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Original Citation

Bluff, Belinda, King, Nigel and McMahon, Gráinne (2012) A Phenomenological Approach to Care Leavers' Transition to Higher Education. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 69. pp. 952-959. ISSN 1877-0428

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International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

A Phenomenological Approach to Care Leavers' Transition to Higher Education

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Abstract

Previous research conducted in the UK has highlighted issues with the educational experiences of care leavers in general and has suggested that life transitions affect care leavers' later experiences. However, the participation and achievement of care leavers in education particularly care leavers' experiences of transitions in education, remains under-researched. This research investigated the educational experiences of nine care leavers studying in their first or second year, at universities across the Greater Manchester and Yorkshire areas of Northern England. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview relating to their transition to university. Adopting a phenomenological approach, interview transcripts were analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Three main themes emerged; 'care leaver identity', 'lack of positive care leaver role models', and 'corporate versus normal parenting'. The first theme 'care leaver identity', investigates what impact being a care leaver has on the participant personally and within their education. The second theme 'lack of positive care leaver role models' explores, what effect role models have on care leavers within their educational pursuits, and the final theme 'corporate versus normal parenting', investigates care leavers' perception of what 'parenting' means and the nature of the parenting they receive.

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Key words: Care leavers; Transition in education; Higher education; Phenomenology.

1. Introduction: UK Context

A great amount of emphasis is placed on academic success within the UK and underperformance in education can be seen to have an impact on one's future prospects, particularly in an individual's career (Sharples, Slavin, Chambers & Sharp, 2011). The Department for Education (2012) argue that amongst those at risk of underachieving in education, are individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007; Sharples et al., 2011). This can be seen amongst young people who enter the care of their local authority (Department of Health, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; Berridge, 2006; Department for Education, 2010; Department for Education, 2012). A local authority refers to the council over a particular area in which a person lives (Local Authorities Social Services Act, 1970). Statistics show that only 13% of young people from a care background achieve five or more A*-C grades at GCSE level compared to 58% of the general population (Department for Education, 2012). A GCSE is a General Certificate of Secondary Education, that young people most commonly study for at high school, between the ages of 14 and 16 (Directgov, 2012). This pattern of low educational performance in school reflects a care leaver's academic success after leaving care. Current statistics show that around 6% of care leavers aged 19 are in higher education (Department for Education, 2011) which is consistent with statistics five years ago, present in Jackson and Ajayi (2007). However, statistics offer little explanation as to why care leavers 'underachieve', suggesting the importance of researching care leavers' personal experiences of education.

Research investigating the personal accounts of care leavers has often focused upon their transition to independent living (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Dixon, Wade, Byford, Weatherly & Lee 2004; Chase, Maxell, Knight & Aggleton, 2006; Stein, 2006; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Dixon, 2008; Stein, 2008). However, research of this kind has raised concern for the educational experiences of care leavers but has never specifically looked at the effect life transitions have on a care leavers' academic success. In general, transition involves learning to adapt to a new set of circumstances (Schlossberg, 1981; Goodman Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Kralik, Visentin & Van Loon, 2006). Most people may experience particular transitions in their lives, such as starting work, moving home and parenthood (Goodman et al., 2006). For people under the age of 25, some of the more common transitions one may experience are moving from childhood to adolescence and going from one educational institute to another (Cowan & Hetherington, 1991; Noonan, 2002). It may take an individual time to adapt to their new situation (Schlossberg, 1981). During this time one's reactions to the situation may change (Noonan, 2002; Goodman et al., 2006). Individuals entering the care system may frequently experience disruption, which could, in turn, affect the outcome of their life transitions (Dixon et al., 2004). In addition, this may increase the likelihood that these individuals will face other transitions, for example changing schools, moving address and leaving care to live independently, much younger than their peers (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Dixon et al., 2004; Stein, 2006; Wade & Dixon, 2006). Therefore, this raises a concern for the transitional periods in the lives of those individuals that have entered the care system. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2005) suggest that individual background can have an effect upon transition in education, although, research of this kind does not specifically explore the impact of educational transitions for care leavers. This raises a concern for care leavers' experiences during this time, as Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2008) suggest that difficulty in transitions in education can lead to low academic attainment and can also have an effect upon one's overall educational experience.

The educational transitions of care leavers remain under researched, despite an increase in recent years in research investigating care leavers' experiences in further and higher education (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley, 2005, Cameron, 2007; Driscoll, 2011; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Amongst this more recent research, Cameron (2007) found that care leavers reported receiving insufficient support in post 16 education. Furthermore, those no longer continuing in education were highly likely to explain this in terms of a lack of support (Cameron, 2007). Research with care leavers in higher education argues that support from foster carers can be a key factor in educational success (Jackson et al., 2005, Jackson & Ajayi, 2007). In concurrence with this Driscoll (2011) reported that supportive relationships appear to be crucial for attainment in education. This was also consistent with findings reported by Jackson and Cameron (2012). From the body of research available, a consistent theme concerning success in educational attainment is the quality of support these children and young people receive from their local authority and foster parents (Jackson et al., 2005, Cameron, 2007; Driscoll, 2011; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Within this developing body of research that has investigated the experiences of care leavers in education a gap in the literature still remains, relating to the experience of the transition into Higher Education. Therefore, the present study focuses on care leavers' transition to university, taking into consideration any other transition the participants may experience during this time, to explore how care leavers manage transitional periods and what effect if any this has on their overall educational experiences.

2. Methodological Approach: Phenomenology

This research aims to investigate personal experience; adopting phenomenology as the methodological approach facilitates this form of investigation, as it enables the researcher to explore phenomena from another's perspective (Sadala & Adorna, 2002; Spinelli, 2005; Smith, 2008; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). This method dates back to Husserl (1970), who argued for the importance of the researcher describing phenomena as they appear to an individual, without the influence of prior knowledge. Therefore, Husserl's (1983) approach argues that phenomena need to be stripped back to their original form, taking away any form of judgment, prejudice and pre-formed stereotypes, in order to discover and describe its true essence objectively. This follows the discipline of transcendental phenomenology (King & Horrocks, 2010). However, Husserl's successors in the tradition question the researcher's ability to fully detach their self from what they are investigating, marking the move towards existentialism within phenomenology (Spinelli, 2005; Langdridge, 2007; King & Horrocks, 2010). Heidegger (1927) was amongst those to debate the work of Husserl, arguing that we are not able to view and describe another's experience from an objective point of view, due to our connection with the world around us. Therefore, breaking away from Husserl's approach Heidegger (1927) argues that phenomena require interpretation not just description. This saw the development of interpretative methods in phenomenology.

Following Heidegger's (1927) move to interpretative methods in phenomenology, and further developments by Merleau-Ponty (1962), Smith (1996) developed the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). Through IPA the researcher attempts to interpret the participant's experience which in itself is an interpretation of the particular phenomena; this is referred to as a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Through the use of IPA, a thematic analysis was carried out and

the researcher drew upon patterns and themes from the transcripts of the care leavers’ experiences (Smith, 2008; King & Horrocks, 2010).

3. Method

The research findings presented here are from the first stage of a larger study, which will go on to examine transition experiences longitudinally. Adopting a qualitative approach, the present study investigated the personal experiences of nine care leavers aged between 18 and 33, in their first or second year at university. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview and was asked questions about their application process, the support they received from their local authority, and their first few weeks at university. Participants were from a mixture of universities across Greater Manchester and Yorkshire. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Huddersfield. Participant, local authority and university names and any other potentially identifying information has been changed to protect participants’ identities.

Table one: Characteristics of participants who took part in this study.

Participant’s Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Degree	Year of study	Type of care	Length of care
Gavin	19	Male	Journalism	First	Foster care and supported accommodation	2 years
Rhiannon	20	Female	Exercise, Physical Activity and Health	Second	Foster care	11 years
Layla	23	Female	Counseling Studies	Second	Foster care	9 years
Catherine	20	Female	Adult Nursing	Second	Foster care then adoption	10 years
Bridgette	23	Female	Social Work	Second	Foster care	Since being a baby
Rochelle	20	Female	Education with Cultural Studies	First	Foster care	-----
Stephen	33	Male	Social work	First	Supported Lodgings	-----
Sam	25	Male	Environmental Health	First	Residential and foster care	6 years
Mary	18	Female	Psychology	First	Foster care and supported lodgings	2 ½ years

This table illustrates the demographics of all participants that took part within this research. Blank spaces within the table indicate when information was not given by the participant.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Through the use of IPA three prominent themes have emerged from the interview transcripts. Each theme relates to the care leaver’s transition to university. The first theme to emerge is ‘care leaver identity’, the next is ‘Lack of positive care leaver role models’, and the third is ‘corporate versus normal parenting’.

4.1 Care Leaver Identity

“I’m so embarrassed is that bad? I’m so embarrassed of saying I’m in foster care.”(Rhiannon)

Identity relates to who an individual is (Côté & Levine, 2002; Woodward, 2004). Some identities can be formed by one’s actions or groups of which they are part (Woodward, 2004). Identity can be important in how we perceive ourselves (Tajfel, 2010). This theme investigates the impact of care leaver identity and the effect this has upon the participants of this study, both personally and within their educational pursuits. From the extracts it is apparent that each participant is aware of his/her identity as a ‘care leaver’. In the quote above, Rhiannon shows that she views the label of being in care negatively, to the extent that she is ashamed of this experience. Later on in the interview she says, “I did know that the news and stuff you hear rubbish things [...] I just didn’t want to associate myself with other people that had been through the same thing as me”. Due to her negative perception of being in care from external sources, Rhiannon appears to actively reject her connection with other care leavers as a way of disassociating herself from the stigma of being in care. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that if an individual views their social identity negatively this may lead to them rejecting the group of which they are part. This appears to be the case for Rhiannon and can also be seen within Catherine’s experience,

“I never wanted to be seen as a foster child, so what I saw is that foster children weren’t usually going to university, so I was going to go to university.” (Catherine)

Catherine appears to say that she was going to attend university because care leavers did not usually pursue this path. Catherine appears to feel that if she associates herself with being in care this will affect her educational prospects, which similar to Rhiannon leads to Catherine disassociating from the identity of ‘care leaver’. Bridgette also appears to view the label of ‘care leaver’ as having an effect on her educational success;

“I think that they must of thought, ‘you know she’s not going to go,’ and I do remember one situation where I was told, ‘you know care leavers don’t go to university.’” (Bridgette)

Bridgette later explains that the stigma surrounding care leavers and attendance to university has had an effect on her original career path before she applied to higher education,

“I just thought, ‘they know what they’re talking about,’ and so you think [...] ‘you’re not going to do it,’ but it really impacted me because it took me so many years to get past it, you know to kind of think, ‘I can do it, I can do it,’ but before I was thinking, ‘I’ll do something that doesn’t include getting qualifications.’ So I went to work as a chef because going to college, to do catering, you didn’t need qualifications to get in the course to start off with and then you could kind of go on from there but even that I didn’t finish because I still had it in the back of mind, ‘you don’t you know, you don’t achieve at things like that because it’s not something care leavers do.’” (Bridgette)

For Bridgette, her thoughts toward education were shaped around the perceptions of those professionals who worked with her during this time. Bridgette’s experience shows that this stigma of ‘care leaver’ can affect career choices and educational pursuits, in turn reinforcing the negativity of this identity. The participants all drew upon negative stigma for being in care and this, in turn, had an impact on how they viewed the identity of being a ‘care leaver’ and how they feel about this being a part of who they are. Care leaver identity has had an impact on all participants who took part in this research, suggesting this to be an important factor in the educational choices of care leavers.

4.2 Lack of Positive Care Leaver Role Models

“I wanted to know that people from less privileged backgrounds could make their way in life and do really well” (Stephen)

Care leavers’ experience of role models was investigated during the interview process, leading to the development of the theme ‘lack of positive care leaver role models’. All participants within this research appeared to lack positive care leaver

role models, although, in one instance where such a role model was encountered, this did serve as a form of encouragement to the participant. This can be seen within Gavin's quote,

“Robert explained to me that there were other care leavers here and my experience [...] was that all care leavers are either pregnant or in prison and there is no other option for you [...] and because coming here and meeting John and, ‘oh my God it’s a guy[...] that isn’t in prison and that is in uni,’ [...] that filled me with confidence [...] and I was like, ‘if he can do it I can do it, it’s not impossible.’” (Gavin)

Gavin's opportunity in meeting a care leaver at university gave him a new positive perspective of care leavers. Before he met John he appears to have a negative perception of the life outcomes for those that have been in care. Research conducted by Sowards, O'Boyle and Weissman (2006) supports this finding. They argue that role models with some form of shared experience can play an important part in providing an individual with 'hope'. Rhiannon's experience differs to that of Gavin because she explains that she did not have any role models.

“In regards to foster care I didn't speak to anyone that was in foster care other than my sister. I didn't have any other friends, so I had no idea what anyone was thinking and stuff [...] I just wanted to forget everything so no I didn't have any role models.” (Rhiannon)

Rhiannon previously expressed that she was ashamed to say she had been in foster care. In Gavin's case, having a positive care leaver to identify to does appear to provide a better perception about care leavers. A lack of positive care leaver role models was a barrier that participants in this research had to overcome and could offer some explanation as to why some care leavers who are academically able do not access university. Other participants in this research share accounts of having role models who have not been in care. Mary shares an experience of her Granddad being her role model in education and the impact this had on her decision to go to university,

“Definitely my granddad was my biggest role model because he went to university at 18, in Birmingham and did Electronics or something [...] and he loved Open University. If he saw an advert he'd get dead excited about it and he'd go to visit unis, just for like the fun of it.” (Mary)

Mary's quote demonstrates the importance of role models and although she may not have a care leaver role model, Mary's granddad shares the experience of going to university and as previously discussed role models with shared experience can act as way of providing hope and confidence in an individual (Sowards, O'Boyle & Weissman, 2006). In this case Mary's granddad has in turn affected her decision to go to university, arguing that role models are important within education. In support of this, Murrell, Crosby and Ely (2009) stress the importance of role models for those whose backgrounds may act as a disadvantage to them in their educational pursuits.

4.3 Corporate Versus 'Normal' Parenting

“I think in my head I've built it up that if you've got a mum and a dad your life's perfect.” (Layla)

'Normal' parenting is often associated with a parent's unconditional love and care for a child (Clarke & Dawson, 1998; Bornstein, 2001). However, when the local authority becomes the parent, experiences of parenting appear to differ from this. The final theme explores how care leavers have experienced parenting from their 'corporate parents'. Corporate parenting refers to all professionals within a local authority that work with a child or young person that enters care. They are responsible for the support they offer to this individual and for their wellbeing (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001; Jackson et al., 2005). The term 'normal parenting' is in reference to care leavers' perception of parenting. The sample of care leavers' experiences, illustrated that there was an imbalance between a care leaver's perception of parenting and the parenting that they in turn received from their 'corporate parents'. An example of this can be seen from Gavin's transcript, in which he is explaining his experience of going to an university interview,

“A normal person their mum and dad would be like, ‘oh your first interview let's drive you down, oh aren't we excited,’ sort of thing, sort of making it more fun, than it is an intimidating sort of experience.” (Gavin)

Gavin's quote explains his perception of parenting and what he feels one should receive in this situation. Gavin appears to feel disadvantaged because his parenting situation is not 'normal', as he describes it, a term he uses to refer to other people who have not been in care. Rhiannon also draws upon differences in parenting, from her experience of watching her partner fill out application forms for university, with his mother,

“they would sit you down and make you do it in front of your face because [...] I've seen my boyfriend and his Mum and he'd be like 'I'll do it later' and she'll be like 'no you'll do it now', sit there and make him fill out an application form.”
(Rhiannon)

Rhiannon argues her partner receives encouragement in filling out the application forms and this has not been her experience of parenting. These differences in parenting that Gavin and Rhiannon both draw upon are associated by them with their experience of being in care. As illustrated in first theme of 'care leaver identity', care leavers are already battling with the outside perception that care leavers do not achieve, so this process might serve to discourage them, as they are left feeling different from their non-care peers. Layla's quote below explains how she feels about the parenting she has received,

“You become a number, a case file and that makes me angry because we're not, we're people and like social services are meant to be corporate parents and I look at the way I've been treated and people that I know have been treated and I think, if you were actually parents, we should be taken into care by now.” (Layla)

From this it is evident that Layla feels 'let down' by her corporate parents and from her perception she argues that the level of parenting she received would result in being removed. Throughout these care leavers' experiences of parenting, it appears that care leavers feel they are disadvantaged through the process of applying for university because of being through the care system and being parented by 'corporate parents'. The term corporate parents has already been noted as problematic by Jackson and Sachdev (2001). These two words placed together appear to contradict one another, with corporate a term often associated with business and parenting referring to words such as nurturing and unconditional love (Jackson et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2005). However, as it stands, these young people are left experiencing an imbalance between their perceptions of parenting and the reality of the support they experience.

5. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates how the individual background of 'care leaver' has an impact on one's transition to university. From these preliminary findings, care leavers' experience of the transition to university appears to be influenced by the identity of 'care leaver', the presence of role models in their lives and the nature and level of parenting they receive. In addition, the theme 'care leaver identity' appears to permeate all the themes, with participants illustrating that the identity of 'care leaver' has an impact on how they identify with other care leavers and understand 'parenting'. More specifically within the 'lack of positive care leaver role models' theme, it can be seen that when a care leaver has another positive care leaver role model to identify with this can help the participant see the identity of care leaver from a positive perspective. Therefore, this raises the importance of positive care leaver role models for care leavers pursuing education. Further to this, the theme 'corporate versus 'normal' parenting' suggests that care leavers feel they are disadvantaged in the parenting they receive because of the fundamental differences between the 'corporate' parenting they receive from their local authority and what they understand as 'normal' parenting. The findings from this study will inform the longitudinal stage of this research, which aims to explore care leavers' transitions to university, through a series of interviews, as their transition occurs.

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