Negotiating, Opposing, and Transposing Dangerousness: A Relational Perspective on Young People's Experiences of Secure Care

Sofia Enell1 and Monika Wilińska2

Abstract
This article analyses how young people, with experiences of secure care, relate to the contradictory images of children in child welfare: the child in danger and the dangerous child. The study is based in Sweden and consists of in-depth interviews with 16 youths conducted repeatedly (three times) over a period of 2 years. Using the perspective of relational sociology, we demonstrate how abstract images of children are materialized through the institutional practices of broken, interrupted, forbidden and forced relations. Within this context, young people are found to relate differently to being placed in the institution by negotiating, opposing and transposing. All practices display their unfolding agency and struggle to make sense of the experience. The restrictive practices seem to deny young people relations through which a sense of safety and care can be established. We conclude by putting into question the very foundations of secure care within child welfare services.

Keywords
Relational practice, relational agency, secure care, child welfare, young persons

Introduction
This article is about young people's experiences of secure care. The stories of being taken into care, of everyday life in placement and reflections upon past events constitute the main focus. The article has two aims: on the one hand, to shift the perspective in explaining secure care from the institutional actors and agencies to

1 Department of Social Work, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden.
2 Department of Social Work, School of Health and Welfare, Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden.

Corresponding author:
Sofia Enell, Faculty of Social Science, Department of Social Work, Linnaeus University, SE-351 95 Växjö, Sweden.
E-mail: sofi.a.enell@lnu.se
those directly affected by it and, second, to critique taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the purpose, the organization and the consequences of secure care. This study is based on a prolonged engagement with 16 young people placed in secure care and in-depth interviews conducted three times over the period of 2 years.

The way of handling troubled and troubling youths is guided by a dualistic conception of a child. On the one hand, there is the vulnerable child in need of protection and care; on the other, there is the dangerous child who is the source of problems, an offender (Egelund & Jakobsen, 2011; Goldson, 2000). Donzelot (1979) named these two images of children as the child in danger and the dangerous child. While the child in danger is not seen as responsible for hers/his behaviour, the dangerous child is. The key responses to the dangerous child are therefore control and correction, measures that aim to protect others—the society—but also to protect the young persons from their own behaviour. Facilities incarcerating young people, like secure care, have in this way a double task of protecting both the society and the young people. As such, they are a place for both protection and punishment, care and control (Goldson, 2002).

In Nordic countries, institutions with the mandate to use restrictive measures are based on the welfare model of care (Pösö, Kitinoja, & Kekoni, 2010). In Sweden, where this study takes place, this is materialized by having secure care institutions within child welfare. With its far-reaching powers, these institutions are designed to protect children at risk of harming themselves and/or others. The vast majority of young people in secure care are in compulsory care, based on their care needs and confined in a locked unit (Enell, Gruber, & Vogel, 2018). In other countries, such as the USA, responses to the dangerous child are handled within a youth justice system and separated from those to the child in danger (Hill, Lockyer, & Stone, 2007). In contrast to this, child welfare in Sweden is responsible for both the child in danger and for the dangerous child. This implies that responses to the child in danger and the dangerous child potentially can be blurred and the double face of secure care is even more pronounced.

In this article, we analyse the voices of young people placed in secure care to illuminate their ways of making sense of the placement. We begin with a literature review to explain secure care as a form of institutional and relational practice. Thereafter, we outline our methodological approach and analysis guided by insights from relational sociology that emphasizes the active and interdependent position of young people and their agency as relational. The analysis is then organized around three main themes: negotiating, opposing and transposing images of the child in danger and the dangerous child. With an understanding of agency as something that unfolds within ordinary and ambivalent relationships (Burkitt, 2016), we provide a new perspective on the young people’s experiences of secure care and the type of relationships that shape those experiences. In the final section, we discuss practical and political implications of the study.

**Secure Care as an Institutional and Relational Practice**

In Sweden, secure care is conceived of as child welfare’s last resort. As part of child welfare, secure care is supposed to provide treatment. A placement in secure care has therefore no time limit as a court sentence has; instead, it ends when professionals
consider that the young person has achieved desired changes. Unlike all other interventions in child welfare, secure care institutions have far-reaching powers. This includes both the possibility to apply restrictive measures, such as incarceration, body searches, temporary isolation and resources to surround the institution with surveillance cameras, fences and barbed wire. The process of change in secure care appears to be conditioned upon the use of penal and controlling measures. Also, young people isolated from the rest of society share (all) their (school and spare) time with other troubled youths.

Undoubtedly, the context of secure care resembles that of total institutions. In such institutions, inmates are found to adapt to the institutional life through ‘situational withdrawal’, ‘being the perfect inmate’ and taking the, often temporarily, ‘intransigent line’ (Goffman, 1961/1991). The most rewarding track, however, appears to be a ‘play it cool’ strategy that entails staying out of trouble, with both the inmate group and staff. Similar patterns have also been observed within the institutional contexts for youths. Although the institutional context puts constraints on young people’s ways of expressing themselves, it does not make them into passive recipients of care. Polvere’s (2014) study of restrained agency demonstrates the whole array of various forms of agency and dialectical thinking employed to take control over individual life stories. Different contexts can provide young people with varying levels of agency, and, as Bordonaro and Payne (2012) point out, agency can be ambiguous when it comes to young people who threaten and challenge the existing moral and social order. This, as Tisdall and Punch (2012) argue, merits further research to problematize agency and to recognize that children and young people’s agency is about something more than not being passive.

In this article, we recognize that various forms of agency develop and evolve within a specific context, and rather than indicating any personal characteristics, these should be read as emerging from complex situations in which different social worlds interact. This leads us to a relational view of agency as never complete; instead, persons, younger or older, are seen as interactants and interdependent within various situations (Burkitt, 2016). From a relational perspective, relations understood as processes of social interaction define and make the process of meaning-making possible (Burkitt, 2014). It is through relations that we understand ourselves; we make sense of the social situations and emerge as agents. Agency is thus not a thing or a characteristic that one may or may not have, it is an ongoing and unfinished process. As explicated by Emirbayer (1997), agency is inseparable from the unfolding dynamics of situations, especially from the problematic features of those situations (p 294).

Being placed in secure care is certainly a situation with numerous problematic features. The loss of control in secure care and being in a socially divided world impede young people’s efforts to achieve a sense of belonging and self-control over their life-situation (Enell, 2016). The problematic features of secure care are also reflected in the changing relational landscape of young people placed there. While having trusting relationships with people around is something highly valued and sought for by young people (Enell, 2017), the ambiguous and contradictory practices of care and control exercised within the institutional context hinder the development of trusting relationships with staff members (Ellis, 2018; Vogel, 2018). The secure care placement is not only about establishing new relations with other peers and with staff members at the institution but also involves management of relations with
caseworkers, family members and friends who are not present at the institution. However, very little is known about the ways of establishing and maintaining trustful relationships with others within that context and the ways in which those relationships affect young people’s experiences of the institutional placement.

Previous research on the experiences of children and young people in institutional placements has documented various positions and strategies. In a Norwegian study, young people in coercive residential care positioned themselves in two ways—as an autonomous individual and as a responsible individual (Reime, 2017). Interestingly, Reime (2017) concludes that the youths did not talk about themselves as vulnerable, at risk or in need of control, nor did they talk about themselves as rights-bearers. Follesø (2015) discusses the term ‘youth at risk’ and the ways in which young people reject being labelled as such because it gives them a feeling of being a problem. In her exploration, Follesø (2015) found that ‘at risk’ is related to the individual youth’s actions, and thus, the term underestimates and overlooks complex life situations and structure. In the same vein, Jakobsen (2013) problematizes concepts such as ‘anti-social youth’ and ‘behavioural problems’ that tend to simplify and turn complex situations into fixed personality traits. The use of less stigmatizing labels is not, however, free from challenges. For example, from the perspective of staff who wish to reduce the disciplining aspect of secure care and instead put forward the caring element, the position of a child appears more appropriate than that of an inmate or delinquent (Franzén, 2015). However, youths seem to be ambivalent about the ‘child position’. While the girls in Ellis’ (2018) study thought that the child and vulnerable position did not recognize their competence and fluid identities, the boys in Franzén’s (2015) study joined the construction. The boys’ joint construction was understood as both an indication of resistance to responsibilization and as a means of positioning themselves as responsible subjects.

The context of residential care creates a space for the development of various positions that change and are altered by young people depending on concrete situations. However, what has not been demonstrated yet is that those various positions and forms of agency emerge within the context of changing relations. Those relations, as Burkitt (2014) emphasizes, are dynamic, fluid and always evolving. The different contexts and situations described in previous research can therefore serve as empirical evidence of changing and shifting relations with various participants in the institutional situation, and it is through those relations that young people make sense of their placements.

In this article, we turn to relational sociology to understand and problematize secure care from the perspective of young people. Young people who are locked up in secure placement are sent there under the premises of care. However, in addition to being restricted in their physical space, those young people find themselves in a new social environment, in which their earlier relationships are either broken or seriously interrupted by the institutional life and physical distance. What does it do to those young people when their lives are transferred to a strange physical and social environment, for an indefinite period? Suspended in space, time and relations, these young people make sense of what is happening to them, and in doing that, they also relate to the two dominant narratives underpinning that institutional context: the dangerous child and the child in danger.
Methodology

The empirical material comes from a research project about young people’s experiences of being assessed in secure care (Enell, 2016, 2017). While previous analyses have focused on the experiences of institutional assessment, this article is about the experience of secure care. The material consists of interviews with 10 boys and 6 girls who were interviewed on 3 different occasions within a period of 2 years. For each interview, all youths gave their informed consent to participate. If they were younger than 15, their parents’ consent was also obtained. The procedure was independently reviewed and approved by a regional research ethics board.

The first interview was conducted at the secure care unit, and the subsequent two interviews were conducted 1 and 2 years later. The interviews were semi-structured; most lasted for about 40-100 min. Even though the assessment experience was the main focus of those interviews, the youths talked a lot about the experience of being placed in secure care and what that experience meant to them afterwards. Most of them stayed in secure care for 2–3 months, but some of them were kept there for about a year. While the first author carried out the original research project and the interviews, both authors engaged in the renewed analysis of the material together.

Transcripts from the 3 interviews, with all 16 young persons, were first read through and then discussed by both authors. This discussion led to a more detailed reading of the transcripts and a repeated listening to recorded interviews from the nine youths with experience of locked care. The group consisted of three boys and six girls of the ages 14–18.

In the first stage of the analysis, we identified segments of the transcripts that could be referred or related to the experience of control, care and how the interviewees perceived that the staff looked upon them. What drew our attention early on in the process of analysis was the highly emotional language used by young people to describe their situations and experiences. Thus, drawing on the concept of emotional reflexivity as introduced by Burkitt (2012), we approached various emotions as indicative of the ways in which those young people engaged with their surroundings and made sense of their experiences. Emotions are *patterns of relationship between self and others and between self and world* (Burkitt, 2014, p. 2). Emotions are in that sense highly social and interactional phenomena through which we appropriate our lives and concrete social situations. By looking at emotions and the emotional language used in the stories narrated by young people, we could identify different types of social relations that were made relevant to the experience of secure care. Some relations were interrupted, some were newly established and others were prohibited. Interestingly, those relations included people both present at and absent from the institution. Gradually, we began exploring the institutional setting as relational, meaning that, instead of rigid and prescribed positions, we could observe the emergent patterns of social relations and forms of agency that changed from situation to situation. What remained intact in those different situations was the contested images of children underpinning various institutional practices. We found young people negotiating, opposing and transposing those images as they engaged with physically present and absent others. These three different ways of relating appear in the narrated stories with a varied intensity and to a varying degree. However,
rather than looking at those different ways of relating as individual properties, we focus on presenting the situational and relational context in which they emerge.

As follows from above, this article is based on the re-analysis of data collected for a purpose different than that of understanding institutional life as relational. Reuse of qualitative data may, instead of limiting, open new and creative ways of thinking about certain phenomena (Moore, 2007). Qualitative data analysis is never about seeking the truth or an accurate version of reality. To reuse qualitative data is both to recontextualize it to gain new insights and to critically reflect upon own assumptions. This, as Wilson (2014) argues, keeps our sociological imagination open.

Analysis

We begin this section by introducing the stories of the first encounter with secure care and the problematic features of secure care as institutional and relational practices.

Broken, Interrupted, Forbidden and Forced Relationships

The stories of first encounters with the institutional setting tended to be recalled by young people in great detail, and this made an important impact on the ways in which young people experienced secure care. The feelings of fear, confusion, if not terror permeated the ways in which young people described the moment of being locked up:

To be honest, it was horrible. […] you know, I wasn’t used to, I didn’t know anyone there, they were all strangers to me. I was going to sleep somewhere and I didn’t know where I was. I didn’t know what it was, I didn’t know anything. The only thing I knew was that I was locked up and then, what is this? (Aisha, second interview).

The sense of being taken aback, receiving no explanation or consolation prevails in their stories. The young people struggled to understand what was happening to them, where they were going and why. They communicated a sense of being displaced, taken from a familiar environment to a strange and far-away place that they could not understand. What is important here is the apparent lack of communication on the part of the social services and police, which exaggerated the sense of something horrible taking place. With no one to relate to, the meaning of the situation seemed to be very difficult to establish.

For the majority, this highly emotional tone did not diminish with time. On the contrary, 1 or 2 years after being placed in a locked unit, the same intensity of that first encounter was brought up by some young people:

If they had just listened and talked to us, I mean to both my parents and I, then they would have understood how bad it was and I wouldn’t have had to flip out the way I did. It would have saved so much time. (Frida, third interview)

The lack of incentives to establish any form of rapport or relationship appears to be the most disturbing aspect of the event. The memory of the first encounter is like an
open wound. The feelings of fear and anger arise as a response to an unnatural situation, in which young people are not only physically displaced but also put in a type of a social vacuum with no chance of establishing meaningful social relations. Not only could they not create new social relations, but they were also effectively prevented from maintaining old ones. With arguments of care, relations to parents and peers were restricted:

I think it was stupid to take your mobile and such stuff because it is a way to call you mum or dad when you feel bad and need to talk. Yeah, sure, you might contact people you shouldn’t, and so on. […] But then, you could have a phone on your own to call someone when you feel bad. Because it wasn’t good, you could only talk for ten minutes each day and what can you say in ten minutes? (Elina, second interview)

Well, the staff are very, they don’t think we should talk so much about our problems because it can affect others, well, it can make people say lots of stuff that isn’t true and a lot like that. And they said that if we don’t talk about our problems it is better for the group because it can only get back. (Frida, first interview)

Both the prohibition of talking about problems to each other without the presence of staff and the different limitations placed on contacts with family and friends are examples of how secure care impinges on the young people’s existing social relations and prevents them from establishing new ones.

One type of social relation at the institution that was not prohibited but rather encouraged was the relations to staff. From the staffs’ perspective, it is through these relations that change is supposed to take place (Franzén, 2015). However, to young people, that relationship is not entirely unproblematic. That relationship is both forced and needed to survive the institutional life. From a relational point of view, the emergent situation becomes very difficult to understand if not accept:

The ending was good though. The funniest thing was what my contact person said to me ‘Now, we never want to see you again!’.[laughs] No, I can understand that. But the start. How you should handle that. You just don’t do it like that. (Elina, second interview)

Elina’s story is an account of complicated social relations existing between the staff and young people. When Elina recollects what her contact person, her personal contact in the staff group, said to her when she was leaving the unit, she laughs. The contact person’s joke about how he never wanted to see her again is a frequent remark often directed to the youths when they are discharged. It is supposed to be an expression of care—the staff hope that everything will go well for the young people, so they do not end up in secure care again. However, this also sends a message that neither the staff nor the place is seen as a resource in the young persons’ evolving lives and social relations after placement. Instead, the institution and institutional relations are portrayed as bad, as something to be avoided.

The young peoples’ narratives of their first encounter with secure care are stories of broken, interrupted, forbidden and forced relations. It is through those various social relations that the two contested images of children: a child in danger and a dangerous child are materialized in everyday institutional life. It is against this backdrop that the practices of negating, opposing and transposing emerge.
Negotiating the Images of the Child in Danger and the Dangerous Child

In some stories, narrated mainly by girls, the experience of secure care emerges as a moral lesson thanks to which young people get to know themselves better and realize a need for a personal change. However, that type of understanding is preceded by periods of intensive work during which the image of the dangerous child must be confronted:

Frida: We came to this place because so many bad things had happened. But, just because all the bad things that have happened, it doesn’t have to mean that the person is responsible for all the bad things. […]

Sofia: They have focused on you?

Frida: Yes, well, all the time it is, ‘Now you did this’, ‘Why did you do that?’ It’s you, you, you all the time. […] Well, there are so many other things can play a part in you getting a placement here. But instead, ‘No, it’s you that are wrong. It’s you, you, you’. (Frida, first interview)

Frida’s reflections upon the placement are coloured by her negotiations with the image of the dangerous child. While she reacts strongly against being seen only like that, she also recognizes that the situation is not black and white, and there is more complexity to it. In her narration, self-awareness and self-criticism are apparent, showing at the same time her difficult relations with the staff who she was forced to confront. The staff are portrayed by her as a distant, yet very present, other that persistently wants to ingrain the sense of guilt and blame in Frida. Frida’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ when referring to other young people can be indicative of a sense of belonging and supportive relations that might have counterbalanced the difficult relations with staff.

While Frida learns that her situation is far from easy, and there is no single person to be blamed for anything, Nicole exemplifies a different type of negotiation that involves the acceptance of being a dangerous child:

Nicole: Well, a lot has happened to me. I’m totally changed in here. I’ve found many negative things about drugs. I mean, before I didn’t eat anything, I fucked up school, my health and many people around me. I could take a whole day just to find drugs. I’ve fucked up so much for myself and for people around me.

Sofia: Do you realise that now? How did you do that?

Nicole: I’ve been reading my files, talking to my parents and, well you think a lot when you’re in here, especially when you’re locked up as we are. I’ve gone through all my life with the psychologist so, it’s a lot. […]

Sofia: So, in other words, this time has been, what would you say?

Nicole: It’s been educative, yes, that’s what I think. (Nicole, first interview)

Nicole’s story illustrates her rather as an interactant than a self-governed actor (Burkitt, 2016). What comes out is that other adults, such as parents, psychologists and social service staff (the authors of Nicole’s files), have a prominent role in
the process of transformation. Nicole learns to accept being dangerous to herself and to others, and her goal is now to change. Her story is the story of ‘I’, who although surrounded by others, assumes full responsibility for past actions and current changes.

Faced with the reality of restricted contact with the outside world and prescribed ways of relating to the staff, the youths spend a lot of time on their own. Every day is scheduled with ‘a quiet hour’ that the youths spend alone in their rooms. During weekends, when their school and leisure activities are less intensive, they have even more time on their own or with the other peers. This time is seen as something new and as something that provides a space for thinking about their life before and after the placement. That thinking is often related to moral issues and, with this, the notions of the child in danger and the dangerous child:

But when you come to this place you almost have to think about it because you have so much time, so you cannot avoid it. So, you do think about what was my fault and what wasn’t my fault. (Karolina, first interview)

A dialogue with oneself is not necessarily something that young people look forward to; just the opposite, as Karolina says, it is something that is best avoided. The time on their own becomes, in many instances, a time for confronting the images and voices of the staff.

The stories of negotiation reveal the processes whereby the young girls move along the continuum, spanning from being a child in danger to recognizing oneself as a dangerous child. Although that movement is presented as a process of individual change, the young people stand out as interactants, and their actions are evidently accomplished with other people, like parents and staff.

**Opposing the Image of the Dangerous Child**

In contrast to the negotiations presented earlier, many young people expressed their dissatisfaction with the placement and its rationale. They did not see the placement as needed, and they showed no understanding of the necessity of being locked up. Instead, they clearly resisted any attempts at being perceived as dangerous:

Aisha: Of course, it [being locked up] is not the last option, I cannot understand that it’s possible to do like this, you do feel all dangerous you know, but shit, I’m just an ordinary person as you are, idiot.

Sofia: But they lock you in?

Aisha: Yes, ‘she is like a danger to herself and society’. ‘She can, she can’, well, it’s like, when you’re sitting and reading that, you think, oh my God. (Aisha, second interview)

Young people’s use of alcohol and drugs, alongside criminality, is a common example of ‘dangerous behaviour’ and, in Sweden, one of the named criteria for compulsory care. Måns, one of the boys who rejected the image of a dangerous child, knew that it was because of his drug use that he was placed in the locked unit.
However, he was also explicit that he did not intend to change in the way he was requested:

Måns: Well, they’ve said that I will stay at a locked unit until I’ve got a, until my attitude to drugs changes. When they can see that I have changed, then, hopefully it will be an open unit.

Sofia: So, you know that you will change your attitude?

Måns: Yes.

Sofia: Okay.

Måns: There will need to be great acting from me. (Måns, first interview)

Måns’ bold attitude towards his drug use and to the requested change from him is an example of how the youths related to being a dangerous child. They did not share the professionals’ assessment of them and their behaviour as dangerous. Another young person who also displayed resistance to the way she thought that the staff wanted her to act and behave was Lucia. She claimed she should not be in secure care, and that she did not need any treatment. She was clear about being punished for mistakes and wrongdoings of the social authorities. The sense of unfairness that she carried meant that she explicitly did not comply with the formal or informal rules of the institution:

Lucia: So, if you speak up, then you’re a troublemaker, ‘she couldn’t manage so she needs to stay’. But, if you sit quietly, like a package, all quiet, then they are happy and can move you to another unit, because you have shut up.

Sofia: So, how did you handle that then?

Lucia: Not for a day! I came and started directly to interfere [laugh]. (Lucia, second interview)

Both Lucia and Måns could recognize the implicit rules that would determine whether they could leave the unit but still refused to conform.

The young persons’ stories that reject the image of the dangerous child demonstrate a great sense of loneliness. Lucia and Måns talk about how they, without support from others, managed and offered resistance to the staff’s understanding of them as dangerous is presented as a work on their own. The loneliness was also apparent in their stories of how they came to the unit. Most of them were in a residential setting before the placement in secure care. They arrived either with their social workers or under police escort. Despite those social contexts, the stories told by the youths were not stories of ‘us’, they were the stories of ‘I’ who is left on her/his own:

And then I left [residential setting], acute in the middle of the night to [secure care A], the emergency unit at that place. Then I was there for, I was there and then I left to [secure care B]. (Benjamin, first interview)

Benjamin’s account brings forward the perspective of a lone journey. That apparent loneliness can be seen as a strategy to preserve the sense of self in the situation of displacement and detachment from a familiar setting. Loneliness accompanying
young people in secure care is presented here not as forced, but rather as chosen. As Follesø (2015) found, that emphasis on singular agency and downplaying of the social situation reflects how being seen as dangerous and risky is related to the individual youth’s actions.

In Sweden, restrictive measures can only be used in secure care and when necessary to carry out the care for the young persons. When the youths talk about these restrictive measures, they describe them as the opposite to care. Benjamin, comparing the secure care with other places he had been to, describes the differences in the following way:

Benjamin: They use punishments, if you don’t listen then you are punished. Sometimes it’s not hundred percent.

Sofia: What do you mean, hundred percent?

Benjamin: That you’re not feeling well. You cannot manage to go to school. Then they withdraw your granted leave. Smack, smack, that’s it. […] it’s no help, there is no help in it. […] It’s hard to explain, you have to be there to understand. You cannot believe there are such places. I thought that this would be okay, I mean, it’s care. But I was wrong. […] It’s not care. It’s just hell. They made a hell for me. (Benjamin, second interview)

By the time of the interview, Benjamin had experienced secure care for more than 1 year at three different places. His verdict is bitter and harsh—this is not care, this is hell. When Benjamin narrates his experience of secure care, he uses ‘they’ to refer to the staff members. In his story, how ‘they’, the staff members, act and choose to use the restrictive measures constitutes his experience. The apparent anger and frustration as expressed by Benjamin are born out of contact with the staff who seem indifferent and ignorant of his side of the story.

Accordingly, the youths present themselves in the interviews as opposing the figure of the dangerous child and as taking an ‘intransient line’ (e.g., Goffman, 1961/1991). Their expressed agency is in a sense a replica of the total institution and the stereotypes that inmates and staff produce of each other. However, it can also be a way to make meaning of separated social worlds with conflicting social relations. To these youths, their experience is rather an individual social process of resisting change.

Transposing the Images of the Child in Danger and the Dangerous Child

In some of the narratives, there is an ambivalent experience of secure care. These youths show great difficulty in making a coherent and understandable life story around their experiences. This difficulty lies in merging conflicting experiences of care and control at the unit with the experiences afterwards. As such, the way they relate can be understood as a reflection of secure care as a place for those who need both care and control. This is apparent when young people talk about rules and routines that were motivated as care to them. The placement itself is an example of this—it is argued to be in the best interest of the child, but to the youths, this is
not obvious when it is accompanied by experiences of being displaced and of incarceration. Another example is the prohibition on young people talking to each other without staff being present, and restrictions placed on the contacts with family and friends living outside the institution. As mentioned earlier, young people see those rules as ‘stupid’. Interestingly, the rules motivate them to seek contact with other people placed in the institution. The restrictive rules and their group-solidifying character can be seen in Frida’s elaboration on the earlier mentioned prohibition regarding talking to each other (see page 7 this article). She continues:

But we decided and started to talk more and more about what really happened and why we had come here and all of it. […] the staff are there like all the time, but there are moments when they’re not and we can talk properly. Also, the walls are thin and it’s really easy to talk through them. So, sometimes in the evenings, we talk, especially when someone has had a quarrel with their parents or isn’t feeling well. (Frida, first interview)

The oppressive rules in secure care actually bring young people together. The excerpt shows how the sense of agency emerges against the staff’s actions and alongside the peers’ experiences. When expressing their ambivalence, the young people demonstrate that their experience was not entirely negative, and that, for example, they could build new social relations, and those relations helped them to get through difficulties. In a similar vein, Frida talks about the placement as something that made her stronger:

Frida: Well, it has been a lot, like, it’s clear that there will be very hard situations in life and that it will be really hard. But I did get through this and I was also pretty young then, I was only 13-14 years old. So, like, I have done it. Now, I can handle anything.

Sofia: […]And do you think about what made you come to [the institution], how you felt, or do you also think that it was hard to be at the institution?

Frida: The hardest thing was to be at that place. I mean, to be locked up and feeling so bad. That wasn’t good. No, it really wasn’t. (Frida, third interview)

Interestingly, it was not the problematic situation or how bad Frida felt when she was placed that made her stronger. The tough part was the placement, her stay in secure care, which was a place where she was supposed to be protected. Considering the focus of this article, how the youths relate to the contradictory figures of being seen as in danger or dangerous, the placement itself is understood as dangerous by Frida and others. With its contradictory mission to provide care and control, secure care brings disorder rather than order into the youth’s experiences. The contradictory signals that secure care send to young people are revealed by Elina:

No. Well, I don’t want to go there again. I would consider going for a visit; to remind myself about how it was, and why I’m here today. Because after the things that have happened, I’ve been feeling bad again and not wanting to live anymore again, and things like that have arrived again. Therefore, I would like to see how it was because it feels unreal being there when you’re out and have got used to this again. Totally unreal. It was like when you got away from there, then it was unreal not being there anymore. (Elina, second interview)
In this story, Elina emphasizes the difficulty of uniting the experience of secure care with life afterwards. On the one hand, she cannot fully grasp the whole experience; on the other, she actively uses memories of it to help herself stay on track. Aisha expresses similar difficulties when, in the third interview, she claims that it was a *horrible time but also good, it was fun to live there, but still super annoying to be there.* Just before she presented these conflicting and contradictory conclusions, the dialogue below between her and the interviewer took place. In this, Aisha talks about her continued relations to two staff members:

Aisha: I call them sometimes.
Sofia: You do?!
Aisha: Yes, I’ve called many times.
Sofia: May I ask, who are you calling?
Aisha: Mikael and Sven. Shit, I was going to call Sven today.
Sofia: Hmf. Why then?
Aisha: ’cause I want to talk to him, I’ve missed him. (Aisha, third interview)

The surprise seen in the interviewer’s reaction results from earlier interviews with Aisha, during which an opposing picture of relations with staff was painted. Yet Aisha’s relations to Mikael and Sven show how the secure care unit remains present in the young peoples’ lives after placement. The story is the story of ‘I’, and to Aisha these social relations are chosen and of importance. At the same time, she expresses her ambivalence towards secure care, saying it was a *horrible time but also good.*

The young people seem to transpose the images of *child in danger* and *dangerous child* into their lives after placement as incompatible experiences. In this way, they move beyond those images and, instead, consider their experiences as comprising both helpful situations and something that brought chaos and disorder into their lives.

**Discussion**

The aim of this article was twofold. First, we wanted to place the young people’s experience of the secure care placement at the forefront. To this end, we have applied relational sociology. By doing that, we find the institutional practice to be a highly relational practice that affects the ways in which young people relate to secure care. One powerful example of this is that a placement in secure care is not only about physical constraints, it is also about relational constraints. Our analysis indicates that all outside-institution relations to family and friends and inside-institution relations to peers are handled as potentially negative and are, therefore, restricted. From the perspective of relations as means to understand ourselves, makes sense of social situations and emerge as agents, this way to manage youths’ social relations is highly problematic. The constraints placed on youths’ relations with others entail impoverished resources for emerging as human actors and exercising the social aspect of life. From a relational point of view, the practice of restricting young
people’s relations is a practice that limits their possibility to enact their humanness. If, as Donati (2011) emphasizes, the beginning of all are relations, then, with no relations, there is nothing that can emerge.

The recurrent theme appearing in the stories narrated by the young people is their need to deal with the imposed perception of them as being dangerous, no matter whether they find it valid or not. We were able to identify three different ways of relating to ‘their dangerousness’. Negotiating practices suggest that dangerousness becomes a part of the young peoples’ way to look at themselves; in a process of change, they integrate the figure of the dangerous child into their own self-image. This is in stark contrast to youths opposing the figure of the dangerous child who show no intention to change. Another difference between these two of relating is how the youths present their stories. The opposing practices are dominated by stories of ‘I’. With broken and forbidden relations to others, except staff members, the youths express feelings of being left on their own. Negotiating practices seem to be much more about the stories of ‘we’ and ‘you’, indicating that the young people find support and fellowship in each other. The third identified practices of transposing could be seen as a form of counter-narrative that illustrated the possibility of moving beyond the duality of dominant images of danger. The young persons transposing the contested images mainly narrate stories of a reflective ‘I’. That ‘I’ is not alone, but the ambiguity of the placement and the difficulty of merging the conflicting aspects of control and care make that ‘I’ stand out and cause it to be positioned as if above other relations.

Considering the relational nature of the placement, we were also struck by the emotional aspect of stories of the first encounter with secure care. Those stories were loaded with strong and powerful emotions that did not seem to fade away with the passing of time. Expressions of horror, even 2 years after placement, demonstrate the difficulty of making sense of the drastic measures employed by the institutions. Those emotions also testify to the chaos that the placement brings to the young peoples’ sense of meaning and professionals’ relational failure in providing the young people with a sense of safety and protection.

The analysis presented in this study indicate on the gendered ways of making sense of placement: boys would more often engage in opposing practices, while girls in the practices of negation and transposition. This pattern merits, however, more thorough investigation that goes beyond the scope of this article.

The second aim of our article was to critique taken-for-granted assumptions regarding secure care. To the young people, the experience of control and restrictions overrode the elements of care. Moreover, none of the young people in this study took the position of a dangerous child that the institution is designed for. Instead, their narratives are struggles to relate to the two contradictory figures of a dangerous child and a child in danger. In this, they are forced to look at themselves and negotiate their own self-image. For some, this was perceived as very demanding but also helpful; for others, it was a source of an ongoing conflict. Our analysis indicates that the dangerous child figure that dominates the institutional design also dominates the relational practice of the institution. This is most apparent in the institutional practice that applies to a group but makes the individual a key focus. The practice prevents relations with others as if those young people could exist outside relational bonds. Young people are, by force, placed in a group environment in which group processes are discouraged. The perspective of relations as risky also seems to hold
for secure care; as such, neither staff nor youths regard institutional relations as a resource in the young peoples’ evolving lives. Above all else, our analysis reveals the importance of social relations and being connected to others for the young peoples’ sense of self and understanding of the situation. In their stories, the young people tell us that it is through relations to peers and to staff members that they get comfort, a sense of meaning and care. In these stories, relations to family and friends are rather absent. This implies that we do not know what happens to those relations when they are interrupted or broken by placement in secure care. How family relations are reconstructed and, possibly, brought to life again is yet to be explored.

This study emphasizes that the concept of secure care has very little bearing on the ways in which young people make sense of their institutional placement. According to young people, secure care is neither perceived as secure nor as care—the care element of the placements rather emerges as very ambiguous and contested. This is demonstrated in the young people’s struggles with making sense of the situation and how they incorporate secure placement experiences into their own life stories. The institutional practice that breaks, interrupts, forbids and forces relations denies the young people relations that can help to establish a sense of care and comfort. This puts in question the foundation of such institutions—placing young people in a peer group, separated from other relations, with the purpose of reintegrating them into society.

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**Authors’ Bio-sketch**

**Sofia Enell** has a PhD in Social Work and is senior lecturer at the Department of Social work at Linnaeus University. Her research concerns child welfare with a particular interest in institutional and assessment practices. Currently, Enell and Wilińska are working on a research project, funded by FORTE (Swedish Research Council for Health, Working life and Welfare). In the project, family relations and family practices of young adults with experience of secure care placements and of their family members are explored.
Monika Wilińska is an associate professor of Social and Welfare Studies at Jönköping University, Sweden. Her research focuses on the intersectional approaches to the processes and practices of inequality (re)production within the context of welfare systems. In the most recent work, she has been studying knowledge practices in research and institutional settings from the perspective of emotions. Currently, Monika and Sofia work together on a project, investigating family practices and relations of young adults with experiences of secure unit placements.