The Internal Conversations and Social Networks of Care Leavers at University

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**<u>Acknowledgements</u>**

Well I finally got there! Thanks first and fore most to the students who kindly agreed to meet with me.

Thanks also to Dr Peter Appleton and Dr Danny Taggart for your patience and expertise. To my friends and family, I hope you still remember me?

I have learnt so much about myself in preparing and writing this thesis and hope that the old adage 'what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger', is right this time.

# CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT**

Individuals who have been in care are often thought of as a homogenous group who, because of past and ongoing contextual adversities, have outcomes reflecting hardship in various domains. Aggregated outcomes may conceal the presence of individuals within this group who develop life projects and are able to put plans into action. Some manage to succeed educationally and take up places on university course. This research seeks to explore the reflexivity, internal conversations and social networks of young people who had been in care but had managed to become students at university. Five young people were interviewed using Archer's (2003, 2007) semi-structured internal conversation interview and then using Hartman's (1978) ecogram to graphically represent their social network. Data was analysed using Robinson and Smith's (2010) composite analysis, which incorporates elements of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (2015) and the Interactive Model (Miles and Huberman (1995). The young people's accounts showed that they were proudly independent, demonstrating considerable personal agency, but were well connected and able to access emotional and practical support in their social networks. They felt different to others and managed their difficult histories in a variety of ways. The results are considered in relationship to Archer's theory and theories of resilience.

## **CHAPTER 1 - Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction: Young people who have been 'in care' who are now in higher education**

This thesis begins with the common observation that, despite adversity, some young people who have been in care display incredible resilience, managing to be successful in education so that they are able to attend university (Hines, Merdinger and Wyatt, 2012).

After defining the meaning of 'in care', this introduction describes outcomes for children in care and care leavers. This is followed by an outline of psychosocial factors proposed as affecting the differential outcomes between those with experience of being in care and the general population. The concept of resilience is discussed, as it has been offered as a pan-theoretical means of understanding how some care leavers cope unusually well. The following sections move from: first, describing a model of individual agency in context (Archer); then, discussing methods and findings in social network research; and finally, a review of the literature on care leavers in higher education. Conclusions are drawn and research questions following the findings stated.

## **1.2 What is meant by 'in care'?**

The widely used term 'in care' refers colloquially to those children looked after by their Local Authority (LA), the level of government with responsibility for accommodating children in cases where they cannot remain living with parents. The Children Act 1989 refers to these children in law as 'looked-after children'.

Looked-after children are accommodated by the LA following a court order or voluntarily.

A child is considered looked-after if he or she is provided with accommodation under S.20 and 21 in Part IV of the Children Act 1989. These parts of the Act set out the broad circumstances under which a child might be looked-after, including being lost and incarcerated, as well as the more common situation where it is deemed the child is at risk of significant harm and this harm is related to parenting.

In such cases, responsibility for parenting may be shared between birth parents and the LA or, under the terms of a residence order or special guardianship order, given to foster carers. The vast majority of, though not all, looked-after children are placed away from their birth parents, with 74% of these children living with foster carers (DfE, 2016).

**1.3 The impact of being 'in care'**

International research spanning several decades has pointed to poorer outcomes across multiple domains for adults with experience of being 'looked-after' (Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Dill, Flynn, Hollingshead, & Fernandes, 2012; Jackson, 2013). Over the course of their lives these adults are more likely to face unemployment, homelessness and incarceration than adults who were not taken into care (Centre for Social Justice, 2015).

1.3.1 Methodological approaches

When attempting to assess the impact of being 'looked after', a number of fundamental methodological problems, typical of all phenomena not amenable to experimental manipulation, present themselves.

One body of research looking at care leaver outcomes takes the approach of comparing this population with the general population. As is shown below (1.3.2), comparisons with the general population have consistently yielded results showing that care leavers as a group fare considerably worse on all outcomes agreed to indicate their being 'socially excluded' (Stein, 2006). Given what is known about the inadequacy of ongoing support for care leavers, this finding has important public policy implications. However, general population comparison studies suffer the methodological limitation of failing to take into account the likelihood that care leavers may have many other characteristics and experiences shared with other groups which put them at risk of poorer outcomes, such as neighbourhood unemployment or domestic violence. In order to attenuate the involvement of confounding variables, other researchers have attempted to match the care leaver population with other groups similar on some relevant variable(s).

Berzin (2010) argues that propensity scoring may provide a more sophisticated and potentially more valid approach than either of the aforementioned study designs. Propensity scoring is described as a way of measuring treatment effect (here the effect of being in care), where randomisation to groups would be unethical, by creating a comparison between foster youth and those who were not in care but, based on multiple covariates, statistically likely to have been. As

expected, Berzin (2010) found that this method of analysis produced a closer matched set of comparison youth than other designs. Her finding that the groups' education, employment and social outcomes were similar casts some doubt on the assumption that being in care has independent importance in determining outcomes.

1.3.2 Outcomes by domain

Following is a summary of the extant literature covering the impact of being in care measured by outcomes in the following domains: mental health, housing, work, young parenthood, substance misuse, criminal behaviour and academic achievement. Where matched and propensity matched studies were available these were included and no priority was given to either quantitative or qualitative studies.

1.3.2.1 Mental Health

Epidemiological studies have estimated that the prevalence of mental health difficulties amongst children in care (Meltzer, Lader, Corbin, Goodman, & Ford, 2004) and care leavers (Southerland, Casaneuva, & Ringeisen, 2009) is at least twice as great as in the general population. Tarren-Sweeney and Vetere (2014) compared rates of mental health 'disorder' among looked after children with 'non-disadvantaged' and 'disadvantaged' children, finding rates over five and three times higher than in respective groups. The 'disadvantaged' group were comprised of children at relative economic disadvantage, known to be a correlate of mental health difficulty (Rogers & Pilgrim, 2002), but were not matched on any other known correlates. When matched on other characteristics, care leavers,

while more vulnerable, may not be uniquely vulnerable to mental health difficulties (Buehler, et al., 2000).

Aside from more widely contested issues around categorising mental health (Kutchens & Kirk, 2001; Rapley, Moncrieff, & Dillon, 2011), additional challenges have been identified regarding the categorization of psychopathology in children in care. The complexities of pre-natal health, early interpersonal trauma and disrupted attachments impact upon development in ways which are difficult to categorise (DeJong, 2010).

### 1.3.2.2 Housing

As is widely reported, care leavers face the challenge of making the transition into adult roles at an arbitrary point in their development without the support usually afforded to their peers. Most care leavers, unlike their peers, move to independent living in their late-teenage years (Stein, 2006). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, care leavers are at increased risk of homelessness in the period after care (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Dixon & Stein, 2005; Mendes, Baidawi, & Snow, 2014).

Despite reporting statistically insignificant on most 'indicators of adjustment' between care leavers and a matched group (where the variables were basic demographics, parental education and family stability), Buehler et al. (2000) did find that care leavers were more likely to live in a less-desirable housing-type. However, recent care leavers in another matched study (Simon, 2008) were found to be less likely to experience crises transitions and homelessness in comparison

with other young people described as 'in difficulty', identifying better preparation and support as helpful factors. Wade and Dixon (2006) also found housing outcomes for recent care leavers, assessed in terms of suitability and satisfaction, were broadly positive. However, mental health difficulties are reported as the factor most closely associated with poor housing situations. This is of course likely to be a reciprocal relationship, with mental health affecting the ability of young people to find and manage housing whilst quality of housing and housing-related support is a potential stressor impacting upon mental health.

An Australian qualitative study by Johnson and Mendes (2014) mapped short- and medium-term housing outcomes onto Stein's typology (moving on etc., discussed later) and highlighted the important role of structural factors (e.g. professional support) and 'positive focussed' agency on the part of care leavers, in determining housing outcomes. They found a difference between the outcomes of young people who had 'smooth' and 'volatile' transitions out of care, with the latter group likely to leave care earlier and subsequently find themselves in acute housing difficulty.

### 1.3.2.3 Work

2016 data (DfE, 2016) shows that out of 26,340 care leavers between the ages of 19 and 21, 40% were classed as 'NEET' (not in employment, education or training). This compares with 14% of all people that age. Furthermore, Dixon (2008a) shows that even where care leavers have found work or are on training schemes, contracts tend to be casual or temporary and training often short-term. The evidence consistently shows that care leavers fare worse in employment,

both in terms of finding work (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007; Dixon, 2008b; Mendes, 2009) and quality and quantity of employment (Courtney et al., 2007; Pecora et al., 2006). Matched studies, however, paint a more varied picture of the employment outcomes of care leavers: Blome's (1997) matched study did find significantly worse outcomes in employment, although this finding was not replicated in later studies employing a similar methodology (Berzin, 2010; Buehler et al., 2000).

Wade & Dixon (2006) found that employment outcomes are a greater cause for concern compared with housing and other outcomes and that this is an area in which those care leavers at greatest risk of difficulty, inadequately equipped to cope with the challenges of 'youth labour markets', are likely to have even greater difficulty.

### 1.3.2.4 Young parenthood

Becoming a parent at an earlier age is considered in most western societies to be a negative outcome, associated with economic and social disadvantage (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). There is evidence of a relationship between early pregnancy and school absence, lower educational achievement and poverty (Crawford, Cribb, & Kelly, 2013). Recent estimates suggest that 22% of female care leavers became teenage parents (Morse, 2015) and that rates of pregnancy amongst this group are significantly higher than their peers (Fallon & Broadhurst, 2015) although epidemiological studies are absent from the literature.

Qualitative studies have differed in their description of the views of care leavers who have become young parents and, while there exists some consensus about the motivations for becoming a parent, the lived reality of early parenthood may differ substantially from the ideal (Maxwell, Proctor, & Hammond, 2011). The decision to have a child or not to abort an unexpected pregnancy often results from the wish to create a loving and permanent relationship (Love, McIntosh, Rosst, & Tertzakian, 2005) and to break transgenerational cycles of problematic parenting (Maxwell et al., 2011). For some care leavers (and children in care), having a child brought a sense of hope for the future and purpose to their lives (Haight, Finet, Bamba & Helton, 2009). They reported feeling loved and needed (Pryce & Samuels, 2010) as well as respected by others as they took on the identity and status of parents (Rolfe, 2008).

Parenthood for care leavers brings with it the ordinary challenges of being a parent but is compounded by a likely lack of social support (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006) and the emotional legacy of difficult parent/child relations. Maxwell et al. (2011) describe how mothers in their IPA study identified with their child but also felt taken over by it and highly sensitive to rejection by the child as he or she gained greater independence. In another study, the full-time job of parenting impinged upon the autonomy of some parents and they described emotional pain resulting from a loss of previously valued identities (Pryce & Samuels, 2010). A further difficulty described came from feeling judged and stereotyped by professionals and wider society as a result of their status as young care leaver parents (Connolly, Heifetz & Bohr, 2012). Connolly, Heifetz and

Bohr (2012) found that care leavers are more likely to become young parents but that their hopes for and beliefs about parenthood may not be realised.

### 1.3.2.5 Substance misuse

Substance misuse among care leavers is higher than in the general population (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Morgan-Trimmer, Spooner, & Audrey, 2015; Pecora et al., 2006). The higher prevalence of substance misuse is likely due to a number of overlapping factors. Firstly, care leavers are more likely to have biological parents with substance abuse problems (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007). Young people in care may be met with more porous boundaries mitigating against drug misuse, given the absence of a positive health culture (Ridley & McClusky, 2003), greater general behavioural problems (Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, Vanschoonlandt, Robberechts, & Stroobants, 2013) and the difficulty carers may have providing secure yet boundaried care (Stovall-McClough, & Dozier, 2004).

Young people in care and those leaving care are more likely to struggle with mental health difficulties and may use substances to manage difficult affective states. Attempts to 'self-medicate' may over time develop into addictions to substances and additional mental health problems (Quello, Brady, & Sonne, 2005).

### 1.3.2.6 Criminal behaviour

There is increasing evidence of links between childhood maltreatment and the onset of later challenging behaviour (Cashmore, 2012). It is therefore

unsurprising that, although the caveat that the majority of care leavers do not commit offences holds true, they remain disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system (Fitzpatrick & Williams, 2016). Care leavers who commit criminal offenses are likely to share some social characteristics of other 'disadvantaged' youth, such as living in more deprived communities at various stages of life, early victimisation and a relative absence of opportunities to acquire wealth and status through alternative, legal means (McAra & McVie, 2016).

There is also evidence that care leavers, as well as children currently in care, may be uniquely at risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system as a result of institutional and structural factors. There may be a lack of support to prevent care leavers adopting criminal lifestyles and even with accessing quality legal advice (Cusick, Courtney, Haylicek, & Hess, 2011). An emphasis on risk management rather than needs-based support may perpetuate cycles of criminal behaviour (Fitzpatrick & Williams, 2016) and a lower threshold for acceptable behaviour may see relatively minor offenses criminalised (Shaw, 2016).

### 1.3.2.7 Academic achievement

As in other outcome domains, research has documented poorer outcomes for children currently looked after and care leavers (Goddard, 2000). Throughout their academic careers, children in care do not achieve at the same level as their peers. The percentage of children achieving the 'key measure' of 5 or more GCSEs or equivalent is 18% versus 64% for looked after and non-looked after children respectively (DfE, 2015).

The gap in achievement between looked after children and their peers steadily widens as they grow older, with the high frequency, suddenness and ill-timing of school and placement moves sometimes argued to be primary factors preventing looked after children from fulfilling their potential (O'Sullivan & Westerman, 2007). However, Berridge (2012) cautions that the problem with state care is not that it has a negative impact upon children's achievement, rather that it does not adequately compensate children for negative pre-care education, in the broadest sense of that term. It is argued therefore that 'low achievement' is a more suitable description than the routinely used 'underachievement' (Berridge, 2012). More recent research (Sebba et al., 2015) has shown that children in care actually outperform 'children in need' (deemed under the provisions of the Children Act 1989 as requiring the support of local authority services) over the course of their academic career. This might suggest a positive effect of being in care versus remaining at home for some children. The importance of early school performance was highlighted by Berlin, Vinnerljung & Hjern (2011) who found that this predicted psychosocial problems in later life more accurately than other relevant variables.

### 1.3.3 Conclusions about care leavers' outcomes

The outcomes in a range of important domains are worse for those currently in care and care leavers. Research has shown that they are more likely to suffer from mental health problems than their peers, although not when matched with a similar group. Their housing outcomes are also worse but again similar to other deprived young people. Substance misuse and criminality (at least as officially

measured) is higher amongst care leavers. The domain of employment has been highlighted as being of particular concern. The literature warns against using early parenthood as a proxy for poor outcomes but does show that care leavers are more likely to become parents at an earlier age. In education, the focus of the present thesis, school performance falls below the level of the general population but may actually be better than other deprived children. Nevertheless, as will be shown later, accessing higher education is a relative rarity amongst care leavers.

Overall then, when aggregated together, the outcomes for children in care and care leavers is significantly poorer than for the general population, although this difference is less evident when groups are matched by some measure of deprivation.

## 1.4 Psychosocial factors proposed as important

The following section describes psychosocial factors proposed as important across some or all of the domains described above. For clarity these are separated into those prior-, during- and after-care factors thought to affect functioning and well-being later in life.

### 1.4.1 Influences prior

Jones et al.'s (2011) review of factors and interventions associated with outcomes for looked-after children identified behavioural problems and age at first placement as key factors occurring prior to or at the very start of a child's entry to LA care.

The age at which children are first taken into care is associated with future outcomes (Jones et al., 2011; Rahilly & Hendry, 2014) and children entering care at a younger age tend to be less likely to display later behavioural problems or suffer the profound disruption of placement breakdown (Oosterman, Schuengel, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). By entering care at an earlier age, children may have less difficulty adapting to their new environment and their carers may find it easier to manage the behaviour of younger children (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). The nature of this relationship is complex, however, and given the expansive literature detailing the dose-response impact of enduring trauma (Kira, Fawzi, & Fawzi, 2013; Neuner, Schauer, Karunakara, Klaschik, Robert, & Elbert, 2004; Spauwen, Krabbendam, Lieb, Wittchen, & Van Os, 2006; Steel, Chey, Silove, Marnane, Bryant, & Van Ommeren, 2009) it is likely that other variables have a partial causal impact upon *both* predictor and outcome variables.

Briefly, attachment theory predicts that in cases where early parenting is not characterised by care and responsiveness, the child will develop internal working models of others as unable or unwilling to meet their needs, themselves as unworthy of this support and ineffective in eliciting care (Bowlby, 1969). These stable mental representations, a set of explicit and implicit memories, then guide future behaviour and affect future relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). In families where children are exposed to abuse or neglect, the insurmountable difficultly they face finding safety in the care of someone unsafe can cause attachment trauma (Mosquera, Gonzalez, & Leeds, 2014) and the development of what may be termed a 'disorganised' attachment (Main & Soloman, 1986) or, alternatively, compulsive and obsessive strategies for self-

and relationship-protection (Crittenden, 2005). It should be noted though that these conditions are not considered the sole cause of attachment difficulties (Hesse & Main, 2000).

More recent developments in attachment theory (Fonagy, 2010; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002) have drawn further on psychodynamic theory and neuropsychology. It is argued that the often severe emotional difficulties of people whose attachment style can be categorised as 'disorganised' are primarily problems in affect regulation, caused by failures to 'mentalise' accurately the mental states of oneself and others (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist & Target, 2002; Schore & Schore, 2007).

For children entering care, the impact of insufficiently good parenting is at least twofold: that his or her behaviour may be adapted to this different, often hostile environment making relationships with subsequent carers more difficult; and that early attachment will affect the mental health of children at entry to care (Sempik, Ward & Darker, 2008).

### 1.4.2 Influences during

It has been suggested that the repeated occurrence of consistent and containing 'relationship experiences' may mitigate for early attachment difficulties and disruption to attachment caused by care proceedings (West, Spreng, Rose & Adam, 1999). An experience of a different kind of care may increase the 'felt security' of children and adolescents as their perception of the availability of their carers adapts to their present reality (Schofield, 2002; Schofield & Beek,

2005). For this to be possible, it is argued, carers must be able to reflect on their own mental states and those of the child and adapt their style of parenting accordingly (Schofield & Beek, 2009): in other words to 'mentalise' with them, in order to provide a secure base which may previously have been missing.

An additional element to Schofield's (2002) psychosocial model of care is the 'goodness of fit' between carer and child. Where levels of expressed emotion and common behaviours were relatively similar, Schofield (2005) found that mentalising was a less challenging achievement. A related finding elsewhere is that the quality of the placement, as measured by levels of carer training and assessment, is perhaps unsurprisingly associated with better outcomes (Walker, 2008).

The environment in which they live and quality of support, care and supervision offered differs widely depending on the type of placement provided to children (i.e. foster care, children's homes, 'therapeutic' placements or kinship placements). A consistent finding is that children placed in children's homes, which is usually considered a placement of last resort (Barth, 2002), fare worse than those in foster care in multiple domains (Overcamp-Martini & Nutton, 2009).

Findings on the effect of placement type are less clear though when group differences upon entry is factored in. Two propensity score studies, where children were matched according to their probability of being assigned to that group given background covariates, found being placed in children's home did

not have a deleterious effect on behavioural outcomes (James, Roesch, & Zhang, 2012) and, where the children's home was 'specialised', meant that children were more likely to be favourably discharged, more likely to return home, and less likely to experience subsequent placement failure in the first six months after discharge (Lee and Thompson, 2008). These findings suggest that the poorer outcomes experienced by young people in children's homes might be due to baseline differences and a consequence of having more problems before being placed there. However, it remains the case that regardless of the unique effect of children's homes themselves, children placed there fare worse and homes can often suffer from staffing inconsistencies, increased risk of harm and negative peer influences (Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999).

Peer relations at school can be strained by entry to care and a greater than average proportion of children in care report that they are bullied (Daly & Gilligan, 2006), partly due to stigma associated with being away from their families. Gilligan (2007) claims that children's homes and foster placements alike can be 'cold houses for education' (p. 136), with minimal interest in the education of children and insufficient support with homework and informal education.

Placement disruption has been described as a traumatic experience by some care leavers (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). Sadly then, placement 'breakdown' where care comes to a premature and unplanned end (Sallnäs, Vinnerljung, & Kyhle-Westermark, 2004), is a common phenomenon, with half of pre-school children placed in non-kinship homes experiencing three or more

moves (Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000). In their correlates review of the literature, Jones et al. (2011) found both studies which suggested behavioural problems have an influence of number of placements (Pardeck, 1983) as well as studies which concluded that number of placement moves affects behaviour (Newton, Litrownik & Landsverk, 2000). In Newton, Litrownik and Landsverk (2000), problem behaviour was found to be both a cause and a consequence of placement breakdown.

### 1.4.3 Influences after

Arnett (2000) proposes that Erikson's (1982) life stage theory be revised to take account of cultural and economic changes which, it is claimed, have affected the nature of young people's psychosocial development. According to Arnett, a period of emerging adulthood, focussed on the years 18 to 25, is characterised as the most 'volitional' in a typical person's life and the time when, free from some of the constraints of school and not yet settled on a life course, they pursue the developmental task of identity exploration and formation. Acknowledging that Erikson had already described 'prolonged adolescence' in industrialised societies as an extension of the adolescence stage, he goes further by suggesting that emerging adulthood constitutes a new and distinct period when adulthood has not yet been reached but adolescence has been completed.

Criticism of the categorical and allegedly reductionist nature of the emergent adulthood concept has more recently been made (Hendry & Kloep, 2007) as well as criticism that it ignores cultural differences and population heterogeneity (Côté, & Bynner, 2008).

Furthermore, if its basic premise is accepted, it is contentious whether what is described constitutes a positive development, with Arnett suggesting that it might permit more informed decision making for young people during this stage whilst others (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011; Timimi, 2005) have described the deleterious effect of an extended adolescence on the behaviour and emotional well-being of young people in western cultures.

One group for whom the main challenges of this part of life, namely identity exploration and the transition into satisfying adult roles, are likely to be particularly difficult, are young people leaving the care of local authorities. Briefly, care leavers face the ordinary challenges of emergent adulthood but in a timeframe which is 'accelerated and compressed' (Stein, 2006), in a context of instability (Hiles, Moss, Thorne, Wright, & Dallos, 2014) and against a background of adversity which might reasonably be expected to compound their difficulties.

Mendes, Baidawi and Snow (2014) describe 'end of care' support as a fundamental difference between typical care leavers and their peers. Whereas most young people can rely on some level of continuing support, usually associated with some implicit evaluation of their developmental age, care leavers were found to have support withdrawn having reached a chronological landmark rather than on an assessment of their being developmentally ready. Where support is available, it may lack or undervalue the importance of emotional support, focussing on practical and material help (Adley & Kina, 2017).

The 'instant adulthood' (Rogers, 2011) most care leavers have imposed on them, whereby they are expected to suddenly take on adult roles and responsibilities, denies them the time to focus and deal with changes at a reasonable pace (Stein, 2004). Furthermore, it has been argued that, a 'good parent' (Winterburn, 2015) would be more ambitious for children in their care rather than, for example, automatically enrolling their child on state benefits. Ongoing support has unsurprisingly been shown to smooth the transition and contribute to positive outcomes (Purtell & Mendes, 2016; Liabo, McKenna, Ingold, & Roberts, 2017).

1.4.4 Conclusions about psychosocial factors

The psychosocial factors outlined above have each been proposed as playing some role in determining the outcomes described in the preceding section (1.3.2) with events and experiences before-, during-, and after-care implicated in subsequent poorer outcomes for most of the people studied. However, what is sometimes lost in this literature is the heterogeneity of inter-group outcomes, which may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing negative stereotypes of care leavers (Hare & Bullock, 2006).

Stein (2006) reviewed care leaver research up to that date and observed that young people tended to fall into three groups, with each group sharing some experiences in and after care. Unlike the 'survivors' and 'victims', the 'moving on' group were more likely to have formed a secure attachment relationship, had positive experiences in education and maintained relationships as they moved into adult roles. This latter group exceed many popular expectations of them and

may be classified as 'resilient' in lay terms and within the parameters set in academic exploration of resilience.

## 1.5 Resilience

Psychosocial factors discussed so far comprise the traits and risk/protective factors which are thought to mediate and moderate the effect of being in care on individuals' development and future achievement. Rutter (2012) introduces the concept of resilience as 'an inference based on evidence that some individuals have a better outcome than others who have experienced a comparable level of adversity' (p. 335). By this definition then, some care leavers demonstrate greater levels of 'resilience'.

Building on the work of Norm Garmezy, Rutter (1987, 2012) has been influential in moving the field of resilience research and theorising away from more simplistic comparisons of traits and factors towards a conceptualisation of resilience as a process. Here, drawing on Developmental Systems Theory (Griffiths & Tabery, 2013), resilience is not considered to be a trait but rather an interaction of multiple systems, including the individual, familial and societal.

The shift in conceptualisation, from focussing upon the influence of traits and factors to a process of interaction between different ecological levels, goes some way towards addressing an important criticism of resilience research and promotion. This is the observation that resilience, when described as a primarily individual quality, lends empirical validation to myopic, individualistic ideological arguments by obfuscating influences beyond the agential capabilities

of individual actors. Waller (2001) cautions that when defined in this way, resilience could be not only theoretically flawed but also have harmful implications for those who face adversity and do not flourish in unexpected ways.

In studying resilience as a multi-level process, concerned with how individuals manage adversity (Kaplan, 2005; Manyema, 2006), it has come to be understood as a dynamic phenomenon, whereby individual and social factors interact and give rise to differing levels of resilience (Berridge, 2017). Crucial here are argued to be the chance occurrences in life which facilitate change not predicted by the adversity an individual has encountered (Rutter, 2012). The difference in outcomes not predicted by either protective or risk factors may be explained by the negotiations between individuals and their environments (Ungar, 2004).

Rutter (2012) identifies 'steeling' and 'turning point' effects which may lead to a greater sense of agency in individuals showing resilience. Steeling effects are the consequence of intermittent exposure to stressful experiences, whereby an experience of a stressful situation leads to a greater capacity to cope with later stresses. In the case of care leavers, it might be hypothesised that for some individuals in care with certain characteristics the experience of surviving care means they more able to cope with other stresses. Turning points are external factors which proffer the chance to live differently and Rutter (2012) cites marriage and employment opportunities as occasions where individuals may somehow make some dramatic change. Thus, resilience may not be the summative effect of risk and protective factors, but rather some more complex

interaction of prior experiences and later events which provide opportunities to make a break from the past and defy expectations. Alternatively, apparent resilience may be the consequence of unusually high levels of resources (Hines, Merdinger and Wyatt, 2012), such as intelligence or social support.

## 1.6. Resilience and agency

The ability to act in ways not predicted by aggregated data is predicated in part on the notion of individual agency, that is, the ability of social actors to select, create and transform their environmental circumstances (Berridge, 2017). Bandura (2000) argues that agential capabilities rely largely on perceived efficacy, the belief that their actions can produce desired effects. Hauser, Allen and Golden (2006), interviewing people who had previously been in adolescent in-patient units and reported traumatic early experiences but who were showing higher functioning in key personal and social outcomes, found in their narratives themes of agency, an ability to self-reflect and a commitment to relationships. This constellation of positive qualities enabled the individuals studied to adapt to difficult circumstances (Hauser, Allen & Golden, 2006). An earlier study (Gilgun, 1999) broadened the construct of agency beyond socially approved of qualities to include the antisocial actions of some violent offenders and Ungar (2004), referring to these findings, suggests that the expression of agency can only be understood in relationship to the resources available.

A comprehensive account of individual resilience then should include factors at an individual level, such as individual agency, and the opportunities and constraints present in an environment (Kotze & Niemann, 2013). The relative

importance placed upon internal and external factors varies but Walsh (2015) and Ungar (2002, 2004, 2011) have posited that emphasis should be placed on the social ecology of the individual. This means that the resilience displayed by some care leavers may be understood as a quality of their social ecology, specifically the extent to which environments facilitate growth and success (Ungar, 2011). Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity, discussed next, provides a detailed account of the way agency may be both shaped and used in a social context.

## 1.7 Margaret Archer's theory of agency, reflexivity and the internal conversation

It is necessary and apposite that Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity be described in its scholarly context, with some elaboration of its location in social theory and the broad debate to which it contributes. Essentially, reflexivity as conceptualized by Archer is the process mediating between social structure and individual agency – the Structure-Agency question (Archer, 2003).

Structure has been described as an 'absent concept' (Crothers, 1996: 21) as, although looming large in the literature, it is rarely adequately defined. Structure is defined here as reoccurring arrangements dictating which choices or opportunities are available to social actors, including but not limited to: social and political institutions; instruments of cultural transmission and persuasion; physical embodiment; and health.

Agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Central to the concept of agency therefore is the idea that the agent could have acted otherwise in a given situation (Giddens, 1976).

The relationship between social structure and individual / collective agency has been central to social theory from the beginning and throughout (Archer, 2000; O'Donnell, 2010). Traditionally, such as in the work of Durkheim and other Structuralist theorists, one or other of these levels of analysis (Structure or Agency) would be held to be of principal or even singular importance in explaining individuals' actions. Contemporary theorists like Giddens (1984) have emphasized the enmeshed, co-constitutive nature of the relationship between Structure and Agency.

Archer argues that structure and agency can be separated analytically as they are different kinds of 'emergent properties' (Archer, 1995), operating on different timescales and differing in properties and powers. Archer criticises the tendency, as she sees it, to conflate either Structure into Agency or vice versa. *Downwards conflation* describes determinist analyses which grant power to structure, thus denying efficacy to agency, an example of which might be classical Marxist theory. *Upwards conflation* describes voluntarist analyses which value agency at the expense of structural causes for human action, which is arguably what many forms of psychology do.

A further approach to the Structure-Agency question Archer argues against is Bourdieu's influential notion of *habitus*, the abstract schemes, tastes and habits

which permit the negotiation of routine and novel situations with the minimum of reflexivity. Habitus is therefore the unquestioned order of things (Bourdieu, 1994) and his conceptual framework offers a way of explaining the reproduction of social structures through everyday practices. Archer's objection to habitus as a theory of social reproduction rests partly on its alleged error of central conflation (Structure determines Agency as the social 'gets inside us' through habitus) but perhaps more importantly on its difficulty in explaining Agency in periods of social transformation. Archer accepts that routine, habitual action predominates under certain conditions but can no longer be relied upon successfully by individuals in present-day Western (globalised) systems, for whom the old ways of doing and being are increasingly difficult to reproduce, even for those who wish to maintain this continuity.

### 1.7.1 The morphogenetic approach to structure / agency

Archer (1995, 2003, 2007) puts forward an alternative theoretical mode of analysis, the *morphogenetic approach*, where in any cycle of analysis Structure predates action. Preceding it temporally, it 'lays the ground' for action, which is described by Archer as the exercise of the powers of human agents who are presented with enablements and / or confronted with constraints (Archer 2012). This action then leads to either the reproduction or transformation of social structures, which again 'lay the ground' for the next cycle of agency. Crucially for the present discussion, the exercise of agential powers relies on *reflexivity*, which is understood to be a process of 'mediating deliberatively' between one's own subjectively defined concerns and objective structural obstacles and opportunities (Archer, 2007). So whereas Bourdieu emphasizes habitus as the

mediator between Structure and Agency in determining individuals' actions, Archer (re-)introduces the concept of reflexivity.

### 1.7.2 Archer's reflexivity

Archer's version of reflexivity defines it as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa' (Archer, 2007: 4). Archer's work essentially constitutes a sociological analysis of reflexivity (Caetano, 2014). She argues that reflexivity takes the form of an 'internal conversation' (Archer, 2003) which may cover all forms of non-habitual action, from the mundane to the level of demarcating our *concerns* and working out how to live in accordance with, and work towards, *projects*.

### 1.7.2 The internal conversation

Central to Archer's own theoretical project is the internal conversation. Archer (2003) believes that the internal conversation takes the form of questions posed to ourselves and then answered, again internally by ourselves as an inner dialogue, thereby allowing us to consider ourselves, our environment and the relationship between them. The internal conversation is not conceived as limited to natural language and, following Peirce (1931, cited in Archer 2012), may be complemented by symbols, sensations and imagery.

### 1.7.3 The internal conversation, concerns and projects

Internal conversations are intended, according to Archer, to facilitate the elaboration of an individual's 'ultimate concerns', meaning those things they care

most about. Although primarily interested in the kinds of goals and values covered by the descriptor 'aspirations', Archer does not limit the scope of likely concerns to the kinds of mechanical, 'dry' choices often implied by rational-choice theory (Boudon, 2009), instead including consideration of emotional concerns such as relationships, love and intimacy, with other authors taking the idea of emotional reflexivity further (Burkitt, 2012).

The constellation of our *concerns* helps define our identity and our *concerns* lead inevitably to some sort of action, successful or otherwise, in the form of *projects*. *Projects* are thus designed to advance or protect our ultimate *concerns*. If a person were to have no concerns, however vague or unrealistic, it would render them a passive agent at the mercy of social hydraulics. Alternatively, active agents whose projects enable them to realize their concerns are able to establish 'modus vivendi' (Archer, 2007). Archer's three-stage model is as follows:

Defining *concerns* ⟶ Developing courses of action or *projects* ⟶ Establishing satisfying sustainable practices or *modus vivendi*

At the heart of Archer's theory of reflexivity then is the following simple proposition: that in the first stage an individual reflects on their values and the opportunities afforded to (and denied) them; in the second, projects reflexively answer the related questions, 'what is it that I want?' and 'how can I go about getting it?'; and finally, an individually reflexively deliberates and considers whether their projects are indeed achievable, unachievable or not ambitious enough.

1.7.4 Modes of reflexivity

In Archer's trilogy, which expounds her 'morphogenetic approach' and explores the constructs of agency, structure, reflexivity and the internal conversation (Archer 2003, 2007, 2012), she found that individuals' dominant style of reflexivity could be categorized in four modes. This finding, replicated across the trilogy, was based on interviews with three different cohorts, each relatively large. The modes described were:  communicative reflexivity, autonomous reflexivity, meta-reflexivity and fractured reflexivity. Whilst the categories remained constant, the proportion of people in each of the cohorts differed substantially.

1.7.4.1 Communicative reflexives

These individuals seek to confirm their internal conversations by engaging in external dialogue with other interlocutors. In order to maintain this mode of reflexivity, their priorities necessarily focus upon maintaining positive relationships and literal (or virtual - through 'social media', regular telephone contact etc.) proximity with significant others. In a Modern pre-globalised, broadly social democratic society, the pattern of relationships required to remain an effective 'communicative reflexive' would have been possible to sustain without agential work. However, today it is argued that reflexivity is required for actors to maintain the preferred conditions of their natal social world – the 'reflexive imperative' (Archer, 2012); or put differently, even when people favour the types of activities and relationships they 'grew up' with, they must actively resist structural pressures constraining them from following them.

### 1.7.4.2 Autonomous reflexives

Individuals whose reflexivity is described by this mode are considered self-contained, making their own plans and following courses of action without recourse to external interlocutors. Archer (2007) suggests that they *will* consult others where gaps in their knowledge exist but not because they lack confidence in their internal conversations. People categorized as autonomous reflexives are described as being more individualistic and motivated by status to a greater degree than those fitting other modes; it is further proposed that their self-referential approach to decision making and tendency towards individualism may make them well suited to present-day societal conditions

### 1.7.4.3 Meta-reflexives

Meta-reflexives are individuals whose internal conversation is itself monitored and commented upon, thus taking a reflexive stance towards reflexivity. They are more inclined towards questioning what drives their thinking and considering how factors beyond their immediate context affect the content of their internal conversations. It is proposed that these individuals often reject the individualism implicit in autonomous reflexives' concerns and projects, whilst being unconcerned about reproducing the conditions of their own natal world. Instead, meta-reflexives are less sure of what they want and so reflexivity is often employed in an open-minded way, to enable them to find a 'vocation in the social order' (Archer, 2012, p. 209).

### 1.7.4.4 Fractured reflexives

These are described as individuals whose internal conversations are unhelpful, as they do not lead towards effective action or satisfactory resolution, instead intensifying confusion and distress. The only participant in Archer's studies to have been in care was categorised as fractured reflective and it is suggested that individuals with mental health difficulties are likely to fall into this category.

### 1.7.5 'Discovering' modes and methodology

Archer (2003, 2007) hypothesised a relationship between modes of reflexivity and differential outcomes, suggesting that relational/consensus, status/outcome and social/values concerns map onto  communicative, autonomous and meta reflexivity respectively.

Methodological issues have been raised (Hung & Appleton, 2016) as Archer does not provide a detailed enough description of her method of analysis to allow her studies to be repeated. The Hung and Appleton (2016) study circumvented this problem by following Archer's open-ended interview framework and using a qualitative methodology established in psychological research. Their findings differed from Archer's in that the participants, all care leavers, were described as possessing a more complex range of reflexivity types, including: fractured reflexivity; emerging active agency with elements of fractured reflexivity; and what they termed a 'survival-oriented' mode of reflexivity.

Despite these methodological concerns, Archer's (2003, 2007) thesis has nevertheless been taken up enthusiastically within sociology, social theory and

beyond (King, 2010). Studies have applied Archer's typology to a range of topics (e.g. Davidson, 2012; De Vaujany, 2008, Manning, 2013) and although they typically suggest minor refinements to the model, there is a tendency in this literature to overlay categories onto the data and then tautologically find the only phenomenon that was being looked for. If Archer's model as currently constituted (particularly regarding the four dominant modes of reflexivity) is to claim empirical grounding, a more critical and methodologically robust approach to data collection and analysis is required.

Although it is a theory which casts its scrutiny across social and the individual layers, the focus of its analysis has been on the internal conversation. If resilience is, as conceptualized by Rutter (1987, 2012), an interaction of multiple systems, on individual, familial and societal levels, then a more complete analysis would include the social networks of individuals.

**1.8 Social Networks**

1.8.1 Social network analysis – a focus on structure

Social Networks are social structures made up of sets of social actors, sets of dyadic ties, and other social interactions between people. Scott (2017) explains how interest in Social Networks has seen a parallel growth in Social Network Analysis (SNA), a set of formal, mathematical techniques for analysing 'relational data'. He defines relational data as the contacts, connections and group attachments that relate agents to one another and contrasts this type of data with 'attributional data'. As such, he contends, relational data cannot be 'reduced' to individual agents' properties. SNA has been used widely to study, amongst other

qualities, the content, direction and ties between agents with these components typically analysed quantitatively and displayed diagrammatically.

Quantitative SNA has consistently found that the structural properties of social networks explain group and individual outcomes (Granovetter, 1985). In particular, this field of enquiry has pointed to the significance of centrality, the extent to which an individual is connected relative to those around them, in determining advantage or disadvantage (e.g. the early study by Brass, 1984). However, while SNA literature can illustrate the nature of Social Network *structures*, of at least equal relevance are the subjective qualities of individuals' social networks and their consequences, beyond the level of analysis of SNA.

Westaby, Pfaff & Redding (2014) suggest that the main omission in 'traditional' SNA is the exclusive focus on structural linkages between individuals at the expense of consideration of goal pursuit and resistance. They propose a taxonomy of Social Network roles, each role being oriented towards a different, though sometimes complimentary, goal. The resulting conceptualisation, grounded in Dynamic Network Theory (DNT), and their proposed schematic type, offers more descriptive power than common SNA sociograms (or network webs) but remains a rather crude approach given the complexity of human relations, perhaps therefore best suited to organisational psychology. A significant omission from DNT, echoed later in social capital literature, is the basic human motivation for attachment and emotional security (Bowlby, 1969), which is overlooked in favour of an instrumental understanding of relationships.

SNA and correlational studies looking at the impact of Social Networks on mental health outcomes and resilience consistently report what are described as peer contagion effects (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011), which is the mutual influence of peers on one another. Peer contagion effects, usually studied as hindering rather than helping, have been found to be associated with both externalising and internalising problems. These include: externalising / aggressive behaviours (Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani, & Bukowski; 1997); body image and unhelpful social comparisons (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir; 1999); depression (Goodwin, Mrug, Borch, & Cillessen; 2011); and suicidality (Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito; 2001).

A widely reported finding in peer relationships literature is that adolescents' and their friends' psychological characteristics tend towards homogeneity. Two main processes of 'homophily' are proposed as contributing to this homogeneity – selection and socialisation (Kandel, 1978). Selection effects refer to the tendency of young people to associate with peers who are similar to themselves; socialisation refers to the process of peer influence, whereby association leads to similarity on behavioural or psychological variables. Brechwald and Prinstein (2011), reviewing peer influence literature, note that more recently attempts have been made towards understanding reciprocal associations between selection and socialization. Other related processes have been put forward to explain homophily, including preference for those perceived to be similar, as well as avoidance and withdrawal (Schaefer, Kornienko and Fox, 2011) amongst depressed individuals whereby marginalised people group together.

Not all friendships tend towards homophily though and other recognisable reasons have elsewhere been catalogued. Mendelson & Aboud (1999) outlined functions of friendships which included: reliable alliance, self-validation, stimulating companionship, intimacy, help and emotional security. Cotterell (2013) added integration into a network of friends and reassurance of worth through social validation to this list.

1.8.2 Social network quality

A young person's social network extends beyond their peer group however to include adults and others who may provide formal and informal support. Underwood (2000) charts the historical development of academic interest in social support and well-being, beginning with Durkheim's seminal work on the social correlates of suicide and arguing that traditionally social support has been assumed as having positive valence. Willcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) suggest that two complementary hypotheses have been put forward regarding the connection between social support and well-being. The 'main effect' hypothesis contends that social network quality has a direct impact on individuals who perceive themselves to have greater self-efficacy and higher self-esteem; the 'buffering' hypothesis is that in times of stress social support mitigates its impact.

Weiss' (1974) model of 'social provisions' is useful in broadening understanding of the psychological and social functions of social ties and networks. Weiss' component model of social support contends that six 'provisions' or functions can be obtained through relationships with others and that all are required to

insulate the individual adequately from stress and for them to feel adequately supported (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). These provisions are: attachment; social integration; reassurance of worth; reliable alliance; guidance; and opportunity for nurturance. Guidance and reliable alliance are needed for effective problem-solving whereas other provisions are not directly related to problem-solving and decision-making, aiding the individual in less direct ways. Cutrona and Russell (1987) note that there was unanimity amongst theorists on several of these provisions (most notably reliable assistance, elsewhere referred to as 'material support' and 'tangible support') but Weiss' model differs in identifying 'nurturance', the sense of feeling needed by others, as an important factor.

As well as helping the individual cope with stress, social networks are thought to exert influence through several other mechanisms, each of which can affect the person positively or negatively. One such mechanism is social support, the access to resources or social capital (Lin, 2001) controlled by other people through past and present social interactions.  Care leavers are unlikely to have social support on a par with their peers (Biehal & Wade, 1996). A second mechanism proposed is social learning (Bandura, 1986), which takes place when individuals' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by experiences, principally through observation, in their social networks. Another mechanism, which Cotterell (2007) has suggested is particularly influential in children and adolescents, is social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). After people have been categorised, by themselves and others, into a social group, they identify with the norms and values held by the group, meaning that for children in care and care leavers the groups they have identified with will affect their outcomes. Finally, emotional contagion (Christakis &

Fowler, 2013) may mean that individuals automatically take on synchronous emotions as others in their social network.

### 1.8.3 The effect of disruption to social networks

Children who experience network disruption, such as that caused by removal from their family of origin, respond in different ways and with different levels of associated distress. Perry (2006) explains this difference at least in part as being derived from Social Network features, suggesting that it may be influenced by the strength and structure of the resulting network. Whilst this may be a plausible thesis providing its descriptive powers are not overstated, a myopic focus on Social Networks risks ignoring or overshadowing other important factors (including those described in section 1.4).

Being in care often means children lose valued contact with members of their extended family, have difficulty maintaining contact with groups that are significant to them and find making and sustaining friendships more challenging (McMahon & Curtin, 2012; Ridge & Millar, 2000). High levels of social network disruption are associated with psychological distress in care leavers (Perry, 2006) and where networks are disrupted psychological empowerment is unlikely (Christens, 2012). During the transition out of care, young people face the challenge of building sustainable social networks. They may be let down when older fragile relationships are found to be difficult to 're-negotiate', continuing support from foster carers is found to be contingent on financial reimbursement, and parents continue to fail to be a source of consistent support (Biehal and Wade, 1997). However, they may also take advantage of opportunities that are

afforded them in instances where carers and 'informal carers' continue to be supportive (Arnau-Sabates & Gilligan, 2015).

**1.9 Care leavers and higher education – review of literature**

The number of care leavers gaining university places was reported to have risen slightly from just 5% in 2004 to 7% in 2010 (Driscoll, 2011), although more recent statistics suggest that may not be a continued upward trend but more likely reflect normal variation in the data (DfE, 2015). In contrast, one third of young people who have not been in local authority care attend university. Getting to university then is a relatively rare achievement for care leavers.

A literature search was conducted to identify and examine research looking at what the experience of university, in its broadest sense, is like for those young people who manage to negotiate the many and various obstacles to getting there.

The first step was a search on CINAHL Complete, E-Journal, MEDLINE, Psycharticles and Psychinfo. Search terms were kept as wide and inclusive as possible to maximise returns, a reasonable strategy given the known scarcity of relevant research in this area. Firstly, the terms 'care leaver', 'care experienced' and 'looked after' were entered. These returns were then combined with 'higher education', 'university', 'HE' and 'HEI' (Higher Education Institutions). No date restrictions were set; searches therefore ran within pre-set database publication dates (1995-2016). This search yielded eight papers for inclusion. An additional search using the Google Scholar search engine yielded one further paper (see Appendix I). Papers not written in English were omitted from this review.

Writing in 2012, Hyde-Dryden found that that the Going to University from Care study (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley, 2005) was at that time the only research to focus on the experiences of care leavers in university in England. Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley (2005) reported the findings of the first large-scale study looking at the experiences of people going from care to university. They recruited over 100 care leavers across three university cohorts and interviewed participants at various points along their journey through higher education. Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley (2005) found that care leavers, faced with a higher financial burden compared with non-care leavers, struggled to manage financial demands and 'juggled' paid work with study, often to the detriment of grades and social lives. Some students believed that not having had opportunities to acquire study skills prior to university adversely affected their performance in higher education. The study also identified perceived failures on the part of universities to offer the required level of support, in areas such as housing and tutoring, although later cohorts were found to be more positive about the support offered to them by their universities, perhaps due of the effect of changes in legislation (such as the Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010).

Hyde-Dryden (2012) investigated whether the experiences of care leavers entering university may have changed since Jackson and colleagues' 2005 study, given the later official agenda towards 'widening participation' in higher education. Quantitative and qualitative data (analysed using Thematic Analysis) was collected from universities and local authorities, and the study also compared disadvantaged students' accounts of their experiences of university with those of

people with a care background. Hyde-Dryden acknowledges practical deficits in support and pays particular attention to those considered to be the consequence of the conflicting agendas of the various agents involved. Explicitly organising her broader findings according to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, Hyde-Dryden found that where support was made available, it had a positive impact upon care leaver's economic, social and cultural capital (in broad terms: their usable resources), repeating findings elsewhere (Askew, Rogers & West, 2016). In cases where students had opportunities to find out about and experience aspects of university life before starting at university, this was found to affect those individuals' habitus, or disposition, during their studies as the 'field' of higher education felt less alien to them. In early research looking at the wider student population, moderating factors such as family background and prior educational experiences affected the extent to which they were able to integrate into university life, which dictated whether or not they would complete their degree (Tinto, 1975). Later studies emphasized the importance of familiarity with elite cultural codes at university (Longden, 2004). Other authors (Cameron, 2007; Driscoll, 2013), although not writing about care leavers solely in higher education, have similarly found that care leavers, having developed self-reliance skills out of necessity in response to often adverse circumstances, can sometimes be misperceived by professionals in other areas as being `difficult'. This may then affect relationships between care leavers and those potentially in a position to support them. Even where self-reliance is not aversive for those in a position to provide support, it may lead care leavers at university to avoid help and thus not access valuable support (Hyde-Dryden, 2012).

A phenomenological study of nine care leavers (Bluff, King & McMahon, 2012) looked retrospectively at their transition to life at university. Three main themes were identified in the analysis: a paucity of positive care leaver role models; negative care leaver identity; and 'corporate' (LA) versus 'normal' parenting. It was suggested that the perceived lack of role models was an important factor in limiting applications to university from care leavers. A negative care leaver identity affected some care leavers' ability to be open with their student peers. Participants also noticed visible differences between their experience of corporate parenting in terms of demonstrable care, including practical support with moving in to accommodation, which was seen as symbolic of deficiencies in their own experience of support.

Cotton, Nash & Kneale (2014) used narrative interviews to ask nine care leavers ostensibly about their experience of mostly practical areas of their experience and their plans after university. They found that, aside from universal risk- and protective-factors impacting on success, the availability of a 'safety net' and support from a significant adult were identified as particularly important. A further quantitative section of the study purported to show care leavers struggle to have a sense of 'belonging' at university, although the analysis appears to have been limited to descriptive statistics and the finding was not echoed in the qualitative analysis.

Research has shown (Hines, Merdinger & Whyte, 2005; Munson, 2013) that when care leavers at university reflect on their success in pre-university education, three types of protective factors, operating at the individual level and

micro- and exo-system levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), are identified. At the individual level, factors related to internal locus of control are implicated and at micro- and exo-system levels, foster homes and schools providing alternative safe environments were found to be important. At the micro-system level, Hines, Merdinger & Whyte (2005) found that care leavers in higher education had managed to find adults in their extended family or professional helpers who became positive parenting figures.

### 1.10 Internal conversations, social networks and care leavers at university

The study by Hung and Appleton (2016) explored the reflexivity and internal conversations of young people who had left care and were transitioning to adult roles. The majority of their internal conversations reflected a continuing battle to cope with the legacy of their care-related experiences and the need to adapt quickly with limited resources to the demands of 'instant adulthood' (Rogers, 2011). None were found to exhibit a clearly defined *mode* of reflexivity in the Archerian sense but instead demonstrated combinations of reflexivity and agency which were inconsistent temporally and contextually: some care leavers were able to demonstrate active agency without a clear, consistent mode of reflexivity, with their agential capacity still appearing to serve them well; others showed fractured reflexivity but with some areas of life (and internal world) where their internal conversations thrived; whilst others had what the authors label 'survival-orientated reflexivity', which contains rich internal conversations but concentrated on immediate coping and limited planning.

Hung and Appleton (2016) interviewed a sample heterogeneous in material outcomes, as some were in full-time employment, some had been educationally successful, whilst others were finding the demands of education and employment overwhelming. As explored in the resilience literature, there were and are care leavers who achieve in socially-recognised ways. One such group is the small proportion of care leavers studying at university and an explicit focus upon these individuals may illuminate the relationship between reflexivity, internal conversations and resilience. Furthermore, the review of literature pertaining to care leavers in higher education demonstrates that they are an under researched group and so hearing about their experiences is in itself a valid area of enquiry.

Ungar (2004) argues that differences in outcomes can be explained by the negotiations between individuals and their environments, with resilient functioning requiring personal agency and enabling environments. Therefore, analysis should focus on both levels (individual and social) and their interaction, which could then provide some insight into the contribution of each.

## 1.11 Research aims

- The primary aim of this study is to explore the internal conversations of care leavers at university and what they might suggest about the young people's agency
- A secondary aim of the study is to establish whether the young people studied could each realistically be categorised as having a style of reflexivity at an individual level and whether they shared a style of reflexivity

o Finally, in examining qualities of their social networks, the study also aims to find out how the young people view and make use of these networks

## **CHAPTER 2 - Methods**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This research seeks to understand the internal conversations and social networks of university students who have been in care. The study subscribes to a critical realist epistemological position and this chapter begins by discussing the rationale behind this theoretical positioning. In line with this position, the study uses Archer's model of reflexivity, providing as it does a framework for understanding the mechanisms through which social structure, reflexivity and individual agency interact. The interviews and analysis were selected to stay close to Archer's method as possible, although the focus on social networks necessitated a partial deviation from her method of data collection. As Hung and Appleton (2015) noted, Archer did not describe which method she used when analysing her interviews. A method believed to be most likely to match Archer's analytical aims (the *Composite Model*; Robinson, 2008) was therefore selected for use in this study. Dovetailing with Archer's aims, the Composite Model allows for idiographic enquiry, across-case comparison and, most pertinent to the current study, inclusion of a-priory provisional categories. This chapter outlines the research process in some depth for transparency, along with ethical considerations and criteria by which the study's quality can be assessed.

### **2.2 Epistemology**

Philosophically, this research follows Archer (2003) in taking a critical realist position with respect to both ontology (the way things are) and epistemology (the way we know things). In doing so, firstly it rejects the notion that, ontologically, there is no 'real world' to be studied independently of perception (Phillips, 1987).

Epistemologically, it subscribes to the hermeneutic idea that knowledge of the social world is socially constructed. Thus, attempts to understand the social world can only ever be incomplete and fallible (Maxwell, 2010), limited as they are by the boundaries of that construction. Of course, extending this epistemological position to its logical conclusion means our ontological position can only ever be just that: *a position* rather than fully known. Nevertheless, it is the position explicitly taken in the present research, fitting as it does with both the chosen stance of the researcher and Archer's social theory on which the study is founded. Critical realism constitutes a 'middle way' between postmodernist social constructionism and quantitative realism (Robinson, 2008). It achieves this feat both pragmatically, insofar as it does not disregard the value in the methodological manifestations of these approaches (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010), and also by asserting that 'there is a reality but our interpretations of it are bound by the limits of our cognition and perception' (Robinson, 2008, p44).

Standing in contrast with an empiricist understanding of causality, which prioritises the identification and description of causal variables and their effects, Bhaskar's critical realism explains causality as derived from underlying 'generative mechanisms' (Bhaskar, 1979). These are theories about the pattern of outcomes rather than isolated variables, the mechanism underlying the patterning and the context in which the mechanism operates (Pawson, 2006). For Archer, one such generative mechanism is the internal conversation, which explains the complex interrelationship between social structures and individual agency (see Chapter 1 for a full discussion). The internal conversation is the means through

we exercise our reflexivity and it is primarily upon this level that the present study turns its gaze.

## 2.3 Participants and Sampling

This study was concerned with the nature of reflexivity and the social networks of young people who had been in care and had moved on to higher education. Participants were therefore young people fitting this description, who had been in care long enough for this to be of significance and whose academic success meant that they had achieved a place at university. A looked after child is defined under the Children Act 1989 as any child provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours, subject to a care order or subject to a placement order.

Eligible participants were aged between 18 and 25 years. This age range was chosen so as to include people in that period of their development Arnett (2000) describes as 'emerging adulthood', the expectation being that they have left the dependency of adolescence but are not yet subject to the 'enduring responsibilities' of adulthood. If this is indeed the case, the nature of their reflexivity should be important in determining how they navigate a path between adolescence and responsible adulthood.

Participants were recruited using random purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to ensure, firstly, the suitability of participants to answer the research questions and secondly, so avoidable bias in recruitment was avoided. In practise, this meant that once a (relatively small) group of eligible people were

identified, participants were then selected from this group. To increase heterogeneity of care experience between cases, no parameters were set regarding at what point(/s) during their childhood the person was in care. The young people who participated in the study had been in care at various developmental stages, with two in care in their teenage years and the remaining three removed from their families in early childhood.

Conversely, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the other half of Robinson's (2008; Robinson and Smith, 2010) composite approach used in this study, stresses the importance of using a sample closely defined to maximise the probability of meaningful cross-case comparison (Smith & Eatough, 2006). Participants were therefore sought who were also similar along dimensions described below.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to find UK data relating to typical care histories. Data is available for discrete 12 month periods (e.g. DfE, 2016) but not describing, for example, the total amount of time children spend in care on average. This highlights a methodological weakness in governmental and statutory statistics unfortunately far beyond the reach of the present study. The initial aim of finding cases typical on this dimension therefore had to be discarded in favour of an informed but nonetheless necessarily pragmatic decision about what constituted 'enough time' in care.

Children who enter care at an older age (who may have spent longer in an adverse environment) have been found to be more likely to have poor emotional

wellbeing (Hannon et al., 2007). However, Coman and Devaney (2011) warn against the reductionist tendency to attribute poorer outcomes for looked after children to isolated variables, instead contending that multiple factors influence outcomes. These include the pre-care environment, the care environment itself and the emergent properties of these in interaction with one another. Indeed, the converse relationship vis-à-vis age in care is also likely to hold true, insofar as multiple short-term care episodes might realistically be expected to adversely affect a child's wellbeing (Schofield and Beek, 2005). Whilst any decision about sampling strategy based on timing and time spent in care is therefore a matter of judgement rather than an empirically reasoned decision (where time/timing of care experience $X$ = Likely outcomes $Y$), it is reasonable that a minimum length of time spent in care should be amongst the criteria for inclusion given that this study is interested in young people whose experience of being is care is theorised as important. Participants were sought who had been in care for a minimum of 12 months.

Students formerly categorised as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) were excluded from the study despite being classed as LAC. While UASC do suffer high levels of psychological distress, including emotional and behavioural problems and PTSD (Bronstein & Montgommery, 2011), meaning there are likely to be some similarities between the daily stressors encountered by the two groups, their experiences in childhood are quite different (Simmonds & Merredew, 2010). Conversations with the universtity care-leavers support team also revealed that these professionals, working with UASC and other care-leavers, had noticed that the groups seemed to use different strategies to cope

with difficulties, had different trajectories into education and also reported that the two groups had different educational outcomes.

Students with a suspected IQ below 70 were excluded as it is not known how the reflexivity of this group differs from the general population. However, realistically this was unlikely to be of relevance since all participants would be enrolled on higher education courses and would not be expected to have a global learning disability. Students requiring a translator were also excluded as it was predicted that this would negatively affect the quality of the interviews and unnecessarily complicate the double hermeneutic of analysis as the student's interpreted interpretation of their experience was interpreted. Again though, due to the demands of higher education it was anticipated that this would likely not be of relevance. Students involved with mental health services were excluded from the study as were those who had been with mental health services in the preceding 12 months, although no formal disclosure of status was requested. This decision does pose a threat to the validity of any claim that the final sample can be considered representative, especially as identified mental health difficulties are more prevalent in this population. However, concerns that the potentially emotive nature of the interviews might prove overwhelming took precedence in the final decision.

Recruitment took place at a university in the south of England awarded the Buttle Quality Mark in recognition of their efforts to encourage care leavers to pursue higher education and support them at university. This support includes a mentoring service and year-round accommodation. It was therefore expected that

the additional support in place at the university would be a protective factor for some students and might have an influence on their descriptions of life at university.


**2.4 Interviews**

The semi-structured interviews were based on Archer's (2003) interview and Hartman's (1978) 'eco-map'.  Interviews were conducted in two parts, on different days. The first interview focussed on internal conversations and beginning to map out participants' social networks. The second continued this process, exploring their concerns and projects and the perceived contribution, historical and current, of members of their social network.

Archer's (2003) internal conversation interview was used to capture qualitative data of relevance to our area of interest. The interview introduces the idea of the internal conversation as a normal mental activity and then prompts for examples from ten categories (see Appendix I). Participants were asked for further examples not already covered by these categories and the helpfulness (or otherwise) of participants' internal conversations was explored.

As in Archer (2003), the interviews moved on to focus on current concerns (which areas of life were of greatest importance at that time) and projects (their aspirations and imagined futures). However, unlike in Archer's (2003) study, this second part explicitly asked about which relationships had been formative in shaping participants' concerns and projects.

To facilitate a comprehensive description of their social networks, including but not limited to their family of origin, participants were asked to complete a diagrammatic illustration of their network. The format of the network diagram reflected the priorities of the study and it was important that it allowed all people currently of significance to be represented as well as capturing changes in the structure of the system over time.

A basic genogram (see Jolly, Froom & Rosen, 1980) can be used to visually represent relationships where kinship ties extend beyond the biological family. However, McGoldrick, Gerson and Petry (2008) have suggested that genograms should extend their focus to include larger communities or extended family or supports. This is an important consideration in the present study given the interest here in all available support and sources of influence. The process of drawing out fractured family schematics was also considered, both in terms of its possibly deleterious impact on the relationship between researcher and participant and its inclusion of extraneous data. Hence, a different approach to mapping the social network was required.

Approaches which have sought to extend the genogram beyond the family include: Friedman, Rohrbaugh and Krakauer's (1988) Time-Line Genogram, highlighting temporal aspects of family history that the standard format may obscure; Chen-Hayes' (2003) gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) genogram which explores family of origin and family of choice patterns; Goodman's (2013) transgenerational trauma and resilience genogram; and the Multicultural Genogram (Thomas, 1998). The range of adapted genograms

available might demonstrate its versatility, but unfortunately none of these adapted formats were suited to the research questions.

Utilising an ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), the Ecomap is a way of depicting the 'ecological' system around a family or individual (Hartman, 1995) and provide a visual display of a group of interconnections and relationships, including informal and formal supports which may be beyond the reach of the traditional genogram. Circles representing the participant and other people or agencies are drawn around them and the strength of relationships is also depicted (McCormick, Stricklin, Nowak, & Rous, 2005).

One drawback, in terms of its utility for this study, is that the Ecomap is intended to illustrate a given moment (a 'snapshot') in the life of a family and lacks the temporal quality of, for example, the Time-Line Genogram. Rempel, Neufeld and Kushner (2007) advocate the concurrent and comparative use of genograms and ecomaps as complementary tools but it was thought that this complicated and time-consuming solution might obfuscate the relationship between social network and reflexivity. To remedy this problem, additional free-floating circles, representing influential networks from the participant's past, were added to the Ecomap diagram (see Appendix IV) and, as in Hartman, notational elements from the typical genogram format were used within circles as appropriate (e.g. in family of origin circle to summarise three generations).

**2.5 Procedures**

2.5.1 Recruitment

A preliminary meeting with representatives from the university department responsible for care leaver support enabled the researchers to explain the purpose of the study and find out about the care-leaver population at the university. This meeting also preceded the ethics application and was an opportunity to learn about the formal structures in place for supporting students and to agree lines of communication with staff involved with the day-to-day support of students.

Following further negotiation, it was decided that students would be contacted via an initial e-mail invitation sent on behalf of the researcher by the university Care Leaver Support Officer. This invitation outlined the purpose and nature of the study and the basic implications of participation (i.e. likely time demands and financial reimbursement). Students responding to this invitation were asked to contact the lead researcher, by e-mail in the first instance. Students expressing an interest in participating in the study were then contacted by telephone at a convenient pre-arranged time to informally discuss the study and clarify eligibility, build rapport and agree times to meet.

2.5.2 Data collection

Following the telephone contact but prior to meeting in person for the first interview, participants were e-mailed information and consent forms (see Appendix III) detailing the ethical and research context of the study. Hard copies of the same forms were produced and discussed at the first meeting. A separate consent to transfer monies form was also given to participants but not collected

by the researcher so as not to compromise data protection rights. Participants were advised to return this form once completed to the university Care Leaver Support Officer. After the first meeting arrangements were made for the second interview if they wished to continue. Participants' rights were revisited at the beginning of the second interview and time was provided for questions, observations and recommendations at its conclusion. Sessions lasted up to 90 minutes and were audio recorded. Participants' time and travel costs were reimbursed (£15 per session/£30 total).

## 2.6 Analysis

Hung and Appleton (2015), while seeking to follow Archer's methods, recognised that she offered no clear guidance about the method of analysis used. In response to this, and also to accommodate their wish to both see how the theory applies in a different population and work up from individual cases to see how their data might inform the theory, they used a composite analysis first described by Robinson (2008). This meant that they were able to work deductively to assess how Archer's theory of reflexivity applies in the context of young people leaving care, while allowing for the possibility of modes of reflexivity not specified by Archer.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a clearly explicated method which begins with open research questions and describes a system of data collection and analysis which allows for the inductive 'emergence' of findings. It emphasizes the value of idiographic study and individual accounts of experience. IPA is explicit about the process of interpretation undertaken in qualitative

research, particularly the double hermeneutic whereby the researcher is required to make sense of participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2004).

Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model (1994) is perhaps even more comprehensive and offers a start-to-finish guide to the entire process of qualitative research. Their approach emphasizes the reflexive nature of the process, whereby the stages of research occur concurrently and iteratively with each feeding the next cyclically where this is deemed to be of value. Its main point of departure from the method of IPA is in its inclusion of deduction as part of qualitative enquiry: where IPA might potentially lead the researcher to question or develop theory, the Interactive Model purports to provide methods of testing predictions in qualitative research.

This study shares the basic epistemological assumptions as Hung and Appleton (2015) insofar as there is assumed to be a 'real world' but that our knowledge of this reality can only ever be 'partial, incomplete and fallible' (Maxwell, 2012, p. 4). That study illustrated the utility of the composite approach (Robinson, 2008) as applied to this type of data at this stage in knowledge development. Consequently, the method of analysis here replicates closely that employed in Hung and Appleton's study, drawing in part on Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach to balancing deductive and inductive analyses which was described by Maxwell (2012, p. 6) as the 'explicit application of realism to qualitative research'. As in Hung and Appleton, and following Robinson's (2008) detailed description of a composite approach, the Interactive Model was combined with

IPA to further allow for the idiographic examination of students' individual experiences.

The Interactive model permitted reference to modes of reflexivity and IPA allowed for the detailed interrogation of data on a case-by-case basis with preconceptions 'bracketed off' as far as practicable. Thus, the composite model allows for the presence and acknowledgement of a-priori theory without closing down ideographic enquiry. In practice, this meant that analysis proceeded as in IPA but a list of theoretical constructs and possibilities (i.e. modes of reflexivity) was compared with the data iteratively to search for evidence of their presence.

In this study, the task of data analysis was complicated by the use of graphical displays as a tool for data collection (Ecomaps). Given the analysis of social networks and their theorised influence on reflexivity was unprecedented, the approach to analysing ecomaps was inductive with text associated with the schematics given precedence over the visual data, which was used primarily as a tool for the shared discovery of social network features.

### 2.6.1 Use of memos

The Interactive Model strongly advises researchers to keep a log of dated memos during data collection to track analytical developments and to prevent the loss in memory of ostensibly trivial data which later turns out to be of relevance. They were found to be useful in recording data not captured in the audio or visual records and also in recording information shared before and after the audio

recorder was switched on (verbal consent was sought for its inclusion, i.e. participants were asked whether it was okay for particular details to be used).

### 2.6.2 Coding

The first stage in analysis of transcripts of interviews and Ecomaps was the development of initial themes or codes (see Appendix IV). As stipulated by the Composite Model, in common with other qualitative approaches, each code was supported by an accompanying segment of text. The Composite Model allows for the combined use of data-led and *a-priori* theory-led codes. Here, *a-priori* theory (from Archer's model and Hung and Appleton's revision) suggests the use of several levels of coding related to: different modes of reflexivity; different types of internal conversation; different concerns and projects. Alongside these codes and, where appropriate, in lieu of them, additional codes emerging inductively from the data were attached to segments of text.

### 2.6.3 Developing Superordinate Themes and/or Pattern Codes

Superordinate Themes (IPA) and Pattern Codes (Interactive Model) are units of organisation which sit above initial codes and themes in the hierarchy of analysis. Lower-level initial codes and themes are grouped together into meaningful but more generic clusters. As appears to be the case in Archer's work, superordinate themes were created for individual cases (participants) first and then master themes across cases.

**2.7 Research quality**

In response to criticisms made about the methodological rigour of qualitative research, Shenton (2004) outlined a series of provisions which can be made in pursuit of a 'trustworthy' qualitative study, based on Guba's four criteria. This research will be evaluated against these provisions and those of Tracy (2010).

Table 1: Shenton's provisions to ensure quality:

| *Quality criterion* | *Possible provision made by researcher* |
|---|---|
| **Credibility** | Adoption of appropriate, well recognised research |
| | Development of early familiarity with culture of participating organisations |
| | Random sampling of individuals serving as informants |
| | Tactics to help ensure honesty in informants |
| | Iterative questioning in data collection dialogues |
| | Negative case analysis |
| | Debriefing sessions between researcher and superiors |
| | Peer scrutiny of project |
| | Use of "reflective commentary" |
| | Description of background, qualifications and experience of the researcher |
| | Member checks of data collected and interpretations/theories formed |
| | Thick description of phenomenon under scrutiny |
| | Examination of previous research to frame findings |
| **Transferability** | Provision of background data to establish context of study and detailed description of phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made |
| **Dependability** | Employment of "overlapping methods" |
| | In-depth methodological description to allow study to be repeated |
| **Confirmability** | Admission of researcher's beliefs and assumptions |
| | Recognition of shortcomings in study's methods and their |
| | In-depth methodological description to allow integrity of research results to be scrutinised |
| | Use of diagrams to demonstrate "audit trail" |

**2.8 Ethical considerations**

This research was granted ethical approval by the University of Essex's Health and Human Sciences Care Research Ethics Committee. Approval was sought from the university at which participants were recruited but they deemed this unnecessary and accepted University of Essex ethics approval as sufficient (see Appendix VI).

Given the contextual adversity experienced by the young people participating in the study, measures were taken to minimise the risk of harm. Firstly, although funding which would have covered greater financial reimbursement was offered by the university, it was decided to set the level of reimbursement more conservatively so that students who might realistically have been in financial hardship did not feel economically obligated to participate in a study they felt unsure about.

All participants were known to the university Access and Partnerships team at the study site. They also had access to an additional layer of support from a dedicated Care Leaver Support Officer experienced in the challenges facing care leavers. The researcher remained in contact with this university contact throughout the study and the limits of confidentiality, explained to participants, stated the conditions under which confidentiality would be broken (i.e. where participants were considered to be at risk of significant harm).

Participants in the study, along with staff in the Access and Partnerships team, were fully aware of the potential risks and benefits of taking part in the research. As previously explained, participants read and discussed as necessary the information and consent forms and signed only if happy to proceed. No element of subterfuge or deception was used in the research.

The research supervisor has considerable clinical experience and expertise working with young people in care and as such was able to provide expert advice between and following interviews, as well as in the design of research procedures. The main researcher had some experience working with young people on the 'edge of care', as well as experience working with people suffering from mental illness and managing risk.

Transcripts were anonymised and confidentiality was protected throughout the research.

## CHAPTER 3 – Results

### 3.1 Introduction

A description of participants' known history and current situation will precede a list of across-case master themes. There then follows a presentation of each master theme, their constituent superordinate themes and a divergent case analysis. Following this, a brief summary of results pertaining to reflexivity is presented. All identifying information has been removed or altered to ensure confidentiality.

### 3.2 Individual contexts

#### 3.2.1 Britney

Britney was 19 at the time of her interviews and had completed the first year of her undergraduate studies. Her mother, who like her father is of African heritage, suffered postpartum depression and was grieving the loss of her own mother when Britney was born. Britney and her two brothers were taken into care when she was four and the sibling group lived with several carers until she was adopted by a family member living abroad at 14. Britney returned to England to study at university and lived alone.

#### 3.2.2 Alice

Alice was 20 at the time of her interviews and was about to enter into her third and final year of an undergraduate degree. Her mother suffered mental health difficulties and Alice was cared for by relatives from infancy until she was seven years old. One of these carers, her grandmother, died when Alice was six. Alice was taken into care when she was seven and lived with the same female foster carer until she was 18. She continued to be in regular contact with her foster carer

while at university. Both of Alice's brothers had been involved with criminal justice services and at the time of the interviews her older brother was in prison. She lived with her fiancé and reported being close to his family.

### 3.2.3 Carla

Carla was the only participant who did not return for the second interview, cancelling two interviews at short notice. However, due to the sparseness of her internal conversation descriptions, we had time during the first scheduled interview to draw and discuss her Ecomap. Aged 21, Carla was in the second year of undergraduate studies when interviewed, having transferred from another university at the end of her first year. She had a four year old daughter who was not in contact with her father. Carla was not taken into care until she was a teenager and was the only child out of a sibling group of seven to spend time in care. She had experienced multiple placements, being unsuccessfully repatriated with her family at the end of each placement. Carla lived with her grandmother but was in regular contact with her mother and siblings.

### 3.2.4 Eve

Eve self-identified as a care leaver having lived away from her family since the age of 14, although it was unclear from her account whether she had ever officially been 'in care' according to the remits of the Children Act 1989 or other relevant legislation. She reported experiencing significant adversity during her childhood and was not believed by her family when she made serious allegations against a family member, thereafter living with a friends' family, in temporary accommodation and a placement arranged through a religious organisation.

3.2.5 Danielle

Danielle was 22 when interviewed and in the final year of her undergraduate studies. She did not disclose the reason(s) for being taken into care and her reaction to questions related to the experience suggested that it was an unresolved source of distress, although she did describe attempts to rebuild her relationship with her mother. Danielle had lived with relatives in early childhood for reasons not given and was taken into care at around the time her father died. She lived with one foster carer until she was 18. Danielle had a young daughter and her daughter's father, although separated from Danielle, was still occasionally involved in her care.

**3.3 Outline of master themes and presentation**

Analysis of the data following the procedures detailed in the methods chapter produced the following master themes:

- o *Master theme 1*: Experiencing the self as an effective agent, "I know that I'm smart and I know that I'm able to accomplish a lot"
- o *Master theme 2*: Feeling different but not alone
- o *Master theme 3*: Strategies employed to protect the self, "I've got this big story and I only give them one chapter of the book"

The following account is just one of many which would have been possible, representing a subjective interpretation and not covering all aspects of participants' experience, being selected for their relevance to the research questions. To improve readability minor changes have been made with

repetitions and superfluous utterances, such as 'erm' removed unless considered pertinent. Where material has been omitted this is denoted by dotted lines in parenthesis (…) and where material has been added the same convention has been followed.

## **3.4 Master theme 1: Experiencing the self as an effective agent, "I know that I'm smart and I know that I'm able to accomplish a lot"**

A strongly-held belief in their capacity to manage current and likely future challenges with or without support was a source of pride and comfort for all of the young people interviewed. Despite not being explicitly prompted to do so, they each described having for the most part independently navigated their way through life to date. While they each acknowledged the importance of the support they received from their social networks at crucial times, such as when making the decision to go to university, the young people interviewed tended to focus on their own principal part in the process, downplaying the contribution of others in their successes. However, in some of the accounts (Britney and Danielle) members of their historical social network were credited with having played a significant formative part in enabling them to be effective today.

All but one of the young people (the exception being Carla) believed that planning was important and three of the participants shared the belief that they were able to plan effectively and then execute their plans successfully. Eve spoke about being able to achieve her aims without planning but believed that her problems with planning had some associated personal costs.

The image held of the self as a competent social and academic actor seemed to instil in the young people a belief that future challenges could be managed without overwhelming them and most of them (Carla again being a divergent case) reflected on having coped with recent challenges with relative ease, a feat they attributed to their having tolerated more difficult challenges in childhood and early adolescence. Carla's account for current success was without any attribution to past learning or having developed characterological strength through adversity, instead she focussed on a believed innate ability to make the right decisions.

### 3.4.1 Superordinate themes

#### Proud independence

'Proud independence' represents the strong theme of perceived and reported independence in participants' narratives, along with the sense of pride derived thereof. In terms of frequency of reference and importance attached to it, independence was more visible than other themes and is thus given more thorough consideration here. The young people interviewed spoke often about having managed without the support of others but reflected on how this absence of supportive others had not impinged upon their functioning in various domains. All of the young people interviewed spoke about their belief that despite an absence of adult supervision and guidance they had managed to not only contend with the challenges of school, post-school uncertainty and relationships but go beyond mere survival and thrive. Understandably then, this was an accomplishment they were proud of and which seemed integral to their current sense of self. As participants spoke about achieving on their own it was

noticeable that they appeared more excited and become more animated. Alice smiled as she said:

> I feel like at twenty I am successful simply because I do things that the average twenty year old doesn't do, I have been catapulted into living on by myself because that's (…) how the care system works (Alice)

The experience of being 'catapulted' (a vividly descriptive metaphor suggestive of a single moment of change and an unpredictable destination) did not destroy her, instead in her account it means she now does 'things the average twenty year old doesn't do' which was stated as both evidence of success and part of her attribution for it.

Participants explained that independence is a source of pride but also a quality borne of necessity, as others cannot or are perceived not to be reliable:

> (when) you're doing it by yourself it's different compared to when you rely on someone and they let you down? (…) Thinking there's someone there to help me but who has chosen not to then it feels a bit of a let-down, you've got to pick yourself up (Danielle)

The emphasis here is on the emotional impact of being disappointed when others fail to help and support as hoped, rather than on the practical consequences. Indeed, descriptions of recent disappointments regarding support were uncommon. An obvious explanation for this situation is that highly aversive memories of disappointment in childhood lead the young people to act in ways that they predict will minimise the likelihood of allowing the possibility of future disappointment.

Surprisingly, the stated perception that others can still not be relied upon did not seem to be supported by participants' descriptions of important actors within

their current social networks. The ecomaps and associated interviews showed that most of the participants had some people whom they trusted to be consistently available, helpful and reliable. Eve was the solitary exception here, identifying only her current boyfriend as someone she trusted in her current social network.

This difference, between an independent identity and their description of functional relationships today, was evident within individual participants' accounts. Danielle, who was quoted earlier describing reasons for avoiding help, spoke in her second interview about how her sisters look after her daughter and how this arrangement does not feel uncomfortable anymore. It seems that there is some discrepancy between an imagined self-sufficiency and a lived reality in which others provide valuable support. The prevailing narrative then of self-sufficiency appears to omit certain incompatible details. In attempting to understand these omissions, one explanation could be that participants were motivated to portray their experiences in such a way as to be perceived favourably. Self-promotion could be a motivating factor and in a population lacking in champions this would be understandable. An alternative, or perhaps complementary, motivation for portraying their current functioning as being more independent than may be accurate is the context of the interviews, in which participants were directed to reflect initially on an intra-psychic level and also to focus on narratives of personal success. Another explanation is that the young people interviewed feel uncomfortable with the idea of dependence, with its association with vulnerability and risk of harm, and therefore consciously or unconsciously minimise the extent to which they depend upon other people's

input. Finding dependence uncomfortable they may also be inclined towards focussing upon evidence of independence in their personal biographies.

For most of the participants, their narrative of proud independence was not maintained at the cost of interpersonal relationships, which were characterised by ordinary levels of interdependence. Eve, however, expressed some ambivalence about her independent existence, which was valued by her but came at a cost:

> Yeah a help and a hindrance to be independent I think, I'm definitely, erm I'm very happy to just be on my own, travel and do everything alone but then there's obviously a hindrance (…) because if I do too many things on my own I'm just gonna be (laughs) alone all the time (Eve)

Eve corrects what sounded like an earlier overstatement, so that 'definitely' is moderated to become the less certain 'very happy', perhaps reflecting on a micro-scale her ambivalence. Eve describes a negotiation between a comfortable isolation and a fear that she may miss out on valued social contact.

### A belief in the value and worth of planning

Most participants found planning towards short- as well as long-term goals worthwhile and were able to do so. However, the level of importance given to planning by these young people was lower than that ascribed to independence, demonstrated in terms of both frequency and the way it was spoken about in interview data. Being capable of planning effectively was not seen as an important ability by those who possessed it and those who considered themselves less able to do so (Carla and Eve) believed they had equally effective ways of working towards goals.

Danielle spoke about planning long-term projects:

> I just question myself a lot, like okay you're not doing this but [what's] next 'cause like you have to have a plan and yeah, that's just how I think really (Danielle)

For Danielle, planning was both a means to an end and itself a comfort, as having long-term plans (or Projects in Archer's lexis) meant that she was able to reassure herself that she was different to family and friends. Although Danielle was concerned that she might be perceived as overly materialistic and acquisitive, being more successful than her family and peers from her home community was important and adhering to a plan considered integral to that project.

Britney stressed the importance of planning, balancing this belief with the possibility that overly fastidious preparation could lead to inaction or disappointment:

> I find that once you rush into things it's kind of unplanned and sloppy, it's just, it doesn't end up working out um, I mean obviously some people might disagree and say when you plan too much it doesn't end up working out, but I think that when you plan enough it ends up working out (Britney)

Planning is contrasted here with 'rushing' to action and Britney concludes that, for her, planning thoroughly is worthwhile. Most participants believed that their level of agency, actual and perceived, would ensure that their plans can usually be executed effectively, having previously experienced the power of their individual agency, particularly but not exclusively regarding academic achievement and living independently.

Carla and Eve reported less use of planning but did not believe that this restricted them significantly as they were able to manage without doing so. Carla actively

avoids planning or contemplating her future, saying that she 'tries not to', preferring surprises. Instead Carla tended to choose the path of least resistance, routinely opting to take the easiest option and explaining that she plans to 'blag [her] way through' (i.e. succeed with minimum effort) the remainder of her degree course. It ought be noted though that Carla seemed to be well-practiced in presenting herself elsewhere as tough and indifferent to her own well-being, casually describing risky alcohol binges and referring to herself during her early teenage years as a 'minger' (i.e. promiscuous). It seemed likely that she plans minimally but may exaggerate the extent of her passivity.

Eve did not report regularly using planning but described an alternative strategy, believing that she is effective because she acts decisively. Her remarkable academic success alongside her ability to thrive in other domains (she had started her own small business and lived independently) is evidence supporting her belief, although she partly attributes her struggle to make friends to time-constraints caused by problems with time-management and planning coursework.

### Being able to cope

Several participants believed that they had coped in the past and reported confidence in their ability to manage future adversity. Alice explained this as follows:

> I've had big things to deal with, bigger than most people my age and older even (…) it ain't been all bad but I know I've done that so I can face big tests again (Alice)

Having had past experience of adversity, including at least abandonment and neglect but in some cases trauma and abuse, several of the young people felt

confident that they had the capacity to manage again. Eve mentioned her abuse history but also described less traumatic but nonetheless difficult experiences around the time of getting to university. Unable to find appropriate accommodation, she had camped in a wooded area over the summer, cooking on a stove and washing at a leisure centre. She also spoke about how difficult it had been arriving for her first day at university as the only student on her own carrying only a couple of bags.

Britney's confidence in her ability to cope was more fragile than that of the other participants. She described an internal dialogue:

> you've gone through so much, how can something so small be affecting you, but the inner voice will be telling me, um, this is so hard, you don't deserve this, like making me feel more sad and more negative about myself (Britney)

Britney describes a split, wherein she struggles to accommodate two competing narratives. In the first she is aware, like Alice and Eve, that she has coped with significant adversity in the past and might therefore have personal resources to draw upon and confidence that she can cope again; in the second she is undeserving of her success, as if it has been contingent upon some external force. Britney's fear of the impermanence of success also manifests itself in her management of her social network and she uses 'other people as motivation'. Britney quickly ends relationships with friends if she senses that they are becoming unhelpful influences:

> they brought a lot of negativity and I didn't need it, especially as I've had a lot of negativity in my life (Britney)

**Master theme 2: Feeling different but not alone**

All of the participants believed that as care leavers at university they were different in certain regards to others they considered part of their social network and peers who exist beyond it. This had an impact upon their understanding of how they had managed to succeed under conditions where they might be more likely to struggle. It also had different valence depending on how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis others. In the majority of instances where participants compared themselves to others, their conclusions were favourable.

Danielle and Britney find that being different to other care leavers motivates them, as they fear that they might somehow fail to maintain their own high standards both in education and in other domains and cease to be different. As well as motivating them, a belief in difference and specialness seems to enhance their self-esteem as they make favourable social comparisons. Alice is aware of having had different outcomes to other care leavers but tends to minimise her achievements, focussing on differences in her care experience. Carla is acutely and uncomfortably aware that she is different to most other students in terms of her care history and social class. To manage this difficult knowledge, she embraced this identity and reassured herself that she did not care and was only at university to gain her degree. Eve, who also notices that she is unusual in struggling to make friends at university, seems more aware of this as a painful situation and has experienced it as an insult to her self-concept.

3.5.1 Superordinate themes

Differences to (and similarities with) other care leavers

Not all of the participants spoke directly about perceived differences but Britney, Eve and Alice were proud of their achievements, which they recognised as being unusual for care leavers. Britney was very clear in describing the ways in which she differed from other care leavers. She stated that despite considerable hardship, she had managed to live in accordance with her own values and those dictated by her culture (she is from a black African Muslim family). Although she felt constrained at times by cultural norms and expectations, she found that having an explicit set of rules for behaviour, monitored by her community, prevented her from coping with her distress unhealthily:

> (…) the childhood I have had I could have come out as a different person, I could've become a rebel, I could have turned to a lot of things to relieve my stress (Britney)

Britney also identified members of her extended family as having initially nurtured her and then coached her through the years spent in care. The care system was described in entirely unfavourable terms but supportive contact with family had ensured that she did not succumb to the problems she witnessed in other children in care.

Eve, who lived at home until she was 14, was repelled by the behaviour and social skills of the people she met in sheltered accommodation:

> (…) seeing the kind of people who were there (pause) I reflected that maybe I don't want this kind of life (…) there were a lot of drugs and teenagers with four year olds, a lot of shouting, not much going on, there was no ambition there (Eve)

While her observations of the other young people in sheltered accommodation did not directly lead to her decision to attend university (see 'Different to other students…' below), she cited it as a formative experience and motivation to work hard so that she might avoid a similar fate and maintain her positive difference.

Alice shared Britney and Eve's belief that she is different to other care leavers, construing this difference in similarly positive terms. However, her attribution for her own relative and unusual success differed markedly. Alice was thankful that she was taken into care and believed that she was lucky to have had one, consistent foster carer who persevered when Alice's behaviour was challenging and when Alice had difficulty sharing her foster mother's care with her birth daughter. Alice did not speak about her success as being exceptional in the context of considerable early adversity.

### Different to family

Participants differed in the extent to which they identified as being similar or different to their birth parents and families of origin. This difference seemed less important to most participants than other comparisons, although for Alice and Britney it was something they spoke about proudly, hence its final inclusion as a superordinate theme.

As described above, Alice reported being thankful that she was taken into care as she received consistent parenting from her foster mother, whom she credited with helping her to achieve educationally and with protecting her from her family's antisocial behaviour. She described her brothers as 'very troublesome, one is in prison, one is not in prison, but is acting like that is where he wants to be'. Alice

has a long-term romantic relationship and now spends much of her time with her

fiancé's family, whose closeness she contrasted with her own:

> Which isn't the same for my family, yeah, um so it kind of like fills a void and he, my mum passed away when I was eight, but his mum is very motherly, so I even call her mum like she's very nurturing and welcoming so that's another void that's kind of been filled (Alice)

Despite her foster mother and her fiancé's parents filling the 'void' left by her

family's absence, Alice continued to play a crucial part in the life of her birth

family and she referred to herself (picking up on my suggested descriptor) as

their 'matriarch'. Her role is to support her frail grandfather as her father is

cannot be relied upon to do so and to take care of the brother not in prison. She is

then a part of her family but apart from them.

Although highly critical of the care system, Britney reflected on her entry into

care as a turning point, one which meant she came to have different aspirations to

her parents:

> It's more like women are objects of having children and feeding children and taking care of the house and taking care of the family, and men are supposed to go out and work (…) my parents and my grandparents are in that kind of mind frame (Britney)

Britney has not rejected her culture but stated that she has been influenced

positively by others from outside of her culture and by those within it who are

less 'traditional'. These extra-familial influences had an impact on the choices

she made, including the decision to attend university.

<u>Different to other students: "not here to make friends"</u>

All of the young people considered themselves to be quite different to their university peers. None had disclosed their care history to other students and none intended to, this was considered a deeply private matter not to be shared. In describing their social networks, it was apparent that none of the participants associated regularly with other students. Most (with the exception of Eve) named a few (>2) friends from outside university, and these were often long-term friendships. University acquaintances were treated as transient relationships, often relatively superficial and existing to pass time or as 'study buddies'. Some participants (Carla, Alice and Danielle) had lived away from campus and Carla and Danielle were attempting to balance the demands of motherhood with being a student. In terms of time-use, for these young people university was treated like a job, somewhere they visited during working hours to complete tasks. It is therefore unsurprising perhaps that they had not become close to other students and that they did not identify as typical students. Danielle and Alice seemed comfortable with being different to other students and both had large social networks away from university, with social lives they were content with.

Carla appeared to have more complex feelings about her self-avowed difference to other students:

> I'm not like most of this lot, see they're all posh and serious, I'm not like that I wanna go out and do my thing (Carla)

She identifies marked class differences as well as a difference in attitude towards studying. Carla spoke about being unconcerned about this difference, although

her determination to dismiss other students (she spoke elsewhere about being 'not bothered' about forming friendships with other students) was incongruent with her tone, which seemed defensive. When asked further about the balance of student and non-student friendships she said:

> most of the people I grew up with are in prison or have loads of kids or into drugs so I'm still friends with some of the people I grew up with still and I am making friends as well but not so much because I'm not here to make friends and do all of that stuff, I'm here to get my degree and leave (Carla)

Here Carla quickly explains that her reason for not making student friends is because she is only attending university as a means to an end. This is at odds with her previous assertion that she does not associate with them because she wishes to pursue less serious activities.

Eve stated that she had wanted to make serious friendships but has failed to do so. She explained her tripartite rationale for coming to university:

> (…) it gives me shelter, I'll be the same as everyone else, the same position and I get a student loan (laughs) which will kind of get me along and that's how I made my decision (Eve)

Eve wanted to: 1) find shelter; 2) to be similar to other students; and 3) to have financial security. She reflected on how on the first and final points university had met her expectations but that she had not been able to 'fit in'. Eve found that she actually felt conspicuous as a care leaver and described arriving at student halls alone with few belongings and subsequently finding it difficult to make friends, despite being articulate, well presented and engaging. Although she did not explicitly make this connection at interview, Eve's inability to make friends at university seemed to be due to the level of investment she made in a romantic

relationship, her belief that she was different and would not be accepted and anxiety about trusting others too quickly.

With the exception of Eve then, the participants treated university functionally, as a place for the serious business of gaining qualifications. This meant that they were less interested and less likely to become part of the university community in the way many of their peers will have. Britney explained that:

> To be honest university wasn't something that I was very passionate about, until now not very passionate about university. I'm more passionate about getting to where I want to be and if university is the route I have to take then okay I'll take it (Britney)

Finally, Danielle spoke about difficulties she foresees if she is able to take the opportunities her university education might offer:

> [my friends] wouldn't be able to do things I would do so sooner or later we're bound to like separate if that makes sense, so if I say 'let's go to this nice restaurant' and (…) they're trying to catch themselves for the month (…) they might be like 'oh yeah that's way out of my budget' (laughs) do you know what I mean, so I think in that way obviously your lifestyle sort of changes, your class (Danielle)

Danielle worried that she could potentially find herself not only different to her new social milieu but estranged from her current friends as they may not be able to keep pace with her upwardly mobile lifestyle. However, she accepts this as a reasonable cost of providing a better life for herself and her daughter.

(Different but) not alone

Some aspects of the participants' social networks are threaded through other superordinate themes but '(Different but) not alone' describes how all of the

young people, although conscious of being different to many of those around them, were able to draw on the reliable support of members of their social network. Furthermore, certain commonly shared features are identified, including continuing involvement in the family, the presence of a trusted confidante, a division of labour and for two participants the continued value of now absent (deceased) fathers.

With the exception of Eve, all participants remained close to some people in their family of origin and maintaining family relationships was important to them. As described above, Alice considered herself to be the matriarch of her family, negotiating between factions in conflict and providing material and emotional support to those she was in a position to help. Britney's social network diagram was strikingly absent of people from outside of her extended family and many of the people whom she referred to as 'friends' were also related to her, including a cousin / best friend. Despite describing strained relationships with many family members, Carla's social network diagram lacked any non-family members. She socialised with friends from her community but reported that none were close, citing her eldest sister as her best friend. Danielle did have friends from outside of her family but was heavily involved in supporting more vulnerable siblings. One of her sisters lived with her at the time of interview and another sister had also lived with Danielle previously.

Without the presence of family or friends, Eve's boyfriend was her sole source of support and confidante. She socialised with his friends and relied upon him for emotional support. Having had few supportive others available before her

boyfriend, she had co-created a trusting substitute dyad. Carla found something similar in her relationship with her sister. Carla's sister was of a similar age and shared some of Carla's experiences. Britney and her cousin / best friend were in 'constant contact', each encouraging the other communicating by telephone and social media several times a day. Britney also had a less reciprocal relationship, in terms of sharing responsibility, with her grandmother's sister. In this relationship Britney found the ongoing unconditional care not available elsewhere. Together, these relatives provided for Britney trusted relationships wherein she was able to disclose intimate concerns. She also described her boyfriend as a 'stabilising influence'.

The division of labour mentioned above was most apparent in Danielle's description of her social network. Each member of her social network was assigned a specific role, depending upon their suitability for tasks. Other participants were less rigid in their descriptions but Britney and Alice assigned functional roles to certain important others.

A less generalised feature of participants' social networks was the continued value of fathers who had passed away during childhood. Carla believed that her step-father had taught her the value of hard work and had led her to be more self-disciplined, with this realisation coming years after he died. Danielle described how her father continued to play a valuable role in her internal conversations:

> I don't know where I stand with myself or I'm just like really sad then I go into like my little mode where like I've got a picture of my dad and my flat and erm like I might be like 'help me I don't know what I'm doing next' (Danielle)

In situations where Danielle struggled to decide on the best course of action or where she needs some reassurance, she imagines her father is present offering wise advice. Not only does this complete her deliberations, or internal conversations, it also serves to maintain imagined proximity to an attachment figure.

## 3.6 Master theme 3: Strategies employed to protect the self, "I've got this big story and I only give them one chapter of the book"

This theme relates to the various inter- and intra-psychic strategies participants use to keep themselves safe from actual and imagined harm. All participants either described or alluded to a fear of being hurt by others or by painful memories. Their strategies were highly individual, therefore shown below are both across-case themes and one within-case theme which is presented as an exemplar of an idiosyncratic mental activity which may have been adaptive but has unfortunate consequences for the young person.

### Preparing for the worst

Most participants (the exception being Carla, who claimed not to plan at all, whether by preparing, rehearsing or in any other way) described rehearsing negative scenarios when faced with uncertain outcomes. In doing so they believed that by lowering their expectations they would be less disappointed should the worst case be realised. They also believed that they would be better equipped to manage practically.

> I go over a really bad scenario like what could possibly really, really go wrong, and then once I prepare myself if anything does go wrong I'm prepared for it, cause I've already run over it in my head and how to deal with it (Alice)

None of the participants reported that this strategy had any significant disadvantages, although Alice was told by friends that she was too pessimistic at times.

### Clearly defined social network roles

This theme was influential in the Master theme: 'Feeling different but not alone', subsumed under '(Different but) not alone'. Here it stands alone as defining roles clearly serves an additional protective function for the young people, insofar as it creates predictability and consistency.

### Compartmentalizing

Compartmentalizing refers to a tendency for some participants to be careful about with whom they shared parts of their biography and current lives. Eve was perhaps the most extreme example although it was unclear the extent to which this was a consequence of having a very small social network. Danielle likened her approach to a book, whereby chapters could be seen but the full story rarely shared:

> I would tell her but I wouldn't tell her the full story it's like I've got this big story, imagine having like a book and I give them one chapter of the book but because they don't know each other the book never makes sense (Danielle)

Danielle found that by compartmentalizing she was able to maintain some distance and privacy, whilst simultaneously feeling as understood as was comfortable.

Imagination feels real

This within-case theme was unique to Britney but described in rich detail, occurring at multiple points in her account. In an effort to protect herself from relational pain and disappointment, Britney tends to ruminate about other people, particularly their intentions towards her.

> Sometimes I repeat something in my head too much, where I make up scenarios so much that I've started to believe it's real (…) for example, if I have an issue with somebody and I see that person talking to some someone else, in my head I will think they're talking about me (…) and it'll become so real in my head that I'll think okay, yeah, it's true, definitely they're talking about me (Britney)

It appeared that when Britney believes herself to be under interpersonal threat, her capacity to mentalize is affected and her imagination takes on a real quality. In these situations, she relies on other people to help her to 'snap out of it' and reconnect with reality.

Protecting the self from painful memories

Participants described an array of behavioural and cognitive strategies which enable them to cope with or avoid memories of trauma and past distress. For all of the young people, keeping busy serves to occupy their minds and distract them from painful memories.

It might reasonably be expected then that the young people also avoided distress in their current lives. Instead, they variously described taking positive risks, most visibly in their decision to go to university where their academic performance would be closely monitored. Most of the participants had also taken relational

risks in finding romantic partners whom they relied upon to provide valuable

emotional support.

> He helps me out, he's always there whatever the problem and he doesn't
> judge not really, I don't think (Eve)

In addition to keeping busy and focussing on ultimate goals / projects, the young

people showed themselves to have a variety of idiosyncratic strategies which they

utilised to protect themselves from remembering how difficult their childhoods

had at times been.

Britney described what she called 'disattaching' (sic) whenever she remembers

events and associated feelings:

> (…) if I keep thinking about it too much and it's just becoming worse, I
> kind of just stop thinking about it, like I kind of like pull myself away and
> I just focus on something else (…) I just stop, and then I push it back and
> it's bad because once I push it back and it comes forward again at some
> point it's like an emotion that I feel like is (…) happening right now,
> because I haven't resolved it, I haven't put it away and said okay well, that
> was resolved, that was finished, like you don't feel that way anymore
> (Britney)

Britney's main strategy seemed to be one of avoidance and thought suppression,

which was all too often unsuccessful in protecting her from distress. Britney

appeared to describe trauma symptoms in the above extract, having intrusive

thoughts and memories, unsuccessful cognitive avoidance and reliving. Although

she manages to cope and function well in all aspects of her life, she seems to be

constantly fighting against an unrelenting history which threatens to overwhelm

her.

Alice, whose evaluation of her time in care was mostly positive, recalled some of the ways she managed to cope with parts that were challenging, such as separation from siblings.

> (…) at the weekends my sister would take me and I would spend the weekend at her house and all these things were super-exciting as they are your real family and you get to see them, so by the time I got home I would already be like trying to re-live how much fun I had at the weekend 'cause during the week I wasn't going to have it (Alice)

Alice used the colloquial descriptor 're-live' to denote memory replay and a mental rehearsal in which she concentrated on positive elements. In so doing she held on to a mental representation of her older sister as an ongoing presence in a life separate from her family. Although tinged with sadness, this strategy seemed to have helped to nourish and sustain her while apart from her sister, who elsewhere was described as the only person Alice did not have to worry about and whom she could depend upon.

## 3.7 A divergent case: Carla

The themes presented above used data which either converged phenomenologically or diverged but in a thematically-related way. For example, in Britney's account, she had a strategy for protecting herself (similar to other participants) which was unsuccessful, even in the short-term (different). The content of Carla's interview diverged significantly from the other data and so the additional within-case themes found are presented separately.

Carla cancelled one meeting prior to the first interview and did not attend the scheduled second meeting, cancelling five minutes after it was due to begin and not responding to correspondence thereafter. Carla presented as being

uncomfortable with the formality of the interview and the researcher modified it to better match her needs as a participant, adjusting and simplifying questions and attempting to be more attuned to verbal and non-verbal communication that she had said as much as she wished to. Given the paucity of data, it would be insincere to act as if the themes below were supported by multiple examples in the text. Nevertheless, her case remains important as her experience is as valuable as others and her account may illuminate themes applicable to the large number of students targeted for participation who did not respond or attend.

Superordinate theme 1: Rejecting introspection

When asked to reflect upon and describe her internal conversations, Carla's reaction was to intimate that this was an unnatural thing for her to do.

> I don't really know these things, I've never really thought about them so I don't know the answers, do you know what I mean, it's just how I am

Her reaction was likely born in part from embarrassment and a reluctance to allow a stranger to hear her intimate concerns. An associated anxiety may have been that to acknowledge contemplating her own needs and feelings may have felt too exposing as it might for her be associated with weakness. When Carla talked about imagining how other people's internal conversations might sound, she mimicked an overly uncertain, meek and unassertive voice, to say 'oh, I hope I don't upset them'.

Superordinate theme 2: Practical reflexivity

Carla was more likely to use internal conversations and reflexivity in practical matters than in interpersonal ones. Relational reflexivity overlaps with Theme 1.

When describing planning, she reported being poor with financial matters ('I'm rich for a week, then I'm poor for a year') but described other examples of effective planning, where she recalled posing questions to herself which proved helpful, for example when making decisions about parties she has organised for friends and family. Her account of planning to go to university and then to change course after an academic year was sparse but coherent. She was able to articulate concerns (status, security) and her project (university) was self-evident.

Superordinate theme 3: Family as social network

Carla's limited elaboration of internal conversations, concerns and project allowed time for her ecogram to be completed at her first and only interview. Her decisions about who ought to be included on the diagram, as well as the others she referenced in the first section showed that all of the people whom she considers important are family relations. Other non-textual data seems to confirm this: the interview was disturbed twice by telephone calls from family members and Carla became visibly more interested as the interview focussed explicitly on her genogram. When describing the influence of people included on the ecogram from outside of her family she said:

> They're not that important though, they're just around, they're fine like just people I know and I'm friends with or have known but not that important (…)

Carla is dismissive of the importance of people outside her closed network of family. Having experienced forced separation from them she may need to keep them close, fearing their loss and perhaps struggling with individuation. Given her experience, it may be that she lacks object constancy (Kernberg, 1966) and struggles to believe that  they will remain available if she strays too far away (she

lives with her grandmother and attends the most local university). For Carla this may pose a potential problem: her family are seen as her only source of stability and safety but may also contribute to difficulties. Carla's solution may alternatively be seen as developmentally appropriate given the disruptions she has experienced and her sister is a source of emotional and practical support.

Superordinate theme 4: Insecurity about status

Carla described herself as 'power hungry, always wanting more'. It might be that Carla's experience of emotional and material deprivation (inferred from her large family, her mother's likely preoccupation with multiple romantic relationships, being in care and the socioeconomic hardship in her estate) may have led to an insatiable appetite (Boris, 1986) which manifests itself in a need for power and control, or else a need for safety satisfied by accumulating power.

Carla had some trouble identifying a reason for wanting to go to university, stating without a great deal of conviction that increasing her employment opportunities might have been a factor in her decision. The researcher offered some typical reasons why a young person might want to attend university and Carla seized on status with some urgency, indicating that it resonated with her.

> (…) this is going to sound bad but I just like to come across as better than people, like I don't think I'm actually better than people it's just that, I don't know really (…)

While seeming apprehensive about being perceived as having grandiose ideas about herself, Carla did state that she wanted others to see her as superior, to 'come across as better'. Elsewhere Carla expressed ambivalence about others' perceptions of her, dismissive of their opinions but occasionally seeming

concerned about the esteem she might be held in. Carla may need others to consider her a person of importance if she has felt unimportant to others or overlooked in the past, both likely given the conditions described above.

Superordinate theme 5: Blaming herself

This theme overlaps with the earlier across-case theme 'protecting the self from painful memories'. Carla managed to depersonalise her own care experience, or rather accepted a disproportionate amount of responsibility for being taken into care:

> My mum just couldn't cope, she had three younger children, at the time I was like 'you bitch you've left me' (laughs) but she's a really good woman like she works, works really hard she just couldn't cope (…) it just got to the point where my mum just took me to [name of Children's Services building] one day and was like 'you need to take her and do something with her because I just cannot cope' and erm looking back now when I think about it I really get it (Carla)

In this account nobody is responsible for her having been in care (elsewhere, as already discussed, Carla blames herself) and she is a victim of circumstance rather than of any wider problems at home. If Carla can believe this to be an accurate reflection of events then, at least superficially, her personal biography can be a less painful story of unfortunate events with external origins.

**3.8 Modes of reflexivity**

The strong theme of proud independence identified within the young people's internal conversations would *appear* to suggest an autonomous style of reflexivity for most of those interviewed. Indeed, there were numerous examples of situational autonomous reflexivity, such as when Britney reflected on her self-contained process of decision making:

> I do ask myself questions (…) but most of the time it is more about making up scenarios, making up images, making up stories, making up possibilities and what ifs and stuff like that, questions usually come up when I want to do something and then, huh, I'll say okay do this (Britney)

However, participants' responses to questions about differing aspects of their internal conversation did not support the suggestion that autonomous reflexivity predominates, showing instead that they were also likely to consult with others, using the counsel of trusted interlocutors to complete their internal conversations, a tendency Archer categorised as communicative. Alice explained how reassurance from friends helps her clarify the best course of action before she embarks on projects:

> Long-term decisions, they really tear me up, they actually really do and I need, I feel like I need, sometimes I know the answer, but I want someone else to say the same answer as me to make me feel like my answer is right (Alice)

The young people may then sometimes use communicative reflexivity but do so in particular contexts. A further deviation from the Archer's description of the group she called 'communicative reflexives', is that participants in the present study were not concerned to replicate the main features of their familial relationships. Archer (2012) argues that communicative reflexives identify closely with their natal context, having been both in receipt of high relational goods from their families and having highly valued those relational goods. The young people interviewed here, with the exception of Carla, showed that they drew upon communicative strategies without relying on them exclusively and without being constrained by a need to maintain good relationships and long-term proximity with close others, the prediction made by Archer. Alice's flexible

use of reflexivity demonstrates this succinctly, suggesting elements of both communicative and autonomous reflexivity:

> nine times out of ten times I will call my friend (…) and I'll ask her and she might give me clarity about what, what's going on, um, but I also think about myself when I'm, especially when I'm at work, I think about my day today, my day yesterday, what I could have done differently (Alice)

### 3.9 Summary of results

Participants expressed a belief that they have been able to manage the considerable adversity faced thus far and a confidence in their ability to cope with future challenges. They expressed pride in having coped when help and support had not been forthcoming, however the use of complimentary ecograms facilitated more discussion about the role of others initially overlooked or whose influence may have been minimised.

A belief that they were different to various foci of comparison, including family, other care leavers and other students was another overarching theme. This appeared to have been integrated into their identities but was a source of discomfort for at least some of the participants. The superordinate theme '(different but) not alone' captured the many and varied ways in which the young people were connected to others in their social network, despite perceived differences.

The young people had experienced various and sometimes multiple forms of psychosocial deprivation and trauma so it is therefore unsurprising that despite their high level of academic (and, for the most part, social) functioning they were battling to cope with the emotional legacy of these experiences. All described

shared and idiosyncratic strategies for coping. However, Carla's case diverged from the others in terms of engagement with the research and her use of her internal conversations.

An attempt to categorise the dominant mode of reflexivity across- and even within-participants' accounts was not possible, given the lack of reflexive consistency in the data. Implications of this finding and other results will be discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4 – Discussion

## 4.1 Introduction

The internal conversation interview and the explanation of the theory underpinning it were found to be useful in helping the young people reflect upon internal processes. The interview primed participants to connect with their subjective experience it seemed and provided a language for elaborating on ideas which seemed not to have considered previously. The approach to data collection was successful in uncovering the content of their internal conversations and the themes which emerged from the data will be discussed later, particularly as they relate to their agency. It was less clear how the participants fitted Archer's reflexivity styles and this is where the discussion begins.

## 4.2 The reflexivity and internal conversations of care leavers at university

### 4.2.1 Reflexivity

Archer's theory (2003, 2007) begins with the proposition that most individuals are active agents whose internal conversations facilitate the development of their 'ultimate concerns', the things they care most about. Concerns lead to the formulation of projects which are courses of action compatible with their values. Reflexivity, mediating between structure and agency, is the process of reflecting on one's values to establish concerns, considering the opportunities available and initiating and sustaining projects which if accomplished (and even in the act of beginning) mean the individual knows their actions are congruent with their values.

According to Archer, individuals' reflexivity styles can be categorised into either: communicative reflexivity; autonomous reflexivity; meta-reflexivity; or fractured reflexivity (see section 1.7.4 for descriptions of each mode). With the exception of fractured reflexivity, all of these styles enabled individuals to establish concerns and develop projects but differed in the type of concerns established (and thus the nature of compatible projects). Communicative reflexivity, Autonomous reflexivity and Meta-reflexivity were grounded in relational, status-related and socially-oriented concerns respectively. Fractured reflexivity is a disabling style in which internal conversations are incomplete and are not completed with interlocutors, meaning that concerns cannot be properly established and passivity predominates.

A previous study (Hung & Appleton, 2016) found that the care leavers interviewed did not fit Archer's reflexivity typology and proposed an additional style: Survival-oriented reflexivity. This was similar to the 'survivalist self-reliance' found by Samuels and Price (2008) and described a reflexivity driven by a desire to survive after leaving care, where the internal conversations focussed on the present, cognitive distortions were common and projects impossible to initiate. Hung and Appleton (2016) argued that it differed from Archer's fractured reflexivity insofar as concerns existed but could not be separated from reflexivity, as concerns to be self-reliant and self-protective in order to remain safe meant that reflexivity was limited to the short-term. In the present research, a-priori theory (from Archer's model and Hung and Appleton's revision) was incorporated into the analysis by beginning at an inductive level

and then coding data at levels corresponding to modes of reflexivity, different types of internal conversation, different concerns and projects.

An attempt in the present study to find whether the young people studied shared a style of reflexivity or whether they could realistically be categorised as having a style of reflexivity at an individual level yielded ambiguous and inconclusive results. One participant (Carla) had developed an, albeit rather vague, concern to do 'better' than her peers, and her project which involved finishing her degree had been initiated. She was therefore not a passive agent but did not seem to use reflexivity regularly. The remaining participants did not fit neatly into either Autonomous or Communicative categories, with each having elements of both styles. This was evidenced by their accounts of their internal conversations, some of which were completed autonomously and others through external conversation, and the nature of their concerns, which were both relational and status-related.

It is a temptation in these circumstances, but empirically indefensible, to nominate a new hybrid category to reflect the findings of the present research. A more honest treatment is to pose questions about the claim that reflexivity can indeed be validly categorised into distinct entities. Taken as a whole, these findings along with Hung and Appleton (2016) and Archer (2003; 2007), suggest that the model may be incomplete and reflexivity may be more nuanced and context-dependent (given the differences in findings) than previously conceptualised. An alternative conclusion is that this part of Archer's model (that reflexivity is categorical and that categorical differences go some way to explain

why people with similar experiences and opportunities exercise agency differently) is a tautology, wherein the finding that individuals fit neatly into categories after they are fitted into categories is taken as evidence for the validity of those categories.

4.2.2 Internal conversations

The present research also sought to uncover the content and application of the internal conversations of care leavers at university and what these might suggest about agency and perceived agency. The first master theme, *Experiencing the self as an effective agent, "I know that I'm smart and I know that I'm able to accomplish a lot"*, speaks directly to ideas of perceived agency. All of the young people described a belief in their ability to manage everyday and greater challenges, comparing themselves with their peers favourably.

The strongest evidence for the contribution of the internal conversation to the belief underlying this theme was found in the area of *Planning*. Carla claimed not to need to plan in order to be effective and her functioning and achievements supported this claim, while Eve believed that planning could be useful but that she relied to a greater extent on acting decisively. Given their having experienced unpredictable and momentous change in childhood, one might have expected planning to therefore feel futile (Stein, 2005). For the majority of participants however, planning was crucial to success and they believed in their ability to execute plans successfully. Indeed all had recent experience of successful planning to reach university which suggests that their perceived agency is an accurate reflection of their abilities.

Although planning was considered by participants to be an unexceptional ability, the qualities underlying a related theme, *Proud independence*, were highly valued. Having managed in the past without the support of family, participants felt confident in their ability to continue to do so, with this theme therefore overlapping with *Being able to cope*. Certain similarities exist between these themes and survival reflexivity (Hung and Appleton, 2016) and survivalist self-reliance (Samuels and Price, 2008), insofar as they are strongly individually oriented. Where they differ is in the relative cost to care leavers holding these views of themselves, others and the world. Whereas in the two previous studies, the prevailing attitude towards the self was one of vulnerability compensated for through unhelpful cognitive biases and protected by avoidance and hypervigilance, here the self is a competent actor. Others were perceived as unavailable in the previous studies and, while some participants were slightly sceptical of the willingness of other people to help, their wariness did not prevent them from seeking support.

As well as differences in experiences of care, current context and the meaning construed from these, some of the difference observed may be a function of the methodological differences between the studies: participants in the present research were explicitly directed to talk about their social network, facilitating extensive discussion of other people.

The individual characteristics implicit in *Experiencing the self as an effective agent* have been reflected upon by this particular group of young people prior to

the interviews and seem to be a fundamental part of their positive self-concept (Judge, Erez, Bono & Thoresen, 2002). The belief that they will be able to cope enhances their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993) and their (well founded) narrative that they have been effective agents in spite of adversity is a likely source of self-esteem. Supporting this conclusion is the observation that participants chose to focus on independence as this was not part of the interview schedule, although it might be argued that the frame of the interview encouraged such a tendency.

A further influence on participants' self-esteem, although in this case probably with both positive and negative effects, is the perceived difference to others described in the second master theme, *Feeling different but not alone*. The difference was predominantly experienced and described in positive terms, such as when the young people contrasted their lives with those of family, or when comparing themselves with peers perceived to be less mature. It was interesting to note that participants did not use the personal pronoun 'we' in any of the interviews.

However, here arises a further problem for Archer's theory of reflexivity, one which coincidentally has been explored in the psychological literature on reflexivity. Turning one's gaze towards the self figuratively is not akin to looking into a mirror to examine physical appearance (Rosa, 2015) and the individual's self-reflections are necessarily imperfect representations. The impact of this on individuals' reflexivity (in Archer's use of the term) is to potentially compromise the effectiveness of their internal conversations. Hence, where participants' self-reflections are based on a representation of self which has since forming changed,

the conclusions drawn about their capabilities and opportunities might be outdated and inaccurate. Feeling different, as well as believing others will not be available (an aspect of the first theme), may have been adaptive in past conditions but may preclude, in this case, making friends with other students or embracing university life. For Eve, the impact of difference on her self-worth was experienced more directly. Her concern to become part of an accepting group of her peers led her to initiate the project of higher education to make friends as she saw university as a potential leveller, which ultimately in this regard was a failure. Here, Eve's previous experience of living in supported accommodation was the context for reflexive deliberation, through which she eventually came to the decision to study for a degree. Hers is an example of ostensibly effective reflexivity leading to disappointment rather than a modus vivendi.

The third master theme, *Strategies employed to protect the self, "I've got this big story and I only give them one chapter of the book"*, describes some of the vulnerabilities the young people work hard, literally and psychologically, to defend themselves against. Perhaps mirroring their everyday unwanted occurrence, these vulnerabilities burst through in interviews, not in the sense that participants were reliving past trauma but rather that they would mention or allude to some unwanted memory and quickly switch the focus of their narrative onto something less aversive. The theoretical framework of Archer's reflexivity cannot account for these trauma responses (and was not intended as a way of understanding them). Instead, psychological theories of posttraumatic resilience (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005) can illuminate processes involved in coping with

trauma and theories of posttraumatic stress disorder (Ehlers & Clark, 2000) and complex trauma (Briere & Scott, 2015) can account for the trauma responses displayed by some participants.

## 4.3 The social networks of care leavers at university

The method of analysis employed did not allow mathematical analysis of social network structure, nor was this deemed the appropriate level of analysis given the idiographic focus of the social network research questions. Instead, the construction of ecomaps and accompanying descriptions facilitated the exploration of subjective qualities of participants' social networks. However, some of the findings in SNA will be used to inform this discussion.

As previously stated, the young people emphasized their personal contribution to their successes, referencing supportive others as useful when making more important decisions and in some cases providing support in the form of solidarity, particularly from within the family. The ecomaps (henceforth denoting the ecomaps and associated commentary) showed that family and friends may be more important than initially presented and satisfied the criteria for 'social provisions' set out by Weiss (1974). One explanation for this partial omission is that these supportive others have now come to be a consistent part of participants' social milieu and therefore, paradoxically, less conspicuous to them. This would fit with predictions made by the 'main effect' hypothesis (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) which contends that individuals perceiving themselves to have greater self-efficacy and higher self-esteem will enjoy an overall benefit from social network quality rather than the more visible

'buffering' effect when networks assist in times of acute need. An additional explanation is that the closeness observed in the ecomaps is not synonymous in any simplistic sense with receiving help. As was seen in the Results, the young people in this study were themselves a reliable source of support for others, especially for siblings. Two participants (Danielle and Alice) were accommodating a sibling who was unable to live at home and another (Carla) described taking a nurturing role for her younger siblings. These three participants have found in their sibling relationships a caring dyad which has some of the qualities of an attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1969), in terms of comfort and closeness, without the uncertainty and discomfort of dependency which being cared for may bring.

In terms of social support, specifically of the type conceptualised by Lin (2001) as access to resources or social capital, the young people did not describe being part of wider networks of embedded resources which they could utilise for information, to command influence or enhance their own credentials (Lin, 1999). They had not had the advantages conferred by high social capital but instead had made a little go a long way, to extend the financial analogy (Kadushin, 2004). In other words, they had succeeded in getting to university despite not having relationships with those with the power to influence and provide advantage, who were absent from their ecomaps (even after prompting). This finding supports the idea that the young people had high levels of social competence and agency, so that lacking high social capital they were nevertheless able to achieve their goals.

**4.4 Internal conversations, social networks and resilience**

To return to a statistic cited earlier in this study, the proportion of care leavers gaining university places was just 7% in 2010 (Driscoll, 2011) compared with a general population more than a third. This study sought to explore the experiences of care leavers at university who by achieving that feat could be described as displaying resilience in a broad sense, insofar as they have 1) been exposed to severe adversity; and 2) achieved positive adaptation in spite of assaults on the developmental process (Luthar, 2010). Resilience was not a primary focus of the present research but is discussed as some findings illuminate aspects of the construct and in the introduction resilience was found to be useful in bridging outcome research and Archer's theory of agency and reflexivity.

Rutter (1987, 2012), from a Dynamic Systems Theory perspective, has argued that resilience should be considered the result of an interaction of multiple systems, on individual, familial and societal levels. The present study focussed on the individual and familial / extra-familial levels from the subjective position of the care leavers at university. How then did their accounts of successful coping fit with or deviate from those factors proposed in the literature as interacting to contribute to resilience?

Rutter (2012) identified critical occurrences which may facilitate change not predicted by the adversity individuals have faced, notably 'steeling' and 'turning point' effects. Evidence of some specific well-defined turning points was present in the results. Eve described her experience of living in supported accommodation as being a time in her life where she reflected on the kind of

person she did not want to become. For Danielle, it seems given her determination to be financially successful that having a daughter may have been a turning point. However, this is an observation deduced from rather than explicit in her account. Alice clearly states that being taken into care and having a single consistent and supportive carer was pivotal in her success. Britney similarly identified being taken into care as a turning point, despite being highly critical of the care she subsequently received, as it meant she was allowed some separation from a natal culture which she believes would have inhibited her. Surviving care may have had a steeling effect for Danielle, who ascribed some of her independence to the repeated experience of feeling let down and learning to do things herself. For other participants, the experience of feeling different and excluded seemed to have had a steeling effect, insofar as they understood both that their childhood experiences had been more difficult than most of their peers and that their achievements so far had exceeded their peers'. Alice is an exception, as compared herself with her siblings and her peers, concluding that she had been fortunate to have had her single foster carer. This may be a reasonable conclusion to draw given the parameters of her reasoning, however it rather ignores evidence that the success of her placement likely to have been an interaction between carer's and her own qualities.

Returning to Rutter's (2012) multiple systems approach to understanding resilience in the context of the current research, participants were primarily focussed upon the individual level when making sense of their resilient functioning. This was evidenced in the first master theme, *Experiencing the self as an effective agent, "I know that I'm smart and I know that I'm able to*

*accomplish a lot"*, which represented participants strongly-held belief in their ability to manage challenges and move through life without the aid of others should that be necessary. In terms of the necessary conditions for resilience (Kotzé & Niemann, 2013) and reflexivity (Archer, 2003, 2007), namely individual agency and the ability to navigate opportunities and constraints effectively, participants' idiographic evidence leads to the conclusion that their contribution at an individual level is of primary significance. The results of the present study suggest that for most of the participants, a high level of agency is indeed a part of their stories of success, although that may underestimate the influence of other individual and societal features.

There are other factors likely to have exerted an influence which should be considered in discussing the results of this research. In the double hermeneutic of interpreting participants' attempts to understand their own experience (Smith, 2015) consideration is given to the interpersonal influences on certain utterances and narratives. Some of these, such as the propensity to present oneself in a favourable way, were addressed near source in the results. However, there are also ideological effects on participants' ways of understanding their experiences and themselves. The dominance of neoliberal ideology has colonised the subjectivity of individuals (Sugarman, 2015) and in 'neoliberal subjectivity' the individual takes full responsibility for their personal triumphs and failures (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001), although some do of course resist this way of understanding (Gill, 2008). Against this background, the importance placed by participants on their own agency in explaining resilience might be understood as an authentic, subjective yet culturally biased version.

A further consideration to be made in trying to understand participants' attempts to understand their experience is the nature of their attributions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Most of the young people in this study, in emphasizing the part that their own agency played in their success, did so at the expense of other personal characteristics. Notably, only one participant spoke about her intelligence as a factor relevant to her attending university education.

## 4.5 Conclusions

The attempt to ascertain whether the care leavers at university had a particular type of reflexivity was inconclusive. Their reflexivity was difficult to categorise, sharing autonomous and communicative features. Questions therefore arise about the validity of the construct, for while it may be a useful heuristic in Archer's sociological model, participants in the present study did not fit with its predictions.

The major themes to emerge in the young people's internal conversations were a belief in their individual effectiveness and robustness, a sense of being different to others and strategies used to cope. The findings from narrative identity research and theory (Singer, 2004; McAdams & McLean, 2013) might help to understand the connection between these themes and their resilience. The theory posits that if able to find a coherent and believable story of 'redemption' from suffering in which their personal agency played a part and integrate this with a hopeful imagined future, individuals may have enhanced well-being.

The themes outlined might have been expected to have a deleterious impact on their social network, through avoidance and alienation. However, it was found that, although a narrative of personal agency might limit the participants' perception (or at least their accounts) of available others, their social networks were mostly populated by enough supportive people to be supportive.

## 4.6 Clinical implications

The young people who kindly participated in this study would be classed amongst Stein's (2006) 'moving on' group. Most of them enjoyed a degree of stability and continuity after being placed into care and, as is self-evident, achieved educational success before leaving care. They also had emotionally supportive people around them, usually from their extended family, even if they may arguably have tended to downplay their importance. This stability and availability of support, relative to many other care leavers, has given them the foundation on which to build a successful early adulthood and most appeared to be managing the rigours of university life well. The question raised by Winterburn (2015) as to whether a 'good parent' would be more ambitious for children in their care seems apposite here. The present study suggests that when the aforementioned needs are met, individuals who have experienced some of early life's most acute challenges can succeed. Of course, the present study was cross-sectional in design, interviewed a small cohort of care leavers and was interested in exploring their subjective experiences so findings cannot be generalised but does demonstrate that pessimistic early assumptions about the potential of care leavers are ill-advised.

The study showed that ecomaps are useful in facilitating discussion beyond the individual and even the family to capture a wider field of connected others. Where the social network is identified as a target area for clinical interventions, the ecomap could be useful in helping clients work out who might be available. Alternatively, it could be used in the assessment phase.

In terms of concrete clinical suggestions, the young people interviewed were proud of their achievements and keen to share their experiences, which might mean that students like them could be recruited as aspirational peer mentors for children in care. (Note, this is not a suggestion that raising aspirations alone is a solution for children in care who would be classed as 'surviving' or 'victims' in Stein's (2006) typology).

It was found that the results in the present study *seem* to fit with the predictions made in narrative identity theory (Singer, 2004), with the successful care leavers describing stories of personal agency, coping with suffering and a hopeful future. Of course, it is not possible to establish the direction of this relationship, but if narrative identities do indeed enhance well-being then in cases where care leavers experience heightened levels of distress, a treatment which aims to help young people construct such stories could be beneficial. Wengraf and Chamberlayne (2006) outline a method of data collection and analysis, the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method, which could be amenable to adaptation for this purpose.

The university at which the students are studying was a Buttle UK Quality Mark establishment, meaning that the institution committed to investing in supporting

care leavers to access further and higher education. The study asked whether participants believed they had been assisted in any way by the Care Leavers officer or the wider department managing Buttle Mark tasks. None of the students believed they had been aided in any way despite all knowing about the programme, a common response being that the support being offered was positive but that they did not require assistance which reflects the first master theme in this study. However, their experience of university life was not homogenous and while other participants lived in their own accommodation or with extended family (Carla), Eve found living on campus an exposing and difficult experience. While the young adults studied are likely, given their propensity to avoid being positioned in a help-seeking role, to struggle to engage with support when it is offered, Eve's experience suggests that focussed and proactive support in the first few weeks of university could be beneficial and facilitate greater integration into student life.

It is not possible, given the design of the study, to ascertain whether agency predicts better functioning in this population or whether it is a result of the presence of some other variable. It can be stated that increased agency seems to be present in those young people studied which may suggest that promoting qualities associated with it could increase the resilience of children in care. These qualities might be promoted directly, by finding ways to allow children greater opportunity to experience mastery of tasks and influence decisions made about them, which might help ameliorate the effects of learned helplessness amongst care leavers (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). In addition to direct interventions, the celebration by carers and professionals, including

teachers, of what could be missed as small instances of increased agency might be encouraged. The risk here is that agency becomes a construct with which to blame children for circumstances not of their own making, exaggerating the influence they really have versus infinitely more powerful proximal and distal forces (Smail, 2005).

## **4.7 Critical evaluation**

### 4.7.1 Strengths of the study

In assessing the strengths of the study, the criteria set out by Tracy (2010) will be followed and the provisions of Shenton (2004), included wherever relevant.

The present study explores a *worthy topic* (Tracy, 2010) both in the colloquial sense of examining an area affecting individuals often marginalised and in a sense truer to Tracy's meaning, insofar as it is an area little is known about as is evidenced by the dearth of literature available for review. The inclusion of social network data is novel, casting light on the wider proximal context of this population and participants beliefs about availability of help and support.

*Rigor* (Tracy, 2010) in the study came from following the methodology closely and consulting regularly with an experienced supervisor, particularly during the data analysis phase of the research (Shenton, 2004). Initial coding was checked against an audio recording and transcript. Background to the study was included in the Methods chapter and developed in the Reflexivity section in this Discussion, to establish the context of study so that comparisons can be made.

The use of semi-structured interviews and ecograms overlapped methods (Shenton, 2004).

British Psychological Society (BPS, 2010) ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the study and personal ethics meant a commitment to represent the subjective experience of participants accurately and sensitively. The preparation of the study involved a meeting with the university Access and Partnerships team at the study site, during which procedures were agreed for additional support should this be needed. The researcher remained in contact with the university contact throughout the data collection phase of the study. Participants were made fully aware of confidentiality and the risks and benefits of taking part in the study.

*Sincerity* of approach and intention (Tracy, 2010) was ensured through the use of a reflective diary, completed immediately after interviews, and by being transparent about the method used and the positioning of the researcher in the reflexive account below.

*Credibility* (Tracy, 2010). The researcher had nine years' experience working and effectively living with children in care or on the 'edge of care' (where Children's Services were involved in the supervision and monitoring of parental behaviour). The researcher also had experience as a Research Assistant contributing to a multi-site project, employed by an NHS Trust and was a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the time of undertaking the research.

4.7.2 Limitations of the study

A description of limitations begins with reference to Guba and Lincoln's (1994) As with any qualitative study, its transferability depends on its repetition with other groups and its dependability would only be demonstrated if the results of the present study were found to be compatible with those of a repeated study. The confirmability of the study could be argued to be questionable. This is due to the isolated nature of the later data analysis and assembly of master themes. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the research supervisor, comparison of analyses, as had been planned at the outset, did not take place. Therefore, despite a sincere and methodologically rigorous approach to data analysis in which stages of analysis were followed carefully, the results were not finally 'confirmed' by a second researcher.

A major difficulty encountered was recruiting a sufficient number of participants. The research proposal had originally specified six to nine recruits, with each participant interviewed twice. This target was based on the related Hung and Appleton (2016) study which had examined the reflexivity of nine care leavers. In that study, the relatively (relative to similar qualitative design studies) large sample was considered appropriate to the analysis method, which depended on reaching a minimum number of participants to allow dependable cross-case analysis. Recruitment was conducted online and the number of respondents was disappointing, despite repeated e-mail advertisement and promotion by the university's Access and Partnerships staff. Potential participants did not always meet as agreed, despite provisions being put in place to encourage them to do so. Two of the participants in the study cancelled interviews, another failed to return

for two rescheduled interviews and another two students did not attend their interviews. In every case of non-attendance, correspondence was initiated to encourage but not exert unfair pressure on them to attend at a later date. The result of this difficulty recruiting is likely to be that participants in the study were unrepresentative of their wider cohort, being more committed and less distracted by other events in their lives. This may have had an impact upon subsequent findings, with the 'lost' respondents perhaps more akin to Martin and Jackson's (2002) cohort who described much greater difficulty at university.

On reflection, there may have been methodological issues with the data collection tools used in the study. The first interview followed Archer's (2003, 2007) set of prompts and was helpful in focussing participants on their reflexivity and the way they used their internal conversations. However, prompting for particular kinds of internal conversation may have promoted their importance. The most important example in the present research is in planning, where there was a risk that the suggestion of a particular kind of internal conversation, allied with a desire on the part of the researcher to find prominent internal conversations, could lead to a kind of tautology, in which questions asked necessarily led to particular kinds of responses. The researcher was aware of this potential bias but nevertheless is it is difficult to disentangle priming questions from their responses.

The second interview focussed on a discussion centred on participants' ecograms. These were found to be useful in expanding subjectivity beyond the individual and encouraged a more contextual account of surviving and succeeding. The

ecograms however began at the person interviewed and worked out from that position. When designing the study, this seemed the most efficient means of constructing a picture of participants' proximal world. However, by beginning with the individual and moving through family and then friends onto other important people, the ecogram interview may have suggested family ought to be at the centre of an individual's ecosphere. A better way of approaching this interview might have been to allow the participants to lead the description of their social network rather than suggesting the natal family were the grounding on which a social network is built.

The implicit focus on agency in the interview protocol may have guided participants to focus on this aspect of their internal world at the expense of other ideas and their wider context. Gill (2008) argues that agency could be a smokescreen behind which wider influences hide. Her argument is that agency, or at least a focus upon it, has become central to the 'regulatory project' of neoliberalism at the expense of culture and subjectivity.

## 4.7 Reflexive account

This reflexive account comes at the very end of the thesis but is not an afterword and, I believe, is far from being an afterthought vis a vis the research. I was aware from the earliest discussions about the idea for the research that I had some connection to the topic and that I as result I began with a set of assumptions about the area and the young people whom I hoped to interview.

I was the first in my family, close and extended, to go to university and have often taken the social mobility it afforded me for granted. My parents were employed in repetitive but reliable professions and had no knowledge of the elite cultural codes of university (I remember with incredulity discovering the degree classification scheme sometime in the second year of my degree). As such I identified as an outsider at university, proud of having accomplished something most working class students at a failing school had been unable to do and having achieved academically against the odds became a central part of my identity. While not fully conscious of this when starting the research, I became aware as it proceeded that my achievements, such as they were, were perhaps in reality rather unremarkable. With an aspect of my identity threatened, I may have been more inclined to minimise the participants' achievements or else to overcompensate. There was also the risk that I over identified with the young people and during analysis struggled to disentangle and bracket off my experiences from theirs, perhaps by overemphasizing shared aspects of experience at the expense of things that were more significant to them. I have held these ideas in mind, particularly during data analysis, and believe that I was able to approach the study with the necessary distance.

Having previously worked for almost a decade at a residential special school, the study challenged my preconceptions about what children in care are able to achieve. My experience of working with groups of young people from similar backgrounds probably meant that developing rapport was made easier. However, I still found it frustrating and struggled to see beyond my own needs when participants cancelled appointments on the day of interviews, after I had already

travelled some distance, or else did not show up at all. Something I attempted to keep in mind was that this perhaps spoke to some of the participants' attitude towards professionals (with whom I was allied to and likely classed alongside), who may understandably have been seen as people who let people down and were easily let down, signalling a limited investment in such relationships.

My own politics and interests, in areas such as poverty and social justice, may have influenced my position on the relative influence of structure and agency. By immersing myself in the literature, I believe I have been able to approach the subject in a scholarly manner which I hope has ameliorated such risks, although this is difficult to know for certain.

For me, the process of writing this study has been, quite frankly, the most difficult professional or academic challenge of my life, accompanied at times by anxiety and self-doubt. Writing about success, resilience, agency and so on in such a context has been an odd experience, as I have reflected on my own lack of those abilities at times which has been felt acutely when interviewing people whose ability to cope is remarkable. This feeling is heightened when I consider my personal context, within a supportive family and receiving a comfortable income. There is the potential for those anxieties to affect my positioning to the subject as some theoretical explanations may compound self-criticism. However, I hope that writing this study will prove to be a 'steeling' experience as I learn that I am able to finish what felt at times like an unsurmountable task and a turning point as I learn from the problems I have had during its completion. The

young people may have been an uneasy comparison for me at times but I hope they may also be an inspiration, to myself and to other readers.

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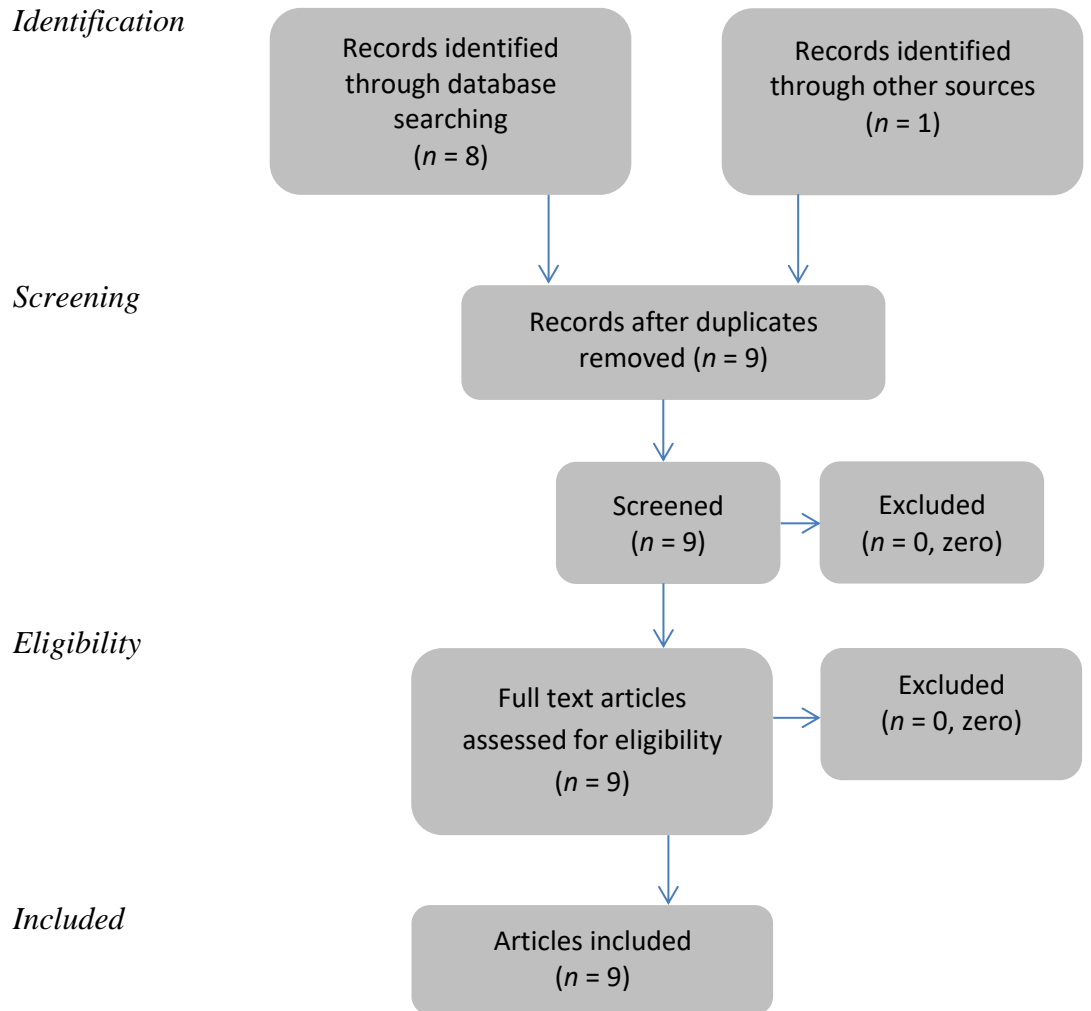
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I: Literature review 'PRISM' flow diagram & articles included

*Identification*

Records identified through database searching
(*n* = 8)

Records identified through other sources
(*n* = 1)

*Screening*

Records after duplicates removed (*n* = 9)

Screened
(*n* = 9)

Excluded
(*n* = 0, zero)

*Eligibility*

Full text articles assessed for eligibility
(*n* = 9)

Excluded
(*n* = 0, zero)

*Included*

Articles included
(*n* = 9)

Articles included in Literature Review (in chronological order):

| Author(s) | Date of publication |
| --- | --- |
| Martin & Jackson | 2002 |
| Longden | 2004 |
| Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley | 2005 |
| Hines, Merdinger & Whyte | 2005 |
| Bluff, King & McMahon | 2012 |
| Hyde-Dryden | 2012 |
| Munson | 2013 |
| Cotton, Nash & Kneal | 2014 |
| Askew, Rogers & West | 2016 |

**Appendix II: Archer interview schedule – interview 1**

**"We are all different and there are no right and wrong answers in this interview. Many great thinkers for hundreds of years have argued that we use language to think. A recent study found that many people are aware that they often experience a conversation with themselves, silently in their head. It is not like hearing voices, it is just the way they have always thought about many things. During this interview I'd like us to talk about whether this is the case for you and want you to tell me a bit about this experience?"**

**"Can you tell me if you do any of the following?"**

- **"Mulling over?"** - dwelling upon a problem, situation, or relationship (When you find yourself thinking over a problem, situation or relationship)

- **"Clarifying?"** - sorting out what you think about some issue, person or problem (when you're not sure what you think about someone or something, e.g. good or bad, right or wrong, do you find yourself thinking about them longer?)

- **"Deciding?"** – debating what to do, what is for the best.

- **"Planning?"** – the day, week or further ahead.

- **"Imagining?"** – the future, including what could happen if…

- **"Rehearsing?"** – practising what you will say or do.

- **"Imaginary conversations?"** – held with people you know or don't know.

- **"Reliving?"** – an event, past period or relationship (thinking in a lot of detail about a past event or relationship?)

- **"Prioritising?"** – working out what matters most, then next important and so on (what is important and not important at all?)

- **"Budgeting?"** – estimating whether or not you can afford to do something in terms of money, time or effort.

**"Are there any other themesthat your internal conversation engages in? Explore…**

**"Is your internal conversation always helpful?"** Explore…

**"I'd also like to know about your current concerns. By this I mean what matters most to you at the moment?"**

Prompts given if the following areas not covered:

- Whether or not these had long been a concern

- Whether or not their list of concerns dovetailed smoothly

- Whether participants spent time in thinking about what they should do in the light or their concerns

- Whether they saw anything in their backgrounds which was helpful or obstructive in realising their concerns

"How do you see your life projects in the future?" Encourage deliberation in order to see how this is achieved. Prompt regarding:

* Money      * Reputation   * Responsibility      * Sacrifices / regrets

* Support / satisfaction      * Ambitions   *University

## Appendix III: Consent form

**CONSENT FORM** 12/12/15 Version 2

Participant Identification Number:

**University Students who have been in Care: Their Internal Conversations and Social Networks**

Mark Uzzell (Trainee Clinical Psychologist)

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. An Information Sheet accompanies this form but you can also contact a member of the research team if you have *any* questions before agreeing to take part. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep.

| | *Please select* | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I confirm that I have read and fully understand the Information Sheet (dated 23/12/15) for the above study. I have had sufficient opportunity to consider the information, ask any questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. | | |
| 2. | I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. Withdrawal will not in any way affect my right to receive support from the University of Greenwich or any other rights currently enjoyed. | | |
| 3. | However, I understand that in the event I withdraw from the study, information I have given may still be used. | | |
| 4. | I understand that all information will be kept confidential unless there is a risk of harm to myself or someone else. | | |
| 5. | I agree that my transcripts can be published in full or in part, anonymously with all identifying details removed. | | |
| 6. | I agree to the audio recording of my interviews. | | |
| 7. | I agree that my genogram (detailed family tree) can be retained until the study is complete, at which point it will be destroyed. | | |
| 8. | I agree that the following people can be informed of my participation: | | |
| | Mark Uzzell (project lead) | | |
| | Peter Appleton (project supervisor) | | |
| | Will Calver (Access & Partnerships Manager, University of Greenwich) | | |
| | Chris Colson (Care Leaver Support Officer, University of Greenwich) | | |
| 9. | I agree to take part in the study. | | |

_____  ___/___/___  _____
Name of Participant  Date  Signature

_____  ___/___/___  _____
Name of Participant  Date  Signature

## Appendix IV: An example of an ecomap
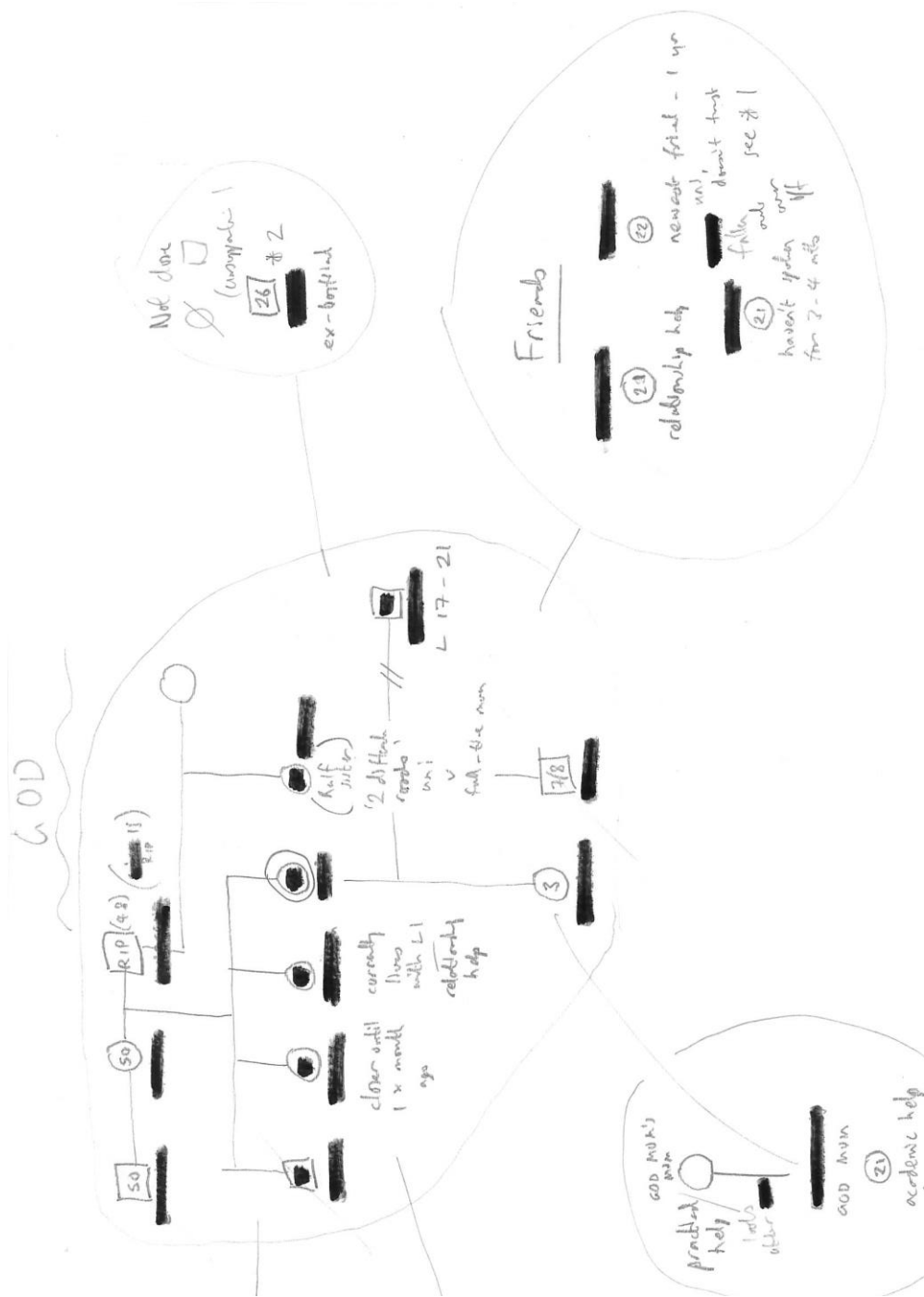
**<u>Appendix V: Example of coding</u>**

42. Female Participant: He did remember.

43. Researcher: Okay, good.

44. Female Participant: And we ended doing something really nice and very romantic and now because I had prepared myself to think of the worst and I wasn't prepared to think of something good, when I did see something good come out of it I was not, I was shocked and you know when people say, um, don't expect too much, so that you're not disappointed, it's kind of like that, so I wasn't disappointed, I was actually very overwhelmed and was very happy, um, but yeah, that's a recent example, and...

45. Researcher: So, you just, you just described to me a situation which that um, preparedness for the worst.

46. Female Participant: For the worst, yeah

47. Researcher: Um, can exactly be quite beneficial cause I suppose it can be, it serves a function of kind of protecting you

48. Female Participant: It does, yeah

49. Researcher: If you're prepared for the worst, then the worst can't surprise you, go on, sorry

50. Female Participant: There was also, there's also consequences where sometimes I repeat something in my head too much, where I make up scenarios so much that I've been really, I started to believe it's real.

51. Researcher: Okay

52. Female Participant: So for example, I will start to think of something like um, there are sometimes where for example, if I have an issue with somebody and I see that person who I have an issue with talking some someone else, in my head I will think they're talking about me, so once I see them talking, I'll like, I'll start thinking in my head okay, they're saying this about me, they're saying that about me, I'll start thinking the negatives about myself that they could be talking about, even though they may not know about it, and it'll become so real in my head that I'll think okay, yeah, it's true, definitely they're talking about me, even though I don't know myself, so when it comes to me having to have a discussing with that person I start to resent them cause I think, wow, they were talking about me even though I have no idea, even to this day I have no idea if they were or if they weren't, so it can be very bad because I make up scenarios that are very real, even though they're not real and they possibly aren't going on or happening

**Appendix VI: Ethical approval confirmation letter**

University of Essex
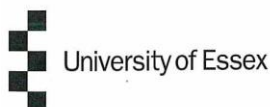
11 February 2016

MR M. UZZELL
60 CLAREMONT HEIGHTS
COLCHESTER
ESSEX
CO1 1ZU

Dear Mark,

**Re: Ethical Approval Application (Ref 15010)**

Further to your application for ethical approval, please find enclosed a copy of your application which has now been approved by the School Ethics Representative on behalf of the Faculty Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa McKee
Ethics Administrator
School of Health and Human Sciences

cc.     Research Governance and Planning Manager, REO
        Supervisor

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