was an intentional one in the case of FG1 and FG2, in the sense that we asked the coordinators of the residential centers to select from those who were in the institution at the time of the interviews and from those who wanted to participate in the research "whom they do better" (they have good results at school, show interest in the center's activities, have no discipline problems, have a capacity for reflection and expression that allows them to participate in the interview actively). As for the participants in FG3, all the young people present at that time in the center (consisting of two family-type houses, one for girls and one for boys) were present at the interview, with only one exception, a boy who expressed a desire not to participate. Only the young people and the two researchers participated in the interviews. In requesting access to the institutions, we specified only the research topic and its purpose, not the interview guide.

As seen in Table 1, the groups are heterogeneous among themselves; their educational and social situations differ: most of the respondents in FG1 had a relatively good social condition; that is, they generally came from responsible families, and the protection necessary to be instituted because the parents did not have the means to keep them in school, despite good academic results. On the other hand, FG2 members were victims of abuse (some severe) and neglect. Finally, the young people from the multifunctional centers (FG3) had left the child protection system, were no longer attending any school, and were looking for a job or were already employed being in a transition period of a maximum of two years between the residential care and integration into society.

By selecting these groups, each with different social backgrounds, we aimed to cover a wide range of beneficiaries within the child protection system, excluding individuals with disabilities since we do not have research experience with this category of young people. We aimed to include young individuals who have experienced various lengths of time in residential care, thus encompassing diverse backgrounds.

2.2. Procedure

Before each interview, the participants received an explanation of the research purpose and settings and confirmed their consent. The legal guardians gave their permission to the minors before conducting the interview. Discussions lasted 2–2.5 h and were audio-recorded, a procedure for which agreement was sought in the informed consent.

After transcribing the interviews and data analysis, the audio and text files were under the custody of a single researcher (OB). Since these interviews are just a portion of a larger postdoctoral research project, the data will be destroyed after the completion of the project. The individuals conducting the interviews were university professors with experience in both quantitative and qualitative research involving children and youths within the child protection system. They had no prior connection with the participants before the interviews. They introduced themselves, including information about their expertise in the field, and addressed any questions posed at the beginning of the discussion or during its course.

The Scientific Research Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences from "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iași approved the study (Address Nr. 97/1 February 2023).

2.3. Measures

The researchers built the interview guide based on the specialized literature review and professional experience. It covered the subjects' experience in the protection system, how they relate to the past, their families and other people, and their plans. The discussions were unstructured; the young people had great freedom in leading the debate and describing their experiences. The fact that the members of each group knew each other helped the flow of the discussion. However, at some moments, it generated the manifestation of latent resentments, which required the intervention of the interview coordinators.

The interview questions (Table 2) and the discussion topics proposed to our interlocutors from which the particular questions emerged during the meeting were built on a model of resilience, understood as survival in adverse conditions [25], where what matters is overcoming risk situations and not recording outstanding results. Another model envisioned is one in which the delivery of resources, experiences, and relationships in culturally intelligible (meaningful) ways to the individual [3] is at least as important as their presence. From the beginning, the methodological orientation was an interpretivist one in which we followed how our interlocutors evaluate and value experiences, resources, and themselves being less interested in their objective accuracy. However, the discussions started from the facts and their descriptions; details and evidence were requested when the statements were vague or accusatory. Only after these aspects became apparent were their interpretation and evaluation requested.

The interview mainly aimed at developing a relaxed and honest discussion about their experience in the protection system, the narrative following a chronological logic (past-present-future). In this development, the opening questions asked the interlocutors to describe the reasons and circumstances in which they arrived at the center in an attempt to assess the adversity they faced at that time as well as the role of the family in this situation. Later, in the course of the discussion, questions were asked about life and experience in the placement center, focusing on social resources (even though the respondents, especially the younger ones, preferred to focus on material resources) within and outside this organization, such as relationships with employees and the development of friendships, but also any significant experiences during this period.

Table 2. Themes and content of the initial interview guide.

Themes	Questions
Experience (from family and residential care)	When did you arrive at residential care? What do you remember from that time? Could you tell us about the reasons that led to your placement? What happened back then? What is your opinion about family (considering their decision) and about these past situations of yours?
Experience in residential care	How have your lives been here? What were the most challenging things you had to face? Who or what helped you deal with them? What are the most beautiful memories from the residential house? Could you share a few? Do you feel grateful for something or someone from here?
Self-Image (how they see themselves, how they compare themselves to others, and how they believe others perceive them)	What are the things you are most proud of? How have you managed in school? What does school (education) mean to you? How do you believe the experience in residential care has affected and transformed you? Do you feel you are different from children who grew up in families? What do you think about youths who have not gone through the experiences you have gone through? How do they see you? What are some significant experiences you have interacted with youths from outside the system?
The future (plans, goals, purpose)	What do you intend to do in the future? How are you preparing for that? What advantages and disadvantages might help or hinder you in achieving these goals?

Regarding the relationship with those outside the center, we asked how they see them and how they see others if they consider that they have advantages and or disadvantages compared to them. For those who were still students (FG1 and FG2), we paid particular attention to the importance and role given to the school. This vital resource contributes to charting the future trajectory of development. Another central question that evolved from all of these experiences and resources was, "When it was hardest for you, who or what did you turn to?" which sought to capture the source but also the interpretation and personal use of the resources and development opportunities available to them during the period they are in the protection system. Finally, at the end of the discussion, we asked the interlocutors to tell us their short-term and long-term plans, including the opportunities and the obstacles they imagined they would face.

2.4. Data Analysis

The type of data analysis was thematic. We transcribed and coded the interviews using the QDA Miner Lite v. 2.0.9 application. The data coding strategy focused on description, an approach "appropriate for studies with the main purpose of identifying or describing specific behaviors, settings, phenomena, experiences and events" [26] (p. 29).

The type of coding was In Vivo, where a code is expressed by a word or a short phrase extracted from the participants' language [27]. This coding technique identifies the relevant information as it appears in the respondents' accounts and preserves the language and meanings without being affected by the beliefs and biases of the researcher. Each team member developed a list of codes, starting from a series of 10 agreed-upon anchor

codes. We later analyzed both lists and merged them without measuring our agreement, resulting in a final list of 81 items. We have had situations where "family is a good thing" and other situations where "some things happen in the family that are not good". Later, we grouped these codes into categories such as "family as a resource" and "family as adversity", and after that, more general categories, such as "resources and support" (what supports positive development) and "threats" (perceived obstacles) or "we are similar to others" and "we are different from others". This process of ordering and classifying the information was performed considering the purpose of the research and the theoretical framework, overcoming the descriptive level of the codes expressed in the words of the interlocutors towards a theoretical and analytical level of data explanation [28].

Further, once these categories were established, connections could be made between them [29], thus foreshadowing the themes obtained. For example, a particular way of being young (an attitude of superiority) is not (only) a temporal succession of past events but can be a reaction to these experiences.

3. Results

Through the approach described in the previous section, the (chronological) stories of teenagers and young people were analyzed from the perspective of the research goal: finding out how the research participants perceive themselves and how they project their future through objectives, goals, and plans. The initial chronological logic is supported by the fact that the components of meaning—mattering and purpose—are not theoretical, abstract constructions but result from interpreting particular experiences situated to a large extent in the past (Figure 1).

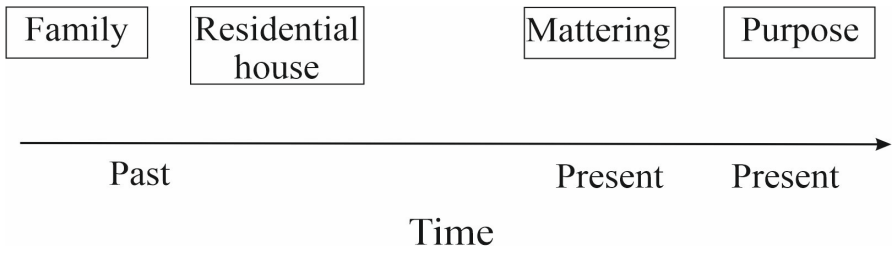

Figure 1. Past conditions that may influence the components of meaning (matter and purpose).

Further, the data analysis aimed to understand the processes by which the past influences the life course of young people. In the case of this study, we have situations of abandonment or neglect by the biological family and the need for protection in the residential system. The protection system thus became the second home. However, the birth family also continued to exist and exert its influence, these being the main elements that contributed over the years to their development. One of the emerging themes of the study is that both instances, the residential care and the family, have largely failed to support our interlocutors, who, for this reason, see themselves as the primary source of resilience. This conviction also comes from a comparison with young people who have not gone through their experiences and who would thus be weaker and less prepared in the face of life's vicissitudes. Given the perception of one's superiority, the future appears in a favorable light, full of opportunities. It is a positive fact that does not consider the multiple risks to which they are exposed given the lack of support—relational and material—of this category of people. Emergent themes and codes appear in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and corresponding codes emerged from the data analysis.

Theme		Codes
The negative evaluation of the residential house and the family.	Residential House	Employee attitude (mainly indifference). Distrust in employees. Dissatisfaction with the quality and diversity of food/clothing/hygiene products. Children's opinions are not taken into account. The monotony of the program. Lack of money. Too many rules.
	Family	The family is not trustworthy. Family issues preventing integration/support (e.g., parents remarried). Extreme poverty. The child was exploited (in the family).
The emergence of a definition of self, superior to others.		It is, for him, the only support. He loves/admires/is proud of himself as he is. The (difficult) experiences made him stronger/more responsible/more resourceful/more mature than others. The others (children, teenagers) are more unhappy than him. He succeeded despite everyone and everything.
The future appears to be full of opportunities, with nothing to lose. There is no purpose (maybe to make money), only plans.		Wants to make a fortune (money, villa, business). He will go abroad to make money. He wants to make a career (but does not do anything about it). He specializes in a field he does not like/interests him. School bores/tires him. He has taken classes/has a passion (he wants to pursue a possible future career).

3.1. The Negative Evaluation of the Residential House and the Family

For the youths we spoke with, the assessment of the family and the placement center is permanent because they continue to represent their projects' current and potential future resources. However, they are disappointed with how the two actors have performed their duties.

Our interlocutors were excited to talk about their experience in residential care. On the whole, they were dissatisfied with it, but unlike what specialized literature records about such services in other historical periods, now the dissatisfaction is generated by the way the residential house activity is organized, by the lack of variety of meals ("Could we eat fries more often?" (FG 1)), in general, by the bureaucratic way of purchasing hygiene items and clothes. These products ultimately lead to waste because children and young people reject and throw away the products purchased because they do not suit their wants and needs and are of poor quality.

A recurring dissatisfaction in the answers regards the attitude of the employees accused of formalizing relations. This distance is perceived as indifference or even ill will by the beneficiaries. There is and is perpetuated a state of conflict in "factions" that do not understand each other.

> *They (certain employees) always reproach us for not understanding, for not respecting them, for not liking food, for we have whims, making "bleah", or that we don't know how to respect the schedule. However, we have always told them that we want more. (. . .) They don't work with you as if you were their child. No, it is all very different. (. . .) (. . .) They don't always understand you and don't want to participate with you. (. . .) Then they complain and also reproach you for not staying with them, not doing activities, or not participating. That is all because of them, not because of me!* (FG2)

> *If I were the head of the center, I would only discuss with the educators the subject of the individual. I would have them speak honestly with one as often as possible. While sitting in the center, I think they have time to talk to each child and ask, "Are you OK? What are your plans?" [. . .] Let the children not come to the psychologist; let the psychologist come to the children. Maybe he is ashamed. (. . .) Maybe I am ashamed to go and tell him.* (FG3)

The youths do not seem happy with the residential care situation, but things seem good compared to the family situation.

> *If I was at home, I could not go to school because I had to go everywhere with my family to work. . . I am glad I am here! I can do school, finish school. . . (. . .) It was the worst in the family.* (FG1)

> *I didn't always have a close connection with my mom. Since I was little and growing up, my parents often argued. My siblings were always crying, and I sat and looked at them. I didn't feel any connection. I felt like I was on my business. Nevertheless, I was about seven years old at the time.* (FG3)

The attitude towards the family is ambivalent. As for anyone, the family is a support and a benchmark, but in this case, many families did not fulfill their mission, and the law protected the children. One interlocutor told us that the family is not an unconditional resource, regardless of the situation.

> (The worst thing that can happen to a child is) *the loss of important people: parents, friends, and close relatives. OK, this only happens when you are attached to them. You are unaffected if you have some of these things in your family.* (FG2)

These "happenings" that have occurred completely change the role of the family for them. However, those speakers do not generally hold grudges against the families of origin. They try to keep in touch with the parents, but this is not always possible because there are complicated situations that they cannot control: they were born out of wedlock, the parents have (re)married, and often the new partner does not want to hear about them, or he really does not know about them, or the families have disappeared altogether.

Looking back, young people feel, at best, indifferent to family and the protection system. The families had and still have problems, and in the residential home, they encountered much indifference and bureaucracy. They do not reject these experiences but are neither a source of inspiration.

3.2. The Emergence of a Definition of Self, Superior to Others

Self-image was evaluated in two directions: how the young person sees himself and positions himself to others in the peer group (colleagues/acquaintances of the same age). The intention was to capture the value the young man gives to himself, the importance he considers having after he has passed and was still passing through at the time of the interview, through difficult experiences.

3.2.1. Self as a Benchmark

Looking with distrust at the residential house's employees and the families they come from leads to extreme situations where the only perceived marker of their resilience is themselves. Young people accept themselves with indulgence and understanding, a conclusion that arose due to disappointments and lack of support.

> *I am proud of myself. Very much! I feel that despite everything that happens, I still come out happy; I keep smiling, I try not to let be overwhelmed by all the bad things happening around me, and I try to be more and more positive. That motivates me to do what I set out to do. Anyway, I am so happy with myself; I feel that way. Other times I don't feel it, but for the most part, I feel it.* (FG2)

> *When it is harder, I look in the mirror and say, "You are all you have!". I learned that I am the only person for whom I develop myself!* (FG3)

> *I would not want to change anything about my past because the things of the past shaped me and made me the person I am today.* (FG1)

> *I cannot say that we have surpassed that problem, let us say. But I try. It cannot pass, but you learn to live with it, which is the reality. I just saw that things don't stop like that, or it cannot pass, and I said, "That is it, that is me; I accept myself as I am. If it suits you well; if not, no!" I love myself as I am.* (FG2)

> *I get laughed at because I stumbled upon those walls and had to learn and manage in their absence* (of adults). *I had the strength to get up, start over again, see if things* (worked) *and adapt to the situation.* (FG2)

To the essential question of the interview, "When it was more difficult for you, who or what helped you?" the most frequently formulated answer was "Me". Thus, a personal definition of the self emerges, built on mistrust of others, in which trials, vicissitudes, adversities, and risk situations (overcame or not) have contributed to the person's formation. A feeling of inner strength and self-confidence emerges, becoming a sense of superiority over others.

3.2.2. Self to Others

In this framework of meaning, having a family is not an advantage but a disability because those who have families with parental support are less prepared for life.

> *On the one hand, it is good that I didn't grow up in a family because I did it that way, out of everything! I tried to handle it even though sometimes I would have difficulty saying, "Oh, that is it! I cannot do it anymore!" I kept succeeding later, but I was succeeding.* (FG2)

From the need for identity and to give meaning to one's experiences, there eventually even emerges a feeling that "we" (those who have faced such experiences) are better than "them" (those in the family).

> *They tease you that they have family, and we do not. I feel bad when I see that they take them from school. That the family takes care of them. (. . .) Yes. I don't know, they think they are more important and. . . , that is, we are in the (residential) home and they look with shame* (with contempt?) *at us, I could say. With superiority.* (FG1)

> *We, kids in the system, are much better than some kids growing up in families. We are much more educated, much more open in mentality.* (FG2)

> (We are) *More mature. And more mature than adults. Many people have told me that I am more mature than my mother.* (FG2)

> *I am more prepared in socializing, understanding, and conversing with people. That is because, sitting with more people, I had to communicate and get along with those around me.* (FG3)

The fact that he had to take care of himself turned into responsibility, obviously only in the case of some.

> *We are somehow on our path; we don't depend on our parents. When someone asks us what we are going to do in the future, "Yes, I am going to finish school, and then I am going to get a job, and then I am going to have a family", the people in the family don't always think that way. "My mother keeps me, (. . .)" And so on.* (FG2)

> *It is different from being on your own feet; if I make a mistake, that it's, and I bear the consequences. I have to go to work, earn money to eat, support myself, and pay utilities; no one has to help anymore.* (FG3)

This feeling of superiority comes in response to contempt and discrimination from others. The highly negative attitude towards others comes along in one's self-narrative, describing himself as a person forced to manage by his powers. This self-story is supported and supplemented by the narrative describing others as unhappy.

> *I am OK at the residential house, but you, who judge me for staying here, at your home, may be worse. You (can) have difficulties when your mother and father beat you. I may be doing better than you, and yet you are the one who judges me as "Oh, you are staying at the residential house!" but you are doing worse at your house than I am doing it here.* (FG2)

> *They have everything they need materially. Nevertheless, they have no affection.* (FG2)

> *In vain, you have the phone. I don't know if it does not love you and does not listen to you when you have problems.* (FG2)

However, when they look more closely at their situation, some interlocutors notice that they are not as good as they describe themselves and that the lives of others are not as miserable as their peers tell them.

> *What I find bad about the fact that I stayed where I stayed is that I felt that way a few years ago about how the world talks, how they dress, the opinions of people, and how much the world develops. For example, I don't know simple things for normal people, like files and taxes. Nevertheless, their parents still explain them in more detail. They have someone to turn to; they can ask the parents*. (FG3)

The need for personal meaning makes these young people describe themselves as the heroes of their own lives, even if they need negative characters to oppose them. The past (trauma of separation from family, family) and the present (life in the residential house) are gradually integrated into stories that make sense to those who tell them, stories with a tragic-optimistic touch: *"It was and still is hard, but all this they made me who I am, different from others who had everything in life! Despite everyone and everything, I am a person I am proud of!"* These self-beliefs foreshadow the future through fixed goals and plans, a future that is exclusively personal and outside the restrictions but also far from the support of the protection system.

3.3. The Future: Full of Opportunities, Nothing to Lose

Young people do not consider themselves inferior to their peers brought up and educated in their families, or even, in many cases, they consider themselves superior. The future projects do not differ from those of ordinary children. Younger children in FG1 and FG2 generally have school-related plans, while older participants in FG3 were more concerned with work and money. On a case-by-case basis, the respondents wanted to take the qualification, finish high school, and take the college entrance exam (Medicine, Military Academy, Arts). On the other hand, there is a desire for success, a success to be expressed by ostentatious material "evidence".

> *I want much money, a big villa, and a man.* (FG1)

> *In the future, I would see myself as a very wealthy person. I dream about it, and maybe, if it were to come out to me, to be a businessman.* (FG1)

> *To work to get a big car to brag to the gentiles, not to make me "poor" anymore.* (FG2)

> *I want to work abroad to get a car and a house to brag!* (FG2)

> *I hope this dental medicine thing comes out to me. I always dreamed of having a lot of money, buying many clothes, and having pets*. (FG1)

Even fulfillment, which is an inner feeling that accompanies the achievement of a goal [17], is also wanted to be proven by reaching these social and external indicators of well-being:

> *I will do certain things to show myself that I did it and could do that. Not to prove to anyone that I did that thing or succeeded! To be successful, to be able to be myself well! First, to be healthy, then the rest! I want to be fulfilled, have my car and home to afford the things I want, and travel! This stuff I make them be for me, not to prove.* (FG1)

In many cases, abroad is the miracle solution, a shortcut for fulfilling dreams, desires, and projects. Although he had met his mother on Facebook, one of the young people was looking to go to Germany at her invitation to start working and earn money. His enthusiasm, not based on many concrete things, may also show the vulnerability of these people who are not enough to have goals, as the theory suggests. Moreover, individuals or organizations can exploit the desire to fulfill some worthy dreams and thus become a danger to their holders.

> *To me, they are not dreams; they are real realities. I am leaving outside in the first month that comes. I am going to Germany, where my mother is. I want to see what working and earning a penny is like. Because here the salaries are not right, I want to see something more.* (FG3)

Young people do not lack goals and plans. This ability to set goals as high as possible is a virtue.

> *Some people tried to discourage me but failed, and they said, "Do not think so far!" "But what is the problem? I think because I want that object! I want to aim up there!" When asked and I started bragging about what I had in my head, she would say, "Yes, but it is not as easy as it seems!" "I am going to make it seem easy! What is the problem?"* (FG2)

The interlocutors intuit the connection between goal and achievement but do not question the means and resources necessary to achieve these goals.

> *Probably even adults don't trust them or their dreams because, at a certain age, they have a hard time and say, "Oh, I cannot!" but I don't put that ambition "Let us shoot a little bit more of myself, I will succeed, I will have it!"* (FG2)

When asked what they think would stand in the way of completing their projects, children and adolescents believe that it depends only on their involvement without thinking about any inherent social obstacles, not only for those in this position but for any young person their age.

> [What would you need to fulfill these plans?] *I don't know! Simply my work. It is all up to me and how much I want that.* (FG1)

These beliefs create an unrealistic model of success in which all that matters is setting a goal and wanting to succeed.

Often, the aims and the means used to achieve them are mismatched. In this case, the goals are dreams, burning desires for the fulfillment of which not much is achieved because one does not know what or out of convenience.

> (I want to become) The *greatest doctor. I don't know in what field, but doctor*. (FG1)

> *I also wanted to become a policewoman, but only with the thought (because) I remembered that I had to learn! College, I don't need it anymore! So far, I have to learn much and dislike learning! I don't like to sit with the book in my hand. I am learning just to pass the class and give my baccalaureate!* (FG2)

> *Too many requirements. It makes you mentally tired*. (FG2)

> *Yeah, in college, only that thought. Too much to learn*. (FG2)

> *I was thinking of starting to write something myself, I have many ideas, but I am a lax professional and can never finish anything*. (FG2)

> *Dances* (I want to do) *As a profession and for pleasure.* [Now, what are you doing? What are you working on?] *At Take and Eat* (a company that deals with food preparation and delivery). [And you are doing a dance class?] *(. . .) No, I would like to do that.* (FG3)

For high school students, many personal projects are already affected; they attend non-prestigious or even low-level schools that have nothing to do with the projection of

their future. There is always the solution of further schooling in the desired field, but these people already have the available resources reduced.

> *I wanted to be a fashion designer but became a confectioner-pastry chef. I don't like it. I wanted something else.* (FG2)

> *Environmental protection, but I don't like that I have to learn. I would not give up if I knew I had learned so much.* (FG2)

However, a few real examples integrate plans with young people's skills, training, and experience, making these projections more convincing about future developments.

> *I want to become an excellent barber and get an enormous salary because at the salon that I am. . . I am new, and I am already taking a decent salary. If I have experience, not experience because I have experience; if I have seniority, if I stay longer, I start to know my clients, and the more clients, the more money. After I get a decent salary, as I want, and I will have the experience to do something else, I will focus on another field to bring me extra money.* (FG3)

> *I would not change anything in the past, at the moment, to be stronger, and in the future, I would like to save the country and enter the Land Forces Academy. I was in a camp organized by the army and met a military family supporting me in this project*. (FG2)

> *I want to finish school, give to a chef's course, love the kitchen, have a good job, and buy a house.* (FG2)

All three respondents in the paragraph above have benefited/taken advantage of opportunities offered by the protection system: the first young man enrolled in a barbering course paid for by Child Protection, and the second was in a camp organized by the army while she was in the residential care. The third takes remedial courses, which he is unlikely to have attended if he had stayed home.

4. Discussion

This research aimed to describe how young people who have had to arrive and live for varying periods in residential care make sense of their experiences to find out how the resources offered by social services have been integrated into their development. Here, "make sense" means, according to the adopted theoretical model [13,15], the design of the future (through purpose, goals, plans, and projects) as well as the perception of the relevance, the importance that they have for themselves and that they feel they have towards others. These two components of meaning would be the visible result of residential protection intervention and an indicator of overcoming (or not) the problems they faced in the past. In short, we wanted to find out who these young people think they are and their purpose in life after going through what they have been through.

The past experiences that we focused on during these interviews were those related to the family and those in residential care, considering that these are the ones that affected them essentially in the past, with effects that extend to the present.

Their opinion about the placement center is critical because it expresses how the social service made resources available and accessible meaningfully for the child [1]. Given the heterogeneity of the sample, the interlocutors evaluated the conditions in the center differently. Those in FG1, younger, with a shorter period in the center (Table 1), and, most importantly, with families to rely on (their only problem is that their parents do not have the economic means to keep them in school) are dissatisfied with resources related to the quality of meals, clothes, and hygiene products distributed. They do not complain about the quality of relationships with the employees in the center, as do their older colleagues with much more severe social problems in FG2 and FG3, whose connection with the family is highly problematic. The latter evaluated the relationship with the employees negatively, complaining that they ignore them and generally do not consider their psychological problems: *"I would have liked a psychologist to come to me and ask me what problems I have, not wait for me to go to him"*, an interlocutor expressed regarding the different expectations

that lead to blockage in the relations between employees and customers. It follows only from this quote, but it is illustrative that although resources are available and accessible, they are not made available to young people in a meaningful way for them [1]. And this "misunderstanding" can be found on many other levels in this relationship.

All the interlocutors come from families with particular social issues characterized by extreme poverty, violence, alcohol consumption, and neglect. Because of this, for many, the family no longer represents a resource, psychological or material, to rely on. When some of the young people, abandoned at an early age, wanted to meet their parents, this was a disappointing occasion, especially since they found that they often had no place in the lives of adults: they had other partners, other children, and different priorities.

Rejected or, at best, ignored (according to their perceptions) by families and by the bureaucracy of the protection system, a pressure also felt outside the placement center, they are forced to make sense of these experiences as they construct their identity and perceive their place them in the world.

The youths admit that it was better for them in the residential care; however, many still feel that others (colleagues, teachers) expressed a kind of inconsideration, to which they respond with an arrogant attitude of contempt, even transferred into a specific identity: *"We are not like them, we are better because they did not go through what we went through!"*

Again, this attitude differs depending on the interlocutors: those in FG1 who have only been protected from the threats of extreme poverty's (also serious) effects feel more integrated in the school and, in general, in the social environment. The others (FG2, FG3) have only the affirmation of their self, of self-affirmed importance that does not need external validation (precisely because they do not receive it from anyone). This finding is consistent with other qualitative research in the field whose conclusions refer to the construction of an identity built around one's person by integrating one's vulnerabilities: perceived self-efficacy growth [7], maintaining continuity based on the need for acceptance, or defining a new identity based on the need for power [8], transition from the status of a "victim" or a "troubled child" to that of a "survivor" [9], being motivated by past experiences or proactive adaptation [10]. Based on these results, we can hypothesize, in line with previous qualitative research, that the construction of a "survivor" identity (different and superior to other young people) is the cornerstone of their resilience, a cornerstone that brings with it the accentuation of some vulnerabilities.

To a large extent, these young people consider that they have nothing in the minus, but some advantages compared to those raised in families. Their life appears to these young people as meaningful, not by what they add to the world but by the sufferings and negative experiences they have overcome. This attitude justifies them developing a thorough understanding of the experiences they have gone through and even generates a culture of superiority determined by the management of uncertainty [30].

In terms of mattering, this attitude can hide a significant vulnerability. As [24] stated, to gain confirmation of their relevance, some people who feel ignored are capable of doing anything (including reprehensible acts) for those who ignore them. One such example is the situation of a young man who reconnected with his mother on Facebook and, without knowing her, was preparing at the time of the interview to move to Germany to be with that person.

The youths consider themselves as entitled as anyone their age to hope for a positive future, focusing on goals that express, especially materially, the success and overcoming of their condition as marginalized children. Unfortunately, many essential choices about choosing a school or acquiring skills have already been made, potentially narrowing their options for the future. This finding is less factual for FG1, where members are younger and with fewer social problems. They only have the issue of the effects of poverty, primarily canceled out by social service intervention. Many opportunities are already closed for the others from FG2 and FG3.

They aim to succeed in life, primarily materially, relying on their image of survivors. Surviving in a partially hostile world seems to be their purpose, and money and success

are the means to that end. Few aim for personal achievement, and none of the interview participants let it be understood that they had a "mission" above them.

We have noticed that these young people are not lacking in goals but in methods and concrete plans for their implementation. Setting a target seems to be enough for them. Between two people who are on a path of development, one of whom has bold goals (he wants to become a lawyer) but does nothing to achieve them, and another person who has more modest goals (he wants to become a popular barber) but already applies them and evolves in achieving them every day, the development towards success belongs, most likely, to the latter. An unrealistic goal for the achievement of which the individual does nothing can be dangerous because interested persons can maintain this illusion and manipulate the child into harmful situations (trafficking, abuse). The goal and objectives can thus become, from a potential resource, a risk factor for the one in question.

We illustrated the development of this process in Figure 2: the self-image of the survivor and the strong individual feeds into that of the individual who succeeds in all circumstances and is convinced of future success in his endeavors.

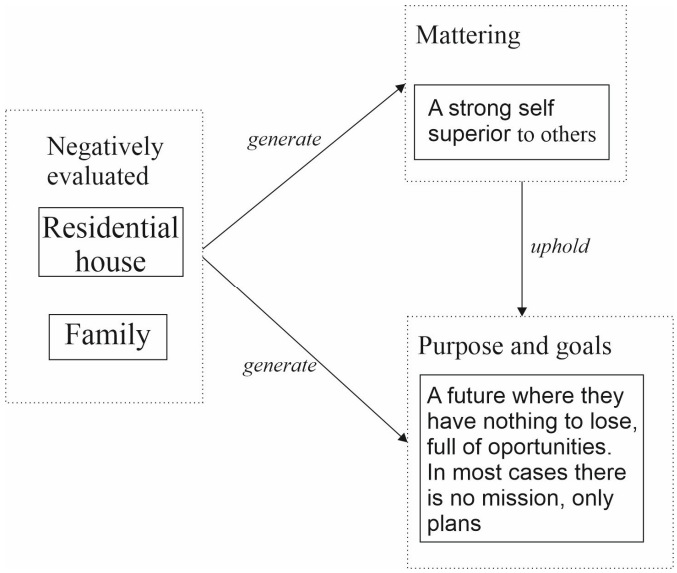

Figure 2. Mattering and purpose as reactions to past experiences.

However, potential developmental trajectories differ depending on the characteristics of the focus group. As we stated above, for the younger ones, with shorter periods in the protection system and fewer social problems, such as the teenagers in FG1, the prospects are more optimistic, and their hopes are more justified. This would be a danger for those in FG2 and FG3: they have the exact representations of self and future as others, but resources (here as chances and opportunities) are less.

We believe the research is helpful because it explicitly shows how young people think about themselves, the world, and their opportunities, a representation that makes them act in specific ways. The approach offers insights into the "negotiation" process of the young person with the protection system [1,3] and sees in the difference of meanings one of the causes of the failures of the intervention. If the "system" through employees does not meet the expectations of young people, the intervention is highly likely to fail. This finding fills a gap in the field where there is little similar research on young people's perceptions of social intervention.

Our research has found, similar to [4,24], that not all meanings (herein including purposes and mattering) are adaptive. Some distorted perceptions (the sense of personal invulnerability and superiority generated and validated by past experiences; a future full of opportunities) can do more harm than good when they are inadequate to reality.

There are some potential limitations in this study. First, the theoretical models used here, both in terms of resilience [1] and meaning [13], have their limitations. Both appeal to what is meaningful to the individual: the relationship with the protection system and the construction of the self and the future. These models translated into research allow the identification of meanings but say nothing about their quality and consistency. For example, for goals to be developmentally helpful, it takes more than just for them to exist. Such an approach ascertains purposes (and the grounds on which the person's importance rises) but does not say much about motivation and action. Second, focusing exclusively on meanings can be harmful because it can easily lead to the conclusion that only the interpretation of reality matters and not the constraints of reality itself.

The second limitation is the methodology used. Ideal research with this theme would be a longitudinal one, which ascertains the adversities, the relationships within the protection system, the evolution over time of meanings, and possibly their materialization after leaving the residential home. Compared to such an ideal approach, these discussions with young people are just the beginning of the research. Finally, the sample considered here is small and provides only a limited picture of the category of young people and the topic under discussion.

We believe that this research has clear implications for social work professionals. They must be constantly concerned with the meaning that the resources provide, and the process of the intervention itself can have for their beneficiaries. And this cannot be achieved without knowing in depth the image these beneficiaries have of themselves.

5. Conclusions

The empirical research findings can be a part of the broader discussion about development and resilience in a framework that goes beyond the provision of resources (material, social, financial) and refers to how these resources are perceived, valued, and given meaning. At the methodological level, our findings conclude that meaning (understood as purpose and mattering) can be a tool for knowing the other's reality and understanding their behavior, emphasizing young people's relationship with the future (with implications in present actions) and themselves.

At the individual level, meaning is an unconscious tool with which individuals operate to represent and orient themselves in the world. Nevertheless, as with any device or feature, it must be used with discernment and considering as many implications as possible. As with intelligence, for example, the ability to make sense of available resources can be dangerous to the individual and society when directed in socially unacceptable directions. Under the environment considered here—residential protection—where supervision, counseling, and support are lower than in the family, the danger of misinterpreting reality and projecting unrealistic meanings (goals and the desire to count for others) is permanent.

If we talk about youth development, we believe that future research studies must consider how adolescents and young people perceive the environment and themselves when they interpret opportunities as turning points that affect their life trajectories. Such a development would lead from knowledge of motivation to that of action and would further explain how, under similar conditions, some adolescents and young people succeed, and others fail.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, O.B. and D.C.; methodology, O.B. and D.C.; formal analysis, O.B. and D.C.; investigation, O.B. and D.C.; resources, O.B. and D.C.; data curation, O.B. and D.C.; writing—original draft preparation, O.B. and D.C.; writing—review and editing, O.B.; visualization, O.B. and D.C.; supervision, D.C.; project administration, O.B.; funding acquisition, O.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Scientific Research Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences from "Al.I. Cuza" University of Iasi (Protocol code 97/1 February 2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Informed consent was obtained from adults; for the minor participants in the study, legal consent was obtained from the legal guardians. The consent stated that the information could be used to publish scientific materials.

Data Availability Statement: Data are available on request from the authors.

Acknowledgments: This work was co-funded by the European Social Fund through Operational Programme Human Capital 2014–2020, project number POCU/993/6/13/153322, project title "Educational and training support for PhD students and young researchers in preparation for insertion into the labor market".

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study, in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data, in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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