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**ASSESSING OUTCOMES: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL
INTERPRETATION OF LIFE COURSE TRAJECTORIES
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING CARE**

CHRISTINE HORROCKS

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Huddersfield

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Remember Clare

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of young people who have been 'looked after' during the transitional period in which they leave 'care', moving on to live independently. The emphasis is on making visible the way in which young people are active in their lives; interacting with, rather than submitting to the social environment they operate within. Drawing upon life course theory (Elder, 1997) taking an interactional biographical approach (Runyan, 1982); historical time and place are considered, particularly in relation to the social timing of life events. Of paramount importance is the notion of 'linked lives' where developmental pathways and life course trajectories are seen to be located within past transitions.

Drawing upon feminist empiricist and feminist postmodernist thinking, a multi-methods approach to data collection is used. Initially, aggregate data for the 150 young people, eligible to receive leaving care services within the Local Authority, was made available for analysis. Structured interviews with 38 young people were completed. Fourteen young people, aged 16-18 when the research commenced, were included in the biographical phase of the research. In this phase, in-depth information about their unique life experiences was documented over a period of 12-18 months. It was found, in line with previous research, that care leavers experienced a much earlier transition to independent living, continual accommodation moves and high levels of unemployment (60-70%). The Leaving Care Scheme's risk assessment showed the largest proportion of young people categorised as 'high risk' (44%). However, leaving care provision was not accessed by 35% of those young people eligible to receive services.

The 'stories' told in depth reveal the way in which past experiences and past transitions can be seen to shape and direct life course trajectories; progressing the view that outcome evaluation is limited in utility when not viewed as part of an integrated whole. An ideological account of independence had consequentiality in terms of 'social timing' also operating as a barrier which distanced young people from leaving care services. There is considerable evidence in the research of young people as active agents. Such 'agency' was always located within personal and situational contexts where differing levels of personal/interpersonal action and compliance can be observed.

The findings suggest that outcome evaluations are of limited use, and a focus on studies which accommodate life as a continuum, a series of 'linked states' where beginnings and endings are not so clearly defined would offer more informative representations of young people's 'post-care' lives. Leaving care policy makers and practitioners should reflect upon the consequentiality of the ideology with which they engage; aiming to foster more comprehensively a favourable social environment but one where young people are not seen exclusively as submitting to social conditions.

Introduction

The eighties and nineties saw a wealth of leaving care research (Stein and Carey, 1986, Stone, 1990, Garnett, 1992, 1994, Biehal *et al*, 1992, 1995, Broad, 1994, 1998, Social Services Inspectorate, 1997). Much of the research conveys a less than optimistic account of care leavers' life experiences both when 'looked after' and beyond. However, Broad (1999) says that there seems to be a 'climate of opportunity' where due to several factors the problems faced by young people leaving care are once again the subject of public interest and concern. He refers to recent critical reports (Social Services Inspectorate, 1997, Department of Health, 1998a) and a change of government, with the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit, as both fostering and reflecting this renewed interest. This thesis aims to continue this renewed interest, adding, an important dimension to the already extensive knowledge base where a substantial amount is written and known about the lives of young people who have spent a period 'looked after' by the state.

The *Looking After Children: Good Parenting, Good Outcomes* (LAC) system has introduced a range of new documentation ostensibly to improve outcomes for children and young people who are 'looked after' (Parker *et al*, 1991, Ward, 1995, 1998). This concern with defining and evaluating outcomes is reflected in the current political and social climate where the process of measuring outcomes attempts to evaluate services and their effectiveness in improving childhood experiences and adult lives. This 'new approach' (Jackson, 1998) was echoed in the recent Government White Paper, *Modernising Social Services* (Department of Health, 1998b) which talks of a 'third way for social care' that 'moves the focus away from who provides the care, and places it firmly on the quality of services experienced by, and outcomes achieved for, individuals and their carers and families' (p8:1.7). The White Paper goes on to list seven key principles which should underlie high quality effective services; these being at the 'heart' of the modernisation programme. The key principle with utmost relevance to care leavers attests that:

- children who for whatever reason need to be looked after by local authorities should get a decent start in life, with the same opportunities to make a success of their lives as any child. In particular they should be assured a decent education. (p8)

The *Quality Protects Programme* (Department of Health, 1998c) sets out the main elements of a specific Management Action Plan for transforming children's services and improving the life chances of 'looked after' children making particular reference to increasing the support for care leavers (11.3). There seems to be a long way to go before such fine and commendable objectives are fulfilled. Broad's (1998) recently published research, providing national statistics on leaving care work, found that while giving due recognition to evidence of good practice, many of the problems reported in previous research were still endemic (Stein and Carey, 1986, Garnett, 1992, Biehal *et al* , 1992, 1995). When giving a summary of recommended concerns and changes which were required by young people participating in his research, familiar recurring themes which have resonance with past failures and shortcomings could be identified. Rather than independence at an early age, young people wanted to have 'interdependence' as a goal at a time of 'mutual agreement'. Also, in relation to future leaving care work, the following changes were deemed necessary: education to have more funding, accommodation to be affordable and appropriate, support that responds to the diverse community of young people leaving care, and a more concerted effort by agencies to help improve the work prospects of care leavers. Young people also gave voice to the belief that in terms of legislation, implementation and funding 'for leaving care work the Children Act 1989 is totally inadequate' (adapted from Broad, 1998, p262).

However, seemingly what is known about the experiences of care leavers is presented in terms of societal, objectively defined outcomes; for example, education/employment trajectories, stability and types of accommodation, number of dependants, etc. Stanley (1992) speaks out against the unquestioning acceptance of 'official knowledge', which arguably might exemplify much of what is known in relation to the lives of young people leaving care. In addition Best (1989) suggests caution when interpreting 'official knowledge' warning against 'claims making', drawing attention to the way in which individuals may respond differently to the same set of circumstances. Thus, while acknowledging that young people leaving care are a socially defined group and as such should be afforded their own 'standpoint', this research subscribes to a feminist ontological position recognising the multiplicity of experiences (Henwood, Griffin and Phoenix, 1998). The notion of a singular experience based upon a socially defined standpoint and/or societally defined 'objective' outcomes is regarded as highly problematic. Therefore, although young people leaving care are at times presented as a unified group with a distinct set of concerns, this research moves toward an accommodation of different meanings and subjectivities.

What this research proposes is an additional and complementary approach to assessing outcomes. This approach draws extensively upon life-course theory ((Runyan, 1982, Hareven,1982, Jones and Wallace,1992, Pilcher, 1995, Elder,1997). Within life-course theory both historical and social time are vital in terms of understanding the individual pathways young people might traverse through the continuum of their lives. Within the discourse surrounding the development of LAC system, Garrett (1999) noted that there is no detailed exploration of the conceptualisation of 'childhood' or 'children's needs' and of how these might 'shift across time and space'. Life-course theory not only enables the accommodation of a changing historical and social context; it intersects with the concept of human agency where each individual is acknowledged to influence and be influenced by their own unique set of circumstances. The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995, 1997) is integrated within life-course theory (Elder, 1975, 1981, 1997) to illustrate the interactive nature of human agency providing a way of evaluating the processes by which individuals might negotiate their own outcomes.

Initially within this research project, young people were asked to evaluate their experiences while 'looked after', and the leaving care process; by taking part in an 'exit interview'¹. This progressed to encompass a more in-depth appreciation of their lives, using a particular methodological approach (Edgerton, 1993) drawing on biographical methods (Runyan, 1982, Stanley, 1992, Smith, 1994, Howe, 1997) and subscribing to a feminist ontological and epistemological position ((Harding, 1986, 1987, Webb, 1992, Stanley and Wise, 1993). This integrated approach fostered the belief that by accommodating the specificity of a young person's life and accessing their biographies a further and somewhat different understanding could be realised.

This study aims to accommodate both difference and commonality by ultimately telling individual 'stories' (Plummer,1995, McLeod,1997). However, these stories are only told after a full appreciation of their location has been presented and a precise explanation for the telling of specific stories has been outlined (Mason, 1996). Therefore aggregate level data is used to provide specific contextual information (Pilgrim, 1990) in relation to the leaving care population in this participating authority. It is

¹ An 'exit interview' can take place once a young person has left care enabling young people to offer an evaluation of the services they had received, and may continue to receive, from the corporate parent. This initiative was developed in partnership with the collaborating authority as part of this research project.

hoped that the ethnographic stories, told in the latter part of the thesis, will provide detailed descriptive biographical information with which to undertake a theoretical interpretative analysis of individual lives. Here the emphasis will be upon not only the unique circumstances and pathways of an individual life but also a recognition of the commonality of a level of shared historical and social context.

Part One

Chapter One

From families to outcomes: a continuum

Jones (1988) made the statement that, 'youth is not a *stage* in life. This concept implies too distinct a beginning and an end. Becoming an adult is part of a continuum, part of a life course from birth to death' (p706). This research accepts the point made by Jones; that life can not easily be apportioned into discrete stages, rather life is a succession of experiences continually influenced by what has gone before. Therefore, this chapter begins to contextualise the often complex biographical accounts of young people's lives which follow in the latter part of this thesis. The extensive literature available is used to locate a group of young people who possibly are simultaneously different from, yet at the same time, similar to their peers who have not experienced a period 'looked after' by the corporate parent. By locating young people in this way I am not adopting an exclusively discursive approach rather aiming to understand the process by which their lives might be constructed both by themselves and within a wider society. Thus, Jones's argument where becoming an adult forms part of a continuum is supplemented by the recognition of an interactive process whereby young people operate in both a subjective context and a wider social environment; made up of past and present. Furthermore, when making an attempt to locate young people within both their past and current contexts the aim was to access a speculative appreciation of both the complexities and similarities of their experiences not only as care leavers but as young people in the more general sense.

There is a need to proceed with caution. Best (1989) promotes a specific kind of awareness, warning against *typification* where emphasis on some aspects results in a characterisation that promotes a particular view of events; in this instance the past and present experiences of young people leaving care. Therefore, the account constructed in this chapter should be viewed as one aimed at an academic audience, with a particular focus - that of trying to structure a narrative account of how the young people participating in this study might have experienced their lives. The accent is on enabling an appreciation of the social context within which young people who have been 'looked after' might have lived their lives.

In order to achieve an integrated overview; young people's life experiences before they became 'looked after' will be considered, subsequently moving on to reflect on the 'care' system - its origins and current culture; contemplating on the way young people might experience such a system. Leaving home, and for children who have been 'looked after' its equivalent of leaving care, will be discussed, leading into a dialogue surrounding the perception of adolescence as a time of transition; situating such work within the lives of care leavers. This will then progress into an examination of the way young people's lives and experiences have been evaluated and translated into outcomes.

'I had a life before!'

Young people who are 'looked after' had a life before they became associated with social workers, foster parents, carers; a time before when their lives were not documented, labelled and filed. This venture in the form of a PhD thesis accepts and embodies this idea of, 'I had a life before.' Trying to separate out sections of a person's life and place them in compartments is viewed with skepticism. Bullock, Little and Millham, (1993) in their research into the return home of children separated from their families, made the point that the past cannot be omitted; 'a child's return to home and family is incomplete without a consideration of the reasons behind the initial separation' (p8). Many attempts have been made to measure the outcomes of young people who have passed through the state parenting system yet how productive can this be if we fail to consider the 'before'. Asking what life was like before enables a holistic enterprise, building arguably a more comprehensive picture of the young people, their lives and their experiences.

Children and their families

This section does not offer a detailed theoretical debate regarding the concept of child abuse and its surrounding issues², it merely aims to raise an awareness of what the lives of this particular group of young people may have been like. This said, for a child to be taken into 'care' it would seem fair to assume that there had been considerable difficulties within their family circumstances, therefore the

² (for a review see Hill and Tisdall, 1997, chapter 10)

literature will be used to illustrate possible accounts of those difficulties.

A child being placed in the 'care' of the state projects a certain image; of parents as uncaring and not possessing the necessary skills to parent their own children (see Marshall, 1995). Parents of children who are 'looked after' are frequently cast in the pathological and/or dysfunctional role where they are afforded little understanding or compassion from society in general. Yet it has consistently been argued that such parents have to cope with far more societal ills than the discourse surrounding their position might suggest (Parton, 1985, Browne, 1995, Rodger, 1996). The pathological and dysfunctional models may not take account of research evidence showing that those children who are received into the care of the state come disproportionately from the poorest local authority wards where social deprivation is acute (Holman, 1980; Bebbington and Miles, 1989). Furthermore, a high percentage of children who are 'looked after' are from one parent families who are more susceptible to poverty, homelessness and poor housing conditions (Equality for Children, 1983, Bebbington and Miles, 1989). Poor families are also less able to afford support and relief assistance with more being in contact with health or welfare services, thus they become more visible to the authorities (Rodger, 1996). Taking these issues into consideration, the notion of the pathologically uncaring family becomes less easy to sustain. When families are coping with the stress that poverty brings, it may not be surprising that some fail to fulfil the 'good enough' role society seems to expect. Indeed, Browne (1995) maintains, when trying to offer an understanding of child abuse, that poverty produces stresses which increase the chances that parents give vent to frustrations through violence toward their children.

Packman's research (1986, p118) into the process of entering 'care' discovered that almost half of the mothers of children admitted into care in her study had been separated from their own parents, through death, divorce or other reasons, (less information was available about the fathers as many of the women were single parents - see also Milner (1993) for an account of the different career paths of father and mothers in child protection investigations). A quarter of these mothers had contact with a child-care agency and almost one in five had been 'in care' or under some other voluntary or private arrangement. When analysing the accounts offered by the mothers about their childhood, Packman coded the most negative answers into, '*the merely sad and the truly dreadful.*' On the basis of this coding almost a quarter of mothers fell into the categories of sad or truly dreadful childhoods. The words of one of the mothers conveys the magnitude of Packman's categorisations:

'A mother described her childhood as:

'miserable - because mother was always walking out, there were rows and she said we were no good. He was leaving, then she was. Me and my sisters always had to do all the housework - she never did any. My Dad used to have a go at us because he was unhappy, but now I think he understands how I feel. When I took the overdose my mother said 'why didn't you do it properly?' (p119)

The image of a person who has experienced a turbulent childhood then is unable successfully to parent their own children is a distressing but constant concern raising the controversial issue of transmitted intergenerational deprivation. The (now infamous) speech by Sir Keith Joseph in 1972 suggested a link between a cycle of transmitted deprivation and parenting. Rutter and Madge (1976) preferred to promote the concept of *cycles of disadvantage*. They questioned the focus on families, pointing to other more complex explanations which stem from a common social environment and a common political structure. They were not unaware of the discontinuities that existed, many people who have experienced what Packman termed merely sad or truly dreadful childhoods moved on, 'in adult life to produce happy, non-disadvantaged families of their own,' (Rutter and Madge, 1976, p6). However, while not ruling out the possibility of familial continuity they pointed toward regional continuities in disadvantage in terms of poverty, employment, housing, education. Such an appreciation prompted Thorpe (1995) to argue that the term *child abuse* should not be applied to cases of neglect where impoverished and stressed parents need material and financial assistance rather than the moral repudiation implied in the term child abuse. Nevertheless, compliance with Thorpe's argument does not temper the difficulties children and young people might have endured before they enter the state parenting system.

Young people and the possibility of an 'abusive' past

While being aware of the theoretical reading of child abuse as a socially constructed problem, continually negotiated and altered over time and among cultures (Parton, 1991, Rogers *et al*, 1992, Rogers and Rogers, 1994), the aim here is to structure a narrative within which later accounts could be situated. At this time the literature will be used to offer insight into the level of difficulties young people might have experienced before becoming 'looked after'.

The 1991 Department of Health guidelines categorised four forms of child abuse:

Neglect: *Persistent or severe neglect of a child, or the failure to protect a child from exposure to any kind of danger, including cold or starvation, or extreme failure to carry out important aspects of care, resulting in the significant impairment of the child's health or development, including non-organic failure to thrive.*

Physical Injury: *Actual or likely physical injury to a child, or failure to prevent physical injury (or suffering) to a child including deliberate poisoning, suffocation and Munchausen's syndrome by proxy.*

Sexual Abuse: *Actual or likely sexual exploitation of a child or adolescent. The child may be dependent and/or developmentally immature.*

Emotional Abuse: *Actual or likely severe adverse effect on the emotional and behavioural development of a child caused by persistent or severe emotional ill-treatment or rejection. All abuse involves some emotional ill-treatment. This category should be used where it is the main or sole form of abuse.*

(Department of Health, 1991a, para 6.40)

Official definitions of child abuse can be seen to embrace both acts of commission and omission. The Children Act 1989 upholds the belief that children are best cared for by their families therefore removing children from their family homes is not seen as a desirable outcome rather a necessary final intervention undertaken to secure the child's welfare. The Children Act 1989 established the notion of *significant harm* as the place where boundaries between state intervention and family life are focussed (Hardiker, 1996). 'Harm' is defined as either ill-treatment or impairment of health and development; the harm need not be physical but may be psychological (Norrie, 1995). Moreover, feminist researchers have drawn attention to male violence towards women and the traumatic effects for children maintaining that such violence is frequently accompanied by child abuse, (Bennett, 1991, Mullender and Morley, 1994).

Precise understanding regarding the extent of child abuse is impeded not only by varied and ambiguous definitions but also by the fact that it may often be hidden from view (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Nevertheless, physical injury continues to be the main reason for local authority registration of children about whom abuse is a cause for concern (Creighton, 1995). Stone's (1990) study of short-term

fostering in Newcastle reported that three-fifths of the children of all ages in her sample were considered by social workers to have experienced abuse or neglect at some time. The Warner Report (Department of Health, 1992) on residential care, found that almost one third of 'looked after' children had been sexually abused. Fletcher-Campbell (1997) listed a range of 'official reasons' why young people become 'looked after': 'parents need relief, parents' health, child's welfare, no parents, homelessness, at the child's request, offence, abuse/at risk, other'. However, the largest category was that of 'abused/at risk' (45.4 per cent of the total in care population as at 31 March 1994; Fletcher-Campbell, 1997, p10). Seen here then are distinct pasts emerging with young people parented by the state often having had turbulent and distressing pre-care experiences.

'Messages from Research' (Department of Health, 1995, p19) studied research evidence outlining what was felt 'bad for children' in relation to parenting. They present the concept of parents who are 'low on warmth and high on criticism'; such parenting engendering an environment of emotional neglect and/or maltreatment which was felt to place children at a higher risk of experiencing other more specific abuse such as physical harm or sexual abuse. For example:

'An alcoholic father may drive a family into poverty, making the mother's task extremely difficult or a violent partner might force the rest of the family to flee to poor or overcrowded housing. Alternatively, some emotional neglect might be explained by a mother's depression. (Department of Health, 1995, p19)

Gibbons *et al*'s (1995) research into child protection practices found that of those children 'originally' placed on the Child Protection Register, 63% had remained continuously at home, 18% had left (been separated from their parents) but returned, and 19% had left and were still away. They go on to list a number of differences (indicators of prognosis) between those children who remained at home and those who were separated, making the point that the more of these *indicators* present in a child's life the higher the possibility of separation:

* Age-group. Two groups were particularly likely to break down or remain separated: under -fives and teenagers.

* Reason for referral. Children originally notified for neglect or concerns about parents' ability to care were more likely to break down or remain separated.

* Poverty. Although, as we have seen, most of the families were disadvantaged, those who broke down had significantly more poverty indicators.

* Parental characteristics. Families where one or both parents abused alcohol or drugs or where there was domestic violence were more likely to break down or remain separated.

* Previous maltreatment. When there had been previous investigations the risk of breakdown was significantly higher. (p100)

Cleaver and Freeman's (1995) study, focusing on parental perspectives in cases of suspected child abuse, offer a classification of 'abused and/or abusing families'. *Multi-problem* families accounted for 43% of the cases studied and were those who were, 'well known to the welfare and control agencies who present an array of problems, including chronic ill-health, poor housing, long-term unemployment and financial and social incompetence.' *Specific problem* families constituted the second largest group at 21%. They were not confined to a particular social class being, 'generally well educated; they are in employmenthave not had previous contact with any statutory agency.' One particular suspicion may bring such families to the attention of agencies. The third family category were *acutely distressed* families where problems accumulate, 13% of the sample fell into this group where, 'Such families tend to be composed of single or poorly-supported immature parents or others who are physically ill or disabled,' (p51). Although, children and young people can become 'looked after' for a wide variety of reasons there seems nevertheless to be a strong possibility that those who experience separation may have pasts fraught with difficulties.

Bullock *et al's* (1993) research into the return of children separated from their families presented the complexity of the children's relationship with their families. A child separated from their family may be returning to different family members than those at the time of separation:

'Indeed, over two-thirds (68%) of children restored within six months of entry to care do so to lone parents or to step-parents and one-fifth (19%) go back to family members different from those at the point of separation.' (p79)

Although, children may also return home more than once, most children 'looked after' are reunited with their parents and most go home quickly (Bullock *et al*, 1993). This research identified three

groups of returning children: *early returners*, *intermediate returners* and *long-term returners*. Early returners were those going home within six months of entry into care and were largely younger children whose families were temporarily unable to care for them. Intermediate returners went home between 7 and 24 months after entering care and were predominantly adolescents with two-thirds (65%) aged 12 years or more on entry, of whom three-fifths were boys. The long-term returners, going home between two and five years after entering care, comprise of two groups: those reunited from a substitute placement and those going home several months after leaving care (p80). The study went on to highlight the children who are vulnerable to return problems with some children 'oscillating' between substitute care placements and relatives. Additionally, a group of adolescents who were unable to reintegrate into their families but lacked the skills to establish a stable alternative for themselves were identified:

'However, each year there are also some 11,000 children going home who fail to find stability. Of particular concern are the 1,700 children who annually join the ranks of oscillators and the 1,500 homeless, skill-less youngsters' (p97).

Such statistics stress the need to better understand the reasons behind terms such as 'fail to find stability' and the desire to accommodate a detailed appreciation of the variability and diversity of young people's life experiences.

From the evidence presented here, children and young people who are 'looked after' have a shared past experience. Their lives 'before' have been affected, often profoundly, by poverty - this seeming to be one of the most ubiquitous factors. The families of children who are separated from their parents often face multiple problems. Where a number of particular problems exist, children are more likely to experience separation. Therefore, those children and young people who become 'looked after' have frequently been exposed to an environment that has not afforded them the most favourable opportunities for their development.

Holterman (1995, p9) made the comment that, 'Investing in children means more than just spending money on them directly; it also means ensuring positive social, economic and environmental conditions.' The UN Convention on Children's Rights, ratified in the UK in 1991, brought about a decisive change regarding children and the way they were to be perceived and treated. The

Convention while establishing children as group of people with individual rights also made it necessary to take account of children when developing social policies. It recognised that children exist and interact in a social world needing protection not only from abusive parents but that they should also be safeguarded from societal ills. Societal factors may indeed in some cases bring about the circumstances that invoke abusive parenting. Whatever the cause, those cared for by the corporate parent have, at best, difficult and, at worst, shocking and traumatic pasts to bring with them into the state parenting system. The question would then be how does the state endeavour to help young people overcome past distress and/or disadvantage? Having taken time to locate young people and their families within a social context it would seem appropriate to take a discriminating look at the child care system. It is assumed that its cultural and organisational arrangements, both past and present, would have a direct influence on the lives of children and young people who find themselves 'looked after' by the state.

The Child Care System

Legacy from the past

Colton *et al*, (1995) stated that, although there may be differences in policy and practices relating to children, a 'common denominator' exists throughout Europe. This commonality is a 'far -reaching social welfare system ... this welfare system is linked to a structured system for the protection of children.' (p3). The authors go on to say that within these systems the avoidance of separating children from their parents has taken precedence. In this brief quote it is apparent that a distinct structuring of an overall child care system has taken place, presumably founded upon particular knowledge base. It would seem necessary to take a step back to see what constitutes such a structuring both ideologically and consequentially.

The ill-treatment of children by parents or carers has occurred throughout much of recorded history (DeMause, 1982). Parker (1990) draws attention to the way in which the history of child care is an interpretation of the past. Its origins can be located in the notion of child rescue and the child-saving movement that was prevalent in the many philanthropic organisations that existed at that time.

Children were 'saved' from terrible poverty and with the passing of the Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of Children Act in 1889 they were also to be rescued from parents who abused or ill-treated them. At this time children were separated from their parents with no prospect of 'restoration' to the family. Parker refers to this as the 'age of separation'.

Social services work with children is now influenced by the principles set out in the Children Act 1989; implemented in October 1991. These principles being:

'the paramouncy of the welfare of the child: the concept of enduring parental responsibility which may be shared but rarely extinguished; a preference for negotiated solutions rather than court orders; and the duty of public authorities to support families in their child-rearing tasks.' (Packman, 1993)

Therefore while the Children Act 1989 upheld the belief that children be cared for in their own families it also endorsed the paramouncy of the child's welfare. We have moved from a well meaning but rather judgmental and maybe arrogant position where children were rescued and indeed separated from parents, to one which recognises that although the welfare of the child is paramount this can best be effected by working in partnership with parents. Reder et al (1993) effectively present the legislative move toward this more contemporary ideology of child care:

'The 1933 Children and Young Persons Act introduced the concept of 'welfare of the child'. ... The 1948 Children Act charged local authorities with furthering the child's 'best interests' these various pieces of legislation were replaced by the 1989 Children Act which promotes a partnership between parents and the local authority in pursuit of child care and protection.' (Reder et al, 1993, p12)

Therefore, a great deal has changed, no longer are children separated in such a way; as indeed Parker documents the move toward *restoration*, clearly showing that change happens slowly and can be attributable to numerous factors; economic, ideological, messages from research and the effects of inquiry reports. One of Parker's final comments is to say that the problems, policies and controversies of today cannot be understood without reference to the past historical origins.

Parker's account demonstrates a societal change of emphasis bringing about what might be seen as more compassionate approach. Gil (1970) echoed that change, voicing a very broad definition of child abuse, moving away from the identification of particular families which have been labelled as dysfunctional toward a more collective societal responsibility. Gil viewed child abuse as:

'any act of commission or omission by individuals, institutions, or society as a whole, and any conditions resulting from such acts or inaction, which deprive children of equal rights and liberties, and/or interfere with their optimal development, constitute, by definition, abusive or neglectful acts or conditions,' (1970, p16)

This was encompassed in *Childhood Matters* - the report by the National Commission into the Prevention of Child Abuse (1996). Accepting Gil's more collective responsibility would suggest that all social services work with children would be related to child protection. Whether this is work with families aiming to enhance the welfare of children, thus protecting them from possible abuse, or whether it is an investigative response to a specific concern, the ultimate focus being to protect the child's interests. Furthermore, it would seem that child protection would continue once a child becomes 'looked after'; there still being a need to have in mind the notion of a collective responsibility avoiding viewing a change of circumstance as having achieved protection. Gil's definition implies that children are abused by many other agents not simply, as might be the populist view, by their inadequate parents.

Within the rescue/separation movement; children of the poor were 'rescued' and social conditions were presented as a hazardous contributory factor. Frost and Stein (1989) argue that when child abuse is experiencing a period of 'higher emphasis' it is still 'children of the families in poor, inner-city, working-class areas who are more open to surveillance by welfare workers than other social groups' (p54-55). They go on to warn of the danger of child protection work becoming, 'a policing service aimed at the removal of poor working-class children.' The theoretical thrust of this argument can be found in the work of Parton (1991) where, using a post-structural analysis, he discusses the subtle ways in which public agencies are used to control family behaviour. His analysis invokes a degree of caution about accepting a simplistic narrative of progressive compassion and heightened collective responsibility. In light of this it would seem wise to take a closer look at child welfare and the child protection system.

Child welfare and protection.

What is meant by child welfare and protection? Reder *et al's* (1993) quote referred to earlier, '1989 Children Act which promotes a partnership between parents and the local authority in pursuit of child care and protection,' implies that they are separate. However, the crucial issue is; are they different or are they interchangeable thus providing the same emphasis? Is child care/welfare provided therefore preventing a child suffering harm; thus welfare and protection have the same focus, or is this matter more complex?

Elliot (1989) talks of protection and says that, 'Inherent in this philosophy is the adult's responsibility to keep children safe, to listen to them and to act should a child tell about a problem.' (p259) She goes on to say extremely forcefully that both prevention and protection has traditionally meant protection after some form of abuse has occurred. There are two distinct points to be made here; the first being that those children and young people who are in 'need' of services have already been hurt and may be suffering the effects of this hurt, (an issue that will be taken up later). The second suggests that welfare and protection are linked but are separated out to provide a different emphasis, nevertheless both are seemingly concerned with the wellbeing of children. However, Jones and Bilton (1994) say that the development of child protection work has been heavily influenced by a strong emphasis on accountability and a need to defend the agency involved against public criticism. As a consequence child protection has become a 'dominant' issue within children's services. Elliot's view talks of safety and has the child as its primary subject of concern where Bilton's explanation is more structurally defined around organisational needs. The question would seem to be are such views sustainable and can we have a system that is able to operate successfully for children on such a disparate remit, fulfilling the needs of children and the organisation?

Parton (1997) identified current debates in relation to child abuse pointing to his previously conveyed argument (Parton, 1991) that:

'there had been an increasing tension between policies and practices whose concerns were child welfare and parallel policies and practices whose concerns were child protection,' (Parton, 1997, p2)

He too sees child protection as the dominant concern. In agreement with Jones and Bilton he relates this to the notion of accountability; drawing particular attention to public inquiries which have forcibly brought about changes in policy and practices which placed child protection as the major focus of social services work with children. In a review of the funding of local authority social services, Schorr (1992) concluded that, regardless of the fact that expenditure had increased on the social services, they were still nevertheless 'chronically' underfunded. He further concluded that the priority afforded to child abuse investigations and assessments was leaving preventative work with families with fewer resources.

Parton (1997) talks of Rose's (1994) notion of 're-balancing' approaches between family support and child protection thus offering an integrated child care system rather than one that is 'polarised' between the two. If concerns are polarised between child welfare, in the form of family support, and child protection in the form of family assessment, where does this leave children who are 'looked after'? If policies and practices are directing resources toward child protection and debates are bringing about the recognition of a need to re-balance in favour of family support and preventative measures, are children in the 'looked after' system within the polarised protection debate, thus a dominant concern, or do they become less important once the state has intervened?

In this chapter research supports the claim made by Elliot that those experiencing a time parented by the state have often had turbulent and distressing periods in their lives. Therefore, how effective might the corporate parent be in ensuring the prevention of further harm by providing necessary aftercare? Saunders *et al* (1996) studied the management of child protection services, looking at the views of ACPCs (Area Child Protection Committees) on the balance between prevention, investigation and treatment. They draw attention to the 'main tasks' of the ACPC as stated in *Working Together under the Children Act 1989* (Department of Health, 1991a, p6) which clearly states seven main tasks one of which is:

- * to scrutinise arrangements to provide treatment, expert advice and inter-agency liaison and make recommendations to the responsible agencies;

Treatment in the study was defined to include, 'after-care, follow-up, and interventions aimed at helping children to achieve a more positive readjustment following abuse.' (p270) Of those

interviewed 93% (27 respondents) placed treatment at the bottom of a prioritised list, whereas 89% gave top priority to investigation. This lack of emphasis on treatment must have profound implications for children who are in need of specific assistance post investigation. Saunders *et al* (1996) point to the reality that child protection services are policy driven and this policy is related to the high incidence of child abuse inquiries in the United Kingdom over the last two decades. The emphasis placed on investigation is at the expense of providing a more comprehensive service which would encompass prevention and a range of services to ease the distress of children.

Wilson (1995) made the salutary point when commenting upon the services available to children and young people who are 'looked after':

'Policy, resource priorities, and practices can become firmly dictated by these procedures. In fact, many comment that child-care generally appears to be driven by child protection procedures. Eventually, emphasis becomes focussed on processes rather than outcomes for children.' (p142)

It is this competing rather than complementary emphasis that may prove to be significant factor in relation to the level of services and quality of parenting children and young people might experience when 'looked after'. However, trying to detach the care experience from the young person's life before they became 'looked after' would seem to be, not only unachievable but a contradiction of the narrative which is under construction - that of the interconnected continuum of life course. Nonetheless, some insight needs to be given in relation to the experience of young people who enter the child care system.

When assessing the effect of being taken into local authority 'care', separating out the effects of family disruption and those of alternative care can be very difficult. There is evidence that such separation may bring with it a sense of relief and a caring environment (Triseliotis *et al* , 1995). For other young people separation may result in feelings of loneliness and isolation symbolised by the term 'system abuse' where their voices are not heard and the procedures for protecting children and young people are experienced as distressing and oppressive (Butler and Williamson, 1996, McGee and Westcott, 1996).

Once they become 'looked after' many young people experience continued movement and disruption (Biehal *et al* , 1992, Department of Health, 1991b, Stein, 1990, Berridge and Cleaver, 1987). In Biehal *et al's* (1995) study young people had experienced both residential and foster care placements with 52% having experienced between one and three moves and a further 32% with four or more moves while 'looked after'. The authors state that multiple movement not only disrupts school and family/friendships but it also may lead to a sense of 'instability and loss of constancy in young people's lives' (p21).

A review of the health of children in contact with, or 'looked after' by, local authorities insists that 'local authorities do not live up to the standards of 'good parents' (Bywaters,1996, p777) . There have been a number of government and official reports criticising the health care of children and young people who have been 'looked after' (Bamford and Wolkind, 1988, Department of Health, 1991b). Bamford and Wolkind (1988) made the observation that, 'children who at some time in their lives have been in care, are amongst the most vulnerable in the community in terms of psychological disturbance' (p25). The Department of Health's (1991b) own research summary concluded that, 'far from remedying existing deficiencies, research is showing that periods in public care have further impaired the life chances of some children and young people' (p7).

Bywaters (1996) places some faith in the LACs project funded by the Department of Health when looking to rectify the situation. The pilot study for this project found that out of nineteen teenagers aged 16-18 three-quarters were regular smokers and at least a quarter had received no information from adults about sexually transmitted diseases or contraception by the age of 16 (Parker *et al*, 1991). The faith of Bywaters seems to be founded upon the identification of deficits which can then be addressed via health promotion and a prime undertaking to address such issues. However, it is nevertheless recognised that the impact of health promotion on the health beliefs and behaviour of young people is a complex issue affected by wider considerations where the decision to use drugs or practice safe sex must be placed in context where to adopt a certain behaviour may have a detrimental effect in terms of peer and other relationships. (Graham, 1993). Furthermore, the health and well being of young people who are 'looked after' cannot be detached from broader socio/structural issues around material resources and the impact this might have on lifestyle (Blaxter, 1990).

Therefore when reflecting upon the account of state parenting there has been a changing social environment influenced by a range of possibly competing ideologies. Corporate parenting was seen in the past to have been founded upon the notion of child rescue with children 'separated' from their parents in a very real sense. Contemporary child care services are more likely to acknowledge that many families need support in order successfully to parent their children, therefore providing family support in order to prevent harm. Nevertheless, the Children Act 1989 whilst upholding the belief that children should be cared for by their families, emphasised the paramouncy of the welfare of the child; although there is a desire to maintain children within families there is also an awareness that some children will need protection resulting in separation. It became evident that the corporate parenting system may be structured in a particular way with child welfare and protection being separated out to form particular areas of emphasis where protection and accountability are a dominant concern. The literature regarding young people 'looked after' by their local authority raises concerns. Once taken into the 'care' of the corporate parent the life chances of young people may not be significantly improved impacting upon their life experiences when they leave care.

Young people leaving 'home'

There is a vast amount of literature on leaving care, however, this chapter does not aim to provide some kind of definitive compilation of this work which can be found in: Stein (1997), Action on Aftercare Consortium (1996) and Broad (1998). This section aims principally to articulate a rationale for this piece of research; encompassing the additional objective of continuing to structure a narrative providing a setting within which to position the biographies of individual young people.

There may be numerous characteristics which make the young people participating in this study distinctive, however, a characteristic of immense significance was their age and how this related to leaving home and making a life in an adult world. All of the young people participating were between the ages of 16 - 21 when the study commenced, positioning them in the late adolescent period of life. Adolescence is perceived and presented in a number of ways ranging from *storm and stress* (Hall, 1904) to a more optimistic view which engenders a time of possibilities when young people begin to make their own way (for an overview, see Heaven, 1994, for a critical review, see Griffin, 1993). However, there is now a preference to view adolescence as a transitional developmental

process with a range of influential factors (see Coleman and Roker, 1998, Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1997). This process is located within Jones' (1988, p707) continuum where, 'the transition to adulthood in modern Britain is marked by gradual gains in civil rights and in status at work and at home.' With adolescence seen as a time of transition, leaving home is therefore one landmark set within this transition. This section will consider this transitional phase concentrating on the nature of leaving home and will subsequently situate the debate within the lives of young people leaving care.

A number of influential factors during this transition are seen to reside internally in particular with physiological and emotional pressures (see for instance, Coleman and Hendry, 1990, Kroger, 1996).

Others are external and:

'originate from parents, teachers, peers and wider society Sometimes these external forces 'push' the individual towards maturity faster than he or she would prefer, while on other occasions they act as a brake preventing the adolescent from gaining the freedom and independence which he or she believes to be a legitimate right. (Hendry, Shucksmith, Love and Glendinning, 1994, p7)

Whilst Hendry *et al*, refer to young people in a generic sense sometimes experiencing external forces pushing them toward maturity, or the reverse that of a brake being applied, it is indisputable that there are considerable differences between young people leaving care and those leaving home in the more conventional way. Both internal and external pressures may be more onerous for young people who have been 'looked after' due often to turbulent pasts frequently involving family difficulties and abuse. In addition there is the non-negotiable requirement to *move on*; the now well used euphemism for young people leaving their substitute homes when, or before, they become eighteen.

Research has shown that almost two thirds of the young people studied left care before they were eighteen with just under a third doing so at sixteen. (Biehal *et al*, 1995, 1992) The reasons for young people leaving care at an early age mainly included placement breakdown and an expectation on the part of carers that they should move on having reached age sixteen or seventeen. The Scottish Young People's Survey showed that 75% of young men and 68% of young women remain resident in the parental home at nineteen years of age, (Jones, 1990). Young (1984, cited in Jones, 1995)

found that the median age for leaving home in Australia was twenty for women and twenty one for men. A secondary analysis carried out on the National Child Development Study (NCDS, 1981 data collection) found that the median age for leaving home in Britain was twenty for both women and men, (Jones, 1987). These statistics demonstrate that a distinct difference exists between the leaving 'home' experience of care leavers and young people in a more general sense, suggesting that those leaving care may feel Hendry *et al's* 'push' more acutely.

Parental support and the transition to independence

It is consistently argued that the transition to adulthood is becoming a more protracted process (see for example: Hendry *et al*, 1993, Heaven, 1994, Jones, 1995) with young people in general extending their education and fewer leaving home in order to marry. Jones (1995) suggests that the normality of leaving home and its function within the transition to adult status is not only being lost but being replaced with an emphasis on preventing young people from leaving home. She refers to the 'changing structural context' of society where, 'in any discussion about young people's opportunities and constraints, their families now play a crucial role.' (Jones, 1995, p8) This movement toward family support is often cited as the rationale behind government changes to the benefit system (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994, Roll, 1990, Jones and Wallace, 1992, Hendry *et al*, 1993). Benefit payments to young people under 25 are now restricted and thus it is intended to encourage young people to stay at home or return to live with their parents. Furthermore, current changes in housing legislation (The Housing Bill 1996) are judged further to disadvantage young people, not least with the setting of housing benefit at a 'local reference rent' which is likely to force young people with limited resources into the cheapest and often the most sub-standard accommodation. (Action for Aftercare, 1997) Young people who are unable to live at home increasingly find it hard to acquire and keep accommodation (CHAR, 1996) and have great difficulty living on the benefits available (see for example Hutson and Liddiard, 1991).

The transition from a local authority placement to what is perceived to be living independently is for young people part of the wider transition to adulthood. If parental support is assumed it would seem wise to examine how this might influence leaving home and the transitional experience of both young people who have been 'looked after' and those who have not. The adolescent is often

located within the notion of family, with the young person negotiating and thus differentiating from their family, or in the case of less idyllic notions of differentiation, a young person taking their freedom. The central issue is seemingly one of independence:

'Adolescents are expected to establish their independence through renegotiating their relationships with their parents to involve more freedom and responsibility.' (Noller and Callan, 1991, pvii)

For young people who have been 'looked after' adolescence and establishing independence are affiliated to the time when they will leave care. Much emphasis is placed on preparing young people for independence yet how tenable is the concept of living independently? Young (1987) maintained that leaving home was frequently a process, and not as generally presented, a singular event where young people leave the parental home once and forever. It was found that those leaving home for non-marriage reasons were younger and were more likely to return home again. It is not an unfamiliar story for a young person to want his/her freedom then discover that it was not as they expected for a number of reasons therefore returning to the parental home (Banks *et al*, 1989). What is critical here is that such an option may not be available for many young people who have been 'looked after'. In a qualitative study by Biehal *et al* (1995), only six young people leaving care (8%) either returned to live with their parents or remained with a parent whom they had been placed with once they ceased to be 'looked after'. Previously mentioned were the difficulties young people might experience when returning home resulting in them *oscillating* and 'failing to find stability,' (Bullock *et al*, 1993). This would suggest that for many young people there is a safety net tagged onto the concept of independence and leaving home which for care leavers seems less commonplace.

The principal issue would appear to be; how does the experience of a care leaver compare with a young person who has not been separated from their family? There are the unmistakable effects of: reduced financial support from the state benefits system; leaving 'home' at a much younger age, and the lack of a more flexible arrangement where young people return to the parental home if things get difficult. Parental support lasts longer, is more flexible and parents are expected to provide financial assistance for those young people who remain with their families. Independence, in this scenario seems far less absolute and awesome than one that might be assumed when considering the concept of living independently which conjures up more a severance of ties. Leonard (1980) drew a

distinction between 'leaving home' and 'living away from home' and indeed questioned whether true independence from parents was a desired outcome for either parent or child. Within this view is the recognition that parenting children and young people does not have a built in time-frame it is indeed more similar to Noller and Callan's (1991, p24) impression of young people, 'negotiating their relationships with parents to involve more freedom and responsibility.' With options available and subsequent choices and future possibilities being related to an assumed level of parental support, the continuing support of the corporate parent becomes a critical factor for young people leaving care.

Local authority support

The duties and powers of local authorities in relation to children who have been 'looked after' when moving on to live independently was given particular emphasis in the Children Act 1989. The Act states that local authorities have a duty to prepare young people for leaving care (S24,1) and to provide aftercare (S24,2).

(Part III, 24)

(1) Where a child is being looked after by a local authority, it shall be the duty of the authority to advise, assist and befriend him with a view to promoting his welfare when he ceases to be 'looked after' by them.

(2) In this Part 'a person qualifying for advice and assistance' means a person within the area of the authority who is under twenty-one and who was, at any time after reaching the age of sixteen but while still a child-

- (a) looked after by a local authority;
- (b) accommodated by or on behalf of a voluntary organisation;
- (c) accommodated in a registered children's home;
- (d) accommodated-
 - (i) by any health authority or local education authority; or
 - (ii) in any residential care home, nursing home or mental nursing home, for a consecutive period of at least three months; or
- (e) privately fostered but who is no longer so looked after, accommodated or fostered.

This duty to provide after care extends to accommodation where the local authority not only has a duty to provide accommodation for young people who have been 'looked after' but has the power to accommodate young people up to the age of 21.

(Part III, 20)

(5) A local authority may provide accommodation for any person who has reached the age of sixteen but is under twenty-one in any community home if they consider that to do so would safeguard or promote his welfare.

The local authority also has the power to provide after care in the form of financial assistance (S24,6,1). This power to provide financial assistance can be used to assist young people with their education, employment or training needs (S24,8) (for a comprehensive overview see Stein, 1991). This legislation would seem to carry with it an implicit responsibility to sustain a parenting role in a distinct arrangement which might suggest a leaning toward Leonard's idea of living away from home. However, White, Carr and Lowe (1990, p59) maintain that the existing provisions leave 'wide discretion' to the local authorities as they are expressed in terms of 'taking reasonable steps' or providing 'as they consider appropriate'.

Research has been undertaken evaluating the preparation that young people receive for leaving care, with the conclusions being that such preparation is often inadequate (Biehan *et al*), 1995). A study by Save the Children undertaken by a group of young people who had themselves been 'looked after' (Save the Children, 1995), stressed that although a range of skills based training had been provided this training should begin earlier and needed to be delivered in a more consistent way. This might illustrate the point that although the necessary legislation is in place service provision may operate in a less than satisfactory manner.

Nevertheless, each local authority is required to provide a leaving care and aftercare policy offering a range of services aimed at supporting young people. Parental support is therefore delivered to young people leaving care in the form of services aimed at fulfilling the duties and powers expressed in the Children Act 1989. However, service delivery does not conform to one particular model. Stein (1990) identified three different leaving care scheme models in the UK: independence, inter-dependence and specialist scheme models.

Independence model: The independence model has the rationale that young people can be *prepared* to manage on their own from the age of sixteen onwards, particular emphasis is placed upon practical survival skills. There is an expectation that young people undergoing such preparation will be able to live independently with a minimum level of support.

Inter-dependence model: Psycho-social transition is viewed as the underlying philosophy for the inter-dependence model. The focus here is inter-personal and relationship skills, and the development of self esteem and confidence. Specialist leaving care workers usually deliver a programme which may include individual counselling, group work, ongoing support and assistance with move on accommodation.

Specialist scheme model: These schemes often have clearly defined tasks, such as specialist fostering/supported lodgings schemes, employment and training schemes, sheltered or supported housing projects. Such schemes can be located at different positions on the independence-inter-dependence continuum and may target different groups of young people.

(Adapted from Stein, 1990 p78 - 79)

The Children Act 1989 also encourages partnership between Social Service departments and the voluntary sector with jointly funded and managed initiatives being developed (Stone, 1990, Smith, 1994). Leaving care schemes have been found to be particularly effective in facilitating access to good accommodation and developing life skills, (Biehal et al, 1995). Nonetheless, there have been a number of publications dedicated to reviewing the situation of young people leaving care since the implementation of the Act in 1991 (Roberts, 1993, Broad, 1994); all indicate a slowness in the setting up of services, regional differences and insufficient resources. The impact of legislation in other areas of social policy resulting in the increased focus on budget driven services, contracting out, and the purchaser - provider division is recognised as having adverse effects on care leavers in terms of: 'continuity, corporate responsibility and good parenting' (Action for Aftercare, 1997, p4). Local authorities are therefore responding to a recognised need for support when young people leave care as expressed within the Children Act 1989. How concerted and effective this response is proving to be seems under question.

Evaluating the effects of corporate parenting

A constant source of debate is how to evaluate and understand better the impact of the 'corporate parenting' system upon the lives of young people and this frequently develops into an evaluation of outcomes³. The concluding part of this chapter focuses on the evaluation of outcomes for young people who have been 'looked after'. Although not all the research documented here stated their aims to be that of measuring outcomes it nevertheless provides a broad overview of the way in which the lives of young people who have been 'looked after' have been evaluated.

In Stein and Carey's (1986) study there was a recognised standard of poor education which was found to be evident in more recent research (Biehal *et al*, 1994, Garnett, 1992, 1994, SSI and Ofsted, 1995). The Social Services Inspectorate, (SSI) Ofsted Report (1995) highlighted grave concern regarding the education of children 'looked after'; at least 25% of children at Key Stage 4 were facing 'acute difficulties'. These children were often not attending school and, 'many have been excluded and have no regular educational placement' (p43). A regional survey (Maginnis, 1993) calculated that a child living in a children's home is eighty times more likely to be excluded from school than a child living with his or her family. Children in residential care and in secondary education constituted 0.3% of the school population, but 23% of the annual number of pupils who had been excluded.

Those 'looked after' children/young people who remain in school appear to experience very little in the way of successful educational attainment, (Biehal *et al*, 1992, Garnett, 1992, 1994) A study by Firth (1993), recording the academic achievements of 'looked after' children found; of the 146, Year 11 pupils studied, only thirty nine gained one or more GCSE passes. Of the thirty nine, no more than fifteen gained a pass at levels A-C. Garnett (1994, p43) in her research into the educational attainments and destinations of young people 'looked after' found that, 'less than half of the 'looked after' group, 48%, obtained at least one GCSE at grade A-G compared with 98% of the County's Year 11s.' Furthermore, only a quarter of her sample of young people, who had experience of the care system for five years or longer, left school with any formal qualifications whatsoever. In one third of the cases studied, social workers had no idea if exams had been taken or had no actual record on file. These findings are further supported in the SSI, Ofsted report:

³ It is accepted that outcome as a concept is a contentious issue and as such will be covered comprehensively in Chapter Two.

'children in secondary schools seldom reach standards close to those expected. None of the children featured were judged by teachers, as likely to achieve 5 subjects at grade A-C in GCSE. ' (SSI and Ofsted Report, 1995, p11)

This compares very unfavourably with the general school population, where 38.3% of pupils in Year 11 achieved 5 or more A-C grade at O Level, in 1993. Action on Aftercare (1997, p14) make the salutary point that a good basic education enables access to further education, good quality training opportunities, and sustainable employment while also helping a young person to develop confidence, motivation and self-esteem.

With employment linked to educational outcomes the transition from statutory education becomes a central issue with high proportions of care leavers unable to find stable employment or continue their education (Biehal *et al*, 1994, Garnett, 1992, 1994, Stein and Carey, 1986). Williamson (1993) argues convincingly that the transitional experience of young people was previously seen to be focussed around the move from school to the world of work but with the massive rise in youth unemployment during the late 1970s and 1980s this transitional marker is being lost for many young people. With the restructuring of this transition to include training and continued education, entry into the labour market is deferred. The number of young people taking advantage of full time education has vastly increased, with 73% of 16 year olds and 58% of 17 year olds continuing in education in 1993/4 (CEP, 1994) Educational outcomes are viewed as a major factor in enabling young people to make a successful entry into education and/or the labour market (Banks *et al.*, 1992, Furlong, 1993, Hickman, 1997). Educational disadvantage alone may not be the sole reason for young people being unable to secure positive routes into employment but it would seem naive to underestimate its effects.

Willis (1984) refers to the failure to secure employment as a *broken transition* and that as such there are serious implications regarding a young person's ability to structure an adult identity. He goes on to stress the effects of this broken transition where if young people 'are unemployed, they are in suspended animation. No wage means no key to the future. The wage finally, of course, permits the transition to being a consumer - having some real power in the market place' (Willis,1984, p476). Leaving home and finding employment are therefore presented as the conventional ways in which young people can develop independence, can begin to form a sense of their own individual

position and begin to exercise a level of self-determination. Jones and Wallace (1992) discuss the way in which work is an aspect of 'civil citizenship', which research evidence indicates is denied to many young people leaving care. Thus the effects of unemployment, in terms of self-determination and citizenship, should not be excluded from any detailed analysis of young people's outcomes. Research indicates a more psychological cost to unemployment with depression, a lowering of self-esteem and loss of self-confidence as possible consequences (Kelvin and Jarret, 1985, Ullah, 1990).

Moving on to consider outcomes in terms of accommodation and stability. The report on support services for young people leaving care in nine local authorities (SSI, 1997) expressed the expectation, in line with the Children Act 1989, that:

'An accommodation strategy reflecting close liaison between the SSD and housing departments should identify the needs of care leavers. The range of accommodation should include developing resources from housing departments, housing associations and the private and voluntary sector to meet the identified needs and wishes of young people wherever possible.' (p38)

The report commented that a range of different types of accommodation is essential for young people leaving care and found that several authorities had in place a variety of supported accommodation and agreements with housing authorities and housing associations which were allowing young people choice in terms of readiness, levels of support and independence. The young people contributing to this inspection did say that they wanted the opportunity to live in either supported or semi-independent accommodation prior to living on their own. This would suggest that Stein's *independence model* of leaving care support is not the one preferred by young people.

Nevertheless, concern focuses on homelessness which has been found to have an association with a care background (Strathdee and Johnson, 1994, Young Homelessness Group, 1991, Randall 1989). In all these studies, care leavers made up around 30% of those young people found to be homeless. This is an alarming statistic when 'in the UK under 1 per cent of young people are ever taken into care, the proportion of young homeless people with a care background is enormous' (Hutson & Liddiard, 1991, p). Biehal *et al's* (1995) study looked at homelessness within the 18 - 24 month period of

leaving care, finding that 22% (16) were homeless at some point during this period. Although this is an improvement on earlier figures it is nevertheless still high. Of this 22%, nearly two thirds stayed in hostels for the homeless and/or slept rough for a while: the remaining young people moved between relatives or friends because they had nowhere else to stay thus they became the 'hidden homeless'. An association between homelessness and leaving care at an early age was also evident and supports findings in other research (Randall, 1989, Young Homeless Group, 1991, Strathdee and Johnson, 1994). Although homelessness is viewed as a complex issue, 'triggers' to homelessness (Biehal *et al*, 1995, p52) were identified, associated frequently with emotional and social difficulties, although finding affordable accommodation was a major reason such difficulties resulted in homelessness.

A further outcome which is continually highlighted in relation to care leavers is that of early parenthood where 'at least one in seven young women leaving care are pregnant or already a mother.' (Action on Aftercare Consortium, 1997, p1). In Biehal *et al's* study almost one half of the young women became a parent within 18 - 24 months of leaving care, a finding consistent with other research (Garnett, 1992). The women were aged between 16 - 19 when their children were born, contrasting with less than 4% of women in the general population aged between 15 - 19 becoming mothers in the equivalent years (Selman and Glendinning, 1995).

Teenage pregnancy and early parenthood are often problematised (Zabin & Hayward, 1993) with concern over the implications for public expenditure and the reporting of a link between absent fathers and crime (Dennis and Erdos, 1992). However, such representations have been questioned; in line with Best's cautionary advice against typification. Phoenix (1991) has argued that :

'Although teenage women who became mothers are often believed to constitute a social problem, it may be more accurate to view them as a group of mothers with problems - often not of their own making - who are struggling against the odds' (p253).

The explanations for teenage motherhood have been varied. Often teenage mothers are portrayed as being influenced by welfare policies which dispense benefits to unmarried mothers (Murray, 1990, Gress-Wright, 1993). A similar suggestion is that the rationing and allocation system for local authority housing may be another incentive for young women to have children in their teens (Coleman, 1993).

However, there is little evidence to support either of these positions (Clark, 1989, Phoenix, 1991, Selman & Glendinning, 1995) and research has indicated that the majority of teenage pregnancies were unplanned; (Ineichen, 1986, Francome, 1993) in most cases resulting from non-use of contraception. Francome (1993) also found that a majority of teenage mothers felt that they had received little or no information about contraception from school. Furthermore, Balding (1994) found that most teenagers were still learning about sex, in the main, from their peers. This evidence provides a less calculating and individually accountable explanation than one that implies young women are responding to welfare and/or housing incentives. Brindis (1993) argues that adolescent pregnancy may be related to dropping out of school, isolation, poverty, unemployment, lower self-esteem and a lack of hope for the future; all factors which may have particular congruence with regard to young people leaving care.

Taken 'objectively' the 'looked after' system does not appear to fare too well when outcomes are measured and evaluated. In summary young people who have been 'looked after' have poor educational outcomes, are not well prepared for leaving care and encountering gloomy employment prospects; all presumably resulting in a very limited number of available options in relation to a future adult life. It would appear that young people experiencing a period parented by the state do not have improved life chances. Their life course would seem to hold a future with many of the stressors and summative outcomes experienced by their parents where the concept of rescue would seem to have little currency.

The aims of the present study

As the concluding part of this chapter has shown, outcomes in the majority of the research are presented in terms of generalised outcomes across lives where they are assumed to be similar for groups of young people. Stanley (1990, p114) argues that such '*official* institutional knowledge' (her emphasis) represents only the visible tip of a large iceberg, making reference to what she calls 'important invisibilities'. She refers to the 'unrelatable' nature of statistics and 'official knowledge' because no means exist 'for matching up what are actually, in human terms, closely related facts about particular officially noted transition points in people's lives and deaths' (p115). These invisibilities therefore relate to the individual experiences of those people who make up research statistics and

whose outcomes are measured. Stanley maintains that knowing the way in which persons move between statistical headings and 'official knowledge' where 'numbers' are not divorced from detailed information about particular lives enables something more useful to be said.

Therefore, at the beginning of this chapter it was explained that that the aim throughout was to structure a narrative which spans throughout the life course of young people leaving care rather than attempting to separate out specific stages. The narrative is one that hopefully provides a backdrop for the following chapters where a more detailed account will be made regarding the concept of outcomes and the notion of invisibilities aiming to reflect in more depth the interactive nature of individual experience. The lives of young people who have been 'looked after' are generally presented within a particular collective narrative resulting in the more individualised specific accounts, where a young person's own unique biography has a decisive impact on outcomes, somewhat invisible.

This study places the parenting young people receive from the state within a more extensive picture, one where state parenting is a discrete but not exclusive constituent part. By contextualising the young people's individual accounts of their lives the aim was to appreciate and understand in a more theoretical yet pragmatic sense the everyday experiences of young people who have been 'looked after'. Therefore, by taking a different methodological approach the purpose of this research was to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What is the nature of young people's everyday experience?
2. How has the past impacted upon their lives?
3. In what ways might young people differ when coping with their lives after care?
4. How much influence do young people have in their own lives; impacting upon their own outcomes?
5. How might young people be assisted in achieving positive outcomes?

Chapter Two

Outcomes - whose, how and when?

Assessing the outcomes for children and young people who have been 'looked after' has become a major policy and research preoccupation (Knapp, 1989, Ward, 1998, Jackson, 1998, Knight and Caveney, 1998). The Department of Health funded an extensive project designed to develop and implement, assessment measures in child care services (for an overview see Ward, 1996). The working party involved in developing the assessment measures (Parker *et al*, 1991) gave a number of reasons why assessing the outcomes of children who have been 'looked after' was essential. They began by referring to the growing knowledge base in which it had been found that policy and practice had a variety of *shortcomings*, therefore suggesting the needs of children were not being met. They also made reference to child death inquiries around which had emerged a concern that these may only be the *tip of the iceberg*. In addition to these disquieting reasons, there was a growing demand for participation in the process of service provision by service users; namely children and their parents. A further issue was the *cost question*. Standards of performance and the expectation of value for money had become a driving force. Having established the necessity to assess outcomes the actual process of undertaking such an assessment became formidable as the concept of an outcome is not problem free. Parker *et al*, raised three very explicit questions:

- (i) For whom is something considered to be an outcome?

- (ii) Should greater emphasis be given to specific or to general outcomes?

- (iii) When are outcomes assumed to occur?

(Parker *et al*, 1991, p19)

Using these questions they make the point that different perspectives and interests will determine what, and how, an outcome is measured and evaluated. For example; a positive outcome for a Social

Services Department may be an increase in the numbers of children placed in foster care; supported by a proportional decrease for residential care. The move toward a restructuring of services where residential care is viewed as a less desirable placement is well documented (see for example, Berridge and Brodie, 1996) therefore such a change would be welcomed in certain quarters. However, this potentially positive organisational outcome may not be viewed in the same way by a young person who is uncomfortable at the foster home and feels they would have been more at ease living in a residential community home.

Therefore, for each outcome there will be differing perspectives and interests which will impact upon both the way outcomes are assessed, and the eventual evaluation made. Outcomes which are commonly seen to be important for the well-being of children include, for example, 'the quality of a child's relationships and the extent of his or her networks or the acquisition of practical and academic skills,' (Parker *et al*, 1991, p24). There is a recognition that such a way of considering outcomes presents a particularly adult interpretation of outcomes and may not reflect the outcomes that matter to children. Evident again is the question of who is making the assessment and subsequent evaluation of outcomes. Ward (1996, p242) stressed that:

'outcome measures should adopt the perspective of the children concerned rather than that of their parents, the agency or the wider society and that, since the purpose of social work intervention should be to safeguard and enhance children's welfare, the outcomes of care and accommodation should be evaluated by asking what effect the experience had had on each child's subsequent development.'

Here then is another crucial matter, how to assess and evaluate outcomes for 'each child'. There is arguably a concentration on evaluating service outcomes that encompass whole groups of children rather than individual outcomes in terms of each child's subsequent development. The state accepts into its care children and young people who have experienced a variety of difficulties therefore how might their more individualised needs be evaluated in terms of meeting such needs and measuring individual outcomes? Furthermore, when would this measurement of outcomes take place? Should outcomes be assessed continually, enabling a formative evaluation, or should a more summative line be taken where some kind of end result is measured?

The development of outcome measures (Parker *et al*, 1991) for individual children in the form of the Looked After Children Assessment and Action Records are seen as a major step forward. They acknowledge the unhelpful nature of a one-dimensional view of outcomes, subsequently developing assessment measures across a range of dimensions namely: health, education, emotional development and behaviour, social, family and peer relationships, self-care and competence, identity and social presentation. These assessment measures monitor a child's progress and check that appropriate action is being taken to ensure adequate fulfilment of parental responsibilities. However, the materials produced by this project are not the only means of assessing outcomes. It would seem worthwhile here to look at some relevant past research in relation to care leavers and reflect upon the way in which outcomes have been identified and evaluated, concentrating on the questions raised by Parker *et al*.

Locating outcomes

Here I will outline three pieces of research; one which focussed on the subjective accounts of young people; a quantitative study using survey techniques; and a more recent body of work using both quantitative and qualitative methods. With each piece of research I will consider outcomes in terms of process and the interests they might represent.

Stein and Carey's (1986) ESRC funded research was undertaken in response to the lack of any comprehensive knowledge base regarding the life after care of those young people who had experienced 'care'⁴ in the 1970s and 1980s. Young people in 'care' during this time were known to have lived in a variety of substitute homes including residential, foster care and 'home on trial', therefore previous research which had focused on residential care provided an incomplete picture. Their work was 'essentially a qualitative study, concerned with documenting the young people's own accounts and evaluations of what was happening to them during the time of leaving and for that substantial period following discharge' (Stein and Carey, 1986, p7). Participation in this study involved a series of four taped interviews at intervals of approximately six months and commenced as young people left care. This involvement process was found to be problematic; some young people

⁴ The words 'looked after' have replaced the term 'in care' in the more recent literature, however, for the young people participating in this study this change in discourse does not relate to their experience. Their understanding is that they have been 'in care', therefore this is reflected throughout this thesis where 'looked after' is used to denote an official discourse yet 'in care' reflects the interpretation of the young people.

were, 'embittered by their experiences, or failed to identify themselves as 'in care', as for example in long-term fostering.' (p9) Other difficulties encountered were a 'reluctance' to meet the researchers and young people not keeping appointments. Consequentially, from an identified sample of 79 a group of 45 young people participated in the first interview. This number reduced over the duration of the research with only 24 (53%) young people initially involved participating in the final interview.

The focus of the first interview was a 'point of change'. Young people were asked to look back over their experience in 'care' and look forward to their plans and expectations for the future. The young people's own words were used throughout to create a tangible impression of what their lives had been like not only while in 'care' but before, for instance:

'I remember I were only young, I just remembered sitting round fire; there were me, me brother, there were all lot on us and they just came knocking at door and told us to get us coats and they just took us just took us we didn't know why.' (Stein & Carey, 1986, p34)

In terms of outcome assessment, the research used the young people's experiences to evaluate the effectiveness of policy and practice. Young people were given the opportunity to convey what was important to them, therefore, the work was in many respects individualised. However, the thematic nature of the work lent itself toward a more generalised notion of outcomes. There was no sense of a specific intervention being evaluated rather the more generalised concept of service evaluation across a range of outcome assessment areas, for example, education, employment, accommodation, etc. This is in no way levelled as a criticism of the work rather a classification of methodological approach. Particular themes were drawn out in that, although the research was specifically concerned with leaving care many questions regarding the management of care became apparent. This continuum of effect raises the further issue of when to assess outcomes. Locating an outcome and isolating it terms of a specific time frame is highly problematic - the outcome of the 'care' experience may be something that continues and changes over time, suggesting that there will only ever be a formative evaluation available.

In relation to this particular piece of research, Stein (1997, p7) later argued that there are three kinds of research knowledge required if it is to be established 'what works in leaving care'; citing 'needs

assessment, process evaluation and outcome research.’ With needs assessment he maintains that the aim is to outline the characteristics of the target population and he goes on to classify his research with Kate Carey, (Stein and Carey, 1986) within the needs assessment domain. Stein and Carey arguably were also able to accumulate knowledge which could be classified in outcome terms; for instance, quantifying the number of young people unable to find work; documenting the feelings of loneliness and isolation some young people experienced. The young people participating in this study had been ‘through’ the care system so their expressed views and evaluations may arguably be framed as outcomes; an evaluation of process; or viewed as an assessment of needs. While Stein’s classifications are useful it seems nevertheless problematic trying to show clear demarcation between each area. The strengths of Stein and Carey’s research is that it gave a diverse understanding of the complexity of young people’s lives, even though, assessing unique individualised outcomes was not part of the research aims.

Another piece of research which is useful when trying to appreciate the complexities of assessing outcomes is a national survey undertaken on behalf of The Aftercare Consortium⁵ (Broad, 1993). This survey recorded the views of staff working for leaving care projects across England and Wales. The aim was to provide ‘a summary report on after care work in the 1990s, monitoring the impact of the Children Act 1989 on that work,’ (p3). Broad additionally placed the survey in its ‘social context’ presenting recent legislation that had ‘considerable impact’ on young people leaving care: the (amended) Criminal Justice Act 1991, the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 and the Criminal Justice Act 1991. Monitoring the impact of these various pieces of legislation in terms of how they might effect the lives of young people leaving care was viewed as crucial.

The survey’s focus was to quantify a number of structurally defined outcomes for young people leaving care: were young people in full-time, part-time employment, youth training schemes, education or unemployed? What was their housing status: supported lodgings, housing association tenancy, local authority tenancy, etc? Also, areas of social policy, i.e. housing benefit, income support for under 18s, youth training, employment, level of leaving care grant, etc. were evaluated. While the survey may have had as its central concern the impact of services on the lives of young people, the primary aim was to monitor after care provision at a national level, using objective pre-

⁵ ‘The After Care Consortium evolved early in 1991 following the initiative of the National Foster Care Association, initially to bring together voluntary sector organisations involved in work with care leavers.’ (Broad, 1993, p9)

defined categories. Outcomes assessment was evident, in terms of the impact of the Children Act 1989 and other social policy matters; establishing a more comprehensive evaluation in relation to the impact of legislation on young people's lives. The issues surveyed were to a large extent those which were identified to be important to young people. However, this does allude to Parker *et al's* question, 'For whom is something considered to be an outcome?' The more generalised outcomes of young people would also be vital to organisations (Social Services Departments, voluntary organisations, etc.) in terms of service provision, i.e. meeting needs and value for money. Furthermore, outcomes evaluated might be perceived to be very much at the summative end of the outcome evaluation continuum; to actually be measuring end results: housing, employment, etc. This type of aggregate level analysis is essential if young people are ultimately to receive a service which aims to be efficient and accountable. However, once again individual young people and their unique outcomes were absent.

The third piece of relevant past research I will review is Biehal, Clayden, Stein and Wade's (1995) work on 'Young People and Leaving Care Schemes.' They identified a number of questions that they believed required 'further investigation':

- * First, what different scheme models and approaches to leaving care are developing and what services do they provide?

- * Second how effectively are schemes able to support young people leaving care? What are the 'outcomes' for young people of their involvement with schemes?

- * Finally, how do the outcomes and experiences of young people who use schemes compare to those not being assisted by schemes?

(Biehal *et al*, 1995, p5)

Here the concept of outcome assessment has been fully incorporated into the research in terms of outcomes for young people who experience different types of service provision in the form of scheme models and approaches. The research investigated different leaving care schemes and

approaches to leaving care in three local authorities. 'Outcomes along a range of dimensions were analysed: accommodation, life skills, education, career paths, social networks' (p11). This work adopted a two stage, multi-methods approach in that a survey was initiated during the first stage gathering information relating to the leaving care transition: housing, employment, etc. (Biehal *et al*, 1992). The second phase built on this aggregate level data adopting a qualitative methodological approach using the following research techniques: participant observation of scheme work, interviews with scheme staff and social services staff, along with an analysis of policy documents. This enabled the research team to, 'identify the distinct features of the four schemes and to construct initial scheme profiles,' (p9). Young people from each of the participating local authorities were included in a stratified sampling process where young people, their social workers and leaving care workers gave semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Young people not using the schemes and their social workers were also interviewed providing a comparison sample. The research 'charts' the experience of a group of care leavers receiving services from four leaving care schemes. Here outcome assessment concentrated on the more specific; making comparisons between scheme types, users and non-users. A particular intervention in the form of the leaving care services was being evaluated.

The authors (Biehal *et al*, 1995) make a pertinent distinction between a 'final outcome' and an 'intermediate outcome':

- * *final outcomes* - changes in child welfare defined along the dimensions spanned by society's objectives for child care or child development generally, which are measures of the quality of life
- * *intermediate outcomes* - measures of the quality of care, desirable in themselves and for the impact they have on final outcomes

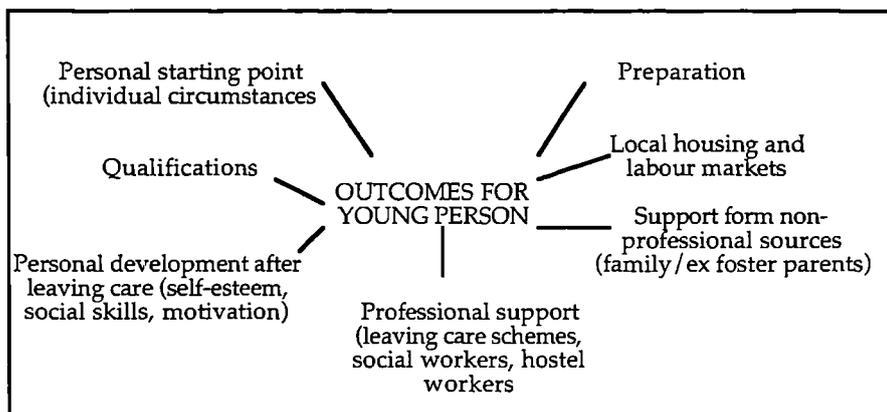
(Biehal *et al*, 1995, p250)

The study makes it obvious how inter-related past, present and future are in terms of outcomes. The past is seen to impact upon a young person in a variety of ways and this then influences their present lives, to some extent determining future outcomes. This inter-relatedness would form the foundation of a persuasive argument in favour of accommodating and accounting for the specificity of experience. Measuring *final outcomes* using dimensions set by society's objectives is in many

respects laudable and rational. A young person who has been 'looked after' will need to cope in the 'real' world and thus needs to have achieved a level of social competence, qualifications, a job. Finding ways of measuring the quality of care is also essential. However, with final outcomes there is the danger of making the same inequitable conclusions that were made with the school performance tables. In a school there is a need to appreciate fully the profile/biography of the children who attend before any useful evaluation of effectiveness can be realised, so it is when evaluating the outcomes of children who have been 'looked after'. It seems impossible to separate out the effects of the past and the way this might impact upon the present. The difficulty must be one of evaluating the effectiveness of services and how they have impacted upon individual lives and individual outcomes.

With this in mind Biehal *et al* ask the question, 'How can the effects of receiving a service from a leaving care scheme be measured when so many other factors may influence the outcomes for a young person?' (p250) This question would be applicable to any kind of outcome evaluation, separating out discrete sections of a life would seem to be an impossible task. Presented below (fig. 1) is the range of factors which Biehal *et al* believe influence the outcomes of young people leaving care. They go on to make the point that any evaluation of effectiveness must, 'therefore recognise the full range of factors that may influence outcomes.' (p252)

Figure 1: Factors influencing outcomes (adapted from Biehal *et al*, 1995 also Stein, 1997)



Suggested later in Biehal *et al*'s study was the idea of measuring outcomes on a 'case by case basis', therefore accepting the individualised nature and interplay of factors influencing outcomes. However, for their study the overall method of evaluating outcomes was one of comparison between particular

groups of young people. Comparisons were made between those who did not use the leaving care schemes, those who did and young people in the wider population. Yet Biehal *et al* constantly highlight the difficulty of their task and although this is a rigorous and comprehensive piece of research it still operates at the more thematic and generalised level leaving the more detailed and individualised specificity of experience touched upon but not central.

This brief consideration of past leaving care research shows the ways in which assessing outcomes is a complex and often compounded problem. Who is involved in making the assessment and for what purpose such assessments are made are paramount issues. Furthermore, the type of outcome being measured is also central. Although Biehal *et al* offer the useful differentiation between *final* and *intermediate* outcomes this might be argued to add to the question of who sets the defining characteristics of outcomes and for whom are they considered to be either positive or negative. The title of this chapter is 'Outcomes - whose, how and when?' It is hoped that this research will constantly address itself to those questions recognising when different agendas and interests are impacting upon the course of the research process.

Chapter Three

A biographical approach to outcomes

In this chapter I outline the theoretical origins upon which this research is based. I will begin by outlining biography and its sociological and psychological interpretations and orientations. The importance of situational context is discussed, followed by life course theory; and the way in which this accommodates both context and the person. Adolescence is discussed as a part of the life course continuum, exploring the ways in which young people might influence their own life course trajectories.

The making of biography

Denzin (1989, p6) makes the point that there are 'many biographical methods', the essential issue is the epistemological and ontological basis for employing such methods. In previous chapters I emphasise the point that the knowledge base currently held regarding the outcomes of young people who have been 'looked after' is founded upon a view that outcomes may be captured and seen to represent groups of individuals. In the specific case of young people leaving care I suggest that the way in which young people might be agents in their own life is somehow invisible when there is a concentration on collective outcomes and the impact of socio-structural conditions. By adopting a biographical approach I hope to provide an alternative perspective, enabling the more personal influence of the young people to come into view.

Smith (1994, p287) presents formal definitions of biography where Webster's Dictionary says 'the written history of a person's life'. The Oxford English Dictionary is almost in agreement, 'a written record of the life of an individual.' Life writing has an array of labels: portrayals, portraits, profiles,

memoirs, life stories, life histories, case studies, autobiographies - the list is endless. Smith further explains in detail how biographies can be drawn from a range of sources, letters, diaries, interviews, ethnographic field work - almost anything related to a life has the potential to be of use. However, having suggested limitations with regard to other methodological approaches to assessing outcomes there is a need to consider the claims made in relation to biographical methods.

With reference to a sociological biographical approach Stanley (1992, p5) proposes that two principles are 'enshrined' within it:

1. a rejection of psychological-reductionist accounts of 'the individual', instead insisting that individual people are social and cultural products through and through.
2. the recognition that if structural analyses do not work at the level of particular lives then they do not work at all.

The activity of assessing outcomes for children and young people, in the sense of monitoring the apparent effects of particular changes in circumstance, can be situated within Stanley's principles. In this rationalisation the individual is 'subject' and, as such, the 'local' in which a person interacts becomes far more crucial than with other explanations which take a less emphatic stance. The social and cultural worlds of individual subjects become central to the enterprise, and as such, ways of accessing, presenting and interpreting both the social and the cultural need to be found. The biographical method has as its subject matter the life experiences of a person, affording an opportunity to reveal the more personal. Thus, the social and cultural are inexorably connected to such experiences; the cultural setting, social networks and social context where young people live their lives are all used to construct the biographical subject.

Stanley (1992, p3) views, 'biography and autobiography as ideological accounts of 'lives' which in turn feed back into everyday understandings of how 'common lives' and 'extraordinary lives' can be recognised.' The notion of ideological accounts is one that is distinctly pertinent to this research as she argues that the material and the ideological are 'symbiotically related' in that ideas have a material origin and the ideology is manifestly as important because ideas are expressed in material practices.

'I use 'ideology' to refer to sets of ideas often expressed within a discourse of competing voices and which have organisational or other material consequentiality within social life ...' (p18)

Therefore there is the need to appreciate the ideology of those telling the story not only in terms of the young people participating but the ideology of the biographer. Furthermore, there is the divergent ideology of the State to recognise and consider both in terms of the impact upon the parenting rendered to young people and the way such parenting impacts on lives and ways in which it is evaluated. This recognition of differing ideologies, and the way this feeds back into material practice is presumably a more theoretical way of presenting the questions Parker *et al* raise in relation to assessing outcomes. An awareness of the ideological positions which guide the direction of particular accounts should thus be made accessible. Researching at this more subjective biographical level is not deemed to be better than more collective research; it is simply different. Operating at a subjective level enables an exploration of how the cultural and the social, construct life as lived by an individual person.

A cautionary note may need to be added to this sort of sociological biographical analysis in that the individual could once again be consumed by a purely socio-structural account of outcomes, where invisibilities in relation to the influence young people might exert would be concealed. However, biography is not limited to only sociological interpretations; writers have presented the case for a more effective consolidation of psychology and biography (Runyan, 1982, Sarbin, 1986, McAdams *et al*, 1988. Meon *et al*, 1995). This consolidation allows psychological theory to aid in the process of discerning the story being told where an interest in logico-deductive modes of experience and explanation is replaced with a person centred approach (McAdams, 1998, p3).

The issue of individual difference is one that is particularly compelling in psychology with developmental psychology attempting to trace explanations for both typical and atypical patterns of human development. There is a case for utilising these generalised explanations; in this instance human development and behaviour, as a resource to draw upon. Yet, Howe (1997) maintains that a particular person's development can be very different from the rendered account of 'averaged findings' obtained in normative psychological research:

'it is hardly surprising that some people have argued that in view of the difficulties involved in attempting to apply results based on aggregate data to individuals, investigations into the progress of development in particular men and women should be left to scholars working in other disciplines, such as biography,' (p237).

While accepting the difficulties facing psychology in relation to a person's unique experience, and therefore their individual differences, he goes on to suggest ways in which modern empirical psychology can contribute to the writing of biography. He maintains that psychology has the knowledge base to 'explain and demystify' previously impervious and inexplicable events. Also, psychological research and its knowledge base generates caution, 'avoiding false inferences' where too much emphasis is placed on particular single events. Research has established that single occurrences affect young people's lives only to a limited degree (Rutter & Rutter, 1992) with far more evidence suggesting that repeated events or adverse circumstances which are persistent over a period of time are associated with enduring problems. This should be taken as a prudent reminder to the biographer who might foreground the more dramatic and leave unnoticed the more common and everyday experience of the individual.

Smith (1994) admits that academic psychologists search for a certain kind of truth which is exemplified in experimentation, quantification and testing propositions; therefore, the use of biographical method is viewed with apprehension. McLeod (1997) offers a more committed liaison between the notion of biography and *storytelling* within the psychological perspective of psychotherapy. He argues for a new emerging approach to therapy theory and practice which, 'foregrounds a sense of persons as social beings, living in and through a culture and its stories' (p138). He, like others, questions the quantification and objective measurement which is paramount in mainstream psychology saying that,

'Only very recently has 'qualitative' interpretive research achieved sufficient legitimacy to be acceptable, but even here the type of qualitative work that is done is such that the narrative accounts of research informants are usually converted through data-reduction procedures into abstracted, schematic, paradigmatic knowledge,' (p142)

He argues for a 'narrative therapy' based upon a social constructionist perspective where, 'stories are not merely cognitive or individual products, but are shared. The story is created between teller and audience,' (Mcleod, 1994, p83, see also Plummer, 1995). Mcleod's use of narrative and his emphasis upon *stories* and the way in which they express the person as active and relational is important here and demonstrates the diverse ways in which biography and the concept of storytelling can be presented and interpreted. We have seen how both sociology and psychology have a much to contribute not only in relation to biographical method but toward an alternative means of assessing outcomes. The emphasis here lies in trying to situate young people within both social and historical conditions while at the same time allowing the way in which the person might influence their own unique outcomes to become visible.

Outcomes, context and transitions

I have thus far begun to question the way outcomes are measured without implying that there are any right or wrong ways to proceed. I merely suggest that there are distinct limitations in the way such assessments and evaluations are made which should be recognised and acknowledged. Reference was made in Chapter One, to a range of social conditions which impact upon young people: their past family experiences, reasons for separation, social policy decisions relating to young people making the transition to live independently. I have highlighted how age (in this study the positioning as adolescent) impacts upon the experiences of young people. Young people become sixteen, seventeen, eighteen and there is an expectation that their status will change - they will live independently and become adults. Therefore, there is a need to consider conceptual frameworks and interpretations of adolescence which might be helpful when trying to gain an alternative view of outcomes.

Adolescence and life course

A useful conceptual framework for exploring the links between a person's life stage and the social world is provided by *life course theory*. Elder (1995, p104) refers to life course theory as an 'emerging paradigm' where time, context and process are more salient dimensions of theory and analysis. The focus is on what happens to the individual going through various social trajectories and

developmental paths, looking at continuity and change over time (Moen, 1995). Elder (1980) explains that life course theory looks at three distinct levels of analysis: *individual lifetime* as measured by age and stage of development, *social time* as measured by the roles one fills and the meanings given by society, and *historical time* the period and events one lives through. Although this sounds rather abstract it can be translated into, 'a way of studying the pathways people follow through their lives and how those pathways are influenced by social norms and historical change,' (Garbarino, 1985, p580). Hareven (1982) uses the additional concept of *family time*, to include the timing of events such as marriage, the birth of a child, leaving home stressing that both family and individual time are closely synchronized:

'A life course perspective views the interrelationships between individual and collective family behaviour as they constantly change over people's lives and in the context of historical conditions .' (p6)

An example of changing context and its effects on family time can be found in Chapter One where poverty and the consequences for families and children were discussed. It would be naive to argue that considerable strides have not been made in reducing the worst effects of poverty were we to compare the turn of the century with present day (although this may not be so when viewed in terms of relative poverty). Evident in this single example is the changing landscape of people's lives, thus context is continually unfolding, constantly changing and most importantly impacting upon lives.

Adopting a life course conceptual analysis enables a comprehensive look at the context within which young people live their lives and also offers the potential to explore individual experience. Pratt and Hanson (1993, p30), who are feminist geographers, support this maintaining that life course can incorporate both the diversity of personal experience and social change; and that such an approach makes visible the way in which such experiences are socially constructed. In association with this Jones and Wallace (1992, p13) state that a life course perspective is a more holistic approach stressing that although the lives of young people are lived in different spheres: families, their peers, the labour market, etc., their lives should be seen as an *integrated whole*. Therefore, individual, social and historical time continually intersect and impact upon daily lives as a whole. For a young person who has been 'looked after' this intersecting and taking of *pathways* in terms of a life course perspective might be, for example:

Individual time: reaching eighteen and therefore being viewed as old enough to live independently.

Social time: the social construction of independence and the implications for a successful transition.

Historical time: changes in the political and economic climate and how this impacts upon the transition to independence.

The characteristics of the life course approach can be further understood when compared with a previous conceptualisation of the person across a life span: the *life cycle*. The concept of the life cycle outlines developmental stages that individuals pass through over time. A concept of adolescence was identified as early as Greek times. It was believed that the human life cycle was developmental, because change and development were considered to be intrinsic to the nature of all living things. Development was therefore seen as self-propelled and teleological in that change comes from within the person/organism and the endpoint of development is implicit at the beginning. Developmental theories are organised around specific concepts of adult competence. Using Freudian principles the endpoint of development is the genital heterosexual adult. Adopting a Piagetian view the endpoint of development is the stage of formal operational thinking (adapted from Fox, 1997). Conceptually then the life cycle has roots in biology and developmental psychology. People develop in physical, psychological and social terms moving in sequence through a number of stages in the life cycle: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age.

It would seem appropriate here to take a brief look at the work of a major life cycle theorist. Erikson (1968) conceptualises the life cycle as a series of stages, critical periods of development which involve bipolar conflict that must be addressed and resolved before one can proceed. Erikson shares many of Freud's basic assumptions, but there are some crucial differences. He moves away from the Freudian emphasis on sexual drive focusing instead on the emergence of a sense of identity. While agreeing with Freud that the early years are important he argues that identity is not fully formed at the end of adolescence but continues to develop through further stages in adult life. During

adolescence his fifth stage comes to the fore, that of *identity versus role confusion*. Identity versus role confusion has been preceded by four earlier stages which each have a necessary place in the life cycle. Erikson's approach, while being rooted in psychoanalytic theory which is biologically determined, is psychosocial. His view is that 'optimal identity formation should show itself through commitment to those work roles, values, and sexual orientations that best fit one's own unique combination of needs and talents,' (Kroger, 1996, p20)

However, according to Pilcher (1995) one of life cycle theory's main weaknesses is that it fails to take account of the social contexts. She says that, 'the main weakness of the life cycle concept are argued to lie in its universalistic, deterministic, asocial, and ahistorical tendencies' (p18). A further criticism is that it manages effectively to locate females within the biological life cycle of males (Gilligan, 1982). These may seem harsh criticisms in light of the way in which Erikson obviously does incorporate the social into his theory. Nevertheless, the notion of stages and the way in which all individuals move through them is questionable and may fail to accommodate the way in which experience is more comprehensively socially constructed. In addition the biological inevitability of progression through the life cycle may move the emphasis too much in the direction of explanations based upon biological determinants and less upon social interaction.

The purpose of the present study is to avoid moving from a position which arguably concentrates on socio-structural issues to one which concentrates predominantly on biological and fixed developmental psychological explanations. Allat and Keil (1987, p1) argue that the contrast between the two concepts is one of a, 'biological and social inevitability, irrespective of individual differences,' which would be life cycle, against the, 'interaction of the individual with social structures which are subject to historical change,' the life course. Life course does not aim to ignore concepts of identity and transition rather it seems to balance more effectively the impact of context and the way in which, for this research, it might be an important factor in constructing the outcomes of young people.

Elder (1997, p47) maintains that life course theory represents a major shift in the way we think about and study developmental processes and human lives. This perspective integrates process and structure, highlighting the differential timing and *connectedness* of people's lives and stresses the part played by individuals in shaping their own lives. Elder highlights the multidisciplinary of the theory drawing on a number of conceptual pathways, for example the generational tradition of life

history (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-1920); the significance of age in accounts of birth cohorts and age strata (Elder, 1975, Ryder, 1965) and developmental lifespan psychology (Baltes, 1987).

In this research I seek to foster the tradition of multidisciplinary in two ways: one by adopting a range of methodological techniques - aggregate level data analysis, qualitative thematic analysis and biography (to be outlined fully in chapter four). Two, by not limiting this research to the verification or otherwise of a unitary theory. Life course theory is used as an exploratory framework, but where appropriate other conceptual positions will be incorporated and explored. Furthermore, incorporating life course and biographical method enables both Stanley's notion of the biographical subject as 'social and cultural products' and Howe's utilitarian view of drawing on psychology where it provides epistemological insights to be reconciled.

Transitions, interaction and life course

The notion of transitions is central to the life course approach. Early transitions are seen to have consequences for the ways in which later ones are experienced (Pilcher, 1995, p20). In the present study, the focus is on adolescence and the social trajectories of individuals and their developmental pathways. These social trajectories are related to outcomes in that they locate individuals on a particular pathway in life. Trajectories are for Elder (1997):

'a series of linked states A change in state thus marks a transition - a transition from one job to another for example. Transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinct meaning and form,' (p48).

This acceptance of the continuing and shaping effect of past transitions on current trajectories (and vice versa) means that outcomes are part of, and are shaped by, the life trajectories people follow. Elder does not suggest that the individual is totally passive being blown about by the temporal conditions they exist within; he emphasises the, 'continual interplay between social and developmental trajectories'. This interplay is associated with four distinctive features of life course theory:

1. human lives in relation to historical times and place,
2. human agency,
3. linked lives and
4. social timing.

When considering human lives in relation to historical times and place, cohort effects are to be studied. For example; did young people twenty years ago find it less problematic making the transition from school to work? If so the nature of these changes may have serious implications regarding human agency and the individual's efforts in securing employment, thus, social change and its life course implications are vital issues when considering outcomes. Elder's linked lives and social timing relates the patterning of a life according to age, where social change will vary in both characteristics and influence across the life course. Therefore, in adolescence social timing will relate to leaving home, developing an adult identity and may be influenced considerably by social change. However, by including human agency, individuals are afforded a level of control over their own unique outcomes. Elder nevertheless places great emphasis on changing social, demographic and historical conditions (see for example; Conger and Elder, 1994) providing a macro perspective on the life course. The literature on young people leaving care, while providing ample information with which to formulate the macro perspective makes only limited direct reference to human agency as a concept. Biehal *et al* (1994) do include social skills, self-esteem and motivation as factors influencing outcomes, nevertheless, the emphasis in research relating to young people leaving care is one which consistently locates young people in a system or conditions where human agency seems, if not exactly non-existent, at least obscured.

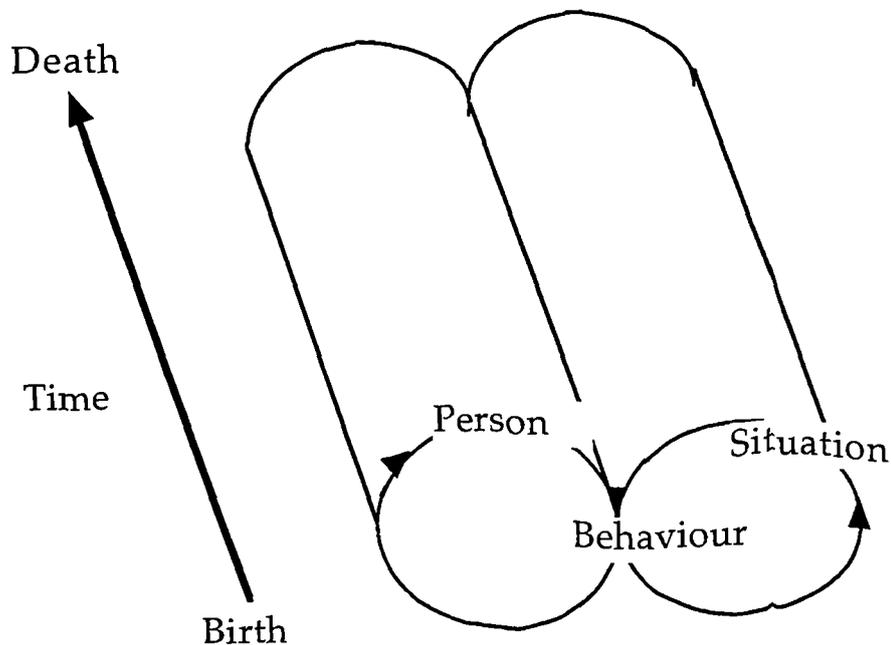
In response to this limited accommodation of young people's possible influence in their own lives, the ontological principle for the present research is to subscribe to an approach presented by Runyan (1982) which provides a theoretical orientation for life course which places the emphasis at the interactionist level. The need to explore how macro conditions shape life courses and therefore effect outcomes is accepted, yet the emphasis for this research is on the processes influencing the course of experience within lives with the social and historical being part but by no means all of the picture. Runyan maintains that the micro perspective on life course, concentrating on the course of experience within lives, is in contrast to the sociological or macro perspective on the life course which

places greater emphasis on the changing social, demographic and historical conditions upon the collective life course. Within Runyan's micro perspective; life course is used to indicate the course of experience focussing specifically on the sequence of person-situation interaction. Runyan (1982, p84-85) suggests that life course can be, 'conceptualized as a sequence of processes, as well as a sequence of interactions,' with three general processes that would need to be considered:

- (1) *behaviour-determining processes*, resulting from the interaction of persons and situations,
- (2) *person-determining processes*, or the processes which create, maintain, and change personal states and characteristics, and
- (3) *situation-determining processes*, or the processes through which people select, create, and influence the situations they encounter.

The relationship between these three processes over time, Runyan says is represented in an interactional model of the life course (figure 2).

Figure 2: Runyan's interactional model of the life course



(Adapted from Runyan, 1982, p85)

There are no arrows which directly link persons and situations rather there is an assumption that:

‘the effects of persons upon situations are usually mediated through their behaviour, and that the effects of situations upon persons are typically mediated by the person's experience within the situation,’ (Runyan, 1982, p85)

Adopting this interactionist perspective affords young people some measure of determining influence over their outcomes. There is also clear evidence of Elder's (1997) continual interplay between social and developmental trajectories. However, as we see with Runyan's three general processes the extent to which the person is *determined* by the situational context they operate within is very much open to debate. The present research aims to explore such issues by looking at a number of factors: the way young people interact with situations, what are their personal characteristics, how these are changed or maintained, and the influence, if any, that young people have upon their situation. This theoretical position encompasses not only Biehal *et al's* mainly situational ‘factors influencing outcomes’ but also introduces the prospect of the young person negotiating and influencing their individual outcomes.

We have seen previously how the term outcome can be contentious and difficult to quantify, however, there is the additional danger of placing all the emphasis on situational variables with no real acceptance that the individual may influence their own outcomes to any extent. This in no way attempts to diminish the responsibility and necessity to create the most favourable environment in which children and young people can develop. Rather there is an undertaking to accommodate and account for the more individualised outcomes of specific young people and the way in which they might negotiate their unique set of circumstances and influence their own outcomes. While situational factors and structural constraints may have certain similarities the way in which young people experience and react to such situations may differ considerably. By undertaking a biographical, life course perspective when assessing outcomes I aim to make more visible Runyan's three interactional processes where the young person has the opportunity to be *situation determining*.

Young people interacting in their own lives

Having commented upon the way in which human agency is often subsumed beneath situational factors affecting outcomes, in this section I aim to consider the notion that as individuals we can be *situation - determining* as Runyan suggests. Runyan in his interactionist model of life course maintains that the individual can transform their environment - can make an impact. However, he also concedes that the situation can shape and change the person. Trying to shed light on this interactive process would seem necessary when attempting to understand young people's lives and the way they negotiate the move to independent living.

From an interactionist perspective, outcomes are determined at both an individual and social level. I have outlined the many ways in which societal conditions impact upon the outcomes of young people who have been 'looked after'. This raises vital questions: how do some individuals strive against all odds and take control of their lives and others not? Is an inability to act a consequence of a reality that there is no avenue to exercise control and therefore be *situation* and *behaviour-determining*? Are persons socially and historically bound or is there something else which is less deterministic and more individual? Many theories have been proposed in relation to the centrality of control in human lives (Adler, 1956, DeCharms, 1978, White, 1959).

In order to generate the motivation to effect a change in the specific direction of one's life the individual would presumably need to have a level of self belief in their ability to achieve a positive outcome. The concepts of control and self-efficacy are presented by Elder (1975, 1981, 1997) when he relates to human agency and life course theory. The notion of self efficacy was developed from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and Bandura's 'transactional view' of self and society where self-reflection and self-influence are important determinants of human action. In this transactional view 'internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective and biological events; behaviour; and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants' (Bandura, 1997, p6). Thus when taking action the individual is not completely and involuntarily determined by environmental events s/he is able to reflect upon any influence they might be able to impart. They consider alternatives and self evaluate, visualising outcomes and making self appraisals with regard to their own abilities.

Issues of human agency and control are rationalised and explained within the social cognitive concept of self-efficacy. 'Efficacy beliefs influence, 'how people think, feel, motivate themselves , and act,' (Bandura, 1995, p2).

'Perceived self efficacy is concerned with beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilise the motivation, cognitive resources, and course of action needed to meet given situational demands,' (Bandura, 1989, p153).

Reflected in the above quote is the view that 'Outcomes arise from actions' (Bandura, 1997, p21) It is generally accepted, and indeed accommodated in Runyan's interactional model of the life course, that how one behaves will influence outcomes but this is balanced within the determining effects of the situation. In line with this interactionist account Bandura (1995) claims that efficacy can be developed by four main forms of influence. The most effective way of bringing about an ardent sense of efficacy is through *mastery experiences*. The experience of being successful builds a sturdy belief in one's personal efficacy, whilst failures undermine this concept of self belief. Bandura (1995) makes the point that if such failures occur before a sense of self efficacy has been established then self belief is more dramatically affected. Developing efficacy through mastery experiences involves, 'acquiring the cognitive, behavioural, and self-regulatory tools for creating and executing appropriate courses of action to manage ever-changing circumstances,' (Bandura, 1995, p3). Here it can be seen how efficacy beliefs would interact with situational variables in the form of social and historical time. For example, the failure to find employment might relate to the structural difficulties young people finding employment in contemporary society experience, yet getting a job (or continuing education) is seen as an appropriate course of action for each young person. If a young person is unable to be successful in finding employment, suitable accommodation, etc., such failures would have substantial implications for the future *pathways* a young person might undertake. Without the self belief that mastery experiences create, young people may lack the motivation to try again, thus for example becoming potential victims of long term unemployment.

The second influential way of creating and indeed increasing self-efficacy is through the *vicarious experiences* which social models provide. Research has found that by seeing other people, particularly those who are similar to themselves, succeed through consistent effort raises the observers' belief that they too have the ability to master comparable endeavours, (Bandura, 1986,

Schunk, 1987). However, the reverse also has an effect, where observing others fail despite considerable effort reduces the observers' judgment of their own efficacy thus undermining their degree of motivation. For young people preparing to leave care the implications of observing their peers falter and often fail to make a fulfilling and happy life for themselves may have tangible consequences with young people having very little belief in their own ability to succeed. In the previous chapter research found high rates of unemployment among care leavers - vicariously young people learn that they can look forward to a fairly bleak future.

Social persuasion is a third way of increasing self-belief; here estimates of one's capacity made by others is critical. People who are told that they have the capabilities to master a given activity are likely to commit more effort than those who are experiencing self doubt (Schunk, 1989). For 'looked after' children the emphasis would be on not only the emotional and practical support of carers, leaving care workers, etc. but also the way in which past parenting had encouraged a positive evaluation to be made by the young people. Young people will make an appraisal of their own capabilities based upon the way in which others have evaluated their competence, here then low expectations may be rewarded by a young person making little effort to achieve beyond such expectations. Interactions with others are therefore instrumental in creating a level of self belief in terms of personal ability, which would then translate into action.

The final influence on efficacy beliefs is the individual's *physiological and emotional states*. This relates to the way in which the person interprets emotional and physical reactions. Bandura (1995, p5) gives the following example: people who have a high sense of efficacy are likely to view their state of affective arousal as an energising facilitator of performance. Those individuals who are troubled by self-doubts would regard their arousal as a debilitator whereas 'the stronger the sense of efficacy, the weaker the anxious expectation' (Bandura, 1997, p151). Therefore those with high levels of self-efficacy would be more likely to interpret 'nerves' before a job interview as a positive state which would increase performance while those with lower levels would inhibit their performance due to the more negative perceptions they hold in relation to their particular state of arousal. Many of the young people leaving care have experienced traumatic pasts; their emotional state is often characterised by self-doubt and apprehension (Stein and Maynard, 1985, Biehal *et al*, 1995, Hutson, 1997). Therefore when interpreting physiological and emotional states the possibility of arousal acting as a debilitator rather than facilitating performance is more convincing.

Having reviewed the factors which influence efficacy beliefs it can be seen that they are, 'the product of a complex process of self-persuasion that relies on cognitive processing of diverse sources of efficacy information conveyed inactively, vicariously, socially, and physiologically' (Bandura, 1997, p11). Breakwell (1986, 1992) maintains that self-efficacy operates as a general and enduring facet of the self-concept. It is nevertheless, important to appreciate the conceptual distinction between self-efficacy and self-concept. Zimmerman (1997) makes the point that self-efficacy is a context related judgment of personal ability and self-concept is a more general self-assessment. However, self-efficacy should not be undervalued as it is founded upon the:

'simple postulate that people's perceptions of their own capabilities influence how they act, their motivation levels, their thought patterns, and their emotional reactions in demanding situations. . . . In this respect self-efficacy is the foundation-stone of personal agency ' (Breakwell, 1992, p35).

It is this foundation-stone of personal agency that is particularly important in relation to the interactionist theory of life course development. Rather than discounting the issue of personal agency Bandura's concept of self-efficacy offers a way of integrating human agency within the more socio-structural and rather deterministic explanations of care leavers outcomes. Bandura (1989) also proposes a theory of *reciprocal determinism* whereby self-efficacy is initially determined by experiences of successful performance but it then subsequently influences the choice of activities and situations. This position would suggest that self-efficacy can be both cause and effect being part of a continuing yet changing cycle. Although the person is not passive, past and present experiences will have serious implications in terms of young people's efforts to confront the situational demands made upon them. Therefore, the concept of self-efficacy fits effortlessly with Runyan's interactionist model where the person and situation continually interact determining outcomes. Indeed Runyan (1982, p84) states that his interactional model of life course is consistent with Bandura's reciprocal thesis.

Having outlined self-efficacy its origins and potential influence on individual life course trajectories it would seem germane to consider explanations relating a more acquiescent facet of the self-concept. Breakwell (1992) links the concept of self-efficacy with *psychological estrangement*. She does not

suggest that they are simply two sides of the same construct, rather that; 'Efficacy largely lies in the domain of personal and interpersonal action; estrangement lies in the domain of social understanding and compliance.' (p38)

Banks, Bates, Breakwell, Bynner, Elmer, Jamieson and Roberts (1992) in their research also studied young people in context looking at issues of control and agency. They too explored issues of self-efficacy and estrangement believing that they represent two components of an individual's overall sense of self-esteem. Self-efficacy is seen as being positive self esteem and estrangement as negative. Estrangement was developed from the sociological and philosophical concept of alienation. Seeman (1959) created a set of indicators which he believed identified alienation at an individual level rather than at a structural or normative level in society. Initially he argued that outlined in the literature were five different meanings which related to alienation:

powerlessness - where individuals feel that their capacity for making decisions lies elsewhere, therefore they have little or no control over their outcomes. Powerlessness is primarily attributable to the political system, the economy and international affairs.

meaninglessness - relates to an individual's uncertainty about what should be believed, the social world becomes confusing and unpredictable.

normlessness - is an aspect highlighted in the work of Merton (1967) where it is suggested that within certain social circumstances norms will be disregarded in order to achieve desired goals.

isolation - Isolation occurs where the individual feel separated from the community within which they live; renouncing the community's mutually held standards of success and failure.

self-estrangement - was added later and refers to the individual's inability to find any intrinsic satisfaction in the activities they undertake. The action taken is motivated only by rewards which others control therefore the person feels the separation of their 'inner real self' from the self which acts in order to receive such rewards.

(predominantly adapted from Breakwell, 1992, p36-37)

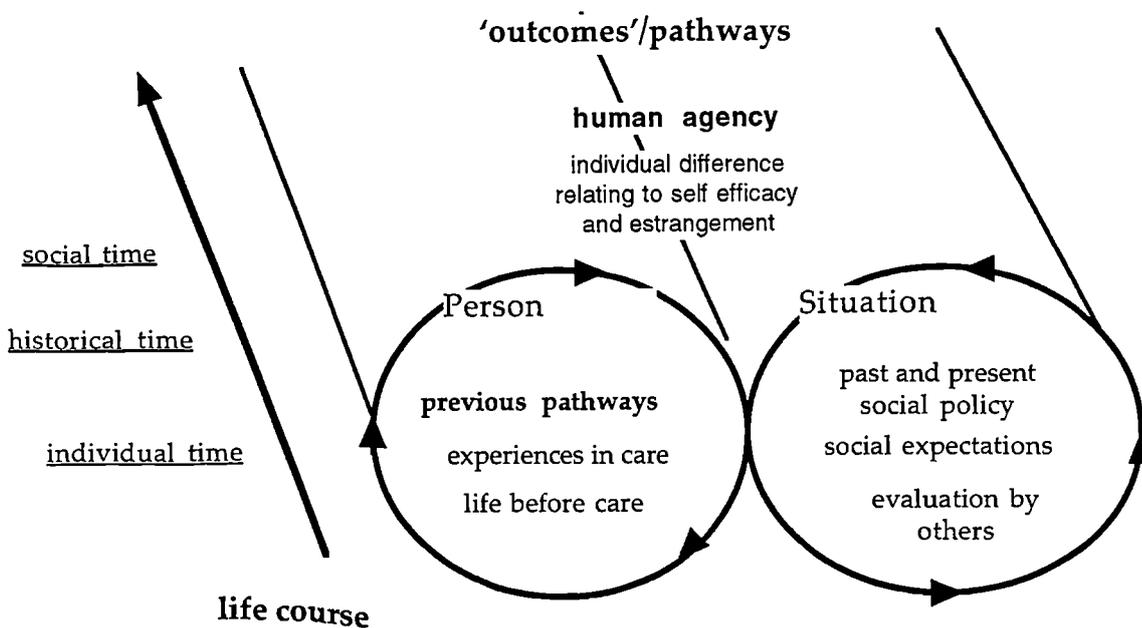
Seeman (1972) introduced a sixth constituent of alienation, that of social isolation. Here alienation is linked to social rejection or repudiation. The move is again away from considering alienation in terms of psychological representations and resorting once more to the way the social system works. Breakwell refers to studies where psychometric measures were developed to measure the various constituents of Seeman's model, with many studies showing high correlating between the various facets of alienation (Simmons, 1969, Neal et al, 1976). However, this correlation should not be seen to imply that alienation is unidimensional (Breakwell, 1992). Hammond (1988 cited in Breakwell, 1992) suggests that these various constituents of alienation are derived from a coherent psychological characteristic of the individual. By labelling this underlying characteristic *psychological estrangement* the hope was to leave aside some of the confusion associated with the term alienation. Yet if, as Breakwell suggests, efficacy largely lies in the domain of personal and interpersonal action and estrangement in the domain of social understanding and compliance how far can they be seen to be underlying characteristics or consequences of an interactional process between the situation and the person? The question of underlying characteristic or consequence is one that may never be answered yet the theoretical application of a life course interactionist model may move some way toward understanding the pathways young people embark upon from a different theoretical perspective.

A life course approach to outcomes

Throughout this chapter I have argued for the need to consider individual young people's outcomes and the way in which they themselves might interpret and impact upon them. Much of the research reviewed does take account of the social and historical time young people experience, however, it is difficult to get a sense of the person; of how they interact with and upon their own unique set of circumstances. By drawing upon life course theory, incorporating biographical methods to evaluate outcomes the person is placed within their own individual and situational context where their past is acknowledged to have shaped their particular stage of development (see figure 3), incorporating Jones and Wallace's (1992) idea of young people's lives as an 'integrated whole'.

Moreover, the situation is seen to be determined by the individual, social and historical time young people operate within and therefore past and present social policy, societal expectations and the evaluations made by others all become important. What Runyan's interactional model of the life course offers is an opportunity to explore conceptually the way in which the situational context and the person shape and determine each other. The interpretations and evaluations of the young person are paramount in this process. The evidence presented suggests that human agency and levels of self-efficacy and estrangement are highly dependent upon the interaction between the person and the situation. These perceived levels of control and influence would therefore be based upon complex issues relating to individual differences of both a situational and a personal nature.

Figure 3: A life course approach to outcomes



This biographical, interactionist approach to assessing outcomes will hopefully make more obvious the way in which situational factors construct and determine the lives of young people leaving care while at the same time making visible the young people: their perspectives, interpretations and influence. Thus, a biographical, life course approach to outcomes aims to elucidate an interactional process, attempting to appreciate at a individual level how far Stanley's (1995) assertion that, 'individual people are social and cultural products through and through' can be accepted.

Part Two

Chapter Four

Toward a methodological approach

This chapter presents an account of the methodological approach and techniques employed in this research. However, methodological issues are continually referred to throughout the thesis; it being contradictory to argue the need to contextualise the lives of young people yet not offer methodological context when and where appropriate. Therefore, even though an account is offered in this chapter relating to methodological approach; when and where necessary throughout the thesis ontological and epistemological issues will be covered in more detail. In addition, I try to be forthright offering a candid account of how the research developed rather than the more neat summary generally depicted in methodological outlines. Thus I will try to make visible the ways in which this research may have deviated from the more traditional and typical approaches, to assessing outcomes and understanding the lives of young people leaving care, outlined in Chapter Two.

Integrating methodological epistemology

This research was undertaken working with: a particular local authority, the Leaving Care Scheme and young people who had moved on from local authority 'care'. It arose out of a local authority initiative aimed at accessing the views of young people in its 'care', thus there was a clear starting point. The design of the study needed to be developed and adapted to meet not only my academic and practical needs but also to fulfil the expectations of those who agreed to collaborate. The perspective I brought to the research was a combination of my interests and the theoretical, epistemological and methodological stances which I had chosen to focus upon. These interests needed to be harmonised and integrated into this initial starting point set by the local authority.

The Authority's initiative was viewed as one response aimed at 'listening to children' which is a dominant theme throughout the many reports which had been produced when there have been

serious concerns regarding the safety of young people who have been 'looked after'. (Levy & Kahan, 1991, Kirkwood, 1993). In line with these report recommendations the Authority had made the decision actively to seek the views of young people they had 'looked after' and who had moved on to live independently. However, while keeping young people safe was a major objective, a further objective was to appreciate and understand better the value young people placed on the services they received and were continuing to receive.

As a consequence of these objectives, the Authority intended to offer *exit interviews* to all young people over sixteen who were registered for aftercare services. These interviews constitute a source of research data relating to the young people's lives before they entered care, an evaluation of state parenting and additional information relating to leaving 'care'. Considerable time was spent working with the Authority to develop this initiative. What needs to be acknowledged is the *real world* nature of this piece of research. In the first instance a particular method had been determined by the Authority's intent to provide *exit interviews*; there being a specific starting point which had to be embraced and from which further research needed to be developed. Notwithstanding this possible restriction, the methodological approach evolved throughout the life time of the research, being undertaken in the first instance as a collaborative enterprise with the full cooperation and support of the Authority. The aim of this level of collaboration was that it be mutually beneficial; the Authority being assisted in their endeavour to offer *exit interviews*, and in return the resulting data would be made available for analysis as part of this research.

This phase of the research had at its base an *action research* mode of enquiry, whereby it was collaborative with the ultimate aim of improving practice. Furthermore, the researched, which arguably in the first instance were the Authority, participated in the development of the research by making decisions about the study format (Banister et al, 1994). What was not applicable was the level of intervention usually explicit in action research. The central aim of the research was to understand better and offer an interpretation of young people's lives thus the requirement of testing out and monitoring effects, as in an action research approach, would not be appropriate. Therefore a more evaluative line was taken, drawing on Reinharz's (1992) concept of 'action-in-research' where two of her five 'types' were constructive in developing a methodological approach. The first was 'evaluating' the effectiveness of action in meeting needs and the second 'demystification' believing that increasing the knowledge base around issues or certain groups of people will in itself create the

potential for change. The idea of evaluating effectiveness rests comfortably with the notion of assessing outcomes and demystification reflects the need to gain increased knowledge about particular groups of people, hopefully illuminating three interactive processes (Runyan, 1982) identified in Chapter Three.

A feminist perspective also informed the development of the study. Although, working in partnership with the local authority did set parameters I have tried to adhere to basic feminist principles. However, this perspective does not provide a unified methodological or epistemological approach (Griffin, 1995, p119; May, 1993, pp10-11, Maynard, 1994) with many continuous debates regarding ontology, epistemology and methodology (see for instance, Bannister *et al.*, pp122-123, Henwood, 1993, p5, Stanley and Wise, 1993, for a discussion of differing feminist positions). Nevertheless, Gill (1998, pp23-25) maintains that although none might apply to all feminisms, there are some common themes. She says that most share a critique of traditional social science research, highlighting the way in which 'the partiality of the research passed as universal knowledge' (p23). Feminisms mounted a 'sustained attack' on traditional notions of objectivity, raising the issue that claims to consuming truths were a reflection of 'little more than the experiences of white Western males , and more recently, white middle-class, first world feminists' (p24). Gill also identifies challenging the way in which the producer of knowledge is primarily presented as irrelevant, needing to alienate and distance themselves from their own lives in order to produce credible work. With this distance, 'The producer of knowledge and the means by which it is produced are systematically effaced in traditional writing.' (p24) In stark contrast is the way in which many feminists argue in favour of a model of research which places the researcher and the researched 'on the same plane' (Harding, 1993, Stanley and Wise, 1993) thus leaving behind notions of distance and alienation.

I would describe my own position as combining two particular feminisms stemming from a belief based on 'feminist empiricism' (Harding, 1986) where it is felt that existing knowledge can be improved and supplemented. I have drawn upon the breadth of knowledge held which relies heavily upon a socio/structural analysis moving on to explore the way in which young people might interact in their own lives thus trying to expand the theoretical understanding of young people leaving care. Reinharz (1992, p249) argues that empirical feminist research is guided by feminist theory and sometimes by critical and mainstream disciplinary theory. The theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Three draws upon the disciplines of both sociology and psychology, however, the methodological

epistemological position was a feminist one aiming to recognise and expand the account of young people's experiences.

In order to avoid adhering to the constraints of grand theories and to accommodate the way in which life course theory implies lives are socially and culturally constructed I feel that elements of what has been described as 'feminist postmodernism' (Harding, 1987) addresses these concerns. Maynard (1994, p19) argues that this epistemological position, 'along with other variants of postmodernism, is critical of universalistic grand theories'. Within this position there is a rejection of a unitary experience and the accommodation of diversity and difference enabling the individual subjective experience to be brought into view. This combining of two feminisms utilises a qualitative epistemological position, highlighting that meaning is constructed by people within 'cultural, social and historical relationships' (Henwood and Nicolson, 1995, p109) while, at the same time allowing theoretical frameworks conforming to the traditional notions of research within the social sciences to be adopted.

This combining of 'feminist empiricism' and 'feminist postmodernism' reflects my view that existing theory has something to offer to an understanding of the experiences of young people leaving care while recognising criticisms of such theories within the social sciences. It also reflects a certain tension and anxiety on my part which I felt in conducting this PhD project. While developing this research I was concerned that it would conform to the accepted parameters set for such work. Therefore, I sought to base my research upon a theoretical framework which linked into existing theory conforming, to some degree, to traditional notions of research within the social sciences.

The feminist emphasis on exploring the accounts of experience (Banister *et al.*, 1994, Griffin, 1995) makes it particularly appropriate for this research. A feminist perspective stems from particular concerns within a framework which recognises the influence of power and the political within and outside the research process. Reinharz's methodological approach is based upon accepting the view that how research is carried out will have a direct impact upon what form of knowledge will be produced; when taking this position the 'how' and the 'what' are *interconnected* (Stanley, 1990). A fundamental part of accepting the interconnected nature of the research process and the knowledge produced is to acknowledge the researcher - researched relationship.

Reflexivity within a feminist standpoint is characterised by a concern for critical analysis of 'objectivity' (which is seen as a certain kind of 'masculine subjectivity') critically reflecting the way in which subjectivity influences the production of research (Banister, *et al.*, 1994, p124). The concept of 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1991, p164) means that the researcher makes known the interpretive processes in knowledge production, including her own agendas. This is one of the justifications for telling a methodological story which continually comes to the fore throughout the thesis rather than locating methodological issues in a single chapter. Once the objective-subjective issue has been disrupted this does not herald the abandonment of rigour and systematic analysis; these are maintained (Burman, *et al.*, 1996). Yet another reason for offering an ongoing account of methodological issues; in order to demonstrate 'strong objectivity' and the painstaking and diligent way in which I have tried to undertake this research.

By taking a feminist standpoint within the research process I am reflecting my own interests and concerns with the way young people's lives have been studied and accounted for with the aim of reporting upon their lives in a way which will be both diverse and recognisable to them. A vital constituent of developing a methodological approach has been to be mindful of inequalities within the research relationship with a commitment to involving young people, keeping them informed and constantly ensuring that the young people have choice within the research process.

I have provided a discrete section on managing ethical and moral difficulties. This does not suggest that ethical concerns were somehow located within the confines of the accounts I proffer in this section. Ethical concerns were uppermost in my mind throughout this research and I aim to portray the pervasive way in which ethical issues arose and were handled in the course of the research. At every turn ethical issues emerged and as such I feel they are best explained, and any action taken justified, by presenting them as part of an evolving story. To do anything else would be to sanitise (Finch, 1984, Seed, 1995) the account at the expense of providing an authentic record of the *real* process. Finch (1984, p72) taking up the point made by Stanley, maintains that researchers sanitise their writing purging them of their real experiences and concerns thus failing to represent 'how' research is actually 'done'. I consider that the 'how' of this research was a major determinant in terms of taking an alternative approach to assessing the outcomes of the young people participating. Therefore, how the research was done and the often perplexing difficulties that adhering to a moral

and responsible ethical position created are interwoven into the fabric of not only this chapter but this entire piece of work.

Gathering data

The present research, as mentioned previously, was undertaken with the support and collaboration of a local authority and the leaving care scheme in the authority. The leaving care scheme was jointly funded by the local authority and a voluntary child care organisation. A multi-methods approach to the research was adopted with three discrete stages of data collection, adopting a range of research techniques. Such diversity aimed not only to offer a multi-faceted and rich source of data but also to enable the individualised accounts of the young people to be located within a wider contextual framework.

Data sources included:

1. Quantitative data held by the Leaving Care Scheme,
2. 'Exit Interview' data, both qualitative and quantitative, developed with the Authority,
3. Biographical data made available via continued informal contact with the young people.

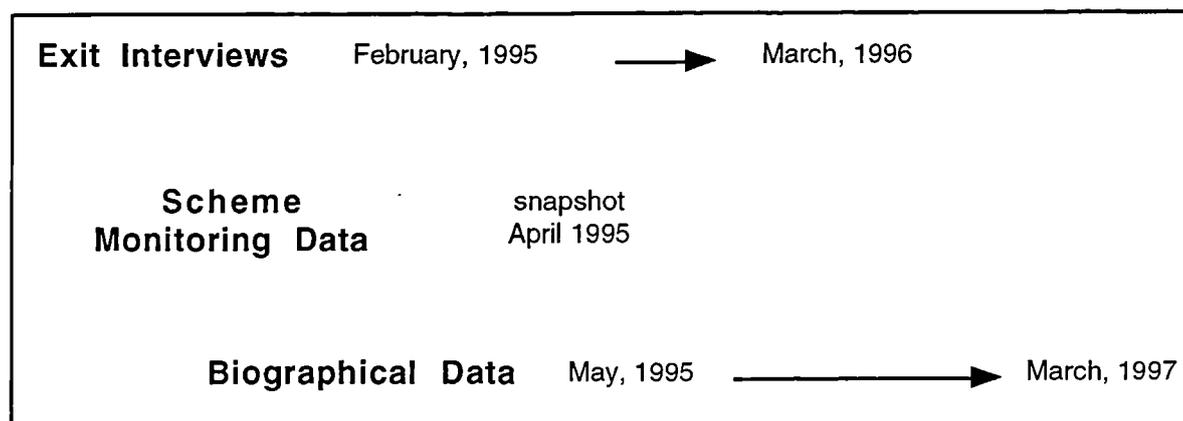
Drawing data from a variety of sources aimed to create a comprehensive account of what it was like to have been 'looked after' and then leave care in this particular local authority. The Leaving Care Scheme provided invaluable assistance throughout the research endeavouring to be helpful and cooperative whenever possible. As such the Scheme made available for analysis anonymised statistical monitoring information which enabled the generation of a general profile of the leaving care population in this authority to be drawn. This aggregate level data is used to locate the unfolding stories of the young people involved in the more longitudinal, biographical phase of the research.

Furthermore, participant involvement in this research was founded upon young people 'opting in'; they were encouraged to become involved and as such were not 'selected'. Aggregate level data of this nature provides one means of assessing the the '*transferability*' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the more individualised accounts which are presented in Part Three of the thesis. Transferability is equated with the concept of external validity: how far are the findings of research generalisable to other populations? The concept of external validity operates within a quantitative framework where the onus is on the researcher to demonstrate generalisability. Robson (1993, p405) argues that within the qualitative approach the focus is altered in that the person(s) carrying out the reporting of research need to provide enough detail for others to assess how it links both with a body of theory and how and if it can be transferred to other settings. By providing detail and gathering data from a range of sources it is hoped that this has been achieved enabling the reader possibly to assess the applicability of the present research to other settings and similar groups of young people.

A major factor regarding the Authority's agreement to support and collaborate in this research was the benefit they would gain from having additional assistance initiating *exit interviews* for young people leaving care. These interviews form part of the general contextual information drawn around the lives of the young people and were vital in relation to making contact with young people. Therefore, the principles upon which the initiative was founded will be tendered with the subsequent development and outcomes being outlined. Finally, the biographical phase of the research will be described outlining the philosophical basis and practicalities of undertaking such a methodological approach. Issues of making and maintaining contact and ethical and moral difficulties will be considered.

The figure overleaf (fig. 4) shows the time scales of the different data collection phases. The biographical phase ran alongside the exit interview phase. This enabled the research to have a staggered start and gradual closure. The Scheme data provides a snapshot relating to all young people receiving services from the Leaving Care Scheme at the beginning of the research process.

Figure 4: Phases of data collection



Quantitative Scheme data

The Leaving Care Scheme gave access to general information for young people who were registered for aftercare services during **March 1995**. These data had been updated and re-evaluated as the young people's circumstances changed. The Scheme information relates to: age, gender, ethnicity, accommodation, stability, employment and dependent children. Also recorded was the level of contact each young person had with the project and a level of risk assessment based upon information available. Such information provided a detailed profile of the more generalised outcomes of young people leaving care in the Authority, subsequently offering context. All of the information in this data source is objectively defined and would fit Biehal et al's (1995) notion of a 'final' outcome and would also be outcomes in the more generalised sense in that a whole group of young people's outcomes are measured.

Nevertheless, Best (1989) suggests a way of using such information, presenting the argument against making assumptions about objective reality. For example does the 'fact' that a single young woman has two dependent children automatically say specific things about that person: they are living on benefits, unable to cope effectively etc? He encourages caution when 'claims-making' promoting the notion of 'contextual constructivism'. While acknowledging the usefulness of making some assumptions about social conditions and therefore locating 'claims-making' within its social context thus utilising objective data; he nevertheless advocates the need to evaluate such claims. Therefore, the more generalised, objective data relating to employment, accommodation, dependants etc.

which has been made available are useful for context but should not be used indiscriminately to make claims about the more individualised lives of young people. This cautionary view fits well into the concept of life-course where life is seen as an integrated whole with the individual operating in more than one sphere, therefore making claims based upon one dimensional information should be avoided.

Exit Interviews

The climate surrounding the Authority's decision to initiate *exit interviews* for young people leaving care will now be explained, as will the actual implementation of the initiative. This explanation will necessarily be detailed in order to convey the way in which the biographical phase evolved. Also, I tell the unfolding story of how the initiative developed as one member of a group of people who worked together on this initiative (see also Horrocks and Karban, 1996).

The development of this initiative was set against a backdrop of growing interest regarding the concept of children's rights and how the principles underpinning a children's rights perspective could be meaningfully translated into practice. Franklin (1986) demonstrated that the concept of 'children's rights' can embrace both protection and liberation perspectives: on the one hand children have the right to have their welfare safeguarded by adults, yet this does not then sustain the notion of a child's right to autonomy - to actually be in control of situations which affect them individually. Franklin argues for an extreme liberationist approach to children's rights, however, Fox Harding questions the consequences of a liberationist approach, asking, 'Should children with adult rights also incur adult liabilities?' (1996, p. 42) She presents Freeman's (1992) more restrained approach which purports a 'balancing act' between children having a more independent say and the child's welfare being best served by some paternalistic interventions. Giving young people a voice within the looked after system was therefore seen as part of this balancing act where children have the right to safeguarded welfare but can also actively and effectively take part in ensuring that their rights are upheld.

The concept of an *exit*' interview was drawn and developed from a number of sources:

- * The Children Act 1989
- * The Gulbenkein Foundation Report, 'One Scandal too Many'
- * The SSI Conference on 'Keeping Children Safe'

The Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to review their provision at intervals, enabling an evaluation relating to the appropriateness and effectiveness of service provision. A further requirement is to have a complaints procedure with an 'independent element' thus providing an avenue for service users to make comment upon services which may not be meeting needs. This emphasises the need to access the views of service users and involve them in shaping the services which support them. However, it is clear that complaints procedures alone do not give children and young people a voice.

Lindsay (1991), in relation to the 'Pindown' inquiry, questioned the effectiveness of complaints procedures, pointing to the reality in which there are inherent difficulties for young people in exercising their rights to complain against a system on which they rely for support and their continued well-being. It is also clear that for a listening process to be meaningful, it needs to be more comprehensive than simply responding to complaints. Focusing on the complaints procedure as a means of providing a voice to young people does not communicate any information relating to the more positive aspects of the corporate parenting system and therefore strengths cannot be identified and augmented. This is a fundamental difficulty and one that prompted this authority to work together with other agencies in order to develop new strategies for listening to young people in order to provide a more balanced and detailed evaluation of service provision.

Further impetus for the need to access the views of service users was drawn from the Gulbenkein Foundation Report (1993), 'One Scandal Too Many', which reviewed the incidence of childcare scandals. This report highlighted the problem of delivering quality of service in childcare provision. *Exit interviews* were a report recommendation in the section outlining, 'Arrangements for monitoring/reviewing placement and treatment of children'. The recommendation stated that :

'in the case of all placements away from home for a significant period, we propose that there should be an 'exit interview' , at which the child or young person would be invited to comment, if s/he wished, on the placement and its successes, any problems etc.' (2.4, p208)

Additionally, the Social Services Inspectorate organised a conference, 'Keeping Children Safe' (1993) aimed at improving residential care practice. At this conference *exit interviews* were discussed and commended as a positive way forward in the protection of young people who are 'looked after' in local authority 'care'.

Developing 'exit interviews' in partnership

The interviews were developed by a Coordination Group with members representing the Authority, a voluntary organisation which had joint responsibility for the Leaving Care Scheme and the University of Huddersfield. My involvement with the initiative began when it was at the planning stage. I joined the Coordination Group where I had limited involvement in developing the actual schedule but extensive involvement in the piloting and the subsequent development and operationalisation of the initiative. Again let me stress that the details presented here reflect the collaborative nature of the work where decisions regarding courses of action were jointly taken.

The development of Leaving Care Interviews⁶ were envisaged by the group to meet a range of objectives aiming to assure quality services for children and young people. The most critical issue for the Coordination Group was felt to be that of keeping children safe by offering young people the opportunity to speak openly about their recent experiences. Young people were also asked to make detailed comment upon the quality of the care and support they received whilst 'looked after'; those services available to them as care-leavers and accommodation, employment etc., thus providing insight into both 'final' and 'intermediate' outcomes. It was also intended that the interviews provide vital information that could influence future policy decisions, thus helping to ensure the most effective use of what were accepted to be limited resources. The Authority funded the initiative and took overall responsibility for its long term operation, however, I piloted the interview schedule,

⁶ The name was changed as it was felt that *exit interview* might convey some kind of severance of ties to young people who still had the right to support from the corporate parent. Therefore, the terms Leaving Care Interview and *exit interview* should be seen as interchangeable.

suggested amendments and was heavily involved in ensuring that young people were kept informed and in raising the profile of the initiative.

Involving young people

Listening to young people is often presented as an uncomplicated concept which is easily delivered. However, the Group agreed that that accepting this view at face value may not have ensured that young people exercised their right to a voice and that active engagement and participation must be an integral part of the process. Collaboration with the young people was therefore not viewed as an optional extra at any stage of the process, rather it was central to the entire initiative. This acceptance of the difficulties inherent in research fitted well with the feminist epistemological position of the overall research.

With the support and assistance of the Leaving Care Scheme, young people's views were actively sought concerning the development of the interviews. Through the Young People's Forum⁷ meetings which were already in existence, young people were able to have vital input into the formulation of the interview schedule; many of the questions directly reflect this involvement (appendix 1-11). Furthermore, young people participated in the selection of independent interviewers who were to make contact with young people and subsequently carry out the interviews. Publicity leaflets were developed, (appendix 12) again with the help of young people, demonstrating the Authority's intention to listen to and value the views of young people.

Offering the right environment

In addition to involving young people when introducing the Leaving Care interviews, the Coordination Group recognised that young people would need to feel safe when offering their views concerning the services they had received. It was therefore necessary to create the right environment in order to allay the natural anxiety that might arise when asking young people to comment on services they may still have been receiving. In particular, issues concerning

⁷ The 'Young People's Forum' was a committee made up of young people who use the Leaving Care Scheme, the aim was that young people actively engage in influencing the services they receive by getting involved and having a place where their views could be expressed and listened to.

confidentiality and the independence of the interviewers needed to be addressed with care. A further concern was that the young people interviewed might regard the interviews as being of no assistance to themselves, so why should they participate?

Confidentiality was an area of great concern; during an interview a young person may offer information that would indicate poor practice or raise child protection concerns. Information of this nature could not simply be recorded and used in an evaluation process, it would need to be acted upon. It was therefore important that the young person being interviewed should be fully aware of the possible implications of this kind of information being shared and the limits of confidentiality. In recognition of this dilemma it was agreed that young people would be informed that information would be treated in a confidential manner, i.e. their names will not be linked to the interview data, but that, if necessary they would be contacted again to discuss how any sensitive issues arising might need to be addressed. At all times it remained essential to emphasise that the initiative be seen as an empowering enterprise; the underpinning principles being the active involvement of fully informed young people. Treseder (1995) sees 'participation' as a process and 'empowerment' as an outcome. This is a valuable piece of insight - if the process had not offered informed participation the valued outcome of empowerment would have been unattainable. Therefore, the working group's view that it would have been unethical and disempowering not to have made young people aware of the full process was accepted despite the potential effect that some young people might not have felt able to participate or share their views.

The second concern was that young people could be reluctant to talk freely if the interviewer was known to be closely associated with the services upon which they were commenting. In order to relieve such concerns a number of young people participated fully in the selection of the independent interviewers, who were recruited from outside the Social Services department, creating a marked distance between the department and the Leaving Care interviews. Interviewers were also offered a training session where they were made aware of the importance of enabling young people to present their own account of their experiences. I was asked to undertake part of the training session concentrating on interviewing skills. It was crucial for me as a researcher that the interviewers be aware of the need to standardise their procedures and that they understand that they had to be documenting the young people's accounts. Therefore, my taking part in this training session was vital. Further issues of confidentiality were also explored and strategies for responding to sensitive

information were developed, recognising the need for the interviewers to have ready access to appropriate contacts in the event of receiving information which might suggest children were at risk. The need for interviewers to have support systems available was also acknowledged and addressed with the Authority providing appropriate support.

Additionally, it needed to be recognised that young people would not be making any real difference to their own lives although they may be contributing to making a difference for other children currently being 'looked after'. The altruism inherent in participating in the initiative should therefore be appreciated. However, it was accepted that participants may benefit from being listened to and having their views validated and taken seriously. These outcomes in terms of reward should nevertheless not be taken for granted. In recognition of their contribution and time, a more tangible acknowledgement was agreed with a payment of five pounds made to each young person on completion of an interview; this payment being funded by the Authority - no financial payment was made for continued involvement in the biographical phase of the research.

Implementation

When the initiative was formally implemented young people were to be made aware of the Leaving Care interview at their final review and given a publicity leaflet with a tear-off slip to return if they were prepared to participate. They were reminded of the opportunity to give an *exit interview* during the first 12 weeks of living independently, often by their Leaving Care scheme keyworker. The message was one of encouragement acknowledging that young people had the right to refuse and must not be pressurised. It was also recognised that the child care system in the Authority had not changed significantly over the last two or three years therefore those who had left care earlier had a similar level of expertise to impart in relation to the 'looked after' system. Therefore, all young people registered for after care services (young people remain registered for services until they reach 21yrs) were encouraged to give a Leaving Care Interview.

For the purpose of this research it was hoped that 40 *exit interviews* would be completed and offered for analysis. The data from these interviews gives a more detailed account than the quantitative Scheme data while still offering more generalised, contextual information. On completion of an *exit interview* young people were asked if they could be contacted with regard to being involved in

further research; all young people giving interviews agreed. In order to keep within the projected time frame I decided to proceed fully to the next phase of the research with a total of 38 *exit interviews*, (this was almost the number hoped for providing a substantial data source).

The initiative as a whole seemed to have been successful not only in terms of meeting the objectives of the Authority and this current research but the young people's comments suggested that they felt a sense of validation through the process and were able to be forthright with their accounts.

'I think its a good idea doing this. Finding out what kids think is great, nobody has ever asked me before.'

'I think its good. It gets things off your head. It niggles at me all the time when I'm depressed.'

'.... think its a good idea, its helping other people.'

It is important to acknowledge that the systems created to deal with any disclosures of poor practice were implemented on a small number of occasions and the appropriate action taken to ensure the safety of children then currently being "looked after".

Utilising the overall information was crucial to ensure the credibility and reflexivity of the initiative. A report detailing the outcomes after the first year was produced, and used to inform an action plan which incorporated the expressed views of young people (Horrocks and Walters, 1996). A more concise version of the report was produced and distributed among all care-leavers (Horrocks, 1996). This report also included an invitation to comment on the findings.

This process to a large extent managed to lay a solid foundation upon which to develop the more in-depth, biographical third phase. Young people have been included in the process and I feel I succeeded in keeping them informed. Although I did not determine the ethos of the research in many respects it was compatible with a feminist epistemological position in that the researcher - researched relationship was founded upon a real attempt to share power and work together. There were times when I felt young people could have been more comprehensively included, nevertheless,

young people seemed to have responded well to this inclusive approach and to one method of evaluating services.

In relation to the present research as a whole, my involvement in this initiative had a number of positive outcomes:

- * It improved and increased my association and rapport with local authority staff both at the Leaving Care Scheme and within the managerial structure of the Authority.

Continuing the research therefore becomes less arduous when a level of reciprocity is achieved - I had actively assisted in the setting up of the *exit interview* initiative and therefore felt I had a legitimate claim when seeking assistance with the biographical phase.

- * My involvement enabled a level of control in relation to standardising procedures, thus ensuring data collected could be utilised in the present research.

- * The information contained in the interviews provided a rich and substantial base from which to move the research forward.

- * Probably the most important; I was able to make contact with young people and begin to build relationships.

Moving into the biographical phase

The detailed and interpretive 'stories' of young people's lives told in Part Three of this thesis are the culmination and principal focus of this research. What has gone before is there to provide context and background information in order that the reader be better able to evaluate and interpret the 'stories' for themselves. Therefore, I offer a concise account of the biographical data collection phase here in this chapter where methods are expected to be outlined. However, I offer more depth in other chapters where such detail relates more directly to what is being presented.

Biographical data

In line with Denzin's (1989) position stated previously where biographical research draws on a range of methods, this final phase of the research was adapted from a study undertaken by Edgerton (1993) in the early sixties. Edgerton's research was committed to understanding people's lives; it was felt this could be achieved by 'prolonged and direct contact'. Insofar as possible the aim was to see the researched from their perspective. This was achieved by:

'observing and participating in the lives of such persons permitting people to present their own lives in their own words, the interview schedule, though focused upon certain information areas, was loosely structured. The emphasis was always upon a friendly and interested conversational approach.' (Edgerton, 1993)

Interview schedules, in Edgerton's study, were not launched into, a rapport was developed which put participants at ease and enabled a relaxed approach. Note-taking was not conducted in the presence of participants and discussion of the areas of interest was to be non-directive in approach. This informal method was adopted in the present research providing a more individualised account of the young person's experience. In some instances note-taking was employed when the young person's account became too complex, when they seemed at ease; and to some extent when they had the expectation that I would make an official record of what was being said. This mode of research created extensive fieldnotes which continually needed to be updated, condensed and reviewed. Taped interviews were also undertaken but not until young people had become familiar with the researcher and seemed relaxed with the process and most importantly had given their permission.

Edgerton had particular *areas of interest* which he used to develop his research, these were also useful for this project and although widened or modified at times they continue to be helpful in focussing the research. I am also aware that they present a rather distant and objectifying means of showing interest in a person's life. However, I continually shared with the young people the account I made of their participation in the research giving them the final say on what should be included or excluded (this will be discussed in more detail in later chapters) Edgerton's areas of interest were:

- 1) where and how people lived,
- 2) making a living,
- 3) relations with others in the community,
- 4) sex, marriage and children,
- 5) spare time,
- 6) their perception and presentation of self,
- 7) their practical problems in maintaining themselves in the community.

This mode of research is rooted in the ethnographic tradition originating from the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, however, this approach to research has recently been used in social psychology (Banister, *et al.*, 1994). It is defined by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) as the participation of the researcher:

‘in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned’ (p2).

Reflexivity is emphasised as important in the ethnographic process (Hammersley and Atkinson, pp14-23) because the researcher cannot ‘escape the social world in order to study it’ (p15). The researcher’s involvement is seen as vitally important with May (1993, p116) arguing that the researcher will ‘contaminate’ the situation but by understanding how they are affected by the social setting the study is enhanced.

The biographical phase of the research thus combined a feminist perspective, with a reflexive ethnographic approach (Webb, 1992). Webb argues that both of these well established approaches are compatible because of the reflexive aspect of each where both focus on the participants’ perspective. The researcher’s involvement is seen as central where:

‘Rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher, we should set about understanding them,’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1982, p17).

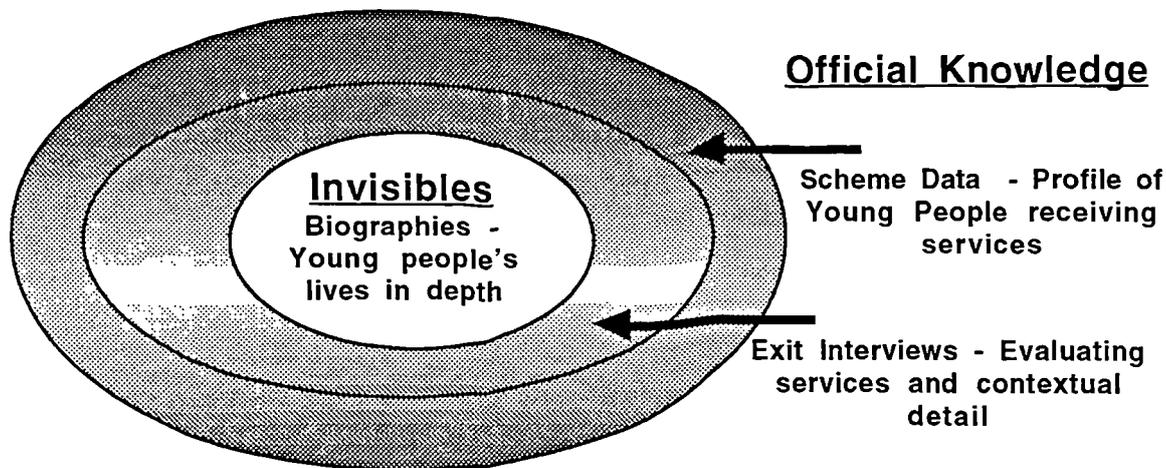
Moving from 'official knowledge' to 'invisibles'

Informal interview contact was established with 20 young people with an aim to stay in contact for 12 - 18 months (it was recognised that this number would probably diminish and thus the aim was to document the accounts of approximately 15 young people). Interviews took place in a variety of locations: young people's homes, parents' homes, Leaving Care Scheme, supermarket cafeterias, friends' homes, casualty department, Benefits Agency, psychiatric units, prison, local parks, bowling alley. The aim of this mode of research was to access their lives, and in that way not only reduce the power differential that might have existed between the researcher and the researched but to enable the biography of the young people participating to emerge.

By taking a multi-methods approach I have been able to gather a breadth of data; beginning with Stanley's 'official knowledge', relating to generalised outcomes located within the Scheme monitoring information. However, this data has distinct limitations in terms of meeting the aims of this research therefore the *exit interview* data offers an opportunity to glimpse beyond 'official knowledge' but this too is limited in that young people's lives are still seen as a collective, something which can be packaged in a neat and specific way.

Edgerton's research presents 'detailed portraits' of selected lives, these portraits represented what he termed as 'typical modes of living'. Whilst having a certain unease with the concept of typicality such detailed portraits do provide intensive description and analysis of an individual's everyday life. The informal interviews and ethnographic style of this current research enabled a view beyond 'official knowledge' hopefully gaining more than a glimpse at the 'invisibles' which relate to individual experience. The figure (fig. 5) overleaf offers a diagrammatical account of how I saw the research process progressing from 'official knowledge', where 'claims making' may proliferate, to an account which might make more tangible the 'invisibilities' representing the more everyday experiences of young people leaving care.

Figure 5: Moving from 'official knowledge' to 'invisibles'



Making and maintaining contact

Throughout the research, both at the exit interview stage and beyond, young people were encouraged to participate in an open process. Young people were informed via publicity leaflets, Leaving Care Scheme Newsletter, local authority staff and the researcher about the nature of the research and what it hoped to achieve. Being informed was a vital part of the process with young people making the initial choice regarding whether to become involved in the research. As such the young people were hopefully able to make informed choices, indeed they could choose not to complete the initial *exit interview* tear-off slip thus opting out of the research process completely.

Nevertheless, it was hoped that young people would choose to become involved in the research and that by including and informing young people their participation would be conversant with what the research was hoping to achieve and would be founded upon a willingness to be involved. This research required that participants be willing to give of their time over a 12 - 18 month period and that they be disposed to engage at a personal level. Offering young people as much information as possible hopefully ensured that young people were aware of what they were consenting to become involved in.

As a result of this process the young people had elected to become involved, both in the initial stages and beyond. They were not, as is the more normative practice in research, selected. This *elective process* whereby young people were proactive in their involvement in the research, may have implications regarding the *transferability* of the research. However, the benefits of this elective process were continued involvement and active participation by the young people. Young people were contacted on average every 6 - 8 weeks. For some this contact was less frequent often reflecting changes or disruption in their lives. Nevertheless, every effort was made to maintain contact and the Leaving Care Scheme were extremely helpful in this area.

I had serious concerns regarding *informed consent*, did the young people feel obliged to become involved in the research rather than elect to do so? With the *exit interviews* young people could simply make a choice not to fill in the tear off slip, however, with the more longitudinal, biographical work this failure to act option was not available. The young people gave consent at their *exit interview* for someone to contact them regarding their involvement in further research. Young people were confronted with someone actually asking for their agreement and as such their capacity freely to give their consent became an issue.

It would be wise here to make the point that all of the young people completing *exit interviews* did give their consent to be contacted in relation to their involvement in further research. I would like to believe that the young people found the *exit interview* a positive experience and therefore felt enthused to continue their involvement, however, this could not be taken for granted; other means of trying to ensure informed consent needed to be found. I wrote to young people indicating a day when it would be convenient for me to call, giving both my telephone number and address at the University, informing young people that if they preferred I would arrange a different time and place at their convenience. Also, enclosed with the letter were brief details relating to their involvement in the more longitudinal, biographical research maintaining the informative ethos of the research.

I made contact with 20 young people from the exit interview process, the remainder I was either unable to contact or they had been living independently for more than two years and therefore could not be included. Two years was set as a cut-off point in the planning stage of the research, I wrote to those not included thanking them for their consent and explaining why I would be unable to contact

them. Of the 20 young people contacted I was able to sustain contact with 14 (which was actually very close to the number I had estimated in the planning stage). With hindsight this was maybe rather ambitious in light of the quantity of data generated and the time necessary to store and analyse such a wealth of information.

At our first meeting I further explained the nature of the research and what I hoped to achieve. I explained to the young people that they could choose to withdraw at any point should they wish to do so. Nevertheless, Scott (1996) highlights further difficulties with the concept of *informed consent* asking the question, what did participants actually consent to? I did explain that the research would involve me telling a detailed 'story' of their lives yet did the young people give permission for their homes to be described, their relationships to be commented upon, in effect for an outsider to document as much as they were able to about their personal lives?

Managing ethical and moral difficulties

At the first meeting and throughout the research we, that is the young people and I, discussed issues of confidentiality and anonymity and how sensitive issues would be handled. The concerns here were fundamentally the same as with the *exit interviews* but with the additional concern that young people should know what purpose this research would serve and that their unique stories would be told and that for some this would be in considerable detail. I explained that I would make every effort to anonymise their stories but that they may still be recognisable to some extent by nature of the distinctiveness of their accounts. Lofland and Lofland (1984) maintain that there is a need to present sufficient detail, description etc., to satisfy the research questions. The research aims here were to provide an account that embodied what the young people's lives were like, therefore should the data be disaggregated in a way that might destroy its coherence and its relevance?

My solution; this may be too strong a word to use maybe response is better, was to go some way to anonymising but to share the final responsibility of what I included with the young people. I agreed to show young people what I had written before I used the information and that I would give them the opportunity to remove or change anything they regarded as wrong or too personal to tell. There are two ways to view this level of sharing, one would be to look at the positive effects in terms of reflexivity

I was able to check my interpretation of events and gain additional understanding. However, there were a few instances where young people asked for omissions to be made as they did not feel able to reveal certain aspects of their lives to a wider audience. I realise this has serious implications for the research in terms of the ultimate end result, however, Scott (1996) says that 'trade-offs' can occur between ethical and methodological priorities. The methodological approach I have elected to use is fraught with numerous ethical problems, this in no way makes the approach less worthwhile. We cannot celebrate the subjective nature of qualitative research methods and then choose to ignore the individual subjective difficulties it engenders, they are there to be managed in the most ethical and sensitive manner possible. This bold statement leads me into a discussion of research with 'real' lives.

Research with 'real' lives

The young people involved in this research bring with them particular experiences which may position them at the vulnerable end of the human experience continuum. There was a need both to understand and accept this vulnerability and act responsibly but also at times cope with the more tough and streetwise side of the young people's behaviour. This research involved young people's 'real' lives and as such there was a need for the researcher to adapt and respond accordingly. Primarily, it was difficult fully to appreciate the effects of a perceived 'outsider' from a University in terms of power differentials, which are in effect what I have been struggling with earlier in relation to informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity.

My first contact with any of the young people had been at the Leaving Care Scheme when I had gone along for a number of weeks to 'Open Door'. 'Open Door' is a couple of hours a week when young people who are supported by the Scheme can go along and have a cup of tea, a chat and watch TV if they like. The same young people usually attended this session and they were often those with more difficult lives who therefore had been in more frequent contact with the Scheme and leaving care workers. During these visits to 'Open Door' which were primarily to promote the young people's involvement in *exit interviews* I felt myself to be very much the one in a powerless position. I was on the young people's 'territory'; (if you like) I had invaded their space. Some young people were cheerful and welcoming, they seemed pleased to have someone new to talk to, where others took a very different line making it plain to me that they had a reason/right to be there and I did not. To convey the character of these encounters I think it is useful to tell of my first meetings with Rebecca,

(constructed from field notes) a young woman who eventually became involved in the research and has been cooperative and accessible throughout and on whom I could rely for what I believe to be an honest and critical account of how she thought the research and I were 'working out'.

Making contact with Rebecca: I had met Rebecca at the Leaving Care Scheme a few weeks earlier, she had been involved in selecting interviewers for the *exit interview* initiative. She was just eighteen at that time and had recently moved into her own place. I found her quite daunting, (I later felt very differently) as she constantly both conducted and consumed the conversation. Staff members and young people alike were captivated by her; managing their conversations through her and around her. I was left in awe of someone so young yet so confident and ostentatious. On this occasion I had not spoken to her a great deal rather just said 'Hello' and chatted briefly. I am aware that there may be reasons for Rebecca's overbearing manner, however, this did not stop me feeling more than a little intimidated by her.

I had been going to 'Open Door' for a couple of weeks and felt fairly at ease; on this particular day I arrived when the session had started. There were a small number of young people there, I knew one or two but not all. I recognised Rebecca and smiled, she turned away and continued her conversation with one of the Scheme workers. Throughout the following hour Rebecca held court, she was able to include or exclude whomever she pleased in the conversation, choosing quite emphatically to exclude me. During this encounter Rebecca held all the power and it would be fair to say that there have been many other occasions when I have been painstakingly aware that it is I that needed to seek acceptance and consent rather than it being bequeathed to me by virtue of who I was and what I did.

It would be dishonest to imply that I have needed to work so hard for acceptance with all the young people but as was the case with Rebecca, I have needed to be pretty sure of my place in the scheme of things. To some young people I may have been perceived as a powerful and knowledgeable person; with whom they had very little choice in relation to their involvement with the research and its

process. With these young people I feel that I did my utmost to open up a dialogue; trying at times successfully at others with less success to enable young people to feel they had control and could make choices.

A level of culpability

The degree of involvement and commitment on behalf of the young people was immense requiring a level of mutual respect. However, balancing the developing relationship with the young people was something which needed continual forethought and reflection. O'Neill (1995) in her work on 'narratives and lifespan biographies' points toward the risk of becoming emotionally involved and developing relationships with those participating in the study that becomes 'entrenched' and maybe 'dependency patterns develop'. She also talks of walking a 'tightrope'; on the one side there is the fear of becoming too emotionally involved and on the other is what O'Neill refers to as, 'akin to pimps'. On the one side there may be too much giving and on the other too much taking with participants being exploited. Maintaining a responsible balance between the two can be extremely difficult.

Throughout the research I have frequently felt very moved, often by the plight of the young people who found themselves in situations that were distressing and disturbing. There has been a real need to resist the 'I can fix this' mentality, as undoubtedly I would not have been able to do so. Nevertheless, there have been times when the impartial, uninvolved researcher stance would have been not only inappropriate, it would have been inhuman and irresponsible. The responsibility of the work has probably been one of the most sobering aspects of the research for me, in that I had to take the responsibility of my involvement in young people's lives very seriously and act with sensitivity yet be fully aware of the full consequences of my actions. I shall take time here to describe an episode where I felt exposed to the real culpability of research with vulnerable young people.

James's right to confidentiality: I had been seeing James for over 6 months, his life was often chaotic with periods of homelessness and various 'run-ins' with the police. On the whole I never ceased to be amused by James' endless bad jokes and his challenging but very friendly manner. He was nineteen at the time having a close relationship with his mum but serious problems with his dad, often resulting in violent

confrontations where James found himself unable to have contact with his mum. At this time he was living in a bail hostel; I'd visited him there a couple of times and although James' room was fine - tidy and comfortable, it was nevertheless pretty grim. He shared the house with men who seemed far more schooled than James in the skills necessary to survive in an environment where burglary, car theft and a degree of violence were the norm. Additionally the hostel was on the outskirts of town leaving him fairly isolated.

This particular day I had called in at the Leaving Care Scheme to collect a few messages that young people had left. The staff were as usual friendly and I stayed for tea and a chat. James arrived while I was sat chatting, he joined me and another member of staff and seemed reasonably jovial although a little quiet for James. While chatting I noticed something white jutting out of his shirt cuff, I didn't say anything. I got up to go and James asked me for a lift out to the bail hostel - it was on my way so I said OK. Giving young people lifts on occasion is one way that I can introduce a level of reciprocity and give a little back rather than feeling that I continually take from them, also it would be ingenuous not to recognise that the car is a good place to talk (Edgerton, 1993, also gave lifts to participants). Once in the car James became upset telling me that he had spent the night in the local hospital after having had a terrible row with his father at the family home resulting in violence. After the violence James had shut himself away in a bedroom and cut his wrists, his mum called an ambulance and he was taken to hospital. He had been discharged in the afternoon and had come directly to the Scheme.

I asked James if he had spoken to anyone at the Scheme about what had happened; he said 'No', that he didn't want the leaving care workers to know. Alarm bells were now ringing. What course of action was I to take in such a situation? To just drop him off at home and record what he had said would not only be callous it would be irresponsible, James might have harmed himself again. Nevertheless, James had the right to choose whom he shared his anguish with, in research terms he had the right to confidentiality. I said I would go into the hostel with him and have a tea before I went home.

Once we got chatting about more mundane things, his music, friends etc. he seemed to cheer up. When I felt able to I explained that I was really worried about leaving him there with nobody knowing what had happened. By 'nobody' I meant leaving care workers, I had a real need to hand James over - to transfer responsibility. At the time I can remember feeling guilty but with hindsight I believe I was right to feel the weight of responsibility to James so profoundly and to subsequently transfer it. I 'persuaded' James to let me go back to the Leaving Care Scheme and contact one specific worker with whom he had a long standing and positive relationship. When I use the word 'persuaded' I again feel uneasy wondering if I did something that was against his wishes thus drawing in the issue of informed consent. What I do know is that I could not have left James alone in the knowledge that he might do something more drastic when I left.

I was able to speak to the specific worker who went out to see James straight away and managed to get him moved out of the hostel the following day believing that his current problems related to his unhappiness at the hostel. I accept that I committed the terrible transgression of influencing the research, James's life story is the data for this research and not only am I in there, I am having a legible effect. I feel unable to make any apologies for the way I handled the situation and even from my position now I still fail to see how I might have handled it differently.

On the one plane I have offered an account of the mundane where I had to cope with the experience of being ignored; being made aware of my place in the scheme of things by Rebecca. Nonetheless, on another plane I was confronted with the uncomfortable sense of culpability in the research process as was the case with James. This culpability is probably something that is tidied out of the write up or even overlooked. However, when the research is so personal such issues will arise and would need not only to be coped with in a sensitive and responsible way; they would need to be acknowledged and an account given in order that an honest and reflexive evaluation can be made. Henwood and Pidgeon (1995) maintain that within the qualitative paradigm, 'there is a need in human sciences research to be sensitive to people's own understandings as seen from their local frames of references, or from inside their own socially situated phenomenal worlds (p116). This kind of research

cannot be undertaken without risking a measure of culpability and accepting the responsibility of coping with the ethical and moral implications of such work.

Summary

In the first chapter the difficulties of assessing outcomes were made apparent; by adopting a methodological approach which gains information from a range of sources it is hoped to provide more than the generalised or thematic notion of outcomes. The first two sources of data: Scheme quantitative data and *exit interviews* provide detailed contextual information about the experiences of young people leaving care in this authority. Yet alone they offer only a restricted lens through which to view and try to understand the lives of young people who have often had difficult and turbulent lives. What the more biographical work aims to do is take a holistic view of outcomes where there is an ardent attempt to access the individualised accounts of young people.

Best (1989) warns against the dangers of 'claims making' and promotes the contextualisation of the more specific. Stanley (1990) raises the issue of 'official knowledge' and 'invisibles' which relate to individual experiences. Thus by taking a more detailed individualised biographical approach it is hoped that a different and alternative yet worthwhile piece of additional knowledge will be generated thus to some extent evaluating and demystifying the individual experiences of young people's lives. Furthermore, by providing a detailed account of the research process together with the research aims (Chapter One) and the theoretical framework (Chapter Three) an overall backdrop is given against which the research was conceived and carried out.

Chapter Five

Young people 'moving on'

Young people participating in this study had 'moved on' from 'care'. Implicit in the term 'moving on' is a change of circumstance; in this chapter a sense of who and where young people have moved on to will be explored. Furthermore, taking a biographical life course approach when exploring the outcomes of care leavers requires that young people's individualised accounts be situated within *historical* and *social time*. Thus, this chapter aims in the first instance to provide historical and social context for the biographical accounts which appear later. Murphy (1987) points out that there are few clear guide-lines for analysis when adopting a life course approach, however, he makes the point that no potentially important factor be left out. Determining what was important was an onerous task, nevertheless, I have tried to use the information available effectively. Therefore, Scheme data will be used to give an aggregate level of analysis with the *exit interview* data providing a more detailed view of the young people participating in the study while still operating at a more generalised, contextual level. Where appropriate these data will be located within other situational and environmental factors drawing on relevant research evidence.

Jones and Wallace (1992) question the previously generalised approach of life course theory in that it may lead to attention being overly focused on 'individuals' (in a general sense) rather than social groups resulting in structural inequalities and the nature of social reproduction being lost from sight. Hopefully this will not be the case here; by operating within the life course theoretical position, using a range of research methods, it is hoped to be able to understand in more depth the way in which the situational context - both social and historical, and the young care leaver interact and negotiate life course developmental trajectories. To be a care leaver is to be part of a specific social grouping who may experience transitions within a particular social and historical context. Nevertheless, the individual differences and diversity of the young people and their lives; both in terms of context and negotiation need not be subsumed beneath a collective explanation and understanding. Thus, this chapter should be viewed as part of an evolving picture where more and more detail is continually added.

In addition to this evolving picture Irwin (1995) stressed that:

‘To understand the processes underlying change in life course event timing it is necessary to locate the data gathered in a small-scale, cross-sectional, survey in relation to more general evidence. Such a strategy will help to avoid the pitfalls of being too quick to generalize from a relatively small number of cases.’ (p11)

Although this research is not a survey in the sense Irwin suggests, the essence of what she says is applicable in that by providing a ‘general evidence’ chapter the reader is able to assess the way in which young people participating might exemplify other young people facing similar situational conditions. Therefore this chapter has a two-fold purpose, one to contextualise and situate the biographical accounts which appear later and the second to enable an objective appreciation of who the young people were and any other young people they may be claimed to represent. By using the terms ‘objective’ and ‘represent’ I do not intend to fall into a more positivist process, however, I accept Mason’s (1996, p5) view that among many other things, ‘qualitative research should be systematically and rigorously conducted.’ Therefore any ‘claims’ made can be based on a detailed and critical evaluation of the information available and any limitations can be identified.

The Leaving Care Scheme

I have made reference to the Leaving Care Scheme in previous chapters, however, it is necessary to offer information regarding the services available to young people in order that the profile information presented, and any later reference to the Scheme made within young people’s ‘stories’, can be comprehensively understood.

Young people leaving care in this authority had the support of a specialist leaving care scheme. The Leaving Care Scheme was a jointly funded initiative involving a voluntary organisation and the Local Authority. The Scheme aimed to provide services that addressed the needs of young people who were homeless as well as offering advice and assistance to young people leaving care (in accordance with the Children Act 1989, see Chapter One). In order to meet the needs of young people leaving

care the local authority had instituted a number of departmental procedures, in strict compliance with the Children Act 1989 (information detailed within this section was taken from the Leaving Care Scheme's published guidelines, April, 1994) :

1) After the child's 15th birthday a planning meeting is convened, the purpose of which is to formulate plans to prepare the child for leaving care/accommodation, the young person's allocated keyworker will attend. In accordance with 'The Children Act, Guidance and Regulations Volume 3, Sections 2 and 4' this meeting will consider:

- a) Future Home Base
- b) Career Plans
- c) Practical Skills
- d) Relationship Skills
- e) Resource Implications
- f) Time Limits
- g) Accountability

2) Progress on these issues will be monitored by the Review System.

3) When the child reaches the age of 16, their leaving care keyworker will be invited to all subsequent reviews.

4) Final Review: will confirm the specific Package of Care Plan for the leaving care process and after care. The plan will specifically identify dates, time scales, the resources necessary and the person(s) accountable for each aspect of the package. These person(s) must confirm their willingness to undertake the care before the final decisions are confirmed.

The Scheme's 'prime task' was, 'to support young people in preparation for independence and to offer advice and assistance after care' (Scheme Guidelines, 1994). The Scheme had a team of workers who offered advice and assistance relating to a number of areas: accommodation, benefits, housing, careers, employment and any other issues that may cause concern including, 'emotional and practical support.' The Scheme also provided 'keyworker' support; a named leaving care worker who would be a direct contact point for the young person. The Leaving Care Scheme introduced its services by undertaking 'keyworker' visits to young people while they were still 'looked after'. Such

visits could continue when a young person had moved on into their own independent accommodation.

The Scheme offered a range of specific services aiming to meet the needs of young people who were included within its remit, these services included:

Home Visits: Offered on a negotiated time limited basis:

- a) throughout introduction period,
- b) when there is a move into new accommodation,
- c) at points of crisis in a young person's life,
- d) as a follow up to maintain contact.

“Options” Groups: Young people are facilitated in developing practical and personal skills. The programme is devised by the young people.

Young Person’s Forum: The forum provides the young people with a platform to have their voice heard regarding planning and delivery of services. Young people are voted onto the forum as representatives for their peers.

Open Door: All young people who are registered with the Scheme (care leavers) are able to use this session (Wednesday afternoon 4-6 pm) to gain access to workers for advice and assistance. Young people are also able to meet with other young people on a social basis.

Emergency Line: A 24 hour emergency telephone advice service is offered to registered (care leavers) young people 365 days a year. This service is operated by senior staff.

Nightstop: Emergency voluntary accommodation for young people who present as homeless.

The local authority published a detailed outline of aims and objectives with regard to support services for ‘selected 16-21 year olds’ (those young people who fall within the Children Act guidelines). The aim was to, ‘provide a range of support services to encourage positive moves from dependence to independence ... within the Metropolitan district.’ Specific objectives were:

- * to work within defined criteria to identify potential young people eligible for the services of the Scheme

- * to assist young people obtain and sustain appropriate accommodation.
- * to ensure support services are available and accessible to young people.
- * to encourage and support young people to maximise on services available to them from other agencies.
- * to recruit, select and support a group of individual volunteers, who are willing to befriend a selected young person for a specified period of time.
- * to provide general information about services and as appropriate publish findings.
- * to provide forums for young people to discuss and address shared issues and areas of concern and, where appropriate, invite specialists to inform these groups.
- * to involve young people, wherever possible or practicable, in decision making that affects them.
- * to build relationships with young people and be able to offer advice and support over issues relating to their future.
- * to operate all services in an anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory way, which values people irrespective of race, disability, gender or sexual orientation.
- * to operate the service in accordance with the basis and values of the project.

(Source: Scheme Guidelines, 1994)

Using Stein's (1990) leaving care scheme models (outlined in Chapter One) I would argue that this particular authority primarily provided support located within his *independence model*.

Independence model: The independence model has the rationale that young people can be *prepared* to manage on their own from the age of sixteen onwards, particular emphasis is placed upon practical survival skills. There is an expectation that young people undergoing such preparation will be able to live independently with a minimum level of support.

Young people within the specific objectives laid out by the Scheme are 'assisted' and 'encouraged' in their efforts to support themselves. Services provided are based upon young people accessing for

themselves. It would seem harsh to imply that the Scheme provided a 'minimal level of support', nevertheless, it would take a rather generous interpretation to suggest a comprehensive *inter-dependence model* of Scheme support. The *inter-dependence* model would seem to imply a more proactive part on behalf of the leaving care scheme with services focussed toward individual needs rather than some more general collective access.

Inter-dependence model: Psycho-social transition is viewed as the underlying philosophy for the inter-dependence model. The focus here is inter-personal and relationship skills, and the development of self esteem and confidence. Specialist leaving care workers usually deliver a programme which may include individual counselling, group work, ongoing support and assistance with move on accommodation.

However, young people were allocated keyworker support which can focus on more inter-personal and relationship skills, and the development of self-esteem which are aspects of Stein's more psycho-social *inter-dependence* model.

Young people 'receiving services'

Having outlined services I will now use the Scheme and *exit interview* data in order to generate general characteristics of young people receiving services from the Scheme and those participating in this study. Taking Murphy's (1987) lead, mentioned earlier, (p96) I have tried to make use of the available data. In this section both Leaving Care Scheme data and *exit interview* data will be drawn together. The Scheme data gives quantitative information relating to the 150 young people registered for aftercare services and can be used as an indicator regarding the *transferability* of the more small-scale *exit interview* information. However, these data sets were not designed to be used together, the Scheme data became available once the *exit interview* initiative had been made operational. Nevertheless, Scheme data were collated in March 1995 which makes it specifically relevant to the *exit interview* data which was being collected from February, 1995 to March, 1995⁸. The Scheme provided services to young people who were still currently 'looked after' by the local authority, therefore, those young people were removed from the data set.

⁸ A copy of the Scheme Inventory (appendix 13-14)

Gender

From the Scheme monitoring data it was found that 150 young people were registered for aftercare services with an almost even gender distribution, with just slightly fewer males (49%). The *exit interviews* were successful in encouraging 38 young people to participate with just over a third being males (34%, 13 young people). This gender imbalance seemed unavoidable due to the elective nature of involvement with the initiative, although, later analysis of the data may provide one indicator which might have affected response rates. Also, a significant number of young men had requested an interview, yet undertaking the interview proved to be highly problematic due to difficulties making contact at the given address.

Ethnicity

The Scheme monitoring data revealed a prevailing White British profile with 96% of the young people receiving services belonging to this grouping. This was indicative of the ethnic grouping in this local authority, where the White grouping formed 98.5% of the population, (1991, Census, Table J). Only 5 of the 150 young people receiving services were other than White British: two were of Dual Heritage, 2 Black Asian and 1 Afro-Caribbean. The ethnic profile for the *exit interview* participants was that they were all of White British ethnic origin. This failure to access the views of young people from minority ethnic groups was a real issue and of great concern. However, one young person of Dual Heritage was involved in the pilot interviews (not referred to in this thesis) and one young person of Black Asian ethnic origin was known to be away at University. Of the remaining young people of other than White British ethnic origin; two had no contact with the Leaving Care Scheme and their location and circumstances were not known, another young person was living 'out of area'. These factors seriously mediated against the inclusion of any young people from minority ethnic groups.

Age

Age is of distinct importance in this study as a defining factor of *individual time* relating to life course theory. As previously stated all young people registered for leaving care services were eligible to participate in the *exit interview* initiative, therefore young people aged 16 to 21 years of age were interviewed. Of those participating in the *exit interview* initiative the largest group (39%) were 18 years of age with six (16%) young people being aged 19 and five (13%) young people aged 20 with a further three (8%) aged 21 (table 1). However, there were a number of young people who were at the younger end of the age band with two (5%) aged 16 and seven (18%) young people aged 17.

Table 1 : Age of the young people. using Scheme monitoring data and exit interview data

Age	Scheme Data	'exit interviews'
16	2 (1%)	2 (5%)
17	20 (13%)	7 (18%)
18	35 (23%)	15 (39%)
19	39 (26%)	6 (16%)
20	34 (23%)	5 (13%)
21	20 (13%)	3 (8%)
Total	150 young people	38 young people

The Scheme monitoring data shows a normal age distribution with the majority of young people being within the middle age range of 18 and 19 years of age. However, as would be expected the Scheme data shows fewer 16 -17 year olds and more 20 -21 year olds when compared with the *exit interviews*. Therefore, those participating in this current study were generally at the younger end of the overall age distribution for young people receiving leaving care services in this authority. This was to be expected as young people at the point of leaving care were primarily asked to give *exit*

interviews . However, as the initiative developed all young people receiving services were given the opportunity to be involved, thus this was reflected in the eventual spread of ages, for the 38 young people giving *exit interviews*.

It is worth restating here that a number of studies have drawn attention to the early age at which care leavers move on to live independently (Stein & Carey, 1986, Garnett, 1992, Biehal et al 1995). Although the majority of young people interviewed were 18 or above this should not be viewed as an indicator of the age at which young people left care in this authority. Almost a quarter of young people giving *exit interviews* were 16 and 17 years of age and living out of 'care'. Additionally, well over half of the young people in both the Scheme and the *exit interview* data were living independently at 19 years of age or under. This is in stark contrast to the transitions made by young people in the general population. A large study of young people in Scotland (Scottish Young People's Survey, SYPS) found that the median age of leaving home was 22 years for men and 20 years for women (Jones, 1987). There is a recognised need for concern when young people become independent at such a young age not least because:

'The younger people are when they leave home, the more risk they are likely to face because, whatever their other circumstances, they are prevented by their age from gaining access to full independent adult incomes.' (Jones, 1995 p40)

This identified lack of financial independence relating to the labour market and the benefits system may for some young people leaving care be compounded by an absence of family support. As a result young people may be left extremely vulnerable. I continually use the word 'may' because at this stage in the research I am basing any summations upon Stanley's 'official knowledge' therefore I proceed with caution making only tentative comment.

Young people and employment

High levels of unemployment among care leavers have been commented upon in earlier chapters. Prior to any analysis of employment outcomes for young people participating in this research particulars in terms of how the data were recorded should be outlined. Employment was recorded differently by the Scheme monitoring data and the *exit interview* initiative (table 2). 'Employed' included both part-time and full-time employment for the Scheme monitoring data. However the *exit interviews* asked for a distinction to be made, yet with such small numbers this seemed an unrealistic distinction and was therefore not included as part of the analysis. Furthermore, the *exit interviews* recorded the number of young people on training schemes where the Scheme data did not and therefore the 'employed' category for Scheme data also includes those on training schemes. Therefore, when taken together the 'employed' category for *exit interviews* was higher than that of the Scheme data with 16% (8% employed, 8% on training schemes) and 13% respectively.

Table 2 : Young people and employment

	Scheme data		'exit interviews'
unemployed	62% (93)		74% (28)
employed	13% (19)		8% (3)
full-time college	2% (3)		5% (2)
not known	23% (35)	training scheme	8% (3)
		other	5% (2)
Totals	150 young people		38 young people

Of particular importance is the category of 'not known' present in the Scheme data with almost a quarter of young people eligible to receive services from the Leaving Care Scheme located in this category. Leaving aside the issue of the Scheme being unaware of the employment trajectories of such a substantial number of young people; it became difficult to make comparisons between both data sets. However, calculating optimistically and therefore speculating that half had been successful in finding employment; this would still leave 73% of young people in this sample unemployed which is

almost the same as the unemployment rate for young people giving *exit interviews*. Therefore, taking an overall view the smaller sample of young people included in the *exit interview* phase seem representative, in terms of employment trajectories, of those young people registered for leaving care services in this authority.

It would seem fair to say that leaving care in this particular authority was characterised by notably high levels of unemployment. Employment is often presented as a prerequisite for a 'normal' transition to adult status, however, for young people leaving care the transition to independent adulthood is based upon the veritable factor of age. Young people are required to leave care at eighteen with many leaving before; stable employment or its educational equivalent are not conditional requirements.

Finding a place in the labour market

Historical time is one of the levels of analysis when drawing on life course theory therefore an account of the labour market and its recent historical origins will be presented. Jones and Wallace (1992) in their book on 'youth' have citizenship as their pivotal concept. They demonstrate how the post-war model of citizenship is founded upon the right to work. This right was underpinned by the Keynes and Beveridge ideological position of liberal collectivism requiring a social commitment to certain minimal objectives which are seen as a condition of existence for a liberal society (Cutler, Willaims and Williams, 1986).

Until the late 1960s Britain had full employment. In the 1970s unemployment rose steeply, it was suggested by some economists that higher benefits had induced more people to become unemployed (Maki and Spindler, 1975, cited in Glynn). Alternative and more substantiated explanations were to be found in the changing political climate and the labour market. In 1979 a Conservative Government was elected which had pledged to cut public expenditure and de-regulate the labour market. The Government aimed to reduce the 'paternalistic' state intervention that had been part of the Keynesian consensus.

National organisations were being replaced with trans-national organisations which were able to operate on a more global scale thus making state intervention less effective. Large scale enterprises were replaced by small-scale organisations operating, 'flexible specialization' and sub-contracted work (Bagguley, 1991) Temporary and contractual work began to replace the more regular expectation of life-time employment and full-time employment was replaced with an acceptance of unemployment, part-time work, home-working or temporary work (Lash and Urry, 1987). In particular there had been a decline in 'traditional' routes of entry into employment, not least because of the collapse of manufacturing industry, with a steep decline of employment opportunities for young school-leavers, (Pollock, 1996). This decline in manufacturing industry would impact upon those young people achieving few educational qualifications; presumably leaving them limited alternative employment opportunities or continuing education prospects.

Unemployment amongst young people rose by 120% compared with a rise of 45% amongst the working population as a whole between 1972 and 1977, (MSC, 1978). This alarming rise in youth unemployment led to major state intervention in youth training policy (see for example Rees and Atkinson, 1982). The response to the 'problem' of youth unemployment was located around the deficiencies of young people (see for example Holland Report, 1977) - their apparent lack of skills and aptitudes made them unattractive to potential employers. For young people leaving care this is especially resonate as their previously identified poor educational outcomes would make them particularly vulnerable to such conditions.

The development of the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) aimed to remedy this deficit providing a 'bridge to work' both through the gaining of specific skills and the provision of work experience. The YOP provided only limited solutions to the youth unemployment question and became depicted by its opponents as 'The Tories Poisoned Apple' and a 'gangplank to the dole' (Scofield et al, 1983, Finn, 1984). This six month training period for those young people unable to find work was replaced in 1983 by the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). By that time over half of eighteen year olds were either unemployed or on special schemes (Glynn, 1991).

The YTS was designed as a one-year, permanent scheme providing a bridge between school and work available to all school leavers. The YTS was extended to two years in 1986 thus introducing, 'a universal status of 'trainee' or 'student' for all people under the age of 18 years.' (Jones and Wallace,

1992, p41). This extension of training to two years was accompanied by the removal of entitlement to housing benefit and income support for those under 18 years of age. At a time when finding a job after leaving school had significantly decreased in probability the option for 16 and 17 year olds to claim benefits was removed (*The Social Security Act 1986 and 1988*) ; a small group such as single parents, young disabled people and carers were exempted. Young people were expected to take up a place on a training scheme and were assumed to look to their families for support until they at least reach the age of 18 when they became eligible for Income Support (Broad, 1998, p34, see also Roll, 1990). Broad (1998) outlining these changes made the point that some subsequent changes were made to assist young people without family support,

'albeit only in exceptional and discretionary cases of extreme hardship, young people can qualify for Income Support, which in any case only lasts for 12-16 weeks, In addition, the rate of Income Support for 16 and 17 year olds living away from home *for good reason* was also increased to that given to 18 to 24 year olds. Young people returning to the family home, relatives or friends are not entitled to Income Support (p34).'

In 1990 the YTS was changed again and renamed Youth Training (YT) and became linked to adult Employment Training with 'trainees' working for a small allowance in addition to their social security. This 'training' option was neither employment nor benefit often being seen by the young people as worse than staying on benefits (Hutson and Jenkins, 1989).

Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) became responsible for placing 16 and 17 year olds on YTs using a list of names furnished by the Benefits Agency. However, TECs were unable to guarantee YT places for all young people seeking such places; this was mainly attributed to employers being unable or unwilling to participate as a result of the recession (CAB Evidence, 1992). The development of 'hidden' employment with work unofficially available at rates of pay which required a subsidy from either another wage or state benefit in order to make the work acceptable have been commented upon (Coffield *et al*, 1986). Young people undertaking 'hidden' employment were not only the victims of exploitative working practices they also faced the prospect of legal consequences if their 'operating between the lines' was uncovered.

Drawing together the historical and social context of young people finding employment Wallace and Jones (1992, p36) propose the following main changes in the situation of young people in the labour market:

- *Abolition of Wages Councils
- * Withdrawal of employment protection
- * Increase in youth unemployment
- * Reduction in youth wages
- * Loss of apprenticeships
- * Increase in part-time casual working
- * Introduction of training schemes

In 1996 there was a further change with the introduction of Job Seekers Allowance which again limited young people's entitlement to benefits (for a detailed account see Broad, 1998). This change cut the period for which unemployment benefit is paid - from one year to six months at which point it is replaced with a means tested benefit, namely Income Support. Job Seekers Allowance has harsher sanctions against loss of job through 'own fault' or refusal to take work. The impact for young people leaving care is one where 18 to 24 year olds receive less when claiming Income Support but had received the same unemployment benefit levels as those claiming who are older.

What this review of the youth labour market and its surrounding climate highlights is that changing political and economic conditions have had a considerable impact upon young people's chances of finding a place for themselves in the labour market. Past transitions based upon an assumption of school to work are seemingly no longer applicable with the majority of young people either continuing their education or moving on to training schemes.

Williamson (1993) claims that social policy development in the United Kingdom throughout the 1980s has been dominated by three central political objectives; 'the reduction of public expenditure (economy), the releasing of market forces (efficiency), and the enhancement of consumer choice (effectiveness).' (p35) In this section the reduction in public expenditure in terms of reduced access to benefits for young people has been mentioned. With regards to the releasing of market forces this marked a return to laissez-faire economics which engendered an avoidance of government intervention to maintain employment levels. With respect to consumer choice Williamson goes on to

make the point that consumers without resources have little choice and no voice; a sentiment which he feels applies especially to young people. Thus, the picture looks gloomy for young people leaving care and can be seen as a backdrop within which to locate high unemployment among not only those participating in this research but young people leaving care in general.

Getting a job and looking to the future

The young people taking part in the 'exit interview' initiative were asked what their hopes for the future were. Twenty eight young people (73%) made direct reference to wanting to find a job, many making the clear connection between employment and other life course events, suggesting that the young people also see finding employment as part of a 'normal' transition:

I want to get a job. I feel more confident in myself when I'm working. I want to end up with a nice boyfriend and home.

I don't know what's going to happen in the future – don't know what's round the corner. Want to get me own flat and have a nice family and a full time job, that's me dream.

To get my own place and have a full time job. Get settled down and have a family.

I want to settle down. Get some education done when Amber's older. Get a job to get whatever, for a better life.

Young people also recognised the need for qualifications, these were often seen as a passport to a more favourable future.

Hope to be able to do course to get the qualifications to work with kids.

To try and forget and go forward, not backwards. I used to be a handful. Go to college and get some qualifications, English and maths, things you need that I didn't do.

To get married to my boyfriend and have another baby together, get a house with a garden and I'd like to get a job and I'd like to get a few qualifications.

For two young people finding employment was about a fresh start:

I hope to get a job by joining the army. I want to make a new start after my seven months in prison

To get a job, settle down, keep out of trouble. Put the past behind me.

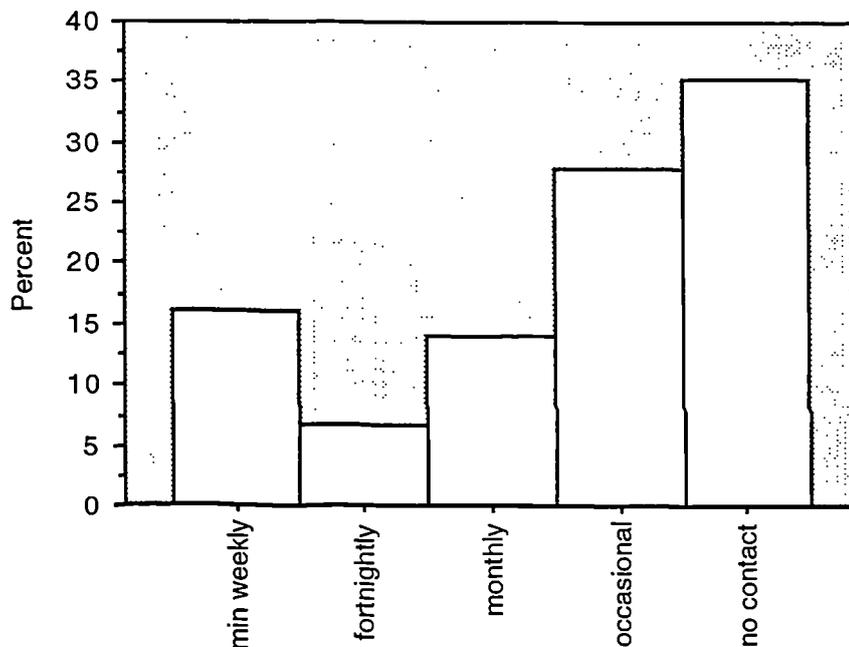
From what young people say it is obvious that they hoped to make a change in their then current employment trajectories. The comments made by young people were not prompted in any way, they were not made in reply to a question relating to employment rather one that simply asked what they hoped for the future. Such comments dispel the myth of young people choosing to live a life on benefits. However, their hopes and aspirations should be evaluated in light of the stark fact that almost three quarters of the young people leaving care in this authority were unable to secure employment. The effects of this should be considered not only in terms of their citizenship rights and their ability to exercise choice as a consumer but in terms of the more psychological consequences. In relation to self-efficacy and estrangement such high rates of unemployment would presumably have a distinct effect on the ability of young people to mobilise the required effort to find work.

A number of studies have reported increased psychological distress with unemployment (Patton and Noller, 1984, Feather and O'Brien, 1986, 1987) whilst others have reported a small or no adverse effects with unemployment (Gurney, 1980, Winefield and Tiggeman, 1989). Jahoda (1982) proposed that it was the loss of the potential functions of employment, e.g. personal status and social identity, which were responsible for the psychological impact of unemployment. However, there is growing evidence to support the view that adolescent identity can be based on factors other than employment (Hendry, 1989) where other social factors are found to be extremely important for young people during unemployment (Breakwell *et al* , 1984, Coffield *et al*, 1986). In the biographical accounts which appear later the individual aspects of such high unemployment rates will be explored in more depth.

Young people and Scheme contact

The Scheme monitoring data were analysed in relation to the number of contacts young people had with the Scheme. These contacts could be either Scheme initiated or young person initiated; the data merely recorded contact not any of the surrounding circumstances. Contact in terms of gender distribution was overall evenly distributed with an equal number of males and females having contact with the Scheme on a minimum weekly basis, while at the opposite end of the scale, a similar gender distribution was found among those young people who had no contact with the Scheme.

Figure 6: Young people and level of involvement with the Leaving Care Scheme



The data did show that the majority of contacts with the Scheme were by a small, apparently consistent minority; 16% (24) who had weekly contact (fig. 6). Fortnightly contact was made with/by a further 7% with 14% having monthly contact. Over a quarter of the young people (28%) had occasional contact with 35% having no contact with the Leaving Care Scheme. These figures might suggest that young people with more problematic lives find it necessary to access the Scheme more often, however, making an assumption of this nature at this point might be deemed to be falling into Best's trap of 'claims making' based upon very limited information.

The Scheme's risk assessment

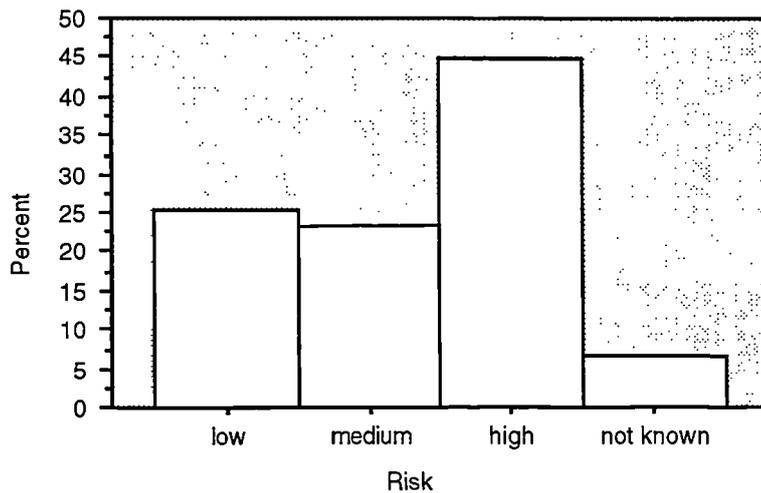
The Scheme carried out a risk assessment for all young people registered for services; this assessment formed part of the Scheme monitoring data. The risk assessment classification was determined by applying the Scheme's 'Matrix of Need' (fig. 7) which rated young people in three specific areas: personal factors, social circumstances (accommodation, finances etc) and support networks:

Figure 7 : The Scheme's 'Matrix of Need'

Matrix of Need	
High	Female Pregnant/Children Male/Female Mental illness/other illness or health related matter needing monitoring Homeless High risk accommodation, i.e. unsettled Risk of abuse (i.e. abuse or unstable partner)
Medium	Male/Female Risk of homelessness Finances insecure/inadequate, debt concerns Poor social support networks
Low	Male/Female Settled accommodation Settled finances Settled support networks

When applying the Scheme's risk assessment, of the 150 young people registered for services, 44% (67) were classified as high risk, 24% (35) as medium risk and 25% (38) as low risk with a further 7% ((10) of young people for whom a risk assessment was not known (fig. 8).

Figure 8: Scheme Risk Assessment



Therefore, using this assessment only a quarter of care leavers were identified as low risk, thus, deemed to be sustaining settled lifestyles in the three specified areas: accommodation, finances, settled support networks. Research supports this rather pessimistic assessment showing that such stable outcomes, as to render young people in the low risk category, are not often accomplished by young people leaving care (Stein & Carey, 1986, Biehal et al 1995) and may even be difficult to achieve for many other young people who have not experienced 'care' (Jones, 1991).

It is worrying to find that 44% of young people receiving services from the Scheme were located in the high risk category indicating that their lives were far from stable. Nevertheless, it may be questionable seemingly to place all young women with children in the high risk category, (Matrix of Need) thus not heeding Best's caution when 'claims making'. In line with this concern Biehal et al (1995) made this observation in relation to young people and early parenthood:

'two thirds seemed to be managing quite successfully. A number of young people, in particular those with wilder and more unstable pasts, felt that the onset of parenthood had been a stabilising influence and helped them centre their lives.' (p 134 - 135)

Looking at Scheme contact and risk

The contingency table for Scheme contact and risk (table 3) shows that of the 24 (16%) of young people having minimum weekly contact, 19 (80%) of these were identified as high risk. These figures would further suggest that young people accessing the Scheme most frequently were predominantly those with more problematic lives. Ten young people (7%) had fortnightly contact, 5 of whom were high risk and monthly contact was sought by 21 (14%) young people, 7 of whom were recorded as high risk.

Table 3: Contingency table for Scheme contact and risk assessment

	low	medium	high	not known	Totals
min weekly	3	2	19	0	24
fortnightly	3	2	5	0	10
monthly	6	8	7	0	21
occasional	17	12	13	0	42
no contact	9	11	23	10	53
Totals	38	35	67	10	150

Well over half of those eligible to receive services, a total of 95 (63%) young people, had only 'occasional' or 'no contact' at all with the Scheme. Of this 95 young people well over a third (38%) were classified as high risk, with a quarter (24%) as medium risk and the remaining quarter (27%) low risk. A further 10 (11%) young people from this grouping had no contact and risk assessment was 'not known'. The actual patterns in the data would indicate that young people classified as high risk often either had a sustained high level of involvement or a distinct lack of involvement. For young people of low to medium risk, the level of involvement was more focussed toward occasional or no contact.

Biehal *et al's* (1995) research where young people participating were those with 'key worker support from the schemes and a 'comparison' group of non-scheme young people' (p9) found that, while

acknowledging the difficulties trying to separate out young people in this way those with scheme support:

'were far less likely to have positive supportive relationships with a parent or other family member, and were far more likely to have experienced rejection by parents or long term carers' (p276).

This would be in line with the way in which young people in this present research, accessing the Scheme on a weekly basis, are predominantly those from the Scheme's high risk category. However, what of the 36 young people categorised as high risk who also do not have contact with the Scheme? It would seem ill-advised to speculate here, hopefully, the later part of this thesis will provide some insight into why 63% of young people eligible for leaving care services seem to have only occasional or no contact with the leaving care scheme.

Young people and accommodation

Again there are differences in the way data were recorded for Scheme monitoring and the *exit interviews*. The Scheme monitoring data had the categories: own tenancy, custody/bail hostel, supported housing, other, not known and no fixed abode - while the *exit interviews* recorded: own tenancy, shared flat, hostel, bed & breakfast, family and friends, other and no fixed abode.

Of those young people giving *exit interviews* over half, 52% (table 4) were living in their own tenancy with 42% of the total registered for services within the Scheme monitoring data also having their own tenancy. Using the Scheme monitoring data, because there was an even gender distribution, it was found that more females (65%) than males (35%) had their own tenancies. In relation to both sets of data there was very little evidence of intermediate supported accommodation with only 9% of young people registered for services living in supported housing.

There is evidence within both data sets of young people using what might be termed temporary housing, in that there is a sense of short term accommodation implied in : bed and breakfast, hostels and possibly family and friends. Again the 'not known' category should be considered, where the

total is not quite as striking in terms of accommodation, with only 10% falling within this category as opposed to 23% for employment trajectories, referred to earlier. In both the Scheme monitoring data and the *exit interviews* there were very few young people of 'no fixed abode'; this should nevertheless not decrease any appreciation of the magnitude of what this might mean to individual young people.

Table 4 :Young people and accommodation

	Scheme data		exit interviews	
own tenancy	42%	(63)	52%	(20)
			shared flat	11% (4)
custody/bail hostel	5%	(7)	hostel	11% (4)
supported housing	9%	(13)	bed & breakfast	3% (1)
other	33%	(49)	family and friends	13% (5)
not known	10%	(15)	other	8% (3)
no fixed abode	2%	(3)	no fixed abode	3% (1)
Totals	150 young people		38 young people	

Leaving care and stability of accommodation

Stability of placement while 'looked after' is frequently considered one of the major concerns when discussing quality of care for young people. Therefore, it would seem vital to consider the stability of young people once they cease to be 'looked after'. For young people leaving care, included in the Scheme monitoring information, instability was a significant issue where the data provided information regarding both planned and unplanned accommodation movement. The mean number of young people's accommodation moves was 4. The data were incomplete for both planned and unplanned

moves, (24 missing values = planned, 20 missing values = unplanned) attributable to the young people for whom, number of moves was not known. The mean number of young people's planned and unplanned moves was 2, the same for both classifications (table 5).

Table 5: Accommodation - unplanned and planned moves

	Mean score	Minimum	Maximum
Unplanned moves	2	0	15
Planned moves	2	0	9

The level of planned movement may reflect to some extent movement from intermediate and temporary housing, although, this should be considered by taking into account that only (9%) 13 young people registered for services were in supported housing. In view of the low numbers of young people accommodated in supported housing the mean number of planned moves may reflect a level of planned or expected instability regarding accommodation. Again drawing on Biehal *et al's* (1995) study; it was found that those young people living in poor accommodation,

‘were more likely to move to good accommodation within two years of leaving care if they had scheme keyworkers, despite having early housing careers characterised by a high degree of instability’ (p275).

However the spread of scores gives cause for concern: for planned moves a minimum of 0 with a maximum of 9, for unplanned moves a minimum of 0 with a maximum of 15. Almost half of the young people (49%) had experienced 4 or more accommodation moves with 15 (12%) young people experiencing 8 or more moves.

The data were explored further to determine whether gender, the Scheme's risk assessment or age appeared to be related to accommodation moves. In terms of gender the box plot (fig. 9) shows that accommodation moves were very similar for both males and females. With reference to the Scheme's risk assessment for unplanned moves there were more young people experiencing above average

moves within the high risk category (fig. 10). This difference was not reflected for planned moves where all risk categorisations seemed to be similar. What might be surprising is that a small number of young people identified as low risk were also experiencing well above average unplanned accommodation moves.

Figure 9: Box plot for gender and accommodation moves

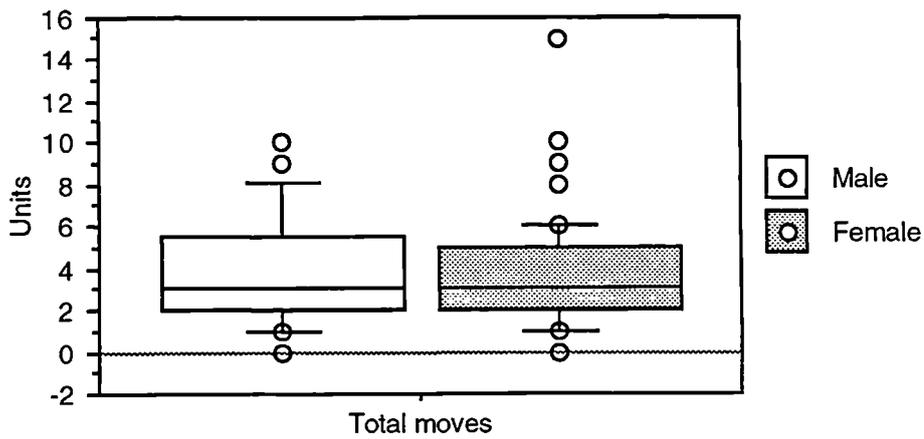
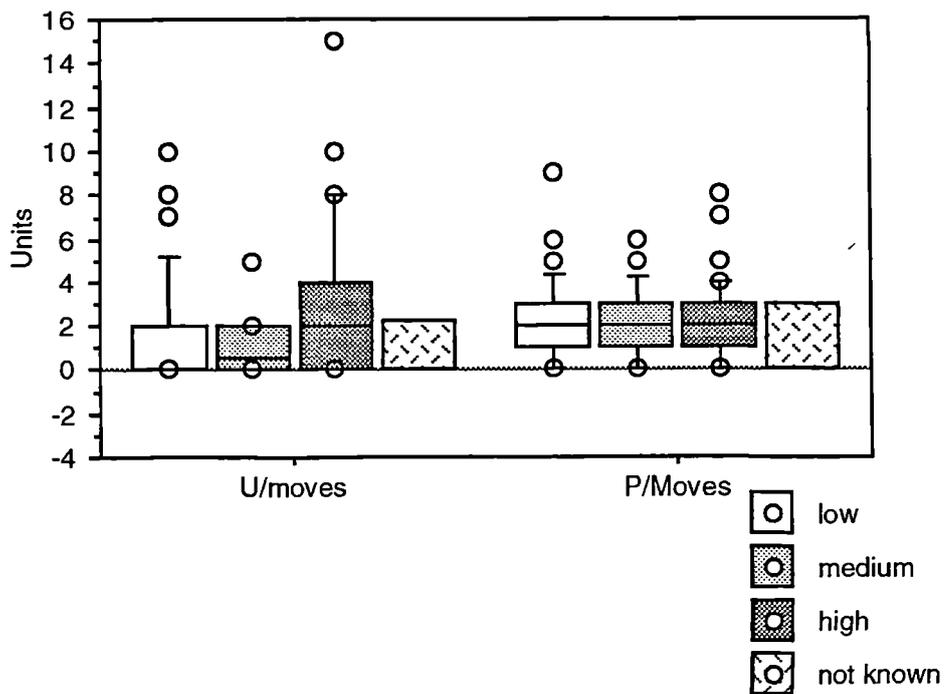
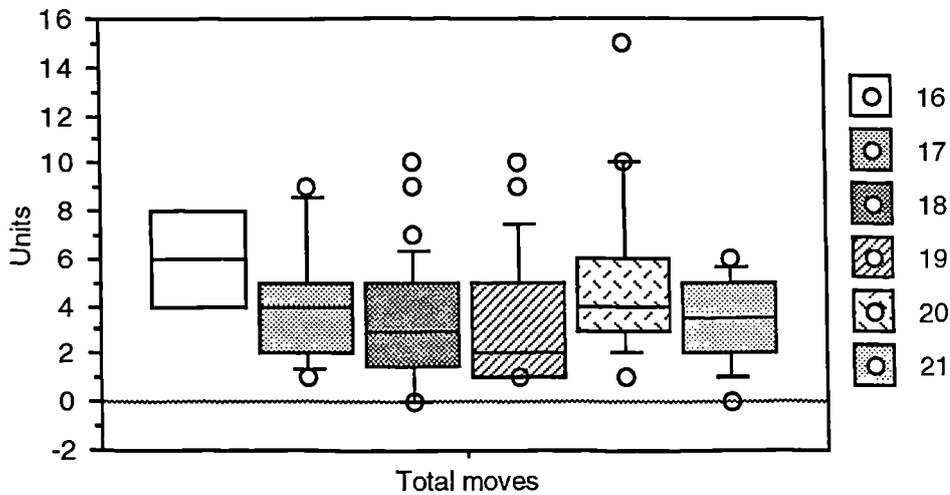


Figure 10: Unplanned and planned accommodation moves and risk assessment



The box plot for total accommodation moves and age (fig. 11) would indicate that for the majority of young people accommodation moves are undertaken when young people first leave care with very little change in the overall average number of moves as young people reach 21 years of age. What might be surprising is that the 2 young people aged sixteen had the highest mean number of accommodation moves.

Figure 11 : Age and total accommodation moves



The literature suggests that young people making the transition from dependence to independence often leave home and return, (Jones, 1987, 1995, Banks et al, 1992) however, for young people with family relationships which are often problematic such instability must be of greater concern. Young people who have been 'looked after' cannot be assumed to have a stable base from which to move back and forth reversing the leaving home event if things don't work out or if circumstances change. Although half of the young people were found to have their own tenancies many young people eligible to receive services from the Leaving Care Scheme changed their accommodation frequently and while this cannot be assumed to be problematic it nevertheless gives cause for concern.

Young people and parenthood

The Scheme's, Matrix of Need includes pregnancy and having dependent children in the high risk category. The Scheme monitoring data showed that 75% of those young people eligible to receive services in this authority did not have children. Of those young people with children; 34 (23%) (table 6) had one dependent child, four of these young parents were male; four young women had two children. Within the 'Matrix of Need' pregnancy and dependent children are identified as a female risk variable, this would maybe need to be reconsidered, although there is no indication within this data set to suggest who actually might have the primary care of the children.

Table 6 : Young people and dependants

age	no dependants	1 child	2 children
16	2	0	0
17	15	5	0
18	29	4	2
19	26	13	0
20	24	9	1
21	16	3	1
Totals	112	34	4

Almost half of the young women registered for services (45%) had a dependent child⁹. Five of the 20 young women who were 17 years of age had one dependent child. These patterns show a similar picture to that of the Leeds University study, at the end of the research:

'nearly one half of the young women were coping with early parenthood.

All were aged 19 or under when their babies were born.' (Biehal et al, 1995)

⁹ Having children may be one possible explanation regarding the gender difference in response rates for the *exit interview* initiative; young mothers may have been at home more often when the interviewer called.

However, as referred to in the first chapter no attempt should be made to infer early parenthood as a poor outcome rather a consideration of each individual's circumstances and perceptions should be sought. The importance of motherhood as a way of claiming adult identity has been noted not only for young people leaving care but for young women in general (Hudson and Ineichen, 1991, Musick, 1993). Also, Biehal *et al's* (1995) study points out that having a clear role and status as a mother gave some young mothers confidence and, for some, better relationships with their mothers and links with their partners' families. The finding that one in seven young people were pregnant or had children at the point of legal discharge from 'care' (Garnett, 1992) or the 'general evidence' in this chapter where almost half of those young women eligible to receive leaving care services can be viewed in a more positive light. Phoenix (1991) and Sharpe (1987) show that young mothers with sufficient support - especially from their mothers, can cope with difficult financial circumstances and still be able to provide good quality care for their children.

Young people and 'official knowledge'

The context presented here is primarily Stanley's 'official knowledge' where outcomes are measured in general evidence terms. The young people have the support of a specialist leaving care scheme offering a range of services; seemingly operating Stein's (1990) '*independence model*' of support. Many of the young people leaving care were below eighteen years of age maybe compounding the difficulties they might face. When making the transition to independent adult status the vast majority of young people in this authority are required to do so without the financial stability of full-time employment. This inability to find employment can be located within changing labour markets and the consequences of a benefit system that denies financial support to 16 and 17 year olds who do not take up or secure a YT place. Of concern is the importance young people placed upon employment in terms of their future and the possible consequences to levels of self-efficacy that observing so many of their peers fail to secure employment might bring.

Many of the young people also experience a high level of instability with several accommodation moves. This high level of movement was for some 'planned' thus suggesting an accepted level of instability, however, for others several 'unplanned' moves seemed to contribute to being classified by

the Scheme as high risk. The data shows that the majority of those receiving weekly contact with the Scheme were situated within the high risk category. This would be expected suggesting the Scheme was providing support to those in most need. However a worrying finding was that a substantial number of young people classified as high risk only had occasional or no contact with the Scheme. Another issue providing context for the biographical accounts to follow is that almost half of the young women eligible to receive leaving care services had dependent children.

Overall the outcomes identified in this chapter appear similar to those outlined in Chapter One; much of the information in this chapter is 'objective' providing measurable outcomes. While the data analysed here is of contextual value it should nevertheless be considered in terms of its limitations; only by looking further into individual lives of young people will any real understanding of what all this means be gained.

Chapter Six

Valuing first encounters

I was able to make contact and stay in touch with fourteen young people during the biographical phase of the research; in this chapter I tell of my first encounters with these young people. However, this chapter has three distinct aims: primarily the aim is to introduce the young people to the reader. If the interactionist position outlined in Chapter Three is to be explored, first encounters are of vital importance as they might influence or even determine future interactions. In addition Runyan's view is of a sequence of processes within which I too take part becoming part of an evolving interactional process. Taking this one step further, in this chapter as I introduce the young people I provide the reader with brief first encounters of their own with which to negotiate and maybe determine further interactions throughout the latter part of this thesis.

The second aim is to continue to provide a less 'sanitised' account of the research process. Seed (1995, p845) says that 'the researcher is continually endeavouring to capture a moving picture'. I aspire, in the 'telling' of this PhD process, to convey the sense of a moving picture with a research process evolving in the same way as the picture I present of young people's lives evolves and progresses. Often in research there is no sense of interpersonal contact between the researcher and the researched; the interactive process of research being omitted from the research write-up. It is seemingly assumed that the researcher's first encounters with the researched are fairly problem free and therefore there is little written in terms of explaining the nature of the interaction which takes place. Harding (1987, p9) argues that 'the beliefs and behaviours of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research'. Therefore, as part of a reflexive and open process I intend to convey my first interactions with the young people who participated in the biographical phase of the research.

In conveying these first encounters; age, accommodation at that time, number of dependants, employment status are all analysed and presented but of themselves such data provide only limited insight. Therefore the first encounters I offer will essentially draw upon my initial meetings with young

people presenting my interpretations; information drawn from *exit interviews* will also be used in order to enable a more holistic appreciation of each young person and their uniqueness; both in a personal sense and a more situational one. This practice of giving a brief 'sketch' of a person's life, prior to more detailed analysis, is not unique (see for example Coffield et al, 1986, Edgerton, 1993). The purpose here is somehow to enable the reader to locate young people in order better to understand and evaluate the more detailed 'stories' that follow. This will nevertheless have an effect on the way the reader interprets future encounters with specific young people throughout the course of the research write-up.

The final aim in this chapter is to provide a means of beginning to organise the vast amount of data collected throughout this research. In their *exit interviews* young people had given information relating to their lives in 'care'. I had made contact and started to keep field notes, organising and analysing as part of a continual process. Yet, when it comes to writing up a small number of stories - which should I tell and why? The process started in this chapter forms the initial part of a selection procedure aimed at providing 'empirical evidence', such evidence will enable the reader to assess the *transferability* of the research allowing any claims made, as a result of the telling of young people's stories, to be more fully evaluated.

In Chapter Four I outlined the various sources and types of data that had been collected. The quantitative data has been used in order to help situate the young people involved in this essentially qualitative stage of the research. Here I begin to draw upon mainly qualitative data from both field notes made during my earliest involvement with the young people and information given during the *exit interview* phase. At that time I was unsure who and how many young people would consent to be part of the research and therefore my field notes and the subsequent write-up reflect this level of insecurity.

A specific qualitative approach

Before I begin to introduce the young people, and my first encounters with them, there is a need clearly to position this present research. So far I have made reference to qualitative research as if there were some widely accepted and precise definition of what it is. Qualitative research can take

many forms both in terms of philosophical position, methods and aims and outcomes (see for example, Banister, et al., 1994, p8; Henwood and Nicolson, 1995, p.110; Mason, 1997, p11). I have already explained the feminist philosophical thinking behind my choice of method, nevertheless, I need to be specific in identifying the type of data generated and the way in which I have analysed and used the data. Tesch (1991. p17-25) made things a little easier identifying three basic orientations of qualitative research:

1. 'language-oriented' which focus on the use of language and the meaning of words and the way people make sense and communicate in their interactions,
2. 'descriptive/interpretive' which are directed toward providing thorough descriptions and interpretations of social phenomena and include the meaning to those who experience such phenomena,
3. 'theory-building' where the orientation is to identify connections between social phenomena.

Although Tesch does acknowledge the contestable nature of this neat classification it provides a useful means of locating this present research. The second orientation is the one that best explains this research which aims to describe and interpret the experiences of young people; trying to understand what their experiences mean to them. Therefore, I continually acknowledge my role in that I interpret and often add my own voice to that of the young people. Miller (1997, p3) asks in relation to qualitative research that both *the systematic* and *artful aspects* of qualitative research be accommodated. She moves on to refer to the current qualitative debate which turns on:

'whether qualitative research is a scientific enterprise which involves reporting and analysing research findings, or is really a process of storyconstructing and storytelling.'
(Miller, 1997, p7)

Miller maintains that the later explanation, that of storyconstructing and storytelling, is one subjective and partisan account which may express one of many interpretations. I have elucidated my intention to present young people's experiences in terms of their unique stories while still acknowledging my

inclusion as the storyteller. Therefore, the interpretive orientation of this research is a conceded point, yet my intention was to provide a 'thick' description (Geertz, 1978). By providing this thick description the reader would be able to evaluate if the interpretation offered 'rings true'. Furthermore, by means of a thick description the young people are placed in context and therefore any action they take can be situated in the social and historical setting in which it occurs. In this way the contextual demands of adopting a life course perspective, when trying to understand the lives of young people, was also served.

The data presented in this research was collected over a period of two years - with some young people having involvement for the duration and others having either considerable involvement for a shorter period or some level of inclusion when they chose to or were able to. Therefore, although it is accepted that this study arguably still provided the *snapshot approach prevalent in much survey research*, my contact with young people over a much longer period and in a less formal manner aimed to provide more detail. This detail is to illuminate the interactions that took place and the interconnection between the actions of the young people, the context and their own unique outcomes. Seed's reference to a 'moving picture' made earlier is useful in that it illustrates the way in which a life can never be captured in its entirety however hard the researcher might try - maybe all we are ever able to interpret is one or two frames from the whole moving picture.

Gaining permission to participate

I have said that I made contact with young people, managing to stay in touch for quite a prolonged period. Dey (1993, p37) makes the discerning observation that when using qualitative methods the researcher becomes a participant, you might ask; is this not the aim of ethnographic participant observation? However, for Dey this relates to the process and more specifically to the recording and interpretation of any data produced. What I hope to demonstrate in this chapter is that the researcher does indeed become a participant but not only in the way that Dey suggests. While I fully accept the point Dey makes in relation to the data there is another point to be made. It is that the research becomes far more determined by those who are perceived to be the participants. Those feminists who write about the research process rightly extol the virtue of acknowledging and trying to reduce the power differential that may exist between the researcher and the researched, placing them on the

'same plane' (Harding, 1993, Stanley and Wise, 1993). The method I had chosen to employ meant that I participated in young people's lives - thus I needed to be given permission to participate. Jorgensen (1989, p55) maintained that the participant role could be conceptualised on a continuum from a 'complete outsider' to a 'complete insider'. However, how far this is determined by the researcher or the researched is unclear. Corresponding to Jorgensen's account, Gold (1969) identified four participant roles: a complete observer, a participant-as-observer (more observer than participant), an observer-as participant (more a participant than observer), or a complete participant. Here the issue is that the level of participation determines the amount of observation the researcher is able to engage in. My foremost concern, was not the level and amount of observation I might be able to undertake; rather that I did not want to take on some illusory role where I might inadvertently dictate the action. I also felt the need to be aware of the way young people might view my participation and if they would be tolerant of it. This not only relates back to the ethical issues identified in Chapter Four but about gaining the permission of young people to participate in their lives. I write this section in retrospect and therefore I am highly sensitive to this issue as a consequence of my experiences.

While the intent here is to introduce the young people, the desire was also to provide a sense of the atmosphere in which the research took place and enable an appreciation of how and when permission was granted in terms of my involvement. Furthermore, while I needed permission to be a participant in their lives, this participation had to be understood in terms of the boundaries that existed when undertaking research. I was not a Scheme worker and therefore I had to ensure that young people did not view me as a source of additional and indefinite social support. This does not however, suggest that I may not at times have been a source of social support, in that I was around when young people needed someone to talk to.

Getting closer to the Scheme

The support and cooperation of the Leaving Care Scheme has been vital to the success of this research. However, never more crucial than when providing a venue where I could meet young people, being able to seek their participation in the research while also trying to gain approval and permission for myself. I have explained previously how Scheme support was invaluable to the research process in this part of my thesis I do not intend to offer in-depth information in terms of the

structure and process of the Leaving Care Scheme. Rather I will weave the Scheme in and out, of young people's first encounters and subsequent stories, as it becomes relevant to them and their experiences. As a mode of research, ethnography 'only succeeds to the degree it enables the reader to understand what goes on in a society or a social circumstance, as well as the participants' (Banister *et al.* 1994, p35). With this in mind I will try to encompass and exemplify the Scheme by drawing upon specific experiences which occurred during the research.

The 'drop-in' and the coffee table

The Scheme ran a Wednesday afternoon 'drop-in', where young people registered for services could call in for tea and a chat. A member of staff was present; and while the main focus was one of friendly chat the worker would deal with any current issues or problems the young people might be experiencing. These sessions were very relaxed and attended by between four and ten young people. While some young people remained constant in their attendance others came for one week and I did not see them attending again. I was a participant in these sessions attending every two weeks for six months during the *exit interview* phase of the research (I maintained a reduced level of attendance at the 'drop-in' throughout the research). Here I acted to promote the *exit interview* initiative; someone who would offer information in terms of the aims of the initiative and the process. Many of my first encounters with young people took place at the Scheme 'drop-in'. If not at the 'drop-in' then on the premises when young people came to meet keyworkers or to seek information and/or assistance.

The Scheme had two sites, one a more formal administrative base a little out of town situated on the same site as the Assessment Unit¹⁰. Although this was not too far out of town, young people did not go there very often. It was my experience that they might go in an emergency but they were not encouraged by staff to call at this particular office. There was always a professional businesslike atmosphere at this particular site, this was where the majority of the paperwork was kept and where the Scheme Manager and her secretary had their offices. Also, the two Scheme workers responsible for organising supported lodgings were based here as was the worker with responsibility for homeless young people.

¹⁰ The Assessment Unit provided short term residential care while young people's long term care was under review.

The second site, the one that I became most familiar with, was located in the centre of town within a local community centre. This was much more convenient for young people as they often called in when in town shopping or going to the Benefits Office, etc. However, the building was far from ideal and the Scheme Manager on several occasions expressed her regret that they were not located on one site where young people could have more relaxed and purposeful access. In the community centre, which in my experience catered mainly for older people with a disability, the Scheme had a small two roomed office where on average five workers shared the space, rotating 'duty times'. Duty time was in effect office hours when a young person could be sure of seeing a worker if they needed assistance - at other times they could use a telephone pager number if they needed emergency support.

These two rooms were often a hub of activity with telephones ringing, opening and shutting of filing cabinets and young people coming in and out, often meeting with their keyworker at arranged times for very specific reasons: sorting out accommodation, benefits, emotional problems, furniture, etc. The staff made every effort to respect the privacy of the young people but this was very difficult because of the limited space available. Staff did try to keep the second room free so that they could discreetly take young people through when confidentiality was an issue. However, this was not always possible, therefore, staff might take young people out into the foyer of the building for some degree of privacy. Nevertheless, there were often people walking past with the resultant distraction of trying to hold a serious conversation in what was a thoroughfare.

The Leaving Care Scheme also had use of a meeting room; this was where Open Door (drop-in) sessions took place. Again there were problems with this room, the decor was far from ideal with seating that had the appearance of having last been accommodated in a nursing home for elderly people. The walls were decorated with very traditional wallpaper; young people were most certainly not allowed in any way to impinge upon the traditional aura it created - no posters - well only educational ones and certainly not any that might relate to sexual well being or contraception.

Something that I found particularly difficult was the coffee table. Everyone sat around in a very relaxed manner with a rather low coffee table situated in the middle. On my first visit one young person was

told *'don't put your feet on the table'*. This was given as a direct order by one of the Scheme workers causing me endless problems. I would unwittingly find myself with my feet on the table; the problem was that I was not asked to remove my feet rather I would come to the guilty realisation that they - my feet, had yet again strayed, and to make matters worse I would jump to attention in the process of removing them. My inability to adhere to this rule became a shared joke and gave me a feeling of belonging with young people present pushing my feet off the table before I got 'caught' by a Scheme worker.

What I hoped to convey with this brief story was not only that I had begun to develop a relationship with the young people, although that was very important, more that the location did not belong to the Scheme and by affiliation to the young people. Rather they shared it with others the majority of whom were from a generation twice, if not three or even four times, removed from their own. Therefore, it was difficult to generate the sense of belonging that the Open Door session might be endeavouring to create. In telling this brief excerpt I do not intend to suggest that young people should be allowed to, or would even want to, show disrespect for property rather that they were not able to act young - inadvertently to lounge about, even be boisterous and noisy. A further blow was struck when smoking was banned in the centre. The centre manager did make the concession that people could smoke in the foyer. This was rather farcical with staff and young people sharing the use of a very small and seedy litter bin around which they smoked. It did to some extent solve my problem with the coffee table. I too sat round the bin soon, like everyone else, accepting this as some kind of alternative Open Door. Nevertheless, it should be said that Scheme staff both managers and workers made every effort to minimise problems related to site location and shared accommodation. Near the end of this research plans were underway to relocate to a unitary site.

First encounters with the young people

Having furnished a closer view of the Scheme I now aim to bring the reader closer to the young people by providing first encounters with all those young people participating in the biographical phase of the research.

Beth

Beth was small in stature with very dark shoulder length hair, her dress was not the usual sportswear I encountered with many of the young people but trendy short skirts often worn with a satin bomber jacket. At this time Beth was unemployed and had recently moved back into the family home. When we first met Beth had called into the Scheme 'drop-in', at this time the Scheme had started to hold a Mother and Baby session which ran for an hour prior to the Open Door 'drop-in'. Beth had arrived at the session and tried to convince Hannah (also involved in the research) to take her daughter Amber along with her to a children's birthday party.

I was unsure, and I still am, as to whether the party was the brainchild of Beth at the last minute or if it had been prearranged with the consent of the child's mum. Beth referred to the child as *'our Jessica'*. Jessica's mum was distantly related to Beth, however, their connection was both more specific and personal. Beth and Hannah had been in 'care' with Jessica's mum. Beth unrelentingly tried to persuade Hannah to go with her, bringing Amber along. Persuade is maybe not the right word, coerce may be more fitting. Staff jokingly tried to divert Beth but she did not give-in until she had exhausted a number of avenues ranging from encouragement to almost blackmail, *'you don't want to let Jessica down do you? What about Amber - she'd have a really good time.'* All this was done while writing out a card and wrapping a present which had just been bought in town.

Throughout this rather theatrical episode Beth's language was colourful to say the least and her manner occasionally flashed with anger seemingly born out of frustration because no one seemed to be taking her seriously. She was actually in earnest about the party and the need to make it a success.

Beth had entered the Scheme with another young woman - she neither spoke to her or included her in the conversation - she was simply intent upon the mission of persuading Hannah, and more importantly Amber, to go with her.

Beth did resign herself to Hannah's not going and so asked the worker in a very abrupt manner who I was. On the whole most of the young people - even those who have reacted to my presence with indifference, maintained a level of civility; not Beth. The worker with my assistance explained the *exit interview* initiative. Her reaction unnerved me at the time:

'What a fuckin waste of time. They don't want to know what kids in care think. They all say they're listenin but are they fuck - they just do what they like. Social Services don't care what kids in care think.' (field notes)

The worker who was 'on duty' asked Beth to '*watch her language*'. Beth then flounced out of the Scheme followed by her friend. Neither the worker nor Hannah seemed surprised or bothered by this outburst. I for my part felt exceedingly guilty and somewhat embarrassed; guilty that I had invaded Beth's space with the end result being her leaving, and embarrassed at the vilification the *exit interview* initiative had received.

Nevertheless, Beth did rather surprisingly give an *exit interview*. The following 'care' history information was, as with other young people, primarily taken from information given at that time. Beth's first local authority placement was with foster parents when she was thirteen. During the one year period that followed Beth moved three times; two were foster placements the other a period at the Assessment Centre. Her response when asked why she moved was; '*I haven't got a clue.*' Beth had two more placements, one at the local authority residential unit with education where she stayed for six months. Her final move was on the same site as the Assessment Centre but in a residential unit where many of the young people placed there were among those who were difficult to place - Beth remained there for almost three years leaving because, in Beth's words she, '*got kicked out.*'

Sally

Sally was a tall, athletic looking young woman, constantly dressed in the most up to the minute sportswear. My first encounter with Sally was at the 'Open Door' drop-in where her entry was rather dramatic. Sally and a friend arrived breathless, convinced they were being pursued by the police. They had apparently been '*banned for life*' from the local shopping mall for persistent shop lifting, this information being conveyed with more than a little pride. Sally was in prison for shop-lifting when the interviewer had initially tried to contact her after she had consented to give an *exit interview*. She seemed to be a regular user of the drop-in; the staff appearing to enjoy her company, actively seeking her conversation, laughing and joking.

Sally was unemployed at that time, living on her own in a council flat having left care six months earlier. Problems relating to furniture were high on her agenda - she didn't have a sofa to sit on, '*How would you like it with nowhere to sit in your living room?*' One of the Scheme workers suggested that she should go to the '*Stores to see what they have*'. This was a Social Services storage where furniture which had been donated was sold cheaply to people considered to be 'in need'. This suggestion was met with utter disdain - apparently Sally had been on numerous occasions and there was nothing suitable.

It was difficult to engage her in conversation; she continually moved around, rarely standing still let alone sitting down. Sally had a portable phone belonging to her boyfriend which she used constantly during the Open Door session. This first meeting with Sally left me a little breathless, I didn't get an opportunity to speak to her, nor did she seem concerned with me - why should she? The Scheme workers introduced me but she was preoccupied with her recent experience in the shopping mall.

Sally became 'accommodated' at fifteen years old initially being placed with foster parents - after three days she ran away. During her two and half year period 'accommodated' by the local authority Sally experienced eight placements, three of which were foster placements, two residential community homes, a further three week period in an assessment unit on remand and six weeks in bed and breakfast accommodation. Her final placement was with foster parents where she remained for the whole year prior to leaving care. Sally talked of her foster mum with affection:

'My last foster parents were great, my foster mum was just like a friend. She even came to visit me when I got locked up - you know: picked up or in custody.' (exit interview, doc. 15)

My field notes make the following observation in relation to Sally:

The impression is one of confidence with an air of indifference. She is confident in her interactions answering quickly and effectively any comments made by workers but I was left feeling that she was indifferent to both their concern and disapproval regarding the shoplifting . (field notes)

This rather cold observation was based upon one meeting but maybe it conveys the importance of first encounters. I had no prior experience to draw upon, using only what I saw at that time to place her. It might be argued that as a researcher I should not have been situating her, however, my research is concerned with describing and interpreting what I encounter. Furthermore, is it not exactly what society in general will do and therefore my first impressions, as with those of others, are of vital importance; they are part of an ongoing interactive process and as such are valuable. Yet first encounters as with assessing outcomes do not operate with perfect knowledge. Might my positioning of Sally have been different if I had been aware of an unsettled and maybe traumatic two and a half years spent 'looked after' by the corporate parent?

Peter

I had met Peter at the Leaving Care Scheme twice before but only briefly, on the first occasion he had still been 'looked after' and was at the 'drop-in' for the first time. He was rather withdrawn and kept to himself with staff working to involve him in the usual chatter. The second time we met he had left care and been living in supported lodgings¹¹, he had just turned eighteen. His worker had suggested to him that he might take part in an exit interview. I was actually at the Scheme meeting with another young person when the worker rather formally introduced us. Peter agreed to complete an exit interview if it was at the children's home where he had lived for two years prior to leaving care, and on

¹¹ Supported lodgings: young people leave care going to stay with 'providers' who deliver additional support assisting in the transition to independent living. 'Providers' are trained and assisted by the Leaving Care Scheme in supporting young people.

the understanding that I would be the interviewer. Peter appeared more chatty and relaxed but his insistence upon my doing the interview seemed to convey a certain shyness.

The interview took place in the 'back room' of the residential community home which was a comfortable, private room where the young people sat and chatted. He seemed to be in an ambivalent situation in the home - the young people living at the home swept him along as one of them yet Peter seemed uneasy as if he shouldn't really be there. He told me that he called at the home fairly regularly but that it was difficult as he was living quite a distance away. Peter spoke of his keyworker while in residential care saying that, '*she was real good to me, give me a cuddle if I was ill. I wish she was my mum, I'd have been OK then.*' (field notes)

Peter spent eighteen months 'accommodated' by the local authority all of which were at this same residential community home. His *exit interview* made poignant reading, when asked about the leaving care process his reply was:

'They kept me here as long as they could before they let me go. I'd have stopped here (residential community home) forever, I loved it here. It's a good children's home and you get spoilt here. The staff are reliable and sound people to live with. I wish I'd come here when I was a couple of years younger.' (exit interview, doc. 35)

His residential care keyworker was on duty when I arrived to interview Peter; she showed obvious concern asking him how was coping, encouraging him to seek assistance from the Leaving Care Scheme. Peter seemed to be listening but his smile looked to be more passive than any kind of active acceptance of the pertinence of her advice.

One of the questions asked in the course of the *exit interview* related to how young people had found living independently, his reply was unexpected, '*OK if you call livin the back of a car alright.*' Peter went on to tell me that he had '*trouble*' at his supported lodgings placement. Peter had found himself a summer job fruit picking; the supported lodgings provider had disapproved and insisted that he either inform the Benefits Agency or stop working illegally. Peter refused to do either and subsequently left. He was not angry when telling me this but rather resigned; feeling that he had not

been unreasonable because he needed the extra money for a new stereo and there was no other way to afford one. Nevertheless, his situation at that time was pretty dire, he told me that he was living with a friend at his parents' house. *'I sleep on the floor but they don't really want me there.'* I later dropped him off at his friend's glancing into the rear view mirror as he walked toward the house. His walk was very slow almost reluctant as though he were unsure of his reception. I realise that this is my interpretation but it is based upon my reading of our first encounter. He gave his address as 'no fixed abode' asking me to contact him through the residential community home.

Natasha

Again, as with Peter, I had very briefly met Natasha on a number of occasions, first at a residential children's home when Natasha was still 'looked after', and more recently at the Leaving Care Scheme. She was an extremely attractive young woman with short blonde hair and the usual trendy sportswear. On our first meeting at the home, while she was still 'looked after', she was very loud, shouting to and at staff.

My first real conversation with Natasha was at the local bowling alley when I was invited to a social event which the Scheme had organised and was funded by the voluntary child care organisation which shared funding for the Leaving Care Scheme. At that time Natasha was working as a clerical officer for a local firm on a YT scheme. A number of young people had gone along to the bowling evening with staff, supported lodgings providers and other people who had a degree of involvement with the Scheme. This was a popular event with the young people - bowling, burgers and for those old enough an opportunity to share a beer with the Scheme workers. Natasha came up and said Hi, she was very cheerful and told me that she has just moved into her own flat. Her cheerful mood was curtailed when I asked when she had moved in - she said *'today'* going on to tell me that she had moved in by herself, *'nobody helped me, I help all me mates but nobody helped me.'* I was surprised to say the least by this revelation as I had become increasingly aware of the effort and care Scheme workers took when a young person first moves into their own accommodation. However, Natasha clarified that this was indeed her second flat; moving in the same block but to a different flat to gain more space.

When speaking of her distress she told me that evening that what really hurts was:

'I thought the staff (at the residential unit) really cared for me but probably not, I was there a really long time and none of em come to see me.' (field notes)

She was eager for me to leave the bowling evening early in order to see her flat, I had to decline as there were many young people at the event whom I had contact with and it would not have been appropriate for me to leave with Natasha. Natasha's distress at the lack of commitment on the part of the residential staff was evident. She was obviously neither prepared for nor aware of the boundaries which might exist in relation to roles and responsibilities. I did have concerns that I too had compounded this by my inability to call round at her flat that evening.

Natasha had entered care at the age of two being 'permanently' fostered for ten years. This placement broke down when Natasha made allegations of physical abuse against her foster dad. She was placed at the local authority Assessment Unit but requested she be moved back to living with a family. Natasha then experienced four other foster placements in quick succession with six months being the longest. Her *exit interview* gave insight into why she was unable to settle:

'No matter what anyone did for me I never felt secure in a family environment. It wasn't the foster parents' fault - it was just me, just how I felt. It didn't matter where I was I never felt secure. I don't think I'd be able to feel secure even now in a family.' (exit interview, doc.. 35)

The residential community home where she was subsequently placed proved more stable and she stayed there for two and a half years prior to leaving care at seventeen.

James

James was one of the first young people I met when undertaking this research, I introduced him earlier when highlighting the ethical tensions that might arise. Whenever I called at the Scheme James seemed to be around, his countenance was a little daunting to say the least with his shaven head and

dishevelled appearance. He was nineteen and unemployed when I first met him and had been living out of care for just over a year. His continual presence at the Scheme was problematic as there were set times when young people could call in for tea and a chat; at other times it was very business like with appointments and specific issues to be dealt with. Although staff were friendly with James I became aware that they were unwilling to set some kind of precedent that enabled James to drop in and stay until he was ready to go. This was a continuing issue for the Scheme throughout the duration of my research and not one that related only to James. As mentioned earlier the Scheme shared space and facilities in a community centre, there was neither the space nor the staff available to provide a continuous level of social support based at the Scheme office. Nevertheless, James's need to be there should be acknowledged.

On a number of occasions when I had first seen James he had been homeless and seeking same night accommodation at various hostels. His *exit interview* reflected this movement:

It's difficult (accommodation) I don't like livin in the hostel, I've been to loads of hostels and places but I don't like movin around it makes you kind of lonely.' (exit interview, doc. 1)

The staff at the Scheme allowed him to use the telephone furnishing him with accommodation telephone numbers, it seemed to be a usual occurrence for James to be seeking crisis accommodation. On one particular occasion James was on the phone at the Scheme continually - moving on to contact Careers inquiring about employment. Previously James had found employment but had not been able to stay in work. Later telephone calls were with the police in relation to his impending court appearances. At this meeting I had no insight into what his level of police involvement might be. James was not at all shy on the phone being calm and polite even charming. His keyworker later joked that James should find a job in tele-sales he was so confident on the telephone.

James entered care at fourteen, although, he felt that he *'shouldn't have gone into care, I should have been left at home with me brothers'* (exit interview, doc.1). His first placement was at the local authority residential community home which provided on site education - James had not been

attending school for some time. He later moved into a residential community home where attempts to reintegrate him with his family were unsuccessful with James staying there until he reached eighteen.

Suzanne

Suzanne was 16 when she became involved with this research. I had not seen her at the Leaving Care Scheme and one of the independent interviewers working for the Local Authority had undertaken the *exit interview*. On completion of the interview Suzanne had agreed to become involved in further research. I wrote to Suzanne enclosing an information sheet briefly outlining the research and giving a time when I would be able to call. I also enclosed a telephone number where I could be contacted if she wanted to rearrange the appointment. I arrived as arranged, a delicate looking, slender young woman opened the door holding an infant who looked only days old. Suzanne had forgotten our appointment and had friends round. She was very apologetic and I had to insist that it did not matter and that I could easily call another day before she would allow me to leave. I was relieved to note that Suzanne seemed keen for me to call again.

There were two toddlers playing on the floor with the usual array of toys, the house was very comfortable and cheerful. Suzanne was particularly concerned about my arrival because her 'boyfriend' was in the kitchen decorating and as a result she felt the house was a 'mess'. There was another young woman there, one of the children belonged to her, Suzanne explained that they had called in to see the new baby. The other toddler playing on the floor was Suzanne's older child Lee, she had recently had her second child Kayne - he was the child in her arms as she opened the door.

Suzanne entered the care of the local authority when she had just turned fourteen. Her entry was a direct result of the sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of her stepfather coming to the attention of social services. She spent a week in emergency accommodation with foster parents, the following placement did not work out with Suzanne giving the following explanation:

'At Mrs Deakin's I was left on my own a lot because she would go out and meet people on dates, you know she's with this dating agency and he's (Mrs Deakin 'boyfriend) about seventy. She still does it, she was too old to foster anyway.' (exit interview, doc. 29)

Suzanne was moved to different foster parents where she remained for eighteen months prior to the birth of her first child when she left care.

Tara

I had seen Tara briefly before our first scheduled meeting - she had been with another of the young woman I had been visiting in connection with the research. On this very brief meeting Tara seemed confident and although friendly she maintained a distance. I had also heard her name mentioned numerous times at the Leaving Care Scheme in relation to supported lodgings and the birth of her son Stephen. Tara was seventeen at this time. I was aware that she had recently moved into her own house and that there were problems. However, I was not familiar with what the problems were only that her keyworker had spent a substantial amount of time recently trying to '*sort things out*'. Again, as with Suzanne, I had not met her at the Leaving Care Scheme and I had not been involved in the *exit interview* she had given, so I had arranged to visit in response to her agreement to be involved in further research.

Tara has a council tenancy on a large, rather notorious, council estate on the edge of town. I was late for the appointment, I had serious problems finding the house. Many of the street signs were missing and I had to stop various people and ask for directions. When I eventually arrived Tara was waiting patiently and laughed when I explained why I was late, telling me that it was impossible to give anyone directions because of the kids '*nickin*' the signs.

As I entered the living room it was hard not to notice the walls. Tara had decorated the lounge with the help of Scheme workers when she moved in, however, she explained that there had been a problem with damp and thus the council had needed to undertake major work; so the decorating was ruined. The living room was stripped ready for wallpapering with green distemper showing through but Tara didn't have the money to buy fresh wallpaper. Tara later told me that she couldn't be bothered tidying

the house, *'Why bother, it still looks like a shit heap.'* Stephen, Tara's small son, played while we talked she was attentive and caring constantly bringing our conversation around to him. I had been a little apprehensive about this first meeting - especially as I'd managed to be late. This apprehension was not particularly about Tara but more about my somewhat unnatural route into the lives of strangers. Yet I found myself chatting easily with an amusing and very articulate young woman.

Tara's first placement with the local authority was at the age of fourteen and was related to her mother's physical abuse. Her return home was not successful and her re-entry into local authority care again resulted in a short term foster placement where Tara was happy and settled but had to move because of the short term classification. She then moved into a residential community home but requested a further move because she felt at risk due to the prevalence of drugs and criminal behaviour at the home.

'There were eight kids ranging from 11-18, six offenders who used drugs with only two staff on shift at any one time. I felt isolated. I had to break a rule to get attention as an individual.'

'I came close to bein raped there. I shared with another girl who let two males in at the fire escape door an it got out of hand. She was goin out with one, so the other thought he was there for something from me.' (exit interview, doc.34)

Her last placement was at another local authority residential community home and this proved more stable with Tara feeling that, *'the staff didn't just treat you like another kid in care.'* Tara remained there until she became pregnant with Stephen. Tara was then 'discharged' ceasing to be termed 'looked after', she moved into supported lodgings where she remained until after Stephen's birth, she was very settled and happy there.

Janine

Although Janine did not attend regularly she did make an occasional appearance at the 'drop in'. At our first meeting one of the Scheme workers had given Janine an *exit interview* leaflet and subsequently asked me to explain to her what the initiative was about. Janine promptly said that she thought *exit interviews* were a 'good idea' and filled in the leaflet. I was very much aware that Janine was putting me at my ease rather than any misconception that I might be expected to fulfil that role. Her manner was both friendly and understanding and I felt she was aware of my somewhat contrived presence at the 'drop-in' session. Janine had her small son Elliot with her - he was just over twelve months old at that time. He was a very robust and extremely appealing child who proved popular with both Scheme staff and the young people, therefore Elliot was entertained while Janine chatted. It would be difficult to discern if Elliot was popular in his own right or if his popularity was a consequence of Janine's cheery and sunny disposition.

Janine shared a council house tenancy with Damien, her partner, their house was located on a peaceful cul-de-sac on the edge of a large housing estate. Janine and Damien both said that they liked and 'got on' with most of the neighbours. However, Janine did make reference to the police helicopter constantly flying overhead and the 'no hoppers' who lived 'round about'. Damien had also been 'looked after' by the Authority, he was fine with Janine being involved with the research and his involvement in respect of his relationship with her. However, he forcefully refused to become involved at any other level saying categorically that he did not want to give an *exit interview*. Janine explained that Damien's life had been more fraught than hers and as a consequence he just wanted to leave it behind. Throughout my contact with Janine I respected Damien's wishes making no attempt actively to involve him. Nevertheless, my contact was informal and Damien was often in the house when I called, he was seeking employment at that time, and he often stayed and joined in the conversation to a limited extent. I did on several occasions check that he was comfortable with my making a record of any comments he made as part of any conversations I had with Janine.

Janine was fifteen when she entered care first being placed with foster parents. She stayed with her foster parents for four months, leaving because in Janine's words they, 'didn't get on'. The next placement was deemed to be only temporary with Janine staying at the Assessment Unit for three months. Janine then moved to a residential community home where she stayed for a year before

becoming pregnant with Elliot. Her final placement was with foster parents where she remained until the birth of Elliot and the subsequent move into her current accommodation. Janine still had contact with her last foster parents, visiting regularly with both Elliot and Damien.

Shaun

It is difficult to relay a first impression which is not somehow influenced by the *exit interview* which Shaun gave; thus reflecting the way in which past interactions impact upon the present. The interview left a resounding impression - a young person who 'left' care ('left' seems an inappropriate term, Shaun seems to have been 'moved on',) very early; just before his sixteenth birthday. While 'looked after' Shaun had been placed at a residential school out of the local authority area. On completion of his statutory education he was required to leave the school and thus became the direct responsibility of the Authority and the Leaving Care Scheme. His exit interview tells of leaving the school, where he had been very settled, and moving into a bed and breakfast in his home town. The *exit interview* conveys a level of confusion on Shaun's part as to why he would have been found such accommodation and expected to cope on his own.

'I was only sixteen an I thought I could go to stay somewhere else but nobody seemed to know what was happening. Social Services put me straight into bed and breakfast accommodation. I only had one meal a day, that was breakfast. I had no say, no money - nothing like that.' (exit interview, doc 5)

As with some of the other young people involved in the research I had not met Shaun prior to his agreement to become involved when completing an *exit interview*. His keyworker had expressed concern that it might be difficult to contact Shaun who had by this time left the bed and breakfast and was leading an unsettled lifestyle. Shaun had arranged to meet his keyworker at the Scheme and the worker had asked Shaun if I might see him later - he agreed to this arrangement. Shaun arrived at the Scheme as arranged; the staff all felt that Shaun would not keep his appointment, (a Scheme worker had rung Shaun in order to remind him of his appointment). He was dressed in a rather garish tee shirt and shorts which did not really co-ordinate with his Dr Martin boots the result being that he looked

rather comical with Scheme workers joking about his appearance. Shaun seemed relaxed and at ease with the staff but he looked very young. His key worker took Shaun into the private office to check through some claim forms which Shaun needed to take to the local Benefit Office. I was surprised to be asked by a member of the Scheme staff, if I would like to accompany Shaun to the Benefits Office. I was informed, once I had rather reservedly accepted, that Shaun wanted someone to go with him because he was afraid of passing a hostel where he had previously been a resident. Staff assured me this was more an *'imagined'* fear of Shaun's rather than a realistic threat.

This was one of the times when I was unsure if I was actually crossing a line in some way. Should I have been 'riding shotgun' in this way? Should I have been fulfilling the role of a Scheme worker in this way? Should I have been so quickly placed into the milieu of Shaun's life or would he have preferred a more extended transitional period in terms of our relationship? I have no real problem with going to the Benefits Office, the aim of the research is to access a more everyday appreciation of young people's lives, if young people wanted me to go then fine. However, I did not feel I was invited to participate in Shaun's life; more that I was available so I could go along. I must say however, that Shaun did not seem in any way concerned with the turn of events - quite the reverse. As we walked to the Benefits Office on a bright sunny morning he was more than willing to chat and did not seem at all troubled by my presence.

Shaun informed me that he had recently finished a scheme (YT) - while he was relaying this information he became a little confused. It became unclear as to whether Shaun had 'quit' the scheme or if it had finished, nevertheless, he was at that time unemployed as his trip to the Benefits Office was related to his need to claim Income Support. He told me as we walked along that he had moved into Darwent House a week ago, this was a recently opened (approx 12 mths) purpose built hostel for a diverse range of people; age and circumstances. Shaun informed me that he moved from his previous accommodation, due to other residents attempting to force drugs on him. He told me that he had reported *'them'* to the police, and as a consequence, *'they're after'* him. This would probably relate to why I had been asked to accompany Shaun to the Benefit Office. I asked Shaun if he told the staff at the hostel; he shrugged his shoulders and said that they knew but did nothing about it. I then asked if he had told his key worker; yet again he shrugged his shoulders and said, *'he don't listen to me; he just carries on with his writin and stuff.'*

Shaun told me that he was taken into care at seven and a half, after his step father at that time, had physically abused him. He returned home with the support and involvement of social services, however, he re-entered care at nine being placed in a residential community home. Shaun remained at the residential community home for five months moving out of area to a residential community home with education. Shaun completed both his junior and senior school education at two out of area residential units with education, moving back into the local authority area when his statutory education was completed.

Hannah

I arrived at Hannah's; the flat was on the second floor of a new housing association block of maisonnettes. Hannah's flat is the only one with a broken window. I had written in response to Hannah's positive reply to become involved in further research given on completion of her *exit interview*. Nevertheless, she seemed surprised by my arrival but when I explained she rather indifferently invited me in. A young man was at the flat with Hannah and her infant daughter Amber. He stayed for about half of my time there and was very chatty, at times it was difficult to make conversation with Hannah as there was a need somehow to get past the surface conversation of the young man. He informed me that he was the cousin of Hannah's former partner; Amber's father. Hannah told me that Amber's father was in prison and that she was more than relieved that this was the case.

Hannah was just 18 but she looked younger, however her manner was not that of an older teenager more that of an experienced woman in her mid twenties who was reluctant to be too familiar at a first meeting. I actually found this more comfortable than the unquestioning acceptance I had encountered with some of the young people. Amber was born when Hannah was sixteen, she became pregnant while in care. Although distant and more than a little reserved when I arrived, by the end of the visit she was talking more freely and telling me that I would be able to see Amber again on my next visit who by this time had herself begun to chat and relax in my company. Before I left I was encouraged by both Hannah and Amber to take a look at Amber's bedroom, it was cheery - lots of yellow and sky blue; Hannah had just finished decorating it herself.

When Hannah first entered care she was aged twelve and placed with foster parents. This foster placement only lasted for three months when as a result of, in Hannah's words, '*me absconding*' she was placed in an out of area secure unit. She made some distressing and disquieting comments about this time:

'I don't think they should put you in a secure unit at twelve years old, especially when there are some doing TWOCing (taking a vehicle without the owner's consent) and more. I was just running away. Lots were doin more than me and not sent away. The more they put me away the worse I came back, I'd pick up all sorts of tricks, you know learning new things each time. I was the only one at twelve who was there for runnin away.' (exit interview, doc.. 26)

After three months in the secure unit Hannah returned to her local authority and was placed in a residential community home but again there were problems with absconding and now offending resulting in Hannah again being placed out of area. This time the placement was a residential unit with education where Hannah was much more settled staying for nine months. On her return to the local authority area she was placed at a different residential community home where she stayed for almost three years. Her departure was due, again in Hannah's word, to her becoming '*involved in trouble*'. After two very brief stays at two further residential community homes run by the local authority she moved to a mother and baby hostel where she stayed for three months while pregnant with Amber.

Rebecca

In chapter three I introduced Rebecca and the way in which she, maybe more than anyone else, made me aware of my essentially powerless and contrived position. She was seventeen when we first met yet her demeanour was of someone much older. This impression may relate to her outward physical appearance which was very smart and adult with carefully applied make-up. However, her conversation was also very practical and matter of fact relating to finding employment and her current relationship. Although this account seems accurate it does not convey the more extrovert side of her behaviour which was often present during our first encounters.

Rebecca lived alone in a privately rented bedsit in the centre of town. She had recently started a job as a DJ in a local pub. Her keyworker encouraged her to give an *exit interview* but on this occasion she declined. I made no effort to persuade her as the initiative was about ensuring that young people had a choice, however, I did feel that her refusal was most distinctly about taking control and her refusal directed more at me. This interpretation may be a reflection of my vulnerable position at that time. Nevertheless, Rebecca did eventually give an *exit interview* after a number of her friends had done so (did she choose to or was she merely compliant not wanting to seem different?).

Rebecca's first local authority placement was with foster parents when she was two years old. This placement lasted for a couple of years, Rebecca had no real recollection of the placement or why it ended. She then moved to another foster placement where she remained for six years, however, again Rebecca cannot recollect why she moved but she remembered vividly being moved:

'I hate them. To the back end of it they said they wanted to adopt me, they were going to adopt me but turned round and said to them (Social Services) 'take her back'. I still don't know to this day, Can you imagine what that feels like at nine or ten years old - 'take her back,' and you don't know why?' (exit interview, doc.23)

This disappointment and rejection was followed by a short term placement before being placed with another set of foster parents. Rebecca stayed with Pam and Jeff for six and a half years, speaking with a great deal of affection about her time there constantly referring to them as Mum and Dad and emphasising that they acted toward her as if she was, *'their own kid'*. In her mid teens her 'real' father re-entered her life and Rebecca went to live with him and his new family; this didn't work out with Rebecca later being placed in a residential community home where she stayed until leaving care at seventeen.

Kirsty

Kirsty was a small even petite young woman with elfin features. At the beginning of the research she was eighteen yet she looked much younger - nearer to fifteen. She had an eighteen month old daughter Rachel by a previous relationship and was at this time *'seeing'* Dave. She lived with Rachel in a council tenancy situated in a row of council properties that appeared to have been on the whole

sold to the sitting tenants. As I arrived I subjected Kirsty to my usual but on reflection all too superficial friendly facade. I say this with a degree of cynicism as reading the field notes makes me once again remember how difficult this meeting was:

It was hard to engage Kirsty in conversation - many of her answers were limited to one word responses making me feel like some kind of interrogator. I seemed unable to strike up any kind of rapport with her, finding her distant and remote. (field notes)

I had no way of knowing at that time if Kirsty was ordinarily hard to make conversation with or if this was actually related to her unfamiliarity with me as a person or indeed something else. This first contact where I outlined the research and its aims was, for me, far from encouraging. I left feeling unsure about how Kirsty's involvement would progress and decidedly worried that she might feel I had intruded in some way. The aim of the research was to access a descriptive and interpretive account of her life and this could only be achieved with the accord of the young person. I did not embark upon any significant conversational topic that might provide any real appreciation of Kirsty and her life rather I simply outlined the research and how I thought we might proceed. Kirsty made no objection but nor did she seem in any way enthusiastic. As I left I again stressed that she could change her mind and need not be involved in the research - she declined and we arranged another meeting.

Kirsty was first fostered at twelve years old. This first placement lasted a year but Kirsty was not happy and was thankful for the social worker who brought it to an end:

'My first foster parents, they were crap. They were religious people, they didn't understand my problems. They shouldn't have been foster parents in the first place, they weren't kind to me and me sister. My first social worker (one of 'loads') was helpful because he got me out of that first foster parents'. He used to take me and me sister out to dinner sometimes.' (exit interview, doc..10)

Her second foster placement was much more successful with Kirsty remaining there for four years, leaving when she became seventeen because she wanted to be independent. She had continual contact with her foster parents who provided ongoing support for both Kirsty and Rachel.

Emma

I first met Emma at the Leaving Care Scheme at the now familiar 'drop-in'. She was with two other young women who accessed services at the Scheme. Emma appeared to be much more reserved than the other young people she was with - she smiled a great deal but said very little. Her appearance was in line with most young people of her age; casual with the usual named trainers, etc. Emma sat away from the main conversation but gave the impression that she wanted to be part of the group. At this time Emma had just turned eighteen and was living in her own housing association flat.

It would be unfair not to provide the reader with the information I already held in relation to Emma and as a consequence my reservations regarding her inclusion in this research. Emma had a prolonged history of 'mental health' difficulties which she outlined in the *exit interview*. These difficulties were visible on meeting Emma. She self-harmed and the injuries were evident on her arms, neck and to a limited extent on her face. My main concern was; would the research process prove to be detrimental in some way to Emma? Young people in the research process are to be given the opportunity to tell their 'story', might this lead to some kind of adverse effect for Emma in light of her past history?

Emma had in effect made the choice and given an *exit interview*, she had also chosen to consent to her involvement in further research. Was it now appropriate to render her powerless and make choices on her behalf? It was decided after consultation with the Scheme Manager and my research supervisors that Emma should be included. However, this was predominantly influenced by the Scheme Manager's belief that to exclude Emma, when she would be aware that other young people she had close contact with had been actively encouraged to be involved, would itself have possible detrimental implications.

A further and probably just as important issue is one that questions the notion not only of representativeness in research but that of equality of opportunity. Would it have been discrimination to have quietly sampled Emma out of the research. It might be that her story was less mainstream but is that not the main strength of this approach to research? The individuality and diversity of each young person can be, as far as possible, taken into account and made visible subsequently leading toward a more in-depth understanding of individual outcomes.

Emma's care history reflected the level of mental health difficulties she had suffered. She entered care when she was sixteen first experiencing a one month emergency placement with foster parents. Emma then moved to a residential community home staying for six months after which she moved between various placements, residential and foster placements which were intersped with short stays in local psychiatric hospital units because she was seen to be a '*danger to herself*'. Her last placement, before leaving care at eighteen, was the Assessment Unit because according to Emma; '*it was the only place that would have me.*' (exit interview, doc. 6)

Lindsay

On first meeting Lindsay you are aware of how different her appearance is in relation to the majority of young people who accessed leaving care services. This may be a generalisation but in my experience, which at the time of writing had amounted to three years contact with both the Scheme and young people leaving care, Lindsay was different. Most young people dressed in either sportswear or fashionable clothes, Lindsay's appearance was of someone much older. Having met her at the Scheme I observed that she seldom entered into conversation with other young people nor did she arrive with anyone. While at the Scheme I did not observe any other young people chatting or being familiar with Lindsay. Occasionally a young person might say 'Hi' but this was not followed up with any conversation. Lindsay was at the bowling evening, mentioned earlier, she was vibrant even silly, she was drinking Pils and I think by the end of the evening she had had a pretty good time. However, she was on the whole with Scheme workers not mixing with the other young people present.

At the Scheme, Lindsay usually chatted with staff where much of the conversation was about trying to encourage Lindsay to feel more confident and comfortable with herself. These conversations might relate to her going out more, as it seemed she stayed at home a great deal or discussing how she might improve her situation through finding a job or going to college. Throughout Lindsay was self-effacing and polite.

On my first arranged visit Lindsay was not in, however, I wrote to her again with a rearranged time and this time she was at home. When I arrived Dennis her boyfriend was there - he looked far older than Lindsay (she later told me that he was 42). He was polite and said he was going out so we could talk in private. Lindsay said that he had gone to his parents' house. The flat was very tidy and I felt even more aware of the acute dissimilarity with Lindsay and other young people I had met. There was no evidence of a young person's belongings: posters, stereo, CDs, trainers etc. rather the flat had the ambiance of a much older couple's flat. This may reflect Dennis's age but I felt it more reflected a different way of life, one which separated Lindsay from the more mainstream.

Lindsay had been in the care of the local authority since infancy. Her first foster placement lasted for fifteen years; the breakdown of the placement left her feeling that she'd *'lost her family'*. As a result of the foster home breakdown Lindsay moved into a residential community home where she stayed for a total of seven months, moving out because:

'I didn't fit in there. I didn't steal or do drugs and they (other residents) did and I wouldn't go with them so there was always trouble.' (exit interview, doc. 7)

Her final placement was with foster parents whom she found helpful and supportive easing the move into her own bedsit when she became eighteen.

Drawing on similarities and differences

As this chapter unfolds many issues are brought to the surface. It is noticeable that only three of those young people who participated in the biographical phase of the research were young men. I made considerable effort to include more men but as with the *exit interviews* I had serious problems making and maintaining contact. Of the eleven young women taking part five had children with Suzanne having two children. Nine young people left care 'early', that was before they reached their eighteenth birthday and was not necessarily as a consequence of placement breakdown or early parenthood. Many young people had entered care in their late teens experiencing movement

between foster parents and residential units. The myth of young people experiencing either foster care or residential care should be dispelled among these young people, as even those for whom a long term foster placement had been decided upon seemed to enter residential care at some point. Only Kirsty and Suzanne had exclusively foster placements.

In terms of accommodation young people with children had either council or housing association accommodation. The majority of those without children were markedly different, only Sally, Emma and Natasha had their own council tenancies, the three young men all had unsettled accommodation resulting in periods of homelessness, Beth had returned to live with her family, Rebecca had a privately rented flat and Lindsay lived at her 'boyfriend's' flat. It seems surprising to have in such a small sample two young people who were at that time homeless. Within the Scheme monitoring data only 3 young people out of a total of 150 were classified as 'no fixed abode'. Yet maybe this reflects that way in which 'official knowledge' can obscure the lives which young people experience. In the Scheme data only 3 young people were homeless but there were a number for whom accommodation was 'not known' and a further group classified as 'other'. Was Peter homeless or was he indeed 'other' because he was actually staying with a friend. At this point I make no claims in relation to these insights into young people's lives, merely presenting them as evolving observations adding to the contextual information continually presented.

While acknowledging the need to obtain and present the context of young people's lives hopefully I have provided much more in this chapter. The young people were diverse in ways which seemed unrelated to the kind of 'official knowledge' conveyed previously. Beth confronted me, Sally and Rebecca chose to ignore me, Shaun was unperturbed and Janine tried to put me at ease. It would be naive to assume that there was no connection between 'official knowledge' and these 'invisibilities' in terms of personal interactions but how might they relate, if at all?

Again concentrating on difference and diversity; the Scheme could be a welcoming place for some young people, being less so for others. Peter was wary at the Scheme where James was relaxed and at ease feeling able to call in and stay when he needed to. Many of the young people seemed connected through their 'care' experiences and through accessing Scheme services forming a community where their lives overlapped. Yet others seemed less involved; Suzanne and Kirsty appeared even at this early stage to have little contact with the Scheme living their lives in a different

sphere. Might these observations reflect their diversity in a way that accommodation, number of dependants, etc. might not?

In the chapters that follow I hope to build upon the alternative way of viewing young people's lives which tries to look beyond the obvious exploring the more individual way in which young people might interact with their social context. If Runyan's model is to be explored these more individual and personal interactions would be important to any analysis in relation to the way in which the situation and the person might be *determining*. In the next chapter I will use these first encounters to try to accommodate better the diversity and similarities of the young people participating in this phase drawing upon the interpretive framework identified by Tesch (1991) and accepting the process of 'storyconstructing and storytelling' (Miller, 1997) referred to earlier in this chapter.

Part Three

Chapter Seven

Developing a biographical interpretation of outcomes

Previous chapters have set the scene providing a view of both the theoretical and contextual environment within which young people's experiences can be located. In the final part of my thesis I aim to draw extensively upon the biographical personal experiences of young people; exploring their lives, their outcomes and the extent to which young people might be active agents influencing their own life course trajectories. However, primarily there is a need to consider in some detail the methodological approach taken in relation to accommodating the individual biographies of the young people and how their experiences have been interpreted and constructed. Once the biographical methodological approach has been looked at, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to developing a process for selecting which detailed biographies to tell. Fourteen young people participated in the biographical phase of the research; it would be impossible to present and interpret so many biographical outcomes, therefore a selection process needed to be devised and decided upon. By discussing the biographical approach and the interpretive nature of the present research in more detail the aim was to clearly show the philosophical underpinnings and lay the foundations for the development of the selection process which follows.

The problem of interpretation - fiction, fact or something else?

In the previous chapter I made reference to the 'descriptive/interpretive' approach adopted in this current research drawing on Tesch's (1991) three basic orientations to qualitative research. Moving on from this overall epistemological positioning I now intend to extend this to explore prevalent issues when taking a biographical approach in research. Stanley (1992) maintains that the ontological claims made in relation to autobiography are not dissimilar to those made for biography as the same 'analytic

apparatus' is required; both are forms of life writing and therefore the same problems occur. Auto/biographies proclaim themselves to be factual yet they are by their very nature, 'artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product,' (Stanley, 1992, p4). Denzin too focuses attention to the way texts are 'authored, read and interpreted', drawing on the work of Derrida (1972) and Geertz (1988). These writers all call into question the assumption that a life can be 'captured' in the way that writing a biography might suggest - is the meaning one person places on their life so readily conveyed and understood by another? The answers to such questions are enigmatic, often being left unresolved, replaced with a whole new set of questions relating to whose version of the story is being told and whose interpretation is being placed upon such stories. As a consequence of such questions epistemological disputes asking what can be known and thus what qualifies as knowledge become contentious.

In the present study there is an acceptance of the difficulties entailed in telling the story of another. The process of doing research and the way in which the researcher might construct 'the Other' (Stanley and Wise, 1983) to varying degrees is recognised. Gone is the notion of the 'objective' researcher who makes her/himself invisible; s/he is replaced with a particular woman who has her own ideological and cultural beliefs that will both impinge and direct the ultimate destination of the research. Rosaldo (1993, p194) eloquently endorses this position:

'The social analyst's multiple identities at once underscore the potential for uniting an analytical with an ethical project and render obsolete the view of the utterly detached observer who looks down from on high.'

There may be justification for including my own biography here in considerable detail, however, this work is primarily concerned with telling the stories of others and should not be usurped by my own. I will nevertheless try to make observable the influence I have had on the research acknowledging that there will always be an agent that drives the research toward completion and that agent will most often be me. I have tried to be reflexive and candid as far as I am able but I am undeniably 'in there'. I can never speak or write from the position of the young people rather, I can only, 'pass on selected aspects of (what they have shown me about) their lives,' (Griffin, 1996, p189) This candid approach, that does not aim to 'hide' the subjectivity of the researcher, is supported by Harding (1987, p9) where she says, 'Only in this way can we hope to produce understandings and explanations which are

free (or, at least, more free) of distortion from the unexamined beliefs and behaviours of social scientists themselves.'

A further criticism which might be levelled at research which adopts a biographical approach might be its relevance in the broader scheme of things or its generalisability. Pilgrim (1990) challenges the charge made against biographical methodology based upon its individualistic or homocentric nature - the charge being that such methods are not transferable and therefore of very limited utility:

Accounts are only seemingly individualistic because, provided that they are situated or contextualised, they, or their narrators, can be used as paradigms or prototypes, which can be used through interpretation, to uncover common discursive and organisational aspects of shared social reality.' (p187)

It might also be argued here that more generalisable research is in itself limited in utility because it does not have the depth of detail that a more subjective biographical approach might provide. Here Pilgrim is arguing for homing in on the more unique experience yet *oscillating* between the individual experience and the context surrounding it, thus building up a body of understanding that does not exist in some obscure unattainable place which can never be accessed or grasped. Rather there is more than a glimmer of acceptance that social 'facts' will in part construct the subjective account offered and as such there will be similarities and differences between accounts that make such work both enlightening and useful.

The problem here is arguably one of trying to package biographical methodology in a way that makes it not only a useful piece of research but somehow scientifically acceptable. When I say scientifically acceptable I refer to my own anxieties as a psychologist and the reception that I imagine might be forthcoming to research that takes a less traditional line. I am aware that psychology has begun to 'rethink' its methods, (Smith, Harre, Langenhove, 1996) however, I am still influenced by notions of scientific enquiry. Within Smith *et al's* identified 'multifaceted new paradigm' the emphasis is on diversity which 'attempts to construct ways of working which are more appropriate to, and, in some sense, a closer reflection of, psychological life' (Smith *et al.*, 1996, p3) Yet, even though I fully accept the need to work in the way Smith *et al.* suggest I still feel a residual sense of unease and a need to try to serve the traditional view to a limited extent. Can this be done when there is no attempt to claim

factuality rather an acceptance of the interpretive, auto/biographical character of the enterprise? In answer to this question I feel that I have been rigorous and systematic while trying to be open about the way in which my own biography influences the action and the interpretations taking place.

Turning young people's biographies into 'stories'

This part of the present research, as mentioned in Chapter Four, is methodologically based upon a study undertaken by Edgerton in the early 1960s. This methodological approach aimed to gain insight into a time of transition. I felt it appropriate to engage in a similar approach in the present research which involved young people who were themselves experiencing a time of transition from 'care' to independent living. Also, such an approach enables a look beyond the 'official knowledge' already available. In the study published from his research Edgerton presents the *detailed portraits* of a number of participants whom he states have been selected to represent 'typical modes of living'. He accepts the problematic nature of typicality but believes that as far as possible they are, 'representative of their fellows who live in like circumstances,' (Edgerton, 1993, p17).

There is much in Edgerton's book to feel uneasy with, he talks of making an extensive and objective account of their, the participants, lives. I have argued throughout previous chapters that the approach I have adopted relates to the subjective individual experiences of young people and the importance of accessing such an account, therefore the claims Edgerton makes differ greatly from any which may be rendered here. However, laying aside these reservations and disagreements the pragmatic view would be; how might we better appreciate and therefore understand the life of another if we do not take the trouble to access and in some way document their experience? Therefore, while accepting the need to highlight the philosophical discord between myself and Edgerton's position I do not feel this detracts from the pre-stated research aims or the feminist ideological beliefs which guide my research.

Within contemporary youth research in the United Kingdom this ethnographic biographical approach is not unfamiliar. Coffield et al (1986) undertook a similar mode of research with young people using unstructured interviews and the participant observation of individuals, couples and groups. Their

work too presented 'portraits' of young people's lives with, 'The intention to give an overall sketch of their lives before certain aspects are focused on more closely in the following sections,' (p 13). This format was considered and to a large extent tried in the present research where themes which emerged from individual lives were explored. However, this thematic approach did not provide the desired emphasis on individual lives which I aspired to. Therefore, an alternative line was taken; biographical 'stories' are constructed from field notes and taped interviews where available. Rather than detaching the analysis from the young person's life I have endeavoured to keep intact the uniqueness of an individual life by primarily focussing upon emergent themes from the one account presented, latterly exploring the transferability of these themes in relation to the other young people participating in the study.

Therefore, in the final part of the thesis I intended to offer detailed insight into four young people's lives by telling their individual *stories* where the biographies of the young people are given precedence. I consciously use the words 'detailed insight' to convey the limited nature of the enterprise. By telling four stories and exploring the lives of other young people in terms of difference and similarity I am aware that I move away from the *life story* research (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958, Bogdan, 1974, Strauss, 1974) summarised in Plummer (1996). I do not focus solely upon one life, however, I have tried to incorporate the aims of life story research:

'Life story research aims to investigate the subjective meanings of lives as they are told in the narratives of participants,' (Plummer, 1996, p50)

By telling the stories of four young people in some detail and making an interpretive analysis I aimed not only to bridge my own anxieties around the scientific rigours of research but also at the same time to fulfil my research aim 'to appreciate and understand in a more theoretical and pragmatic sense the everyday experiences of young people who have been 'looked after' .

Furthermore, these stories are different to Edgerton's *detailed portraits* in that they recognise the complexity surrounding the way a person's account is reproduced and constructed. Plummer (1995) says that *stories* have recently moved centre stage and that a distinct 'narrative moment' has now been sensed. He talks of, 'a ceaselessly changing stream of interaction between producers and readers in shifting contexts,' (Plummer, 1995, p22) moving on to ask how such stories are organised

thus introducing the notions of genre and the structure of story telling. Stories which are produced are not static, there is a negotiation between those who initially tell the story, those who document and produce such stories, and the reader. The stories told here are reproduced and are structured accepting Plummer's view that, 'story production and consumption is an empirical social process,' (1995, p24) where such texts are connected to the context in which they were told, relate to practical everyday activities and are 'contested truths'.

Roos (1994) claims that *context* and *authenticity* are useful concepts when viewing auto/biographical research. Context is related to the 'concrete conditions and the significance structure' with authenticity being the, 'the endeavour of the author to present his life as directly, naturally, realistically as possible.' The first concept of *context* I have continually tried to fulfil, however, I have only managed thus far to present what Roos might see as 'concrete conditions', therefore I will undertake to explore the 'significance structure' via an interpretation and analysis of young people's stories. This notion of 'significance structure' would relate to Stanley's idea of 'invisibles' where the reasoning is to look further than the easily observable. Also, here in this chapter and beyond I will endeavour to adhere to the concept of *authenticity* providing detailed information about the individual experiences of the young people.

However, the stories presented in succeeding chapters have been *ordered* (Law, 1994) - they did not originate in the form presented; they emerged over time. Different parts have been told at different stages and there will be omissions; details that the young people were either not comfortable talking about or simply chose not to tell. Omissions may also have occurred as a consequence of the way in which the researcher listened - did I hear and record everything that the young people said? The answer to this absurd question is 'no' but I hope that by being reflexive in both attitude and practical approach these omissions or indeed misunderstandings will have been moderated to some extent. Finally, in *ordering* the young people's stories it is hoped to convey an understanding of their more everyday experience - of what their lives have been, and may be today.

Fiction, fact or something else is probably a question that is answered in numerous ways dependent upon who is asking and who is answering. However, posing this question brings the argument full circle in relation to outcomes, where differing interests and interpretations are recognised to have an effect on the evaluation being made. Therefore, if a more extensive understanding is to be gained,

in relation to the outcomes of individual young people, a range of approaches drawing on a variety of epistemological and ontological positions should be embraced. The interpretation presented here in this study is thus one of many possible interpretations, offering an alternative to those already produced.

Selecting which stories to tell

Mason (1996, p.83) makes the emphatic point that , 'sampling and selection - appropriately conceived and executed - are vitally important strategic elements of qualitative research.' I have previously explained how young people involved in this research elected to participate. Although no strict sampling procedure could be imposed, at each stage of the research I have aimed to make visible the relationship between the young people participating and the wider leaving care population both in the participating authority and in relation to past and current research evidence. In keeping with this approach it was therefore necessary to find some rationale for determining which young people's stories would be told in detail. The aim was to tell a small number of stories in depth which would illuminate the diversity of young people's lives yet still accommodate the similarities that might exist. Of the fourteen young people taking part in the research only three were men, therefore it would seem appropriate to ensure that one of the stories was that of a young man. However, which men - which women should be included?

Utilising objectively defined outcomes

Previous chapters have shown how the lives of young people are often evaluated using observable, objectively defined outcomes: for example are young people successful in finding employment? Are young people able to secure and maintain accommodation? Do young people experience early parenthood? For each young person taking part in the final phase of the present research this information was available (table 7). Therefore, using this criteria it becomes a straight forward task developing a means of categorising young people in order to select which detailed stories to tell.

Table 7: Young people and observable outcomes

Name	age	status	accommodation	dependants
Janine	18	caring for child	own council tenancy	1
Kirsty	19	caring for child	own council tenancy	1
Emma	18	unemployed	own council tenancy	0
Beth	17	unemployed	living with parents	0
Hannah	18	caring for child	own council tenancy	1
Sally	18	unemployed	own council tenancy	0
Tara	17	caring for child	own council tenancy	1
Peter	18	unemployed	homeless	0
Rebecca	15	employed	own private tenancy	0
Natasha	17	employed	own council tenancy	0
Lindsay	19	unemployed	own council tenancy	0
Shaun	16	unemployed	hostel	0
Suzanne	17	caring for child	own council tenancy	2
James	19	unemployed	homeless	0

Five young women: Suzanne, Tara, Janine , Hannah and Kirsty were at home caring for a dependent child(ren) and had their own council tenancy. Sally, Emma and Lindsay were unemployed and had their own council tenancy. The differentiation between these two groups is that one group was at home caring for dependent children - the other had no dependants and group members were classified as unemployed. Rebecca and Natasha can be grouped together, they both had their own tenancy, although one was council and the other private, and they were both employed. This leaves Beth who, amongst the women, differs in that she lived with parents. For the men it is distinctly observable that all were unemployed and lacked settled accommodation with both Peter and James effectively homeless and Shaun living in hostel accommodation. Therefore they appear to form a particular group of unemployed and unsettled males.

Figure 12: Placing young people into categories based upon observable outcomes

Categorising (an example)

1.	female, caring for child, own council tenancy	Suzanne Tara Janine Hannah Kirsty	
2.	female, unemployed, own tenancy, no dependants	Sally Emma Lindsay	Beth - unemployed, living with parents, no dependants
3.	female, own tenancy, employed no dependants	Natasha Rebecca	
4.	male, unemployed, unsettled accommodation, no dependants	Peter James Shaun	

Using this sampling process based upon observable, objectively defined outcomes would seem useful in providing 'transparency' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p85). The reader is able to observe the process whereby stories were selected for more extensive description and interpretation. The categorisations form four distinct groups each drawing on specific observable, 'objective' outcomes. Therefore, taking one young person at random from each category, it is possible to select on the basis of observable, 'objective' outcomes in terms of gender, employed/unemployed, number of dependants and accommodation types.

Making interpretive characterisations

Having outlined a means of selecting which stories to tell based upon clearly defined observable outcomes I will now offer an alternative means of selecting which stories to tell. I would argue that the categorising process described perpetuates the objectification of young people and obscures their individual lives and the way in which their negotiation and interpretation of similar pathways may differ. When sampling and selecting in qualitative research Mason (1996, p. 91-92) maintains that departing from conventional sampling logic is acceptable and that it is possible to, 'conceive of different types of relationship between your sample and a wider population.' She outlines one approach where the sample is designed to provide:

'a close-up, detailed or meticulous view of particular units, which may constitute processes, types, categories, cases or examples, which are relevant to or appear within a wider universe..... A relationship where the sample is designed to encapsulate a relevant range of units in relation to the wider universe, but not to represent it directly. The range referred to here might incorporate a range of experiences, characteristics, processes, types, categories, cases or examples, and so on.' (p.92)

I wanted to avoid making assumptions based upon such 'objective' outcomes; for example the number of dependants. Research has shown the need for caution when making certain assumptions (Phoenix, 1991). Rather than making similar assumptions I hoped to draw upon description and interpretation when selecting which stories to tell. In the previous chapter I gave accounts of my first encounters with young people, these in turn provided the reader with not only information but also a means of *characterising*, a way of knowing, as opposed objectively to categorising the young people participating in the study. It is this concept of characterisation that I wish to employ when selecting which stories to tell. There is a departure from the conventional sampling logic guided by Mason's far less rigid view of selection which accepts the diversity of life experiences and the need to open up the boundaries of both investigation and analysis.

By using the term characterisations I do not intend to make some kind of causal attribution in relation to the young people involved, indeed the aim of this piece of research is to move away from presumed causal relationships. Rather the aim was to develop an alternative analytic device with which to select

a number of stories to tell in depth, in order better to understand the life course pathways of individual young people. By using the first encounters I developed an interpretive and interactive process of selection rather than imposing an objectively defined logic which might adhere to the usual 'claims making' approach which I aimed to circumvent.

This interactive approach to selection is in keeping with the theoretical base of the research both in terms of epistemology and ontology. Stanley (1992) draws attention to the way in which ideology can construct the biographical subject, therefore, I move away from categorising young people based upon their observable social status. This particular research is based upon the interactive individual who both acts and is acted upon. Life course theory stresses the linked, interconnected nature of lives not only in terms of the cultural and structural but also at an individual level where the concept of human action operates. Therefore, embracing such interactionist data as part of the selection process would seem in keeping with the philosophical positioning of the research.

The structural, 'objective' outcomes which were apparent in young people's lives have not been dismissed, rather they provide contextual background while not being allowed to consume the individual subject. Characterisations operate at a more personal and subjective level, hopefully enabling the young people to be known rather than being somehow hidden behind the outcomes and categorisations made. This, however, does not imply that characterisations are not subject to similar difficulties encountered when imposing categories, arguably characterisations also impose order and make assumptions. However, they provide an approach which might bring forth an alternative process and expression of outcomes.

Using only the qualitative information presented in the previous chapter to develop these characterisations does have limitations, in that only partial information from field notes and exit interviews was included. Nevertheless, some means of organising and sorting information needed to be employed and as such using the written up first encounters was arguably transparent, expedient and constructive. Primarily I read through each encounter several times in order to identify basic first order codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp55 - 61). An example of this analysis is presented overleaf where the interpretive analysis is typed in bold and the first order coding is typed in italics.

Making characterisations: an example

Beth

Beth was small in stature with very dark shoulder length hair, her dress was not the usual sportswear I encountered with many of the young people but trendy short skirts often worn with a satin bomber jacket. At this time Beth was unemployed and had recently moved back into the family home. When we first met Beth had called into the Scheme 'drop-in', at this time the Scheme had started to hold a Mother and Baby session which ran for an hour prior to the Open Door 'drop-in'. Beth had arrived at the session and tried to convince Hannah (also involved in the research) to take her daughter Amber along with her to a children's birthday party.

I was unsure, and I still am, as to whether the party was the brainchild of Beth at the last minute or if it had been prearranged with the consent of the child's mum. Beth referred to the child as '*our Jessica*'. Jessica's mum was distantly related to Beth, however, their connection was both more specific and personal. Beth and Hannah had been in 'care' with Jessica's mum.

Beth's behaviour could be interpreted as *caring and committed*. She cared enough to try to ensure that Jessica had the stereotypical birthday with presents and other children there. Also, her shared past with Jessica's mum would suggest a level of commitment on Beth's part in that she felt the need to be there and fulfil a specific role.

Beth unrelentingly tried to persuade Hannah to go with her, bringing Amber along. Persuade is maybe not the right word, coerce may be more fitting. Staff jokingly tried to divert Beth but she did not give-in until she had exhausted a number of avenues ranging from encouragement to almost blackmail, '*you don't want to let Jessica down do you? What about Amber - she'd have a really good time.*' All this was done while writing out a card and wrapping a present which had just been bought in town.

Another young person might have relented when confronted with Hannah's clear lack of interest - not Beth. She was *tenacious* in her pursuit of a particular outcome.

Throughout this rather theatrical episode Beth's language was colourful to say the least and her manner occasionally flashed with anger seemingly borne out of frustration because no one seemed to be taking her seriously. She was actually in earnest about the party and the need to make it a success. Beth had entered the Scheme with another young woman - she neither spoke to her or included her in the conversation - she was simply intent upon the mission of persuading Hannah, and more importantly Amber, to go with her.

Here we see Beth's commitment and tenacity but also a level of *sensitivity* in that she is aware she is not being taken seriously but also *indifference* in that she has no regard for the exclusion of her friend.

Beth did resign herself to Hannah's not going and so asked the worker in a very abrupt manner who I was. On the whole most of the young people - even those who have reacted to my presence with indifference, maintained a level of civility; not Beth. The worker with my assistance explained the *exit interview* initiative. Her reaction unnerved me at the time:

'What a fuckin waste of time. They don't want to know what kids in care think. They all say they're listenin but are they fuck - they just do what they like. Social Services don't care what kids in care think.' (field notes)

The worker who was 'on duty' asked Beth, well told Beth to, '*watch her language*'. Beth then flounced out of the Scheme followed by her friend. Neither the worker nor Hannah seemed surprised or bothered by this outburst. I for my part felt exceedingly guilty and somewhat embarrassed; guilty that I had invaded Beth's space with the end result being her leaving, and embarrassed at the vilification the *exit interview* initiative had received.

It would be easy to interpret Beth's behaviour as aggressive but when reading this first encounter more than once it becomes less obvious in terms of aggression and more related to *angry frustration*. She was angry and frustrated at not being taken seriously but this was also evident in her reaction to the exit interviews and to the subsequent response of the worker. It could be said that Beth was merely reacting to the situation but is this not what this research is about and would the reactions of another young person have been similar?

Nevertheless, Beth did rather surprisingly give an exit *interview*. The following 'care' history information was, as with other young people, primarily taken from information given at that time. Beth's first local authority placement was with foster parents when she was thirteen. During the one year period that followed Beth moved three times; two were foster placements the other a period at the Assessment Centre. Her response when asked why she moved was; '*I haven't got a clue.*' Beth had two more placements, one at the local authority residential unit with education where she stayed for six months. Her final move was on the same site as the Assessment Centre but in a residential unit where many of the young people placed there were among those who were difficult to place - Beth remained there for almost three years leaving because, in Beth's words she, '*got kicked out.*'

Beth did give an exit interview, this could be interpreted in a number of ways and therefore no characterisation analysis will be made. However, her comments in terms of movement could be termed as indifferent. This does not suggest a level of *indifference* on Beth's part rather that she presents those she encounters with indifference

Characterisation of Beth:

caring and committed, tenacious, sensitive, indifferent, angry frustration

Further analysis

This interpretive analysis was repeated for each young person's written up first encounter (appendix 15- 41) and a summary table (table 8) was produced. The summary table presents characterisations as they emerged from the data. I did not attempt to reclassify in order to gain a degree of similarity in relation to the characterisations made and it was necessary to include the five which seemed be most pertinent in providing a comprehensive interpretation.

Table 8: Interpretive characterisations from first encounters

Young Person	Characterisations				
Beth	<i>caring and committed</i>	<i>tenacious</i>	<i>sensitive</i>	<i>indifferent</i>	<i>angrily frustrated</i>
Sally	<i>risk taking</i>	<i>confident</i>	<i>indifferent</i>	<i>self worth</i>	<i>sensitive</i>
Peter	<i>vulnerable</i>	<i>insecure</i>	<i>thankfully appreciative</i>	<i>passively accepting</i>	<i>reasonable</i>
Natasha	<i>assertive</i>	<i>self-sufficient</i>	<i>confident</i>	<i>resentful</i>	<i>insecure</i>
James	<i>dependent</i>	<i>vulnerable</i>	<i>resourceful</i>	<i>confident</i>	<i>unconnected</i>
Suzanne	<i>friendly</i>	<i>sensitive</i>	<i>anxious</i>	<i>vulnerable</i>	<i>discerning</i>
Tara	<i>mature</i>	<i>friendly</i>	<i>angrily accepting</i>	<i>analytical</i>	<i>confident</i>
Janine	<i>friendly</i>	<i>accommodating</i>	<i>popular</i>	<i>consistent</i>	<i>discrete</i>
Shaun	<i>vulnerable</i>	<i>abandoned</i>	<i>unquestioning</i>	<i>indifferent</i>	<i>resilient</i>
Hannah	<i>unconcerned</i>	<i>mature</i>	<i>cautious</i>	<i>resentful</i>	<i>disillusioned</i>
Rebecca	<i>mature</i>	<i>assertive</i>	<i>strongly independent</i>	<i>self-sufficient</i>	<i>desolate</i>
Kirsty	<i>remote</i>	<i>indifferent</i>	<i>reserved</i>	<i>discerning</i>	<i>mature</i>
Emma	<i>shy</i>	<i>distressed</i>	<i>vulnerable</i>	<i>powerfully powerless</i>	<i>resigned</i>
Lindsay	<i>isolated</i>	<i>passive</i>	<i>dissimilar</i>	<i>unfortunate</i>	<i>vulnerable</i>

Once this initial analysis had been completed a way of undertaking a further analysis needed to be found. In chapter two human agency was discussed and it was suggested that, on the whole, little account is taken of how the individual might act upon or negotiate their individual pathways. Often young people are portrayed as passive recipients of services and the subsequent effects of social policy. What this analysis revealed was a certain dissimilarity. If we consider the young women categorised in group one - those working at home caring for a dependent child(ren) with their own council tenancy (fig. 13), at a glance it is clear that they differ when comparing the characterisations made (table 9)

Figure 13 : Young women categorised in group one

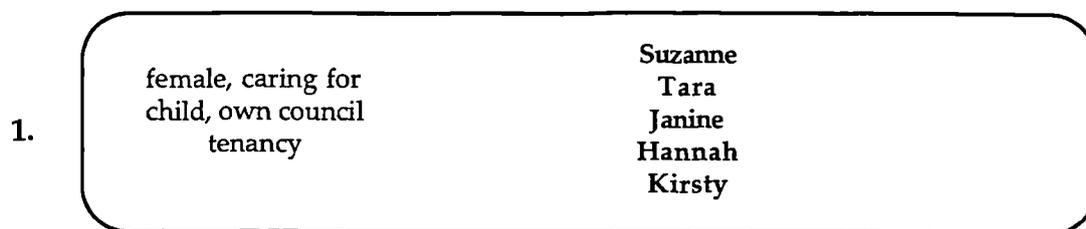


Table 9: Characterisations for young women categorised in group one

Young Person	Characterisation				
Suzanne	friendly	sensitive	anxious	vulnerable	discerning
Tara	mature	friendly	angrily accepting	analytical	confident
Janine	friendly	accommodating	popular	consistent	discrete
Hannah	unconcerned	mature	cautious	resentful	disillusioned
Kirsty	remote	indifferent	reserved	discerning	mature

Although Suzanne and Tara are placed in the same category their interactions and the characterisations made are different. Both are characterised as friendly but Suzanne's interactions are interpreted as more anxious and insecure with Tara displaying a higher level of self-confidence. Janine is ever accommodating where Hannah and Kirsty are far more non-committal and reserved.

The categorisations made using 'objective' visible outcomes do not favour the accommodation of such differences at a more personal level. Variations at this level are surely central to any understanding of the way young people negotiate particular pathways during their life course and as such are crucial in any analysis of outcomes. If any exploration is to be made in relation to Runyan's interactional model of the life course it would seem justifiable to move away from any analysis and interpretation based solely upon 'official knowledge'. Therefore, the characterisations made were used to try to develop a way forward using the more personal and interactive process which also facilitated an opportunity better to understand the degree of influence and control young people might have in their lives. Operating purely at a seemingly deterministic, structural level obscured the individual subject and as such we appeared to have no way of knowing the young people and their lives.

One of the specific research questions posed asks how young people might influence their own lives. This issue prevails throughout this research therefore the concepts identified previously - efficacy and estrangement were used as a starting point for the second level of analysis. Bandura (1997, p3) maintains that most human behaviour is determined by many 'interacting factors', therefore, rather than being the sole determinants of what happens to them they are contributors. It is the level to which young people might contribute in their own lives that is at issue here. It was not my intention to explore in detail social cognitive functioning but rather to explore the relationships between behaviour, internal personal factors and the external environment (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, by making an interpretive analysis of the interactions of the young people, in the form of written-up first encounters, a means of further analysis opens up enabling the development of four alternative characterisation groupings. These groups were founded upon an interpretation of the characterisations made in relation to efficacious or estranged interactions which may reflect the way in which the internal personal factors of the young people interact with the environment and vice versa. Efficacious being where young people appeared to be taking control, and estranged where more passive and powerless interpretations could be made.

For example:

Positively active was used to code characterisations which might be interpreted as efficacious for example: *assertive, confident, tenacious, analytical*. The characterisations would require a level of

human agency being generally, although not exclusively, viewed in a positive light by those with whom young people might interact. Estrangement was more difficult to apply. If a young person is distant and indifferent are they nevertheless being active but not in an obvious way that might be easy to identify and viewed more favourably? Furthermore, is vulnerability a facet of estrangement or a consequence of structural inequality? These are extremely contentious issues, nevertheless, viewed pragmatically some means of coding needed to be decided upon.

Estranged was therefore used to code characterisations which might be interpreted to demonstrate a level of 'powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation', all of which were identified as facets of alienation which constitute the concept of psychological estrangement (Hammond, 1988). Therefore, *vulnerable, insecure, isolated, resigned*, etc. were coded as estranged. I did not code those characterisations made in relation to young people actively distancing themselves as estranged. If these are brought together: *indifferent, distant, resentful, remote, reserved* the interpretation made might be one of young people acting efficaciously in that they were taking control. Therefore, these were coded as 'actively cautious'; behaviour one might arguably expect when encountering a virtual stranger.

Actively cautious as a second order code would seem to convey the sense of agency I was aware of and that some of the young people exerted when we first met. To classify otherwise would be to misrepresent the obvious active participation of the young people. Participation does not necessarily need to be framed in the passively accepting mode often presented in much of the research literature. However, having identified those characterisations which could be interpreted as actively cautious a code needed to be developed which could be applied to those characterisations which portrayed a somewhat converse account. Many of the characterisations made demonstrated a more open and amenable level of interaction at first encounter.

Responsive was used to code those characterisations which reflected a certain willingness to be involved in the research and an amiable level of interaction, for example: *friendly, accommodating, popular*. In relation to efficacy and estrangement these interactions could be interpreted to be either that young people were choosing to act in a certain way or that they felt powerless to act differently. This coding more than any other reflects the way in which social systems and individuals interplay and how difficult an attempt to disentangle one from the other can be. Therefore, the code 'responsive'

was used but this does not denote an interpretation of either efficacy or estrangement, but merely aims to remain neutral.

Proceeding with caution

This second level coding was developed in order to search for characterisation groupings which might provide a rationale for telling particular stories. Therefore, a note of caution should be sounded in that such characterisations should not be used permanently to locate each young person. Furthermore, and to be expected, the codes did not provide an exclusive set of groupings, rather there was a degree of overlap. However, thirteen of the fourteen sets of characterisations made when coded did provide conclusive groupings in that three or more of the characterisations made did cluster within one specific code. For example, the characterisations developed from Natasha's first encounters were: *assertive, self-sufficient, confident, resentful, insecure*. It can be seen that *assertive, self-sufficient, confident*, can all be coded as **positively active**. Although all of the characterisations made for Natasha did not fit within the second level code it can be seen that the majority could be coded in this way. Where the majority, in this instance three out of the five, could be located this was used to position a young person within a particular grouping.

Sally was the one young person whose characterisations did not obviously fulfil the majority clustering requirement. Her characterisations of: *risk taking, confident, indifferent, self worth, sensitive* provided two which fell within the 'positively active' - *confident, self worth* and one which could be characterised as 'responsive' - *sensitive* and another as 'actively cautious' - *indifferent*. However, it might be argued that *risk taking* also demonstrated young people taking action in their own lives; this may not be viewed as positive by society but for Sally and the young people she socially interacted with this may have been the case. On this basis I would argue that Sally is most appropriately situated within the 'positively active' grouping although I accept the anomalies in her case.

While accepting any anomalies and proceeding with caution in relation to making any long term claims it nevertheless becomes evident that the characterisation groupings differ (fig. 14) markedly from the categorisations made earlier in fig. 12. When locating young people together in this way, in order to select which stories to tell in detail, it can be seen that the females categorised in group one (fig. 13)

are not all situated together within the characterisations groupings. Their 'objective' 'outcomes' may appear similar yet their individual characterisations differ. Also, the males are still grouped together but females also comprise this group suggesting again that a difference exists when we move beyond identifying 'objective' outcomes. Evident is arguably a different configuration in terms of evaluating possible outcomes and life course trajectories. Young people may have similar or indeed the same observable outcomes, however, by taking a more interactive and interpretive method of analysis the diversity of their pathways may become more visible. Therefore in the present research I used the characterisations to select which young people's stories to tell, selecting one from each grouping.

Figure 14: Characterisation groupings developed for young people included in the final phase

Characterisation Groupings	
<p>positively active</p> <p>Beth Natasha Tara Rebecca</p>	<p><i>caring and committed, tenacious, assertive, self-sufficient, confident, mature, analytical, strongly independent, angrily frustrated</i></p>
<p>actively cautious</p> <p>Hannah Kirsty</p>	<p><i>unconcerned, cautious resentful, remote, indifferent, reserved, discerning</i></p>
<p>estranged</p> <p>Peter James Shaun Emma Lindsay</p>	<p><i>vulnerable, insecure, thankfully appreciative, passively accepting, dependent, unconnected, abandoned, unquestioning, distressed, powerfully powerless, resigned, isolated, passive</i></p>
<p>responsive</p> <p>Suzanne Janine</p>	<p><i>friendly, sensitive, values appearances, accommodating, popular, discrete</i></p>

Developing a way of accommodating diversity

The present research is predominantly a qualitative piece of research with the emphasis on interpretation and therefore not only does the selection process of characterisations support that philosophical position; it has a further persuasive justification. In terms of reflexivity I as the researcher would have been uneasy with the objective categorising of young people. I was aware of the diversity which existed among the young people in terms of being active in their lives and this did not at a perceptual level correlate with 'objective' outcomes. Using the process of developing characterisations seems better to reflect the diversity of lives across the range of structural 'objective' outcomes, offering an alternative means of analysing and exploring the lives of young people. I have acknowledged the limitations of this approach but nevertheless feel I have justified the value of pursuing an alternative line of enquiry.

Grouping the young people in relation to the characterisations made, and subsequently using the concepts of efficacy and estrangement as second order codes, enables the exploration of control. I have continually identified how the outcomes of young people are obscured by or beneath the structural and social constraints they experience. By drawing on social learning theory it may be that young people are conceivably placed within a behavioural framework where the deterministic explanation transcends. However, by weaving into the analysis an exploration of control a more detailed appreciation of this complex, yet overlooked issue, may be accessed. Outcomes for young people are all too often found to be less positive than was hoped. By exploring the pathways taken and the influence they have within their own lives, a way forward in terms of a wider accommodation of the young people; their impact and influence may be offered.

Young people have been characterised into four groupings: *positively active*, *actively cautious*, *estranged* and *responsive*. The intention is that telling one young person's story from each grouping will provide insight not only into the complexity of their lives but will also enable a more detailed consideration of the differing levels of active influence young people might exert in their lives. Simply using, for example, dependent children as a means of categorising young people does not enable any accommodation of the differing situational and motivational influences surrounding parenthood. By measuring outcomes differently the outcome of parenthood becomes less of a

defining issue and the interactions and interpretations made both by the young person and the researcher move centre stage. For instance, the 'objective' outcome of parenthood is not the issue, but what it might mean on a range of personal, ideological and conceptual levels could be vital in understanding the pathways of young people.

Chapter Eight

Using young people's 'stories' to explore outcomes

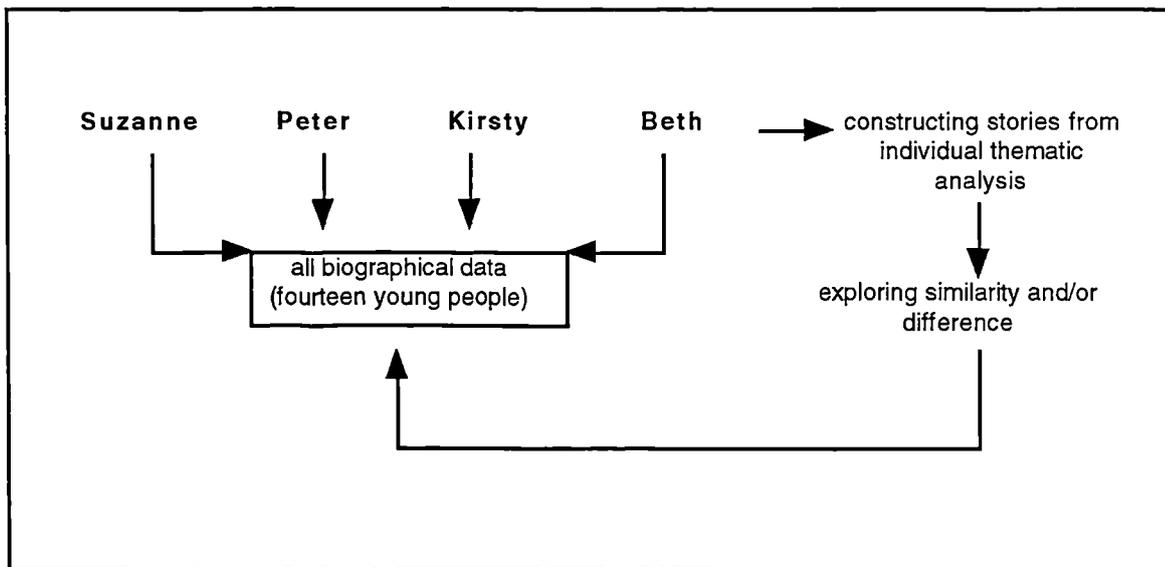
Biographical data analysis

In this chapter I will tell the first of four 'stories' which were constructed from field notes and taped interviews. Here then is the culmination of the present research where the unique life experiences of young people are to be seen as a whole, within the obvious limitations of the research, offering an alternative view of outcomes. The research aimed to make visible the particular issues, events and experiences concerning individual young people. Therefore the analysis of the biographical data reflects the view that that 'there is no definitive way to do qualitative analysis' (Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999, p220). Rather qualitative analysis can be adapted to meet particular research aspirations. In line with these aspirations, where an understanding of individual experience was sought after; five different sets of data were created (fig. 15). Four individual data sets pertaining to: Suzanne, Peter, Kirsty and Beth; one young person from each of the previously identified characterisation groupings, were compiled. One large data set, where all biographical data were stored, was also created in order that emergent themes from individual stories could be explored across lives.

When beginning to analyse the wealth of biographical data, generated throughout the two years of fieldwork, it was necessary to develop a systematic means of analysing the data. However, a thematic coding system across lives was not sought as this may have operated to obscure an appreciation of the more unique individuality of each young persons' experience. Therefore the four sets of biographical data were analysed separately with no attempt to look for similarity or difference; each data set was to stand alone. Only after this accommodation of individual experience had been made, by analysing each individual data set separately and constructing individual stories, was an attempt to look for similarity or difference within the accounts of other young people taking part in the biographical phase, undertaken. As shown in figure 15 over leaf the biographical data of the four

young people was the primary focus of the analysis with the much larger data set positioned in a subordinate position below the individual sets of data. In this positioning there is no implication that one young person's biographical data is more or less important but rather an emphasis on starting from an idiographic analysis moving toward the accommodation of a level of shared experience.

Figure 15 : Five different data sets



Each of the four individual data sets were initially analysed using NUD.IST, (for Non-numerical, Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing) a computerised qualitative data analysis package. Using NUD.IST enabled extensive qualitative data to be stored, organised and coded (see for example, Richards and Richards, 1994). At the first stage of analysis each individual data set was primarily read and re-read aiming to code in detail each aspect of the data. This then developed into the linking together of data where connections could be made and/or where higher order themes might emerge. The purpose of this first stage of the analysis was to operate in line with Tesch's (1991, 1990) 'descriptive/interpretive' orientation in qualitative research which works toward providing thorough descriptions and interpretations of social phenomena and includes the meaning to those who experience such phenomena.

The ethnographic stories presented in the latter part of the thesis were constructed from the emergent analysis of the individual biographical data sets. The headings used to construct the stories are based upon the emergent coded analysis of the data. Yet, such an account of how the stories emanated must be situated within the character of ethnographic research where a mode of writing is

'implicated in the product' (Rachel, 1996, p114). The hope was to transfer experience into writing, where months of research is condensed into only a few pages. My intent when drawing upon the biographical data was to be systematic and rigorous while at the same time capturing and presenting stories which endeavoured to be both 'credible' and 'dependable' (Guba, 1981) but remained recognisable as an account of the young person's life story.

Once constructed the ethnographic stories; based upon a distinctive personal context, both past and present, are then used to explore the interactional process of the life course, life course trajectories, and the influence the young person might have had upon them. This alternative view takes account of the social context while at the same time not losing sight of the individual young person. However, once the story has been constructed and presented it is used to explore similarity and difference within the lives of all those young people participating in the biographical phase of the research. Thus the ethnographic stories constructed from the biographical data primarily form the 'descriptive' aspect of Tesch's orientation, with the 'interpretive' element taking place once the story has been constructed.

The first story to be told is Suzanne's. Both Suzanne and Janine were characterised in the *responsive* grouping with Suzanne's first encounter being interpreted as: *friendly, sensitive, anxious, vulnerable* and *discerning*. In her story and the analysis that follows it becomes evident that life course trajectories can be linked to past experiences, maintaining and influencing the then present life course interactions of the young person. Also apparent in her story is the way in which ideological accounts can impact upon the individual, leaving them not only with a set of expectations but also with a deluge of obligations and responsibilities .

Suzanne's Story

I visited Suzanne for just over a year, during that year I saw her seven times; this being on average every 7 - 8 weeks. These visits were very easy to arrange. On only one occasion was I unable to make contact with her - my letter had arrived while Suzanne and her family were on holiday over the summer. Suzanne was 16 years old when we first met and was 'living with' Wayne with whom she

had a continuing relationship. She had recently given birth to their second child. The term 'living with' was Suzanne's. The tenancy of the house they shared was actually in her name and therefore technically Wayne lived with Suzanne. At our first meeting she seemed shy and sensitive; almost fragile. These impressions of Suzanne did not really change yet they developed into a much wider appreciation of her strength and her deep sense of responsibility.

My first visit was somewhat of a disaster clearly demonstrating the nature of this research. I had written to Suzanne to arrange a visit, after she had indicated in her 'leaving care' interview that she could be contacted regarding further research. I duly sent Suzanne a brief overview of the research suggesting a time when I might call, I also gave a number where I could be contacted if she wished to rearrange the meeting. When I arrived Suzanne had friends round; they had called to see the new baby. Suzanne was very distressed by the fact that she had forgotten our meeting. She invited me in and apologised at length. For my part I was deeply embarrassed, I had intruded at such an obviously private time. It would be easy and more comfortable to omit such an awkward moment; yet it gives insight into the way in which the research was intrusive. I entered young people's lives and at times this may not have been convenient even though the whole gamut of ethical rhetoric had been served; procedures and protocols followed. In terms of her story the telling of this first meeting is vital as it provides tangible insight into Suzanne the person.

Her embarrassment and eagerness to rearrange my visit were evident, she was concerned that I had travelled a distance for no reason and insisted that my intrusion was not a problem. Suzanne's manner was one of concern and politeness, the word polite sounds patronising - it is not meant to be so, it merely states the impression I was left with. (field notes)

Throughout the research I have enjoyed visiting Suzanne, she seemed eager and relaxed to talk at length. The fact that I 'enjoyed' visiting Suzanne should not go unnoticed - she was hospitable and receptive, the gratitude I feel toward her may be influences the way I structure her story. I was, and maybe still am, concerned that our conversations often focused on the negative but this was her choice. My efforts gently to move the conversation to another *area of interest* were often not successful and therefore I recognise that she selected the conversation, not I, and that was how it should have been. Suzanne presented herself in different ways throughout my visits. With the

children she was patient and attentive but later she might usher them to Wayne (her partner) in a brusque and rather domineering way. Not only these instances but many others have left me feeling that she appeared, and may have been, fragile but there existed a strength not seen when first encountered.

Suzanne lived in a quiet cul-de-sac on the outskirts of town in a two bedroomed council house with gardens for the children to play in. The houses around had well kept gardens and the whole atmosphere was pleasant and cheerful. Whenever I visited Suzanne had everything under control; the children were content either watching a video or playing on the floor and the house was always tidy, warm and welcoming.

On the majority of visits Suzanne's 'boyfriend' Wayne was there but he either discreetly took the children out or moved to another room in order that Suzanne and I might have our conversation in private. Wayne was unemployed; Suzanne spoke of his attempts to find work and the frustration he experienced when he was unable to do so. This frustration was evident for both Suzanne and Wayne due to the financial pressures placed upon their lives and their relationship. However, on most occasions when I visited, if he was there, Wayne either shared or took over the care of the children with Suzanne saying a number of times that he was a *'good father'*. Yet, even though Wayne spent extended periods 'living with' Suzanne he had on several occasions moved out to stay with friends. Suzanne saw this as primarily her *'fault'* relating this to her *'moods'* which she believed were a consequence of her emotional problems related to her past. She spoke of times when her behaviour toward Wayne had been extreme: *'People don't know what I do to Wayne he's like one of them battered wives.'*

However, Suzanne was close to Wayne depending on him not only for practical help with the children but for emotional support and guidance. Suzanne did not seek contact with the Leaving Care Scheme; her keyworker calling infrequently. She had very few friends or other sources of social or emotional support making it all the more difficult when Wayne decided to leave. In order to try to know Suzanne's way of accounting for current events it is necessary to place her story in context by telling of her past experiences.

Understanding the past

Suzanne became 'looked after' when she was thirteen, she had been living with her mum and step father. Her words are compelling but they do not convey the emotion; the sense of disappointment and injury which was evident when she spoke of this time in her life.

Int: Did you feel able to talk to people about what had happened?

Suzanne: You can't really tell anybody about it, it's too complicated. My stepfather he hit me and interfered with me for about a year, you don't like to talk about it. I told my sister that it was happening to me and she went and told her teacher that he was doing it to her. I don't think he was but I think she had heard him and was frightened. I was examined and they knew it was true but the police seemed more interested in the drugs bust than what he'd done to me. They were sympathetic about that but they said there was no evidence. (taped interview)

She went on to tell me that she was, 'really, really angry that he didn't get prosecuted for it, they were more interested in the drugs charge - I didn't matter. But it's me that's unhappy - it wrecked my life.' (field notes)

The story of Suzanne presented here is often constructed around or located within the context of the physical and sexual abuse she suffered, reflecting the way in which these issues were an integral part of Suzanne's life. Not prosecuting her step father had left her feeling angry and passed over; somehow she was not important. When she says that it 'wrecked her life' this was not simply a dramatic statement made for effect; Suzanne's current problems were often associated with the past and therefore she felt justified in making this assertion.

Her relationship with her mum was pervaded by the abuse she had been subjected to, showing the lasting effects of this terrible experience.

'I made hints and said things that made her know, she just ignored it. She knew it was happening but she was at bingo all the time - she just didn't give a fuck.' I've never

heard Suzanne swear before and it surprised me, and I think her also because she laughed. We chatted about other less intrusive things but later she said that her mum comes round very occasionally, 'I don't think of her as my mum - you can't just not believe your daughter.' (field notes)

Her estrangement from her mum and her family prevailed leaving her with very little social or emotional support. This does imply that her mum would have been an effective source of support; Suzanne's later comment suggests that this most probably would not have been the case. When asked if her mum might help with the children she replied, '*she's not that sort of mum.*' However, regardless of the support her mum might have been able to offer, Suzanne was without parental support when social policy is seen to be founded upon the assumption that it is consistently available for those teenagers who live away from home (Jones, 1995).

As a result of the child protection investigation Suzanne was found an emergency placement for a week before being placed in what was thought to be a more permanent foster home. Suzanne felt this was a poor choice for her; '*I didn't get on with her, she was too old.*' This foster placement lasted two months, Suzanne was placed with another foster family staying there for almost two years. This placement had aspects that were favourable and others that were far from the ideal solution for a vulnerable child who had been sexually and physically abused within her family and was now alone. I use the word alone to convey the sense of isolation she experienced in relation to her family. Her comments often conveyed a sense of disappointment and at times relief at the separation from her family:

Suzanne: I could have been fostered with them (siblings) but well there were three sisters sharing a room at home an they would always make a noise. Mum would shout up go to sleep an be quiet. I would always get blamed an she'd give us a crack. I hated em really then and I was glad to be on me own.' (taped interview)

Suzanne spoke today of being the only one in her family to try to make something of herself. This was said with a sense of both pride and disappointment. She has told me a couple of times now that her family is 'scruffy' this seems a source of real and continual concern for Suzanne. (field notes)

Suzanne was isolated from her family not only in terms of physical separation but also in a psychological sense located within a conscious need to avoid the stigma of 'scruffy' which she was so acutely aware of. This relief in being able to avoid the stigma therefore seemed to influence her adjustment to the foster placement.

Suzanne talked about her time with her second foster parents and the reaction of people at school, 'Well - they used to say why are you in care you must have been bad but I used to say it was due to drugs in me family. But it wasn't that bad I weren't called a scruff anymore I went to school with nice clothes - I was looked after and fed properly, there was always a cooked meal on the table when we came home.' (field notes)

At her second foster placement things were different, she was important and cared for but this care was not without serious difficulties. Suzanne told of her foster mum being 'possessive' and at times unkind, and of having no one to talk to. She was referred to a psychologist who began to broach the cause of many of Suzanne's concerns; that of the sexual abuse she had suffered. However, her foster mum discouraged this apparent intrusive contact with Suzanne reluctantly ceasing to attend the sessions. I asked Suzanne if she felt able to speak to her social worker about the tension between her foster mum's needs and her own :

Suzanne: Couldn't talk to her about it cause they thought she was a top foster carer so you couldn't say nowt. Nobody would ever believe me. When the social worker would come she (foster mum) would put her arm around me so snide. She couldn't stand the sight of someone else having me. I had to wear the clothes she liked all brown and green with loafers on me feet - I looked like a real 'dag'.

Int: So did you talk to anyone about this?

Suzanne: No I just bottled everything up and it just came out in anger. (taped interview)

Suzanne's account clearly demonstrates how vulnerable and powerless young people 'in care' can feel being left with no alternative but to 'bottle everything up'. Her account is one which shows how easy it can be to overlook and not to hear the concerns of young people who are 'looked after'. The reputation of the foster carer seemed to take precedence with Suzanne being an object of concern rather than participating in her own life.

Coping with the past and having children

Suzanne entered a relationship with Wayne who was considerably older and who had been married previously. Her relationship with Wayne was often turbulent yet he seemed to be fairly constant - someone who was there. While at the third foster placement she became pregnant with their first child this was not planned and was preceded by a very difficult period.

Suzanne: I cut my wrists a couple of times but I told nobody - I did it on my 15th birthday, I'd done it before when I was about 14.

Int: Was your social worker contacted.

Suzanne : Ye. I nearly went into a psychiatric hospital before I had Lee (her first child) I was about 14.

Int: Was this before you met Wayne?

Suzanne: Ye. I was just depressed and I wasn't eating right not anorexic or anything. I told my psychologist that I wanted to kill myself but my foster mum talked her out of me going. I left there and went to new foster carers (the walls were damp and the house dirty) and then Wayne was going to leave me - he'd lost his job and his car and everything. I just couldn't cope with anything else going wrong in my life. This was before I had the children, I was about 15 but I got in such a state I took an overdose - paracetamol. I went into hospital I took an overdose again. I went into hospital and they did a stomach pump, I was attached to heart monitors and all that. I saw a

psychiatrist who wanted to put me in the psychiatric hospital I told her that I hated myself and that I wanted to die. My social worker and foster parents they didn't come and visit me cause they said it was self inflicted. Wayne used to come cause he knew what a state I was in. I promised not to do it again. (taped interview)

Suzanne was referred again to a psychologist, however, once again this professional help did not continue and she was left to face the consequences of her past without specialist support. Her story thus far shows how the abuse she suffered permeated her life. Her unhappiness was present throughout my contact with her. With Wayne's assistance she sought further help from a women's support group. The group met in the next town; Suzanne could not travel such a distance on a regular basis with two small children so she stopped going to meetings. On another occasion Suzanne had contacted a TV programme in the hope that she might gain some help. This help was not forthcoming; once again she was left to cope without any additional support.

Suzanne's telling of the time surrounding her first pregnancy, while at her third foster placement, does little to instil faith in the corporate parent. She did not remember having any conversations informing her of the various forms of contraception available, nor was the environment one which seemed to have encouraged her to take control or make choices.

Int: When did you become pregnant with Lee?

Suzanne : Well, after I had left hospital they rang up and asked me to go back and they told me I was pregnant. I was really upset cause I might have hurt the baby but they said it was OK but I still feel bad about that. Wayne wasn't happy cause I was so young but I was alright. I told my social worker I was pregnant and I told my foster mum. There were two other girls my age there and they got pregnant after me. One of them was 13 when she got pregnant, the other was 17 and she was jealous of me.

Int: Did anyone talk to you about contraception?

Suzanne: I don't like the pill it makes you plump but nobody sat you down and talked about things like that. (taped interview)

Having children was the 'norm' for the young women placed in this foster home. It would be unfounded to imply that the foster home might have been the prime reason for these young women becoming pregnant. However, Suzanne's lack of contraceptive advice and the subsequent early pregnancies of the other young women placed there provides enough justification for there to be cause for concern.

Leaving Care

Often presented in the leaving care literature is the notion of young people being prepared for living independently - of a distinct process. There seems little evidence of a leaving care process in Suzanne's story. She had been placed in 'care' to be protected from her abusive step father. Her expectations were that she would be somewhere 'better' and as previously shown, her second foster parents provided ample material support but this placement broke down. Suzanne was very disappointed with her next placement; once again there was an awareness that her social worker fundamentally failed her. Suzanne spoke of the time just after having given birth to her first son.

Suzanne: I had him while I was in foster care. It was because of that that I lived with Wayne for a month when I wasn't supposed to. It was dreadful at the foster carers, it was unhygienic, you shouldn't have had to keep a baby there. There was damp on the walls it was awful and Wayne knew I didn't like it there.'

Int: Did your social worker know?

Suzanne: Ye she knew and I think she was ashamed cause she knew it wasn't right, she just turned a blind eye. I never had a bath there cause it was dirty - just once after Lee was born because I had to you know because of having Lee. I was brought up as a scruffy person but not like that, there was damp seeping through the walls in the bedroom. (taped interview)

Suzanne's story is on the surface one of rescue, she was taken from a home where she was not protected to a place of safety where her needs would be cared for and things would be better. She

was 'safer' and in the second foster home her material needs were met yet her emotional needs seem to have been, if not ignored, side tracked with the needs of her foster carer being paramount. At the next foster home Suzanne said that they were '*pleasant people*' but she felt let down, the foster home fell far below her expectations with her retaining an acute awareness that she deserved better. Suzanne's dissatisfaction with the foster home prompted her to leave at sixteen moving in with Wayne on a temporary basis. This move was not supported by her foster carer or her social worker.

'I was on a care order but I went to court in the summer and it was dropped. I was living with Wayne for a while but that got us into trouble. Me foster carers and social worker, they said I was too young an that.' (taped interview)

Her account shows how her voice may have yet again been left unheard. How would this amenable, extremely sensitive young woman explain that she simply thought the house was unhygienic and she did not feel able to keep her infant son there? A few weeks later Suzanne went to the Housing Panel. This was the formal meeting where young people's housing needs were assessed, her social worker and her keyworker from the leaving care scheme were also present as were representatives from the Housing Department.

'It was OK my social worker went with me - they were nice but I started crying. I started to tell them where I didn't want to live and why and I just got upset.' Suzanne said that she was encouraged to say what she wanted but that she, nevertheless, felt uneasy. *'But they got me this place and it couldn't be better, it's really nice here. The house is big enough with lots of locks and I feel safe and there's a garden for them to play in I like it here it's nice and quiet.'* (field notes)

Suzanne's experience was a very positive one, she did have people there she was familiar with and she was able to speak for herself. Suzanne's tenancy was one that she was happy with and where she subsequently felt that she had her '*own life*' to lead, except, when you hear her tell of this time you are left sensing the sheer vulnerability and isolation of her position. She was sixteen years old with a small baby dependent upon her; in a room with professionals who held the power to determine her future.

Coping with independence

The value of Suzanne's independence was tangible when you talked with her, conveying a distinct belief in self determination, *'I'm me own person now, I don't have to answer to anyone else..... I have to make me own life and do what's best.'* It might be questionable whether any individual is able to exercise real self determination or live independently. For Suzanne there were distinct characteristics to her independence and subsequent coping. As Suzanne's story unfolded it became clear that her independence was inexorably linked with responsibility. Indeed Suzanne's independence brought with it a home and two small children. Often this responsibility weighed heavily upon her, seeming to be very much affected by the appraisals others might make.

Taking the children into town is a great problem, not only is it difficult with the buggy and the older child - these are physical difficulties but Suzanne seems to have another hurdle which relates to the view of onlookers. Her words were spoken with a degree of resentment: 'They (other people) think she looks young to have those two kids an I bet she's a single mum.' (field notes)

Suzanne spoke to me about something that I am becoming increasingly aware of - she said that as a 'young mum' she feels that she is being watched. She spoke of going to the doctor's telling him that she was depressed and that she had been angry with Wayne (her partner) and had hit him, the doctor instantly asked her if she had hit Lee. Suzanne was indignant and told me that she does not know of any 'young mums' who hurt their children so why is it assumed that they do. (field notes)

Suzanne's conversations often conveyed a pressing feeling of surveillance; a sense of being watched and a distinct fear of being judged unfavourably. This perceived surveillance severely effected her ability to seek help coping with any problems that might arise. In our conversations I asked if she might talk to her keyworker at the Scheme or her former social worker about her emotional problems her reply was telling yet maybe not unexpected, *'I can't talk to them, I have to play happy families, I have to put away all my problems.'* She referred this comment to her being a young mum and that she had to make sure that she was beyond reproach.

One instance, which occurred toward the end of my research contact, clearly illustrated the presence and pressure of Suzanne's perceived surveillance. Her children were very fair skinned and boisterous, aged one and two years at that time. While I was with Suzanne the children were as usual playing together tumbling around on the floor. They subsequently fell against the door with the youngest bruising his forehead. Suzanne became agitated telling me that she was very frightened when the children bumped themselves, *'people will think that I'm not a good mum, that I don't care for them properly.'* This seemed an improbable suggestion to me, not least because I could not imagine anyone being able adequately to avoid the inevitable outcome of two toddlers' playfulness. In addition I was entirely aware of the effort Suzanne invested in caring for her children. It might be that her concern was no different than what any parent might experience if their child injures themselves. But on reflection was she right to be so concerned and was her anxiety more acute because of her past and her interactions in the present? She never openly spoke of being afraid a social worker might 'take' her children but it would be hard to fail to make such a connection when confronted with her acute anxiety.

However, coping with independence and the responsibility this entailed for Suzanne was compounded by this added pressure of perceived surveillance and her accountability. Her need to ensure her children were not only well cared for but were seen to be so must have been hard to achieve. When I again asked if she had been receiving support from the Leaving Care Scheme her answer was not unpredictable knowing how sensitive she was to her position, *'I'm independent and I don't need their help.'* However another time she said that she would have appreciated someone to talk to or to help her cope. When I asked if she felt able to contact the Leaving Care Scheme she replied, *'They don't ring me so I don't ring them. I know they are supposed to help me but I don't think I should have to keep asking, if I deserve it they should offer'* Her reluctance to seek support from the Leaving Care Scheme was not coincidental or surprising; to seek assistance would be to admit that she was unable to cope but to be offered support which it has been decided you are *'deserving'* of is intrinsically different.

Suzanne was seventeen when the research came to an end and it might be that on the surface she was coping well, the children were very well cared for and the house was always presented as an idealised haven. I find that my field notes reflected this impressive facade Suzanne had created yet

she had few friends and except for Wayne was in many respects alone with two very small children. Adding to this isolation was the emotional isolation and distress she often experienced relating to her past. It might be hoped or even expected that Suzanne would receive support because, as she says, she 'deserves it'. This was not her experience and therefore when I left Suzanne she was still coping on her own with the assistance of Wayne; when she felt able to accept his support, and when he was there to give it.

Outcomes, illusions and hidden anxiety

In terms of 'objective' outcomes Suzanne was at the extreme end of those young people experiencing early parenthood. She was seventeen when the research closed and had two dependent children. However, Suzanne was coping well; she was able to maintain secure accommodation, the children were well cared for and she managed to comply with the Scheme 'independence model' in that she required minimal support. A cursory look might suggest that Suzanne's experience was one of success; she was rescued from an abusive environment, managing to make the transition from young person in 'care' to independent adult status. Suzanne's story exposes the superficial nature of such an evaluation of outcomes. Not only does such an objective evaluation of outcomes leave unobserved the ways in which the corporate parent may have failed to include and therefore listen to Suzanne. Revealed in her story is a complex interplay between context both individual, historical and social and the way in which this impacts upon the young person which is neither considered or relevant when making an objective evaluation. In the remaining part of this chapter I will incorporate the accounts of other young people in order to explore further some of the emergent issues in Suzanne's story.

Starting points and the past: searching for resolution

In chapter two reference was made to the difficulties of assessing outcomes - do we measure some identified final outcome or is this issue far more complex and therefore summative evaluations should be viewed with a degree of skepticism. In addition to this difficulty there was the complicated problem of evaluating effectiveness when a range of factors may influence outcomes. Biehal et al (1995)

emphasised the diversity of factors influencing outcomes and the difficulties which prevail when attempting to 'take account of individual histories and circumstances' (p279). Each of the factors they mention is important but maybe the one which comes through and has the strongest relevance to Suzanne's story is that of personal *starting point*.

Defining a starting point is highly problematic. Was it when Suzanne was taken into care, was it when her step father first sexually assaulted her or was it even further back than that - when her mum separated from her biological father? The past is not something which can be removed at convenient intervals throughout our lives so that we can conveniently start anew, nor is it easily packaged in order to classify in terms of good or bad. Elder's point on *trajectories*, raised in chapter two, has importance here where he argues that a particular trajectory has embedded in it *linked states* and that a *change in state thus marks a transition - a transition from one job to another for example*. Therefore, where Elder uses the example of linked jobs across a work history would it not seem justified to apply this to linking traumatic events across a family history. If this is the case there would be a need seriously to consider the shaping effects of the continuous linking of such events and how they influence the developmental pathways and trajectories of young people. The acceptance of linked states and the effect on trajectories and developmental pathways makes a case for the necessity to try both to assess and understand the starting points of young people when they first become 'looked after'. However, when considering the notion of starting points I would emphasise the plurality of the term - a young person will enter care with a whole range of starting points: educational, personal relations, past experiences.

The difficulty with measuring a starting point is that it may fail to accommodate the way in which the past continually constructs and imposes itself upon the present by creating and maintaining life course trajectories. Suzanne felt very strongly the stigma associated with being 'scruffy', coming from a family where she experienced poverty and disadvantage in relation to those around her. This past links itself into the present and is seen when Suzanne talks of, and is engaged in, ensuring her children do not have similar experiences. Thus the past has created a pathway for Suzanne in that she embarked upon saving her children from her past and providing them with a better future. Thus her starting point in relation to her family created a life course trajectory for Suzanne.

However, the past does not only create pathways it can continue to maintain them. The suffering caused at the hands of her sexually abusive step father was immense not only in terms of past trauma but the blame she harboured toward her mother and the subsequent isolation from her family. For Suzanne the past was ever present and her life was fraught with unresolved issues, some of which may be framed as starting points when she entered care. Nevertheless, adopting a summative line when either evaluating the past or the present is accepted to be highly problematic. Yet, one starting point for Suzanne in terms of being 'looked after' was unquestionably that of a traumatised child who had suffered sexual abuse.

There is strong research evidence which links physical and sexual abuse in childhood with a future propensity to engage in self harming behaviour (Gellis, 1980, Carroll, Schaffer, Spensley and Abramowitz, 1981, Livingstone, 1991). Therefore, self harming behaviour was a known possible outcome for those who had experienced one of Suzanne's starting point. Suzanne inflicted terrible harm upon herself and research evidence would suggest this was a consequence of the severe traumatic experiences in her past. Nevertheless, the response to her obvious distress was somehow to blame Suzanne and to adopt the 'self inflicted' position. Both her social worker and foster parent took the view that Suzanne had inflicted this harm upon herself and should therefore be offered no sympathy in order that she be discouraged from further attempts. There appeared to be very little accommodation of her starting point in this response.

Self harming was a feature for a number of young people participating in the biographical phase. Therefore, issues of possible causes, the nature of self harm and where possible the response young people experienced will be explored. Initially within the analysis there seemed to be a continuum of intensity with some young people hurting themselves more often and more severely. Suzanne spoke of specific times in her life when the pressure had become too much to cope with, resulting in occasional desperate acts. For Emma it was very different she hurt herself on almost a weekly, sometimes daily, basis. She used drugs in unsuccessful suicide attempts and 'cut up' which was the term used by young people for taking razor blades or other sharp implements to cut various parts of their bodies. Sexual abuse was spoken of in hushed tones by workers and other young people close to Emma. This abuse was known to be related to why she entered care but, as with Suzanne, no formal charges had been made. Emma faced the present with an unresolved, terrible half known, half hidden secret. The Scheme workers and her social worker searched for ever more

creative ways of helping Emma find some kind of resolution with her past; they had little success.

I did on one occasion take Emma to the casualty department at the local hospital. She had cut herself the previous evening and the gash clearly needed attention. The behaviour of both Emma and staff at the casualty department could be likened to a rather droll piece of theatre except that this was not a performance it was for real.

As Emma and I entered the casualty department the receptionist glanced at Emma then at a nurse who was passing and a knowing look passed between them. The receptionist obviously knew Emma but wanted to converse through me - I referred the receptionist to Emma who answered in a very deferential and apologetic manner. She told me that some of the staff were Ok with her but that others were 'right bitches'. We sat down to wait; the overt exchange of glances continued between staff, I felt decidedly uncomfortable and can only imagine how Emma must have felt. One nurse walked past and smiled at Emma we both returned this readily, by this time we were feeling pretty dire. Two seconds later Emma leaned toward me and said she would be Ok and that I could go if I wanted to. I was very unsure - should I leave her there or should I insist on staying. I looked at Emma, my presence here was adding to her humiliation. (field notes)

I left Emma in that hostile place where her injuries were obviously viewed in the same way as Suzanne's; as self inflicted with hardly any recognition that her injuries were inflicted in her past and the day's lacerations were just manifestations of past injuries. Emma's injuries were there for all to see but on that occasion she received neither care nor sensitivity. This lack of concern was not evident in her contact with either her social worker or the Leaving Care Scheme. Her social worker was consistent in her efforts to access services for Emma and the Scheme invested considerable time and effort yet there was a real lack of solutions to Emma's difficulties. I asked a Scheme worker what he felt might happen to Emma after one particularly severe episode of Emma 'cutting up' and his reply unnerved me, 'she's going to die!' This was not said maliciously or meant to be cruel he was just being honest and expressing his belief that Emma's needs were too great to be resolved in a positive way.

Emma's starting point had been outwardly similar to Suzanne's yet it seemed that her continuing trajectory and predicted outcome was to be tragic. However, it is dangerous making an assumption that Emma's distress is in some way more acute than Suzanne's. Emma's distress was so visible and thus unavoidable. Suzanne was more successful in presenting a proficient facade and thus her distress may have been in some way minimised.

Sally's self harming was almost completely hidden from view. A friend of Sally's mentioned that Sally 'cut' herself. At first Sally was reluctant to talk but when urged by her friend she talked of cutting her arms on approximately twenty occasions. Her injuries were concealed and rather than being solely related to the past there was, at that time, the added strain of coping with the present. She had been taken into care after making allegations of abuse against her father. Sally was unhappy with the residential placement and deeply troubled by the effects her allegations were having not only on herself but also her family.

'Just pressure building up; you take it out on yourself.'

'I used to keep all me problems to myself.'

Sally said she hurt herself in this way about twenty times. I asked if teachers or carers knew, 'no I kept me sleeves rolled down. Sally's friend supported this saying that she was one of the few people that knew. (field notes)

Sally, as with Suzanne, keeps things 'bottled up' and while her account is seemingly different there is a certain similarity in that she too had a past with abuse somewhere in the background, therefore, the idea of traumatic family history, where developmental pathways and social trajectories are influenced, has relevance. The difference which appears most obvious is one of visibility. Emma's distress, and to an extent Suzanne's, was visible and Sally's was concealed. My contact with Sally and her relationships at the Scheme would suggest that people were not aware of her self harming or would even conceive that she might commit such an act. Added to the need to appreciate the way in which the past can shape future developmental pathways and trajectories, is the way in which such ominous and distressing outcomes can be omitted from a more formal evaluation. Such an omission may have serious implications both in relation to any evaluation of effectiveness but most importantly upon the young people where their lives are linked into such a concealed and distressing trajectory.

The concept of a starting point may be useful in that it holds the potential for past trauma and its possible effects to be assessed. However, there is sparse evidence in either Suzanne's story or indeed in the experiences of the other young people participating in the biographical phase of the research to suggest that any concerted effort was made to help young people if not resolve the past then at least avoid the potential outcome of self harming in the present. Furthermore, what may need to be acknowledged is the extent of self injury being inflicted and the way this links to their past and the impact this may have on future trajectories and developmental pathways. I mentioned earlier a continuum in terms of the extent to which young people self harmed. Maybe visibility is, if not more disturbing, then surely of equal importance. Of the fourteen young people participating in the biographical research six told of times when they had self harmed, for the majority this related to distress over past events which continually invaded their present lives. Of these six young people, James and Sally concealed their injuries trying to keep to themselves the extent and nature of their self harm. Suzanne and Tara spoke to me about these difficult times in their lives but were unwilling to seek assistance from Leaving Care Scheme workers. Lindsay talked about her injuries and often sought help from the Scheme workers which made her distress seem even more visible. For Emma her injuries were ever present and could not fail to be known. Therefore, in this study young people can be located along a continuum in terms of self harm and visibility with some injuries remaining hidden and others so overt and public they are disturbing to those they come into contact with.

However, visibility did not seem to determine the response young people experienced from those around them. Spandler (1996) suggests that there are two distinct yet related extreme reactions to young people who attempt suicide or repeatedly self harm. At one extreme there is 'therapeutic pessimism' a view that such young people can not be helped. The second extreme is that of 'minimising the significance of the young person's self harm so that it is not taken seriously or belittled. Ignore it and it'll go away, (Spandler, 1996, p13). Spandler states that there is little theoretical justification for such a position, furthermore, Hawton and Catalon (1987) suggest that the repetition of suicide attempts may subsequently increase the possibility of the young person ultimately dying from suicide. This second position would seem to be the one that both the social worker and foster carer adopted regarding Suzanne. Lindsay, one of the six young people who were known to self harm also experience the minimising approach from those around her. For Emma the responses appear to have been mixed ranging from the minimising position adopted by the nursing staff in the casualty department to the 'therapeutic pessimism' of the Scheme worker. But what of Sally and James and

any other young people who may conceal their hurt? The pragmatic view might be that they achieved a level of damage limitation - they were at least spared the added blow of either having their behaviour minimised or being seen as somewhat of a lost cause.

What seems most important here is two fold. In the first instance - in this small study almost half of the young people were found to self harm, how many other young people conceal their injuries and how does this impact upon their developmental pathways and life course trajectories? Secondly, considering the possible extent of this kind of behaviour and existing supporting research evidence where young people with such starting points have been found to have a propensity to engage in self harming behaviour, should some more appropriate and sensitive response not be found? This response would need to provide better support for young people who might ultimately engage in such desperate acts. In Suzanne's story it seems obvious that young people need help to cope with their past. Her story does tell of times when professional help was made available but she gave no indication that this had been fruitful in helping her find some resolution with her past.

The focus would seem to be to try to nurture a change in state which would shift the life course trajectory of young people onto a more favourable course? It may be that such a change is improbable for some young people but in chapter one I made reference to recent research by Saunders et al (1996) where it was found that after-care, follow-up and interventions aimed at helping children to achieve a more positive readjustment following abuse were placed at the bottom of a prioritised list. If so little account is made of young people's starting points then it is hardly surprising that young people experience such potentially wretched outcomes. I use the word outcomes reservedly as I have previously made a case for the linking of states and the way this affects life trajectories and therefore the notion of an outcome is dubious. Reflecting the linking of states; the disturbing prospect would be that self harming might be a behaviour which would continue to shape and determine the life course trajectories of young people.

Being a 'young mum' and surveillance

Although Suzanne finds it difficult to reach resolution with her past she copes impressively with the everyday demands of two small children. I made reference earlier in this chapter to the way in which

the past can create and maintain life course trajectories and this is clearly evident when she talks of making sure that her children have a better childhood than her own. In Suzanne's story I make several references to the comfortable and caring environment which she provides for her children. I am, however conscious that Wayne, her partner, often seems to be an ambiguous presence existing in the background. This is not a purposeful occurrence rather it reflects my contact with him and Suzanne's inclusion of Wayne. Also, during the research Wayne moved out of the house to live with friends leaving Suzanne alone with the children. Her relationship with Wayne and the way in which he provides inconsistent support would seem to place Suzanne in a similar position to the other 'lone' parents participating in this research. Suzanne's story conveys the impression that the children are ultimately her responsibility with Wayne providing additional support rather than two people with a shared level of commitment. In making this observation I do not in any way mean to imply that the care of children is an equally shared role for most parents rather I raise the similarity of Suzanne's position in relation to other lone mothers participating in the present research. Indeed Suzanne spoke of being viewed derisively as a '*single*' and '*young mum*' in her story.

Lone motherhood carries with it a particular ideology based upon a range of, often unfounded, assumptions. McIntosh (1996) when outlining the social anxieties associated with lone motherhood refers to a 'process of stigmatisation' showing how the young and single mother is presented as a social problem. However, only three per cent of lone parents are aged 16 - 19 years old (McIntosh, 1996). One of the most enduring assumptions is that young mothers become pregnant in order to obtain welfare benefits and housing; this was not supported in the research undertaken with young mothers (Clark, 1989, Phoenix, 1991). Another assumption is that young mothers are indifferent and ignorant of contraceptive use (Doherty, 1995). There are other more considered explanations which challenge this view. Boyle (1991) draws attention to the costs of contraception, the stigma of carrying condoms and the embarrassment of negotiating their use, showing that there is a definite cost for young women in relation to contraception use. Phoenix (1996) refers to, and challenges, the notion of lone mothers as 'feckless' citing her own research (reported in Phoenix, 1991) where nearly two-thirds of 16 - 19 year old 'first-time mothers' felt they were coping 'quite well'. Furthermore, pregnancy can be seen as a benefit; both Pendergast and Prout (1980) and Oakley, (1981) discuss the romantic imagery of pregnancy with Marshall (1991) demonstrating the way motherhood is socially constructed, showing how in childcare manuals motherhood is presented as the 'ultimate fulfilment'. In light of such evidence it would seem simplistic and unjust to stigmatise young, single mothers as a

'social problem' born out of their being both ignorant and diffident.

Suzanne may have expressed, in relation to her first pregnancy, a level of ignorance regarding contraception, but it is hard to imagine that she was uninformed a second time. Her life was taken up with the care and well being of her children. It would be difficult to avoid the socially constructed nature of both the role and the responsibilities which made up her life; these may have been preferable to Suzanne's possible alternatives. She talked of the anguish she experienced prior to having her first child, the isolation from her family and the difficulties relating to her foster placements. It would be insensitive not to recognise the appeal of a complete change in status and circumstance, for Suzanne.

Still, for Suzanne the responsibilities of caring for her children brought the added anxiety and burden of perceived surveillance by those around her. This perceived surveillance may relate to the way in which common assumptions permeated Suzanne's experience. I use the word 'perceived' because I do not have any confirmation that she was being watched only Suzanne's misgivings and apprehensions. Nevertheless, it would be naive in the extreme to dispel the idea that she was actually seen as risky, in terms of parenting such small children, in either official or unofficial circles. Frost and Stein (1989) warn that children of the 'poor' etc. are more 'open to surveillance'. For Suzanne the defining factor was not that she was poor, although, often lack of money was an issue - the defining factor was that she was too young to be seen as a competent parent for two small children.

This perceived surveillance is important in relation to Runyan's interactive processes. Surveillance might be *person-determining* whereby it changes Suzanne's personal state, and would presumably have serious consequences in relation to self-efficacy. A consistent storyline for Suzanne is that she was efficacious in her belief that she could secure an escape from trauma, humiliation and stigma for her children. However, *social persuasion* is central to the concept of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) maintains that:

'When social customs frown on voicing devaluation of others, the low social evaluations are usually masked in disingenuous comments or in social practices that convey the message that one does not expect much of the recipients' (p102).

The social practices she was subjected to in relation to her status as a single and young mother influenced Suzanne's interactional life course processes. If Suzanne feels that her capabilities and competence are continually under review and found wanting then her levels of self belief may diminish; thus perceived surveillance can be *person-determining*. In addition, perceived surveillance was *behaviour-determining* with Suzanne avoiding contact with the Leaving Care Scheme and refraining from seeking assistance which may have greatly improved her patently isolated position regarding practical and emotional support.

Suzanne was not alone in experiencing early parenthood but she was also not unique in rendering a surveillance storyline where the ability to care effectively for her children seemed to be questioned. Of the five young women who had young children, throughout the duration of the research, four made reference to their ability to parent their children being questioned. For Janine this related to a specific incident, demonstrating the vulnerability of young mothers, going some way toward a further appreciation of Suzanne's anxiety regarding her children.

I asked if she had been into the Leaving Care Scheme lately, she said not for 6 months or more but that her keyworker called in now and again. She said she was too busy to go to the Scheme. In the process of this conversation she began to talk about, 'them at the Scheme'. She told me that she was angry that Elliot (infant son) had be placed on a Protection Order. Apparently four young people had reported her to the Scheme and the SSD for, 'throwing up in town because I was drunk and having Elliot with me.' Janine was indignant and said that, 'me mum knew and the residential home knew I was a good mum to Elliot.' As a consequence of the report Elliot was place on the At Risk Register. She said that someone rang the residential home and her mum asking what sort of mum she was, Janine was angry about this. Janine said that the Scheme had apologised and said that they knew it wasn't true, however, the SSD had never apologised and Janine had expected that. She felt that someone had reported her out of 'spite' and she could do nothing about it. (field notes)

For young people with such a close association to Social Service agencies the potential for their parenting skills to be questioned may be more acute. If Janine had not been 'looked after' the young people she knew may not have been able to so easily have her ability to care for Elliot brought under

scrutiny. Therefore, added to an awareness that they are young and thus viewed with suspicion and under surveillance by those around them, there is also the possibility that contact with services and young people in receipt of services makes young women with children even more vulnerable. Suzanne and Janine were both characterised as 'responsive' in that they seemed eager to assist and be friendly - it might be that this relates to a need to seek approval and be seen to be fulfilling their obligations to their children. This may seem a far reaching conclusion to make, nevertheless, there are distinct similarities in their stories which should not be underestimated.

Hannah and Kirsty's stories also had surveillance storylines, however, there were identifiable reasons which accounted for their parenting being evaluated. Both young women had their children placed on Protection Orders. For Kirsty this related to her daughter's father:

He had a child with someone else, it was beaten up. I didn't believe it but I do now. I couldn't leave her on her own with him (I think this is associated with the Protection Order). (field notes)

Kirsty's daughter was assigned a social worker. She described the social worker as being '*against me really. I've known social workers all me life, I'm just sick of em. She watches everything I do.*' When I began contact with Kirsty her daughter's father no longer shared the same house nor had contact with her or the child but the Protection Order had four months to run. The impact of the Protection Order was severely to restrict Kirsty's lifestyle.

Returning to Runyan's interactional perspective on life course again, as with Suzanne, surveillance was *behaviour-determining*. Kirsty like Suzanne and to a certain extent Janine, was reluctant to access much needed services because of the feeling of being watched. Her daughter attended a pre-fives group organised by Social Services, Kirsty was reluctant to attend because it '*was run by social workers*'. Hannah's story is very similar in that she too had an abusive partner and as a consequence her child was placed on a Protection Order. Both Hannah and Kirsty were extremely cautious throughout the research contact. It may be that their experiences regarding their children had resulted in them distancing themselves from those they knew would be watching and evaluating their performance as parents. Thus their experiences have been both *person-determining* and *behaviour-determining*.

Croghan and Miell (1998) in their research with women who were clients of welfare agencies and 'designated as problem mothers' refer to the way in which mothers who are seen as 'bad mothers' find it necessary to resist the construction of a 'spoiled identity'. They explain this necessity within women's identities as mothers and the 'strong social expectations surrounding women's responsibility as mothers, the designation of 'bad mother' is likely to carry with it not only social stigma but also a profound threat to self-esteem and identity (p445).' This may be one of the reasons both Kirsty and Hannah distanced themselves from services; in order to resist the constructed 'spoiled identity'. However, the disturbing issue within Suzanne's story is that she was not a client of the welfare agencies, there was no evidence to view her a 'bad mother' yet she still felt the need to resist being designated as a 'problem mother'. Has Suzanne's identity been 'spoiled' by the often unfounded ideology of the single, young mother? This shows how the life course is influenced by social and historical time where ideology can have a resounding impact. It might be that as Suzanne's life course progresses the construction of a 'spoiled identity' will recede, however, it would seem that this is yet another way in which the past might interact with Suzanne's present life, another issue which she would need to resolve or at least reconcile herself to.

Colluding with the illusion of independence

Suzanne's story has had storylines relating to her difficulty reconciling the past and motherhood in the final part of this analysis I will look closely at the concept of independence and what this means to both Suzanne and other young people participating in the present research. *'I'm me own person now, I don't have to answer to anyone else..... I have to make me own life and do what's best.'* These are Suzanne's words and they convey a particular way of constructing adulthood. Suzanne's words convey freedom, autonomy and self determination all of which are somehow implied in the discourse surrounding independence. To be independent is to set one's course in life - to be in control. Such a view of independence was exemplified in a comment made by a Scheme worker in relation to James who was at that time living in bed and breakfast accommodation: *'James needs to move on, to stand on his own two feet'* (field notes). James had been living at the bed and breakfast for two weeks after several periods of homelessness and had said that he was happy there, *'she (the landlady) looks after me.'* Rather than seeking independence James seemed to be much more

comfortable with being looked after. This brief excerpt from his story clearly demonstrates the mismatch which may exist between young people's needs and society's expectations.

However, maybe more resonant in Suzanne's story is the way in which the expectation of a particular kind of independence interacts with Suzanne's life and is *person-determining* in the way that Runyan (1982) suggests where processes create, maintain and change personal states and characteristics. Suzanne did not become so conscious of these expectations in isolation, she interacted with people and situations. Thus, there is a need to fall back on life course explanations in relation to social and historical time where adolescence is frequently presented as the developmental period of transition from dependent childhood to self-sufficient adulthood.

Coleman (1995, p66) says that, 'One of the central themes of adolescent development is the attainment of independence, often represented symbolically in art and literature by the moment of departure from home.' For young people who have been 'looked after' this then means that independence, self-sufficiency, adulthood would be attained when they leave care. However, in the first chapter the changing *structural context* of society was outlined (Jones, 1995) with young people becoming increasingly dependent upon parental support. Nevertheless, the discourse which prevails in leaving care literature: preparation for independence, independent living, the independence model of leaving care support, does little to reflect this move. Furthermore, the acquisition of independence is often located within a particular process where young people are deemed to develop psychological independence through a social process. Apparent for both James and Suzanne was this notion of psychological independence - that they would be autonomous, self-determining beings. The following excerpt from Irwin confirms this view situating the transition to psychological independence within the social world:

'Transitions to psychological independence are managed through financial and other exchanges, where young adult children negotiate greater responsibilities and independence with their parents.' (Irwin, 1995, p25)

For Suzanne this incremental social process of negotiation toward psychological independence was if not completely lacking then at least somewhat curtailed. She became pregnant with her first child when only fifteen, events somehow took over. She moved to a different foster home where the

surroundings were not conducive, she had to care for a small baby and then there was the necessity for alternative accommodation at which point she moved in with Wayne. These events show very little negotiation in terms of psychological independence, in its place is forceful necessity. There does appear to have been some consultation with her social worker and her tenancy was negotiated at Housing Panel; yet is this the kind of negotiation of greater responsibilities that Irwin envisaged?

Suzanne perceived herself to be independent, she strived against the odds to achieve and maintain the seemingly expected and desirable status. Suzanne had ceased to be 'looked after', she had two small children and she had her own tenancy therefore she had many of the trappings which go along with adult status and plainly these things implied independence to Suzanne. Yet, for Suzanne independence brought with it responsibility, dependants and dependency. Is there some kind of mismatch between the concept of independence and the lived experience of young people leaving care or is this a much wider issue that permeates through all our lives and relates to the mythical concepts of autonomy and freedom?

Inherent within the notion of autonomy and freedom is a belief in the individual's ability to determine the conditions of their life and the direction it takes. Lister (1997, p16) claims that such beliefs recur in contemporary theorisations of social citizenship rights explaining that civil and political rights are the way in which the limited state assures the freedom and formal equality of the individual. There are however, two sides to the citizenship debate - one being the rights approach and the other where citizenship can be conceptualised as obligation to be found in society within the 'duties discourse' (Roche, 1992). In line with this view Wallace and Jones (1992, p22) argue that citizenship contains two elements: rights and responsibilities. Suzanne appeared to have accepted her responsibilities unquestioningly. She strived to live the life of a good citizen in that she provided a caring, loving home for her children. It seems obvious that she had taken on the notion of citizenship as obligation and responsibility. What of the rights view of citizenship with freedom and formal equality? Suzanne perceived the existence of autonomy and accepted the way in which this brought with it responsibilities. External constraints were everywhere for Suzanne - she was isolated with two small children and dependent upon benefits. When viewed as a whole there seems little scope for freedom and autonomy in the grandiose sense. However, her story leaves the resounding impression that she was managing to fulfil her major goal, that of securing a better future for her children.

At the beginning of the biographical phase of the research five young women had infant children and therefore their move to 'independence' was entwined with responsibility and dependence. These four young women shared Suzanne's non-negotiable transition to adulthood which was necessitated by way of becoming pregnant while 'looked after'. Janine moved in with foster parents after the residential home discovered she was pregnant. This foster placement was very successful with Janine receiving considerable aftercare support from her foster mum. Nevertheless, she had to move on to 'independent living' once Elliot, her young son, was born. Tara's story is very similar in that she too had to move out of the residential home when her pregnancy was made known. She too was found alternative supported lodgings accommodation where she was content and happy.

These young women experienced a very specific transition. They were pregnant and could stay with foster parents, supported lodgings providers until a certain time after the birth of their children but then they were to become independent, to accept the responsibilities of adulthood. After the birth of their children both Janine and Tara remained in the secure, alternative family environment until a council tenancy could be found. I do not suggest that either of these young women did not want to move on to independent living I merely make the observation that the notion of negotiation and process is very different for these young people leaving care. Arguably it would be so for other young women who might become pregnant while living at home they too might experience a rushed transition. What might be different would be the extent to which independence actually means the expectation that a young person will live with minimal support at a very young age and cope with considerable responsibility.

Some young people clearly wanted to leave care and their accounts conveyed a tacit acceptance of time limited dependency followed by independence, Natasha 'moved on' at seventeen explaining that:

'I know I could have stayed at the home but well there were people who were a lot younger than meself an you feel like you're ready to go cause like everyone else were like thirteen or fourteen,' (taped interview)

Kirsty's account was very similar:

'I came out of care when I was seventeen. I just knew I wanted to go. I asked to come out and they let me. I just went and had a word with my social worker and my foster parents and they agreed so I left to live in a flat just out of town.' (taped interview)

However, both Kirsty and Natasha later tell of the pressures of living on their own. For Natasha it was predominantly about isolation and the effects of separation from the residential home. For Kirsty her experience was very similar to Suzanne's in that soon after leaving care she too had a child and her life course trajectory became one associated with the responsibilities of parenthood. There is strong support for the notion of citizenship as obligation and responsibility in the lives of these young people but far less that could be located within the citizenship as rights domain.

Suzanne's story, and those of other young people demonstrates how adult status can be achieved via alternative routes. Hutson and Jenkins (1987) strongly argue against the rather simplistic view that independence relates to employment and financial issues. For them the issue is one of youth transition which can be structured from two directions where the first stresses the social psychological aspects of attaining adult status and secondly transitions should be understood in relation to the general concept of citizenship. Young people's gradual acquisition of rights and duties relating to citizenship, exemplify youth. Clearly this was what Suzanne experienced, freedom and autonomy were limited and in their place was the responsibilities of citizenship; where the bills needed to be paid and the children cared for. How clear is this made in the notion of independence. Independence is arguably a socially constructed illusion which serves young people ill and should be avoided. It conjures up some kind of hedonistic freedom which is far removed from the complex and demanding realities of young people's experience.

Griffin (1993) talks of notions of 'lifestyle, choice and the discourse of freedom' which represents the 'normal' process of transition to adulthood as making appropriate 'lifestyle choices'. She later says that dependence and independence are vital to the construction of adolescence in terms of a transition point between the dependency of childhood and the economic, social and psychological independence which is associated with adulthood. However, Suzanne's story and of those of other young women participating in the biographical phase of this research experienced a transition from

dependence to what might be represented independence which is not only gendered in nature but is based upon an ideological illusion which bears only a marginal similarity with their experience.

Chapter Nine

Independence, ideology and social timing

The story told in this chapter is Peter's; he was characterised in the *estranged* grouping where his first encounters were interpreted as: *vulnerable, insecure, appreciative* and *passive*. Other young people in this grouping were James, Shaun, Emma and Lindsay. I will tell Peter's story in detail, trying to impart the complexity of his life after care, while at the same time locating it within the past. In Suzanne's story, told in the previous chapter, great emphasis was placed on the way the past invades and constructs the present - so it was for Peter. Yet there was a difference, in that the past may have to a greater extent impacted upon Peter's developmental pathways, for instance education and social skills. However, the trajectory of his life course when leaving care seemed to be determined by an independence ideology and its subsequent social timing. Such social timing relates to his becoming eighteen - the age at which it is assumed he will adopt the role of an independent adult. As Peter's story unfolds hopefully this ideological impact will become visible, where an exploration of the influences in his life at the interactional level and his responses to them, will be presented. As with the previous chapter I will try to draw out similarities and discontinuities from the other biographical accounts of young people participating in the present research.

Peter's story

I initially met Peter briefly at the Leaving Care Scheme. When we actually made contact I found him to be shy yet friendly. Throughout the research Peter was generous with his time and amenable, even when his life became distressing. His physical appearance was dissimilar to the other young people I had met during the course of the present research in that he wore rather dull, adult type clothes. This is not to say that he looked odd more that he didn't wear the expensive, named sportswear (Nike, Adidas, etc.) which many of the young people accessing the Scheme wore. What did strike me was

a certain innocence which may become apparent as his story unfolds. He accessed Scheme support but this rarely, if ever, resulted in Peter developing friendships with other young people. Maintaining contact with Peter has been both easy and impossible but never straightforward. I had been in contact with Peter for a total of eighteen months making eleven visits. However, unlike Suzanne my visits were not evenly spaced throughout this period. Peter's life has had its ups and downs and therefore my contact with him reflected this fluctuation in his fortunes. Also, information offered by Scheme and residential workers has been incorporated because it provided essential additional data regarding the circumstances of his life when he experienced serious disruption.

In Care

As told in the First Encounters chapter Peter's 'exit interview' took place at the community residential home where he had stayed while 'looked after' by the local authority. This stable placement was looked on with fondness by Peter as one of the good times in his life and he often spoke wistfully of the care and relationships he experienced there. He was fifteen when he entered care following a severe breakdown in his relationship with his mum. The following excerpts from field notes tell of physical abuse and a system that may have failed him quite early on.

He later told me that when he was younger his mum used to hit him and on occasion leave bruises. 'My dad he did nothin cause he was scared too.' Peter spoke of always being 'kept in'. He referred to misdemeanours such as pinching biscuits, fighting with his brother and answering his mum back. (field notes)

Peter's teenage years seem to have been fraught with quarrels regarding his friends and his behaviour at home. Peter talked of his mum chasing him down the street and constantly, 'givin me one'. Peter referred to going swimming when he was much younger and the teacher noticing bruises on his back. 'I said I fell on the stairs when I was messin with me brother. She would have killed me if I said owt else.' No further action was taken as far as Peter was aware. (field notes)

Peter did not enter 'care' as a result of a child protection investigation, in Peter's words his mum had simply '*had enough of me*'. He was taken to the SSD where his mum explained that, '*if they didn't find me somewhere, she would put me on the streets.*' While talking to me about this time in his life he was laughing as though he were recounting an amusing tale but those who are familiar with the process a young person goes through when entering care will be very much aware that the experience is far from amusing. This desire to be amusing was maybe his way of coping with a particularly traumatic event.

While in care Peter developed close attachments with members of staff indeed so much so that he lamented that one particular member of staff (his keyworker) was not his mum. Although other members of staff were less close they too showed Peter concern and fondness. What may need to be considered is the more detrimental side of such attachments. Is it fair or indeed moral to provide such a level of care and security when it will be so abruptly withdrawn? Care and support from the corporate parent seems, especially for Peter, to be conditional upon the clear understanding that it is time limited - once young people reach eighteen it will be withdrawn. There is much in the Children Act 1989 to suggest that this withdrawal need not be so harsh as I seem to imply but as Peter's story unfolds seldom is a more compassionate model in evidence.

Leaving Care

Peter left care when he became eighteen, it would be fair to say that he left care because he became eighteen. This move was not requested by Peter nor thought to be timely by staff at the residential home who considered him to be 'too young' to live independently. Taking this into account the Leaving Care Scheme found Peter supported lodgings¹² when he left care. This did not work out only lasting a matter of weeks. He had a disagreement with the supported lodgings provider who thought that Peter's undeclared working; casual employment on a local farm while still claiming benefits, was unacceptable. Peter's account of his stay in supported lodgings does not instil any

¹² Supported lodgings - 'The scheme (supported lodgings) is financed through Housing Benefit with The Voluntary Organisation acting as landlord and paying providers a fixed amount to cover rent and counselling support for a young person while in placement,' (Leaving Care Scheme Annual Report, 1994). Therefore with supported lodgings a young person leaving care moves in with a family who are paid to provide lodgings with emotional and practical support.

significant sense of permanence or continuation of the care, support and understanding he experienced at the residential home.

Peter moved out of care and went to stay in supported lodgings. He said it didn't work out there, Peter mentioned that he forgot to lock the door a couple of times and he left a gas ring on once. Peter seemed reluctant to say too much knowing that the provider still had contact with the Scheme. He did say that she was phoning the residential home all the time complaining about him - he obviously felt less than at home. He was paying £36 per fortnight which left him with very little money. 'So I went workin at the farm, she said that if I didn't stop workin on the black market she would kick me out.' (field notes)

Peter's reluctance to give up his 'black market' employment was understandable when considered in light of the financial constraints young people living on benefits experience and the difficulty they have finding secure and sufficiently paid employment. He was unwilling to cease his undeclared working and therefore left the supported lodgings with disastrous consequences.

When I first contacted Peter in relation to participating in the present research he was living at a friend's after having spent several nights sleeping in the back of a car after leaving the supported lodgings. The Leaving Care Scheme subsequently found Peter accommodation, he moved into a local hostel which provided short term accommodation. I arranged to call round to see him but I was concerned regarding the nature of the hostel. Those who experienced difficulties in their lives often received accommodation at the hostel, some were alcoholics or drug takers, many had been involved with the police for both serious and petty criminal offences. As I entered the foyer a sign greeted me:

EX-RESIDENTS ARE NO LONGER TO BE GIVEN ACCESS!

This sign did little to impart any sense of welcome for either visitors or residents. Staff were situated in a small office close to the entrance and asked me who I wanted to see and who I was. I simply said I was a friend of Peter's but this didn't seem enough and so I reluctantly said that I had links with the Leaving Care Scheme.

Throughout the present research I have been conscious of the privacy of the young people; I never revealed to the friends and/or family of the young people my relationship to them, rather I left that to the young person themselves. They could make the choice to explain or to not explain their reason(s) for seeing me. Some young people chose to explain fully the nature of the research and their involvement in it, others merely said I was a friend. In this instance I was aware that I had to say who and what I was - it seemed obvious that a mere friend might not gain admittance and therefore my reservations, already alerted by the forbidding sign, intensified.

A staff member showed me to Peter's room which had a bed, a set of drawers and a wardrobe but very little else. The room was impersonal and cramped but Peter had only been at the hostel a couple of weeks and may not have been able to make it more homely, nevertheless, he seemed in good spirits. He told me that he had been looking for work; he had been round local garages asking if there was any work cleaning and valeting cars. Peter had also been visiting the Job Centre regularly, *'but there ain't nowt there.'* I asked what he had been doing with the rest of his days, *'Oh I chill out in bed.'* He was eager to find employment but this was an onerous task when confronted with Peter's limited education and lack of qualifications. He was aware of this saying that he did go to school regularly but, *'I wished I'd tried harder.'* He later mentioned that he went to a *'special school'* and *'they found I was dyslexic later.'* The self-appraisal made is most definitely that he failed, not that he was let down in any way.

I arranged to see Peter a month later. When I arrived the staff informed me that he was no longer a resident. Peter had actually moved in with his 'girlfriend' and her family and had got a job as a security guard. A residential worker at the community home Peter 'moved on' from said that he was happy but that the pay was only £2.25 per hour and that he was based in a portacabin. Workers at the Scheme also relayed the same information and while recognising the exploitation that was taking place acknowledged that Peter wanted a job and this was all there was on offer.

Peter's living arrangements at his girlfriend's were far from ideal. A major problem was that he did not have a bed to sleep on. When he contacted the Scheme asking to purchase one with his Leaving Care Grant he was told that he could have a 'second hand' bed that was currently languishing at the Scheme. Peter's comment was to ask me, *'would you sleep in a second hand bed?'* The bed was subsequently delivered minus mattress and his girlfriend's father phoned the Scheme and told

Peter's keyworker to remove this 'junk' from his house. Peter's comments seem to summarise the issue, *'whose money is it anyway? When it's me sleepin on the floor you'd think I would be able to buy a bed.'*

His living arrangements were further complicated by financial difficulties experienced by the family and the mother daughter relationship, as Peter explained, *'Her mother uses me to blackmail her (girlfriend) - if you don't do this he'll have to go.'* Peter was aware of his uncertain position saying that he was *'doomed'*. *'I'm fed up of movin about, I'm sick of it, I'm pissed off. I just keep cryin - it just gets to you.'* He went on to talk about his move from care and the subsequent places he had stayed, of the hostel he said:

'I don't like bein on me own - at the hostel you're shut up in your room on your own for days. All them promises when you're in care an you come out an there's nowt - no flat nothin.' (field notes)

Often you get a real feeling of desertion from Peter's conversation and from his subsequent life experiences. Leaving care is presented as a process in much of the Scheme and academic literature. The Leaving Care Scheme developed a neat and orderly flowchart relating to the leaving care process in this particular authority. However, when this process proves to be unsuccessful, which can be for a vast array of reasons, young people are in danger of sinking deeper and deeper into crisis. Much is made of the concept of independence - eighteen and you are old enough to cope on your own yet this is very much conditional on staying with the process and following the plans made previously while a young person is still 'looked after'. The unsuccessful supported lodgings placement seems to have sparked a chain reaction impacting upon future pathways.

You're independent now!

Peter had left care, he had been through a process which was not successful for him - regrettably things did not improve, they got considerably worse. His precarious position at his girlfriend's deteriorated resulting in him seeking assistance from the Scheme because he was under threat of violence. The assistance he received from the Scheme was very much in line with the 'independence model'. He was helped by staff to complete a Housing Application Form. Peter seeing no other

alternative went 'home' arriving at the residential home seeking assistance - he was told to go back to the Scheme and ask for supported lodgings. The Scheme explained to Peter that there were, at that time, no supported lodgings placements for young men but that he would be supported in his own efforts to find accommodation (form filling etc). At nine thirty that same evening Peter arrived at the residential community home again with all his belongings. A worker rang the Scheme contacting the worker with responsibility for homeless young people; Peter was found a Nightstop¹³. The following night Peter arrived at the residential home again and residential staff tried to negotiate a Nightstop for him but he refused to go. A bed was available at the home so Peter was allowed to stay, however, during the night his behaviour became 'bizarre and irrational' and staff took him to the Casualty Department at the local hospital. He was seen by casualty staff and returned with the residential worker to the home for the night.

Peter was unable to secure suitable accommodation and after several more returns to the residential community home and visits to the Scheme he became involved with the police. He had apparently been charged with stealing a vehicle but a Scheme worker thought that he had in fact been sleeping in the back of a van. During this time his keyworker changed and he was allocated to a new member of staff. While I was at the Scheme, seeking assistance contacting Peter, a worker at the Scheme made the following remark, *'He simply can't cope with pressure - pressure him into doing something and he will run a mile. He just needs some structure in his life.'* When I heard this I remember being indignant at the way blame seemed to be levelled at Peter. On reflection maybe structure was exactly what he needed and this was why he continually returned to the home where he was able to live his life without pressure and within a safe and caring structure. Is this not what many people want especially those for whom life has been fraught with unavoidable pitfalls and obstacles?

While on remand his social worker pressed for him to be remanded in hospital for a psychiatrist's assessment. This was March 13, I had asked his keyworker to keep in touch regarding Peter's situation. On March 25 I called at the Scheme office inquiring after Peter. His keyworker was unsure what had happened, *'his social worker has gone on holiday for a week and I'm not sure what is happening.'* He was in the prison hospital but he had not received a visitor from the Scheme and his social worker was on holiday. By mid April Peter had been admitted to the local hospital's psychiatric

¹³ Nightstop - young people presenting as homeless at the Leaving Care Scheme are found overnight emergency accommodation. The providers of this accommodation are volunteers who have undergone an assessment, screening and training process organised by the Leaving Care Scheme.

unit. Falling through the net seems such a cliché but it was very much in evidence. When making this observation I level no direct criticism at the Scheme or Peter's keyworker, it is more a statement of fact and should be recognised as one of the consequences of state parenting. A bureaucracy is unable and/or possibly unwilling to provide the consistent and endless support that a good parent aims for. Would a good parent so easily have lost sight of the needs of their own child - would they have been so inconsistent in their contact?

The Peter I encountered in the psychiatric unit was very different to the one I had come to know. The following excerpts from field notes may not be politically correct and reflect seriously flawed stereotypes but they effectively convey the change I observed in Peter:

We went into what was termed 'The Activity' room, inside was a stereo player, some pens etc. and a couple of games, none of which were experiencing any activity. We sat at what felt like an interview table. Peter looked far from himself. He constantly looked at the table and only had eye contact when I directly asked him a question. The answers he gave were short with no elaboration, this is very unlike the Peter I had met previously. His clothes were dishevelled and he looked every bit the 'psychiatric patient' even down to the slow shuffling movements. (field notes)

I asked him to tell me what had been happening to him? He became far more animated but he talked too fast and mumbled therefore it was very difficult fully to understand what he was saying. He did keep telling me that the patients on the unit were all 'KP nutters' and that he had been 'better off' in prison. While telling me this a man of about 35 years old came into the room and Peter whispered, 'this is a real KP nutter'. The man proceeded to give a very loud rendition of 'Nessum Dorma'. I have to admit that I was amused; Jake was his name and he seemed friendly and provided a distraction in that rather gloomy place. But what of Peter? I could leave, not so for him, Peter had to stay. (Was he afraid, was he humiliated, was he confused? Maybe he was all of these things.)

Peter did not receive any visits from his family while in the psychiatric unit and initially only a very brief visit by a Scheme worker to drop off a few personal belongings. He was at the unit for over two months and his keyworker did visit but Peter's social worker seemed to take over responsibility for Peter's welfare. I was surprised to hear that at his 'Pre-release Meeting' which was attended by his

keyworker and the social worker, Peter's mum had been present and offered accommodation but this seemed to be conditional upon his abiding by her rules. Peter would not be expected to see his former girlfriend or 'cause conflict' in the home. His keyworker felt that Peter simply wanted to leave the psychiatric unit and therefore he (Peter) would agree to any arrangement. Alternative suggestions were made in that he could become resident at a half-way house for mental health patients in transition from hospital care. A week's trial at his mum's was decided upon but as might be expected this did not work out and once again Peter moved back to live at his 'girlfriend's' parents' home. I eventually managed to catch up with Peter and was once again troubled by the change in him in relation to our first encounters:

I was 'greeted' at the door by Denise's (girlfriend's) mum. She was polite yet asked me if 'he' knew I was coming. When I said that he did her comment was that, 'he never tells us anything.' She seemed rather annoyed. I made no comment. I was shown into a lounge where Peter was sat watching TV with Denise's gran. He looked very dishevelled. His hair looked as though it had not been washed recently and he seemed dazed. I asked if he had remembered that I was going to call. He said yes. Peter's movements were very slow and restricted he seemed unable to react quickly to conversation or changes in his surroundings. When Denise came in the room he seemed not to notice. He drank his tea very slowly and seemed unable to acknowledge my arrival. I later asked if he was taking any medication. His replies alarmed me. I asked what he was taking. He said that he wasn't sure that they began with T. I then asked why he was taking them and he said that he wasn't really sure. He later said that he is taking them because he doesn't want to get like he did before. He referred this to when he felt really 'depressed, an ended up in hospital.' (field notes)

Peter had at this time moved out of the 'care' system and out of the mental health system. He was living in what might be referred to as stable accommodation yet he was receiving no real support to help him either recover or improve his own circumstances. I didn't believe that he was capable of improving his position but I felt that while he created no specific problem he would be allowed simply to continue spending his days watching TV and taking the pills. This distressing situation did resolve itself but not as a consequence of action by either Peter or the services available to support him. His

girlfriend's family simply got tired of providing Peter with a home. They moved house, Peter was not allowed to go with them but even this was done without Peter's full knowledge. The family were moving, the Scheme had been made aware via the social worker that they were not willing to have the situation continue. I was however, shocked when informed that Peter had moved back into the hostel he originally left because he felt lonely and isolated.

It was with real trepidation that I made arrangements to visit Peter at the hostel. When I arrived the staff were very pleasant and chatty. Peter looked really well - very different from our last meeting. He had put weight on and the lost look had gone from his face. The hostel was still essentially the same but Peter said. *'It's OK here this time.'* He was no longer taking the medication saying that he had stopped taking it a couple of months ago but that he didn't want his social worker to know. I am unsure why this was the case but he seemed to be on very good terms with his social worker saying, *'he got me in here.'*

His former girlfriend's brother had helped him to move in. He was then in contact with his family. *'I go round every weekend, I have to phone first but that's OK.'* He went on to tell me that he had visited the residential home a number of times. He was having some contact with his former keyworker. It was impossible not to be moved by the enthusiasm and pleasure these changes in his relationships engendered. Just as I was beginning to heave a huge sigh of relief and allow myself a glimmer of optimism regarding his future outcomes Peter informed me that his family may be moving to Scotland. This in itself was quite shattering news. He gleaned this information from his former girlfriend's mum who had seen the house up for sale. The optimism began to wane. This was where I left Peter - the pathways of his life had been far from easy. It was difficult to feel any real confidence in his life remaining on the even keel he seemed to have found at that moment.

From safety to despair

Peter's outcomes were disastrous. He was unsuccessful in finding employment, he became homeless, he was unable to cope emotionally and spent time in prison. Ostensibly his story is one of anguish and despair yet looking closer there was resilience. He moved out of care, survived homelessness, hostel accommodation, prison and the psychiatric unit. It was not until he moved out

of his 'girlfriend's' home that he became unable to contend with the uncertainty of his life. Thus to make a purely negative interpretation of Peter's life is severely to diminish the way in which he survived the changes imposed upon him. Nonetheless, I found it difficult and it was probably impossible to convey in approximately four thousand words the true horror of Peter's move from the safety of the residential home to the precarious existence he had thereafter. Furthermore, I entered his life at times when the chaos and devastation had to a certain extent subsided. I was not there when he was taken to the casualty department because his behaviour was 'bizarre and irrational' nor was I there when his return home failed to work out. Therefore, although his story makes sombre reading this may be nothing in comparison to the actuality of his experience and this shows the contrived nature of the research process. However, in defence of this present research I wish to make the point that alternative research methods would have stood little chance of representing the twists and turns in Peter's life after care. As such the story that I constructed did endeavour, and I believe succeeded, to capture more fully the course of his life. In the further analysis to follow I intend to explore in more detail the way in which the developmental and social trajectories of Peter's life seems to have developed. To be considered is the influence he may have exerted, and the way in which similarities and differences can be seen within the stories of other young people involved in the present research.

Abandonment and accommodating difference

I can only speculate on what it must have felt like to be left by his mother at the Social Services office with the retort that she'd had enough of him. He laughed and made light of the incident but the actuality of such an event must be extremely disturbing. To be part of a family and then to be ejected in such a way must have serious implications in relation to self-concept. What is apparent in his story was the loss he felt on being separated from his family after leaving care. This loss seems to have been less acute while 'looked after' at the residential home because he received care and affection from residential workers. However, once he ceases to be 'looked after' the separation from his family becomes grievous - without family contact he was completely alone and lost when things went wrong.

This family estrangement which Peter experienced was also prevalent in the stories of other young people participating in the study. Some like Kirsty had virtually no contact with their birth family but this

was compensated for by caring, and in Kirsty's case, devoted foster parents. Other young people had managed to, if not reconcile with their parents, at least mend fences with one of their parents - most often their mother. Even so, this was not easy as the past cannot be removed and often the same problems prevailed as the following passage from Beth's story demonstrates:

Beth has regular contact with her family, however, it is difficult to evaluate how successful that is. 'My mum lets me stay here because like she said; she can't see me on the streets.' Beth implied that she originally entered 'care' due to a highly charged home environment, 'I don't get on with my step-dad; it int fair to my mum all that arguin.'
(field notes)

Nevertheless, at times of crisis Beth returned home or she simply called round for a chat, something which was not available for Peter in relation to his family. Contact became more and more problematic in terms of the residential home thus leaving him with nowhere to go when things got tough. Of the young people characterised in the *estranged* grouping when selecting which stories to tell all experienced quite severe disconnection from their families. At times of crisis they were unable or unwilling to seek assistance.

Family Contact: Emma has no contact with her parents, "they don't know I'm in here (psychiatric unit) or that I was in prison." I asked if she would like them to know she said firmly, No! (field notes)

Shaun told me that he has no contact with his mum, although he has regular contact with his younger brother. He related the lack of contact with his mother to scars on his arms, which looked old but still relayed the severity of the injury. Shaun stated that he was taken into care at seven and a half, after his step father had physically abused him. His mother still lives with the step father. Shaun became more aggressive in his conversation, stating that he would, "pay him back." (field notes)

Whether family estrangement was related to a young person's anger, or as was the case with Peter, being ejected from the family the consequence is that they were alone and therefore more vulnerable when things went wrong. I do not suggest that other young people participating in the study were well supported by their parents or that their relationships became comfortable. The point I wish to make is that the young people who seemed more at risk and were characterised in the *estranged* grouping operated with either none or a very weak family support safety net. Peter, and other young people disconnected from their family, did have the Scheme support but as I have suggested earlier they were not his family in the way that residential workers had become while he was 'looked after'. Clearly this made a difference. Peter was ejected and as a consequence disconnected from one family, when he had settled down to belonging to another he was once again removed and distanced.

On reading Peter's story one cannot fail to be disquieted by his forced transition. Within Suzanne's story, evident was the way in which becoming pregnant forced young women to leave care. In Peter's story the process seems possibly more brutal - on his eighteenth birthday he was expected to leave the residential unit that had become his home. Griffin (1993) refers to the 'ideological role played by youth research in the construction and reproduction of academic 'common sense' about young people,' (p2) She goes on to identify a range of discourses which throughout history have constructed youth and adolescence: 'mainstream victim blaming, youth as a social problem, youth as storm and stress, youth as transition.' The common sense view of youth as a transitional stage into the adult world of independence, work, marriage and parenthood was never more evident than in Peter's story. At eighteen the state deemed that he was ready to take on such responsibilities and thus his transition was initiated. Those around him realised the impropriety of this course but there was very little they could do to stem the tide.

This expectation that he would make the transition from dependent young person to independent adult relates to one of the distinctive features of life course theory, that of *social timing* where age is a determining characteristic in the patterning of life. The state had based its fixed cut-off point for parenting young people upon social norms and historical change located in Griffin's 'common sense' about youth and adolescence. The limitations of such unsophisticated ideologies is that they fail to accommodate individual difference, where one young person will be better able and better placed than another to cope with the emotional separation and practical responsibilities that leaving care and leaving home necessitates.

Was Peter duped in some way? The state provided him with dependable and caring parents, the state encouraged him to rely upon their support. He became eighteen and all this had to change. The question must surely be; how aware was Peter, regarding the extent of this severance of ties, and the process he would be embarking upon? Yes; Peter did enter into a process whereby the Leaving Care Scheme became involved in his life. A Scheme worker came to his reviews and worked with Peter to plan his move from the residential home to independent living but he didn't want to go! His story provides a graphic account of the way in which a vulnerable young person can be shuffled about between one 'caring' professional and another - what of Peter in the middle of this system? The state withdrew the home and the parents it had provided abandoning Peter to the insecurity of strangers. This cognizance of abandonment was not unique to Peter, other young people participating in the present research also experience it.

Sally was keen to convey her anger and dissatisfaction, regarding the circumstances surrounding her 'leaving care'. She was at the time living with foster parents, with whom she had a good relationship. Sally felt that she was made to leave on her eighteenth birthday by the Social Services Department, regardless of her belief that her foster parents would have allowed her to stay longer. Her eighteenth birthday was spent in the Social Services Department; sorting out benefits. (field notes)

Sally's sense of abandonment was very similar to Peter's in that she became eighteen and had to leave care yet her story is tempered by her reaction in that she was less accepting and therefore expulsion seems more apt than abandonment. To be abandoned seems so hopeless leaving the individual vulnerable and defenceless. The account given by Tara also relates to abandonment but her story conveyed more rejection and disappointment, therefore, once again there exists a subtle difference.

I left the residential home when I was sixteen an half. I had to leave because I was pregnant but I felt very rejected about having to leave - it was my home. But being pregnant was the sole reason why I had to leave. They was considering sending me to foster parents but by that time I'd worked hard to gain some independence. They had given me - transformed me room in Dacre to a bedsit for me. They had given me

my independence an they wanted to take it all away now an put me in a family environment which I didn't want. That was the only available placement at the time. I got really upset an I just broke down an told em that they was treatin me like a parcel just handin me around. I felt like they was just stickin me in the only available joint that there was. I went to this meetin. This stupid woman that were chairperson of meetin just keep sayin to me that we understand how you feel but there's nowhere else we can give you, your gonna have to go. I don't know who she was, she was a standin from my social services, the other one couldn't make it. (taped interview)

The point I make is that Peter's story **was** different - I had continued contact with these young people, I got to know them well and it was an onerous task trying to convey the difference between Peter's abandonment and the rejection, loss and separation felt by other young people participating in the research. It might be that Peter's individual starting point was different and therefore he was even more dependent upon the state as a parent; both while 'looked after' and when leaving care. He was far more accepting of the necessity for him to move on from the residential home - in my presence he never questioned that one stark requirement nor did he express resentment regarding his removal. He did on several occasions try to return to the residential home but that was out of desperation rather than any kind of sense of injustice or measured response. For example in contrast Natasha spoke openly of her disillusionment and feelings of betrayal.

Workers have spoke to me of Natasha's distress at the lack of support she receives from the residential home where she previous lived. She told me tonight that the thing that really hurts is, 'I thought the staff really care for me but probably not, I was there a really long time an none of em come to see me.' (field notes)

'At the kids home I had a bit of a hassle at first. They (other residents) tried settin me room afire but after that it were OK it was me home. That's why I feel so betrayed all the staff meant so much to me - why didn't they feel the same about me? I phoned up after two weeks an said I wanted to go home but they said I'd be OK. They used to think Oh it's Natasha she's strong enough to cope.' (taped interview)

Natasha showed an appreciation that she had been cheated in some way by the leaving care process - Peter was far more accepting and unquestioning. Maybe Natasha hit the nail on the head. Peter was not strong enough to cope - he was different but the state's cut-off point seemed ill prepared, or even unwilling, to accommodate difference. Thus Peter had to follow the path of other young people, who may have been better fortified against the trials and tribulations they were to face. Chapter One considered the diverse needs and experiences of the children the state might be required to parent. Should young people, with unequal abilities and needs, all be expected to have the same life course event timings or should some other course be sought?

What if? Managing the crisis

Peter's moved into supported lodgings which proved to be disastrous for him prompting one to ask; what if? What if he had stayed at the residential home until he was a little older and had found stable employment? What if he had gone to stay with supported lodgings providers who had less rigid and unrealistic benchmarks? What if the Scheme had been based upon another model, for example the *inter-dependence model* (Stein, 1990) where the psycho-social transition rooted in inter-personal relationships, self esteem and confidence takes precedence - would Peter's outcomes have been improved; would he have avoided entering the mental health system? The subjective evaluation of outcomes possible in the present research enables such questions to be asked and considered more comprehensively than when looking at collective outcomes. Nevertheless, it would be naive in the extreme to answer yes; to the above questions. I hope to convey the way in which the *independence model* where young people are prepared to survive in the harsh and uncharted territory of the adult world is at best optimistic, at worst catastrophic for the young people unable to live independently with a minimum level of support. For Peter after the supported lodgings failed his life and his relationship with the Leaving Care Scheme and other agencies became purely one of managing the crisis. His contact with the Scheme and then his social worker was born out of the necessity to manage periods of homelessness, police involvement and emotional distress. Yet throughout there was the *independence model* ideology where Peter was expected to help himself even when it seemed obvious that he would be unable to do so.

James, Shaun, Emma and Lindsay were also characterised in the *estranged* grouping. With the exception of Lindsay their contact with the Scheme was primarily about managing the crisis: eviction proceedings, police prosecutions, hospitalisation and a range of other calamities. Periods of homelessness were common with Nightstops and hostel accommodation used as emergency accommodation. Support from the Scheme was vital, the thought that it might not have been available could hardly be contemplated without the recognition that these young people would have sunk into an abyss from which their retrieval might have been impossible. On reading Peter's story there might be a tendency to dismiss the assistance he received from the Scheme, this was not my intention when constructing his story. Peter and many other young people, with varying levels of need, received advice and support but it might be that at times the demands made on the services available were simply too great to be met. Therefore, while recognising that managing the crisis is what many parents of troubled young people go through everyday there is still a need to consider the way in which the ideology and subsequent practices of the corporate parent interconnect with the lives of vulnerable young people leaving care.

Shaun like Peter was forced to leave care - he had been educated at a residential school, when his statutory education finished at sixteen he was simply placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. The B & B was not a planned move in conjunction with the Scheme's leaving care process, it was more about misunderstandings around where he would go when he left the residential school with neither the Scheme or the Social Services Department prepared for the move, let alone Shaun. Shaun like Peter accepted his fate but as might be expected at such a young age and with no preparation he was unable to comply with the *independence model* of leaving care support. The following excerpt from field notes shows the unpredictable and hazardous lives some young people experience and thus the Scheme was required to manage the crisis.

Shaun moved out of Darwent House to live with his 'girlfriend'. This now appears to have broken down. Asked staff at the Leaving Care Scheme if they had heard from Shaun. A worker told me that he had received a telephone call from Shaun's social worker informing the project that he was now homeless. The worker's response was that Shaun was and is the responsibility of the Social Worker and the Social Services Department. The treatment Shaun had received to date from the SSD was viewed as

'shabby' and it should be 'them' that pick up the pieces. I do not have any real means of contacting Shaun at the moment, however, the workers seem sure that he will 'turn up'. (field notes)

Shaun moved back into the hostel today.

Shaun still has a room at the hostel although he is about to be evicted due to non-payment of rent. He has not paid any rent since he moved in. Social Services have been approached by the Leaving Care Scheme to pay the arrears because the worker believes that if he still has a base there they may be able to keep track of him. (field notes)

Once again a young person was being passed around within a system but Shaun's experience was subtly different to Peter's in that he seemed to be someone else's problem, although, his story can be likened to Peter's in that Peter also was someone else's responsibility being passed onto the Scheme because the residential workers no longer saw him as their problem. As with Peter the Scheme did give assistance to Shaun in line with their *independence model* picking up the pieces when necessary but this support was purely reactive and it seems fair to ask once again - what if? What if Shaun's movement from the residential school had been organised differently would he have made a better start and thus been able to avoid homelessness and the problems that ensued. Was Shaun's difficulty coping with independence related to his starting points and a system which finds it difficult to organise and manage individual difference? Does the ideology of independence act as a barrier between the corporate parent and the young people influencing the interaction and thus outcomes and life course trajectories?

Alternatives to victim-blaming

Griffin (1993) refers to the *victim-blaming thesis* where specific social problems are storied through an individualizing discourse where blame 'is attributed to the supposedly 'inadequate' characteristics of individuals, 'deviant' family forms or 'deprived' cultures,' (p34). Following the same debate she points out the way in which social problems can be constructed to be the fault of the individual or the consequence of economic and structural conditions. In chapter one I endeavoured to provide an

account of the way in which social policy impacted upon the lives of young people leaving care but later argued within this thesis the need to look at the influence individuals might have in their own lives. Thus the aim was somehow to straddle the individualising and structural debates; to appreciate at the same time the impact of social and economic conditions and take account of the individual life course trajectories and developmental pathways of active young people.

Peter was predominantly unemployed throughout the duration of his participation in this present research: who was to blame? He seemed to think it was him but might that be a consequence of the individualizing discourse where ability and fortitude are deemed to come from within the person. In Chapter Three an interactional model of the life course was outlined where the person and the situation were seen to mediate behaviour. It might be that Peter had individual difficulties reflected in, for example, his educational development thus adding to the already formidable economic and structural hurdle of finding employment. However, to individualise is to fail to accommodate the interactional model of life course where both the situation and the individual are viewed as determining outcomes.

The state provided minimal support in line with its independence model but what of the young people unable to comply? Does the failure to make successful transitions and thus have poor outcomes relate only to the individual? Previous exploration of Peter's storylines pointed toward an appreciation that he might be more exposed and susceptible, than some of the other young people participating in this research, when leaving care. This was linked to starting points and individual difference, yet this was in no way intended to discount the part played by the situation in mediating behaviour. The indicators of psychological estrangement are primarily located within the social environment where the following interpretations can be drawn from Peter's story :

powerlessness - where control over outcomes lies elsewhere - in Peter's case was this not so? He was told when he had to leave care, there was no negotiation.

meaninglessness - where the social world becomes confusing and unpredictable - residential workers led Peter to believe he was valued and then the situation changed.

isolation - when the individual feels separated from the community - unable to find work, life went on around Peter while he 'chilled out in bed' . He was separated from family, residential staff and the adult world that it had been decided it was time he entered.

With *powerlessness, meaningless* and *isolation* as prevailing facets of his life experience it is hard to comprehend how he might have exerted positive influence over his life course trajectories. Therefore, to hold Peter responsible for his outcomes in relation to employment, accommodation, etc., is to negate the situational social context he operated within and the vital part this played in mediating and determining his behaviour.

Staying with the interactional perspective on life course *mastery experiences* was identified as the most effective means of bringing about a keen sense of self-efficacy - a means of believing in one's ability to cope with life and the difficulties that might confront us. Therefore there would be a need to consider the effects on this facet of self-concept when young people continue to fail to live up to the expectations and demands of life after care. When failing to obtain employment, secure and maintain accommodation and cope emotionally the self-efficacy of the individual must take a severe if not fatal battering. When Bandura (1995) *points out that when failures occur before a sense of self-efficacy* has been established there is a more dramatic effect; it has particular resonance for young people leaving care. The life course trajectories of young people unable to live with minimal support who experience a range of failed transitions - employment, education, relationships, accommodation must be significantly effected in terms of self-efficacy. Young people may have had few avenues where they were able to develop efficacy through mastery experiences due to breakdown in family relations, poor educational achievement, etc. Therefore their forced and/or abrupt move into the adult world of independence and the difficulties that ensued may create a life course trajectory where managing the crisis becomes the norm, where control is located elsewhere. The situational demands made upon young people will interact with the young person. Where the demands are too great young people will experience similar distressing outcomes to those in Peter's story.

Furthermore, the relationships young people have with Scheme workers, residential workers, family and friends may all act likewise to impact upon self-efficacy. Those Peter had contact with; professionals, family and friends - all had low expectations regarding his ability to cope, his work

prospects and future outlook. It could be argued that they had good reasons for taking such a pessimistic line but what would need to be considered should be the consequences in terms of *social persuasion*. Social persuasion is yet another way of influencing self-belief whereby if others encourage and exhort belief in a person's ability to master a given activity this will mean that the person will be more likely to try - to make an effort. The young people characterised within the *estranged* grouping may have been unavoidably characterised as vulnerable by those they came into contact with. Nevertheless such characterisations have daunting implications.

Yet, there is more in Peter's story than merely succumbing to the battering - he did manage to influence his life, coming off the medication and making the best of the accommodation at the hostel. It is obvious that changes in the situation regarding his accommodation, the assistance of his social worker and the renewed contact with the residential home and his family influenced the change in his life but Peter was also turning his life around demonstrating the reciprocal nature of experience. Nevertheless, if young people are to be expected to make the transition from being 'looked after' to living independently and then to survive with minimal support earnest consideration should be given to providing young people with an environment which sustains at least the possibility of mastery experiences within a personal climate where encouragement and support are given. Learning survival skills while still 'looked after' such as shopping, budgeting and other life skills is not the same as flying without a net and being picked up, or having to pick yourself up, once you have hit the ground.

The trouble with outcomes

When would an evaluation of outcomes have taken place for Peter? Would it have been when he was unemployed and in supported lodgings, when he was employed and living at his girlfriend's or when he was in prison on remand and later in the psychiatric unit? The fluctuating fortunes of Peter illustrates the problem with assessing outcomes supporting Parker et al's (1991) questioning of when to assess outcomes. A further problem with outcomes is the notion of apportioning some kind of responsibility. The nature of Peter's transition from young person dependent upon residential staff to independent living was marked by a particular ideology which deemed him old enough to cope and if he did not this was about him needing to try harder. The structures were in place to support him and all he needed to do was stay with them but this is highly problematic and assumes a group of

homogeneous young people with a common level of ability. Peter needed more from the corporate parent. He was unable to manage the demands independence made upon him. This was an obvious case where Stanley's (1992) *ideological accounts* had consequences and were evident in material practices.

The social environment for young people leaving care is fraught with pitfalls and problems to be faced. Some of these problems relate to structural issues. Others are more personal where, as with Peter, his changing fortunes in relation to his family had considerable impact. However, consideration needs to be given to the impact on life course trajectories if young people, for whatever reasons, are unable to live up to the expectations of the independence ideology. If young people with a range of needs enter care then it is to be expected that those leaving care would also be similarly diverse. The young people characterised in the *estranged* grouping all experienced serious difficulties coping with the social timing of their independence. The Leaving Care Scheme worked toward trying to help young people take control of their lives but for some this often resulted in managing the crisis. The problem with assessing outcomes is that attributing success or failure does not make any real headway in relation to the accommodation of difference or provide any real possibility in terms of exploring in detail the effects of a simplistic independence ideology.

Chapter Ten

Shattering illusions

The story told in this chapter is Kirsty's. Kirsty, and also Hannah, were interpreted to be in the *actively cautious* characterisation grouping. The characterisations made from Kirsty's first encounter analysis were: *remote, indifferent, reserved, discerning* and *mature*. Her story is one that initially holds the potential for faith in the notion that children can be rescued from poor developmental pathways by being provided with a life course trajectory which is much improved. As her story is told such illusions are shattered and there remains an illustration of the way in which the confines of a young person's life: before they enter care, while 'looked after' and when they have left care, can be instrumental in shaping future life course trajectories. Her story raises particular issues and concerns around the extent to which the life course trajectory of young people might be determined by their past experiences; and the impact of the prevailing social structure they operate within.

However, Kirsty does not present as some vulnerable figure blown about by the fluctuating social conditions she has to endure. Rather her story tells of a young woman who is acutely aware of the circumstances of her life, developing her own individual way of dealing with unchangeable actualities. Kirsty's story is not specifically one of a young person subjected to the social conditions they experience it is one of a young person who does take a measure of control in her life. However, the way in which she takes control is one that might subsequently distance her from essential services and other young people. Kirsty managed her life by keeping those around her at 'arms length' and at one level this proved to be successful but on other levels there were consequences.

Kirsty's Story

Kirsty was nineteen years old when she became a participant in the present research. She was living with her eighteen month old daughter Rachel on a small council estate, built in the late sixties, within walking distance of the town centre. The estate was made up almost entirely of neat, two or three bedroomed houses on tree lined streets with well kept gardens - Kirsty had a two-bedroomed

tenancy. I visited Kirsty over a fourteen month period, managing evenly to space the time in-between contacts.

Like Suzanne, and decidedly unlike Peter, Kirsty remained at the same address and was almost always at home when I had arranged to call. Yet Kirsty was so different from Suzanne; when I first made contact she was very hard to engage in conversation seeming to keep me at 'arm's length'. Distinctive in relation to most other young people I encountered in the present research, Kirsty was neither friendly nor aggressive; she merely seemed aloof and somewhat unfriendly. My interpretation of her distant and moderately unfriendly manner was that she resented my intrusion into her life. I constantly emphasised that she could withdraw from the research, if she felt the need or the desire to do so. Kirsty merely said that it was 'OK', and that she had no problems being involved in the present research, although, when I asked if we might tape an interview she declined. Kirsty was happy for me to write down all that was said but she made it clear that a taped interview was out of the question.

Kirsty had given consent to be contacted in her 'exit interview'. Nevertheless, I was constantly aware, throughout the present study, of researcher/researched issues around power, and the difficulties participants might face when needing to remove themselves from the field of study. I do not underestimate the possibility that she may still have felt unable simply to say 'No' to me but I think this was an instance when I almost completely misread an encounter with a young person. Kirsty was very small, almost elfin in appearance. Her initial ability to maintain an almost flawless facade of indifference and at times disdain was surprising and unnerving to me personally. On reflection her distance was not necessarily about myself and the research I was hoping she would participate in - it was a facet of Kirsty's way of interacting with people; and maybe with life. As her story is told it will become more evident just where this 'arm's length' approach to life may have come from.

Being 'rescued'

Kirsty became 'looked after' when she was nine years old. She was quite terse when explaining the circumstances surrounding her entry into care, concentrating understandably upon the actual reason for her removal from home, rather than some drawn out process.

Kirsty: I was in care cause of me dad, he interfered with me. He got sent to prison for 2 years, he's back in again for doin it to another little girl. (Kirsty became distant so I changed the direction of the conversation) . (handwritten interview)

Her father had sexually abused her from a young age; Kirsty's disclosure resulted in her being placed with a foster parent. This placement was terminated after three months because she was not happy; the family were religious and quite distant toward both Kirsty and her sister, who was also placed with her. At the next foster placement things were greatly improved; Kirsty stayed with her foster parents whom she called 'Mum' and 'Dad' until she moved into her own flat.

To say that Kirsty was rescued sounds so dramatic and impertinent - dramatic in relation to her foster parents and impertinent in respect of her biological family but that seems to be the most logical interpretation to make when constructing Kirsty's story. Her foster parents both had 'professional' occupations and therefore it seems impertinent and condescending in the extreme, especially for Kirsty's parents, to imply that two 'middle class professionals' rescued their daughter. Nevertheless, her foster parents with no children of their own successfully embraced Kirsty into their family. Later in the research, when Kirsty had become far more friendly and open, she showed me photographs of family gatherings, at birthdays and Christmas, when both she and later Rachel were there as an integral part of a happy and caring family.

Kirsty's foster parents supported her during the difficult and prolonged period when she tried to come to terms with what her father had subjected her to. Kirsty's initial disclosure positioned her, in the eyes of her biological family, not as the victim but rather as the cause of some avoidable disaster. Her father and sister blamed her for what happened and Kirsty was willing to accept their version of events; her foster parents helping her to see the injustice of such a view:

Kirsty told me that, 'for years I thought it was me. It took me foster parents four years to convince me that it won't my fault. I used to think did I encourage him.' I ask how old she was when it all started and she says seven or eight and I ask if she thinks she could be responsible at that age. Kirsty says that this is exactly what her foster parents had said but that she used to think it must have been her but that now she can see that 'it's his fault'. Yet she seems concerned that her family and indeed her father

blame her. She told me that when things were bad she thought of suicide. Kirsty told me that even as things are today she is still not happy with her life, she seemed unable to really say what she was dissatisfied with but that she was aware that it could be far better. Just occasionally Kirsty shows you a little more of herself and you can see the isolation and hurt she has experienced and probably still experiences. (field notes)

Kirsty had no contact with her biological father who was in prison when Kirsty began to participate in the research. The contact she had with her biological mother was almost the same with Kirsty neither seeking nor wanting to see her. When she did meet with her mother by chance this was what she had to say:

I asked if she had contact with her natural mother. Kirsty was much less enthusiastic about her (we had been discussing her foster mum) - 'she's scruffy, people say I look like her an I hate it, I suppose I do but I'm not like her.' Kirsty talked of seeing her mum when she was out with her boyfriend, 'he said is that your mum, I thought oh that's just great seein her.' (field notes)

Kirsty seemed to be not only rescued from the sexual abusive environment of her father but from the poverty and stigma she associated with her biological family. Her rescue was not without its consequences. Her sister was also placed with her foster parents but only for a short time, returning to her parents. Kirsty felt that her sister realised she had made a mistake by returning home with the result being that she resented the holidays, new clothes and devoted attention that Kirsty received from her foster parents. Therefore, Kirsty became almost totally estranged from her biological family.

Leaving home

Kirsty moved out of her foster parents' home when she was seventeen; she was not forced to move she simply decided she wanted her independence. She rented a private flat which was viewed as short term transitional accommodation:

Kirsty: I came out of care when I was 17. I just knew I wanted to go. I asked if I could live on me own and they let me. I had a word with me social worker and me foster parents and they agreed.

Int: Where did you live when you first left care?

*Kirsty: Moved to Garforth Street in me own flat - I didn't like it much there. Lots of em were druggies, lots had been in bother, they stole off you and told lies an that. I lived there about a year, but you were only supposed to stay there for 6 months. The landlord he used to walk into the flat - I was scared when I lived there.
(handwritten interview)*

While living at Garforth Street she met Scott; Rachel's father who had also been 'looked after'. Kirsty moved out of the flat where she was afraid, moving nearer to Scott's. Later she shared a flat and ultimately her current council house with him. When I first saw Kirsty she was at the Scheme with Scott. He talked constantly with Kirsty merely supporting or tentatively elaborating on his conversation. Their relationship lasted just over two years resulting in him leaving after having had 'an affair' with Kirsty's sister.

Kirsty: He had an affair with my sister. She was on the streets and I let her move in, that's really good in't it. I'm better off without him, I didn't think so at the time but I do now. Now I know he was no good - gamblin and that. My foster mum she said that she didn't like him, I wish she had told me that before. (handwritten interview)

The tenancy was in Kirsty's name therefore his leaving created no accommodation problems but she was left to cope on her own with a small child. However, Scott gave little or no care to Rachel with Kirsty explaining that, 'He never looked after her or owt it was always me, he couldn't be bothered with her - he should have done his fair share. I just got into the habit of doin it all meself.' Kirsty also said that Rachel was placed on a Supervision Order 'because of Scott'. Kirsty went on to explain how, in a past relationship, Scott had physically abused a child and this resulted in the Order relating to Rachel. Whenever the conversation drifted toward Scott and the Supervision Order Kirsty became cautious

and wary. I made a point of not broaching the issue but Kirsty wanted to tell me about Rachel's social worker and thus the subject would be raised. I always got a sense that there was more to know but that I had been told as much as she felt able to tell. During one conversation Kirsty spoke of Scott's behaviour toward Rachel.

Kirsty said that he (Scott) had done something to Rachel, he had got angry at her when she would not take her food, 'he forced her to eat it and got really mad, cos she wouldn't take it he shoved her in the cot and left her. She had some food stuck in her throat and she could have choked if I hadn't been there.' (field notes)

Kirsty stayed at home taking care of Rachel. Her remoteness was only sometimes evident in her behaviour toward Rachel, when Kirsty might become irritable and/or dismissive. The majority of her day was taken up caring for Rachel who was a chatty and demanding toddler therefore Kirsty's need to distance herself at times was understandable. Kirsty told me that she had '*always wanted to have children*' and she seemed not to have similar concerns to Suzanne in relation to her being a 'young mother'. A sense of being under surveillance was, however, an ever present factor in her life. Rachel had a social worker who came to '*check up*' on her progress; once then later twice a week. For Kirsty this had a number of consequences. She talked of, '*feeling trapped*' by the Supervision Order and of the social worker '*being against*' her. Her view was that it was Scott who had been the guilty party but she who had been blamed.

Her foster parents had a holiday home which Kirsty and Rachel used to visit with them. For Kirsty this was an escape from the social worker's constant surveillance.

Kirsty says that Rachel's social worker is still calling but that this is a 'real nuisance'. 'My mum takes me to Whitby so I can be free of her. I'm always watched while I'm here, cos of needin a psychologist because of me dad and cause of Scott.' This is a recurrent issue for Kirsty with her feeling that she is under surveillance, however, she feels that this might be warranted, 'They need to see if I'm a good parent to Rachel cos of Scott & that.' (field notes)

Kirsty was not without insight in relation to the social worker saying that she recognised the need to be sure Rachel was safe. She was also aware that Rachel's social worker could be a source of vital practical support. Rachel went twice weekly to a 'Pre-fives' group, organised by her social worker. At these sessions Kirsty could also go along to discuss any problems she might be experiencing or simply to socialise. These sessions were clouded by her belief that the workers who ran the group were watching her; *'there's always somebody checkin up on me, they (Pre-fives) tell the social worker what I'm like.'* Yet, it was Rachel's social worker who made Kirsty aware of her right to compensation due to the harm her father had inflicted. Rachel's social worker ensured that her case was dealt with efficiently resulting in her receiving a significant sum of money. It was also this same social worker who notified Kirsty of her father's impending release from prison. Nevertheless, her feelings were very much resigned to seeing Rachel's social worker as judge and jury rather than advocate and helping hand.

Kirsty's opting to take the negative view in relation to her social worker was grounded in her past experiences, with her saying that she had always had social workers in her life and that she was 'fed-up' with them. Kirsty also spoke of her time with her foster parents and of feeling resentful of the need for foster parents to gain permission from *Social Services* before she could stay the night at a friend's house, saying that, *'mum and dad had to have me friend's parents checked out before I could stay an that made me feel really small when they had finished. It takes em weeks an months too.'* She went on to describe a more recent instance involving her then current partner Dave.

Like with Dave there was nothin wrong an so he used to stop over without em knowing.'
Kirsty then went on to recount times when Dave had stayed over and pretended to the social worker that he had just been upstairs to use the toilet when he had actually just got out of bed. All this was said with Kirsty checking with me that I would not tell Social Services. I asked what she thought would have happened if Social Services had found out about Dave staying over. She said, 'I'd have got blamed and they would have threatened to take Rachel or stop me seeing Dave.' (field notes)

The telling of this incident shows how vulnerable Kirsty feels and the way in which she perceives the social worker to be somehow holding her to ransom - actually to be a threat. Indeed the social worker

was seen by Kirsty to endanger her whole identity as Rachel's mother with her saying, '*Sometimes I feel like they're the mother and I'm just the childminder. I'm trapped in a prison with that order.*'

Living on the edge of a community

I mentioned earlier that Kirsty lived on a neat tree-lined street. This was in contrast to the homes of other young people participating in the research, who lived in far less conducive environments. The neighbours on both sides of Kirsty were elderly. When I asked how she found them she said:

Kirsty: They're old bids. I keep mesen to mesen. They came round and complained once when Rachel was upset. It's OK round here though no real rough people an I have a garden at the back an one at the front. It's not easy though I don't like gardenin an that so it gets a bit of a mess. Me mum (foster mum) would help me but she can't do everything. (handwritten interview)

Kirsty's house was markedly different from others on the street in that her garden did not have the same cultivated look. On one occasion there was a large sofa in the middle of the front lawn. When she received the compensation she had bought new things for the house but had real problems getting the old things removed. In terms of 'fitting in' with the community where she lived it was difficult for Kirsty. She was a young single mother whose garden was '*a bit of a mess*', not helped by the sofa on the lawn. Her foster mum helped Kirsty to decorate the living room and they were in the process of brightening up the depressingly dark kitchen. Decorating like everything else costs money and Kirsty experienced problems managing on the benefits she received.

Kirsty did say that Christmas had been difficult as she had lots of presents to buy and there was the trouble with the phone bill. This clearly demonstrates how benefits enable young people to live but do not enable access to the more fun things that are expected and taken for granted. She said that she managed to get most things at Aldi, (a shop selling basic food and household supplies at prices much cheaper than Tesco, Asda, etc.) cos it's cheap.' However, she said this made her feel 'cheap' in

some way. I asked her to elaborate and she said that, 'well most people don't have to live like that do they?' (field notes)

Kirsty spoke of the future and wanting a life with 'no hassles' and of going to work in order to access a better life but like many young people leaving care she left school with no formal qualifications. She wanted to go to work but was aware of how difficult it might be; not only in terms of securing work but also because of the confines of her life with Rachel. Kirsty talked of Rachel in terms of restricting her life:

'I want to go to work but I can't cos of Rachel. I don't go out anywhere an so I'm with her all day an we get on each others nerves. If I had a job she'd be with someone else in the day an she'd be tired when she came home so she'd go to sleep.' (field notes)

Kirsty spoke of pressure in relation to caring for Rachel. She said that taking Rachel to Pre-fives twice a week just wasn't enough. At this time Kirsty no longer had contact with her social worker as the Supervision Order had been discharged. Her manner did not appear desperate rather a little miserable. Her foster parents provided invaluable practical and emotional assistance. Nevertheless, Kirsty was the one who had to live a life with very few friends (she didn't seem to have any enduring friendships) in an environment where she was safe but very isolated; almost on the periphery of a community. Kirsty took Rachel to Pre-fives and went into town shopping but she didn't seem to have any other involvement with people her own age. I did ask if she had made any friends who might call round to visit and she said, *'No. I like to keep myself to myself, it's best that way no trouble.'*

Nevertheless, she did have an ongoing relationship. When I first started to contact Kirsty - Scott had moved out and she had recently met Dave. It seems odd to place her relationship with Dave so late in her story but that maybe reflects the rather superfluous way in which Kirsty seemed to convey his impact upon her life. He first stayed at Kirsty's on a regular basis, maybe once or twice a week but he didn't actually move in. Kirsty explained that:

'I don't want Dave to live here - I can't cope with a man livin here. I lived with Scott for too long. He's happy just stayin at his mother's.' Kirsty went on to tell me that since her holiday (with her foster parents) she has been tired and that Rachel has been

waking up very early and therefore she has been falling asleep rather than having sex with Dave. I said that maybe he'd understand and Kirsty laughed and said that it was her fault and that he shouldn't have to 'put up with that.' I suppose this provides insight into her relationship with Dave - he stays with her on his terms which she has told me do not involve housework or caring for Rachel.

I asked if Dave knew about her father. She said that he did but that they didn't talk about it because, 'Dave can't stand things like that .' (field notes)

At my next visit things had changed with Dave living at Kirsty's, 'he got really fed up at home and so he came here.' I asked her if she was fine with this. Her reply was somewhat mixed, if not a little resigned. She spoke of not really wanting someone to be there all the time after Scott, 'He was there all the time, twenty four hours a day and it got on me nerves, it was my fault too I didn't trust him.' Kirsty talked of finding it difficult to trust men and said that men could not be trusted to 'say no to women'. On at least two occasions when I called round in the afternoon Dave was still in bed. Kirsty was irritated by this but relating it to his being unemployed. However, Kirsty was seriously concerned regarding her benefits if it should be discovered that Dave was staying with her. Her financial situation did not improve with Dave's taking up residence; Kirsty spoke of him often being short of money and of her loaning him small amounts 'to see him through'.

When my contact with Kirsty concluded she was still living with Dave although she gave the impression that this was not really going anywhere. Rachel, Kirsty and I went to MacDonald's for a burger on my last visit. Our relationship had changed considerably; I can't say that Kirsty was exuberant and responsive but she was friendly telling me about her family (foster family) and asking about mine. I think she trusted me to listen without judging her and to tell her story in a way she would not feel offended by. Nevertheless, even now as I construct her story I am not sure that I ever knew her in anything like the way her foster parents did; I don't think I was ever really allowed more than the briefest glimpse behind Kirsty's facade of indifference and restraint.

Leaving behind the ideology of rescue

It is so easy to become beguiled by the ideology of child rescue. The image of a delicate little girl being taken from the abusive clutches of her perverted father and being set down within a kind and loving family is gratifying to countenance in Kirsty's story. Her foster parents did, without doubt, commit themselves to providing a much better life for both Kirsty, and later Rachel. The corporate parent managed to secure Kirsty affectionate and benevolent foster parents, nonetheless, we should try to look beyond the innocuous ideology of rescue and consider the confines of Kirsty's life when she moved on to live independently.

As with other stories I return to the concept of outcomes where Kirsty's might be measured in both a positive and negative light. She was only seventeen when she had Rachel, choosing a partner who, similar to her father, exhibited abusive behaviour toward children. Kirsty did manage to maintain stable accommodation and cope, on the whole, with the financial demands of living on benefits. Nevertheless, her child was on a Supervision Order being visited regularly by a social worker. Did the corporate parent rescue Kirsty or did it merely offer her a providential interlude making her better able to cope when she returned to commence her expected life course trajectory? In the analysis to follow I will try to look behind the ideology of rescue drawing on the way in which Kirsty was able to negotiate her life after care.

Connectedness and boundaries

In the previous chapter the way in which young people faltered in their efforts to make a success of their life after care was linked with a lack of connectedness. Young people located within the *estranged* characterisation grouping were without any significant family contact and/or support. I did imply that it was problematic trying to replace family support with professional, leaving care provision. However, evident throughout Kirsty's story were two people who were for Kirsty far more than 'carers'. Her foster parents provided more than some kind of designated, paid care taking role. Seldom, if ever, *did she bring her birth parents into the conversation rather it was her foster parents who were referred*

to and chatted about. Her foster parents became her parents; for Kirsty they seemed to replace her biological parents providing vital connectedness.

If the placement was so successful then why did she leave home at seventeen and why did she refer to her move as coming 'out of care'? This would suggest that however successful the foster placement might be there remains a tacit acceptance that the relationship is built upon a contractual understanding with set boundaries. The boundaries for Kirsty were that she would leave when she became old enough to live independently. Unlike Peter, Kirsty seemed aware and responsive to the boundaries set by the corporate parenting system. It might be thought that she simply moved out of her foster parents because she wanted to be independent - this may have been the case; Kirsty may have been influenced by the ideology of independence. However, she told of being afraid in her flat and of the dangerous environment she was living in but she did not seem to contemplate returning to her foster placement. It might have been that her foster parents would have enabled Kirsty to return to live with them; equally so the opposite may have been the case. The point to be made is - did Kirsty feel able to push back the boundaries of the corporate parent? This question remains unanswered. *It would have been inappropriate for me to have asked such a difficult and maybe intrusive question.* What seems apparent is that Kirsty was different from other young people leaving home (Young, 1987, Banks *et al*, 1989) in that she was leaving her 'foster' home and that meant no going back.

Boundaries appeared also to have existed for her foster parents. What did it mean for her foster parents entering into such a tenuous parenting role? Kirsty became involved with Scott and it seems evident that her foster parents, most especially for Kirsty her foster mum, did not voice any kind of opinion regarding their relationship. When things went disastrously wrong and Scott was no longer on the scene her foster mum told Kirsty that she had little regard for him. Kirsty said that she wished her foster mum had spoke earlier illustrating the delicate relationships that probably exist between foster parents and foster children. It might be that both Kirsty and her foster parents were conscious of the inherent boundaries of corporate parenting, although it may be argued that this kind of tenuous relationship is part and parcel of parenting any adolescent. However, I mentioned earlier the contractual nature of foster parenting, it would be very hard not to recognise that once Kirsty had left care the formal contract had been terminated.

Even so; her foster parents managed to give immense and sensitive support to Kirsty. The care she received from her foster parents was in contrast to her past life. Kirsty's young life by any standards had been abominable. Poverty of itself should not be categorised as abominable but this was augmented by a lack of care and a father who sexually abused his small daughter and then sought to blame her. Kirsty, with a complete lack of drama which made her comment all the more potent, said that she had thought of committing suicide. It would be foolish to formulate some causal link between Kirsty managing to avoid attempting suicide and her foster parents as significant others. Nonetheless, when we consider the other young people who hurt themselves in the present study; all were experiencing varying degrees of family unconnectedness. Rachel and Lindsay were totally disconnected from their families with Suzanne, James and Tara having only rare, often conflictual contact. Smith, Cox and Saradjian (1998, p22) say that 'the emotional care' received after a traumatic experience will have a great effect upon a person's ability to cope and thus avoid self-harming behaviour. Therefore, the emotional support Kirsty received from her foster parents may have had untold reverberations in terms of her avoiding the potentially disastrous life course trajectory associated with self harming. In addition they provided support when coping with the more everyday responsibilities.

I made the point that Kirsty's foster parents became her 'real' parents; in that capacity they provided a '*supported transition*' (Jones, 1995, p80-101). Jones refers to the '*family function*' of helping young people make the transition from dependent child to independent adult thus providing a supported transition. She also maintains that the state has increased the economic dependency of young people therefore increasing the reliance of young people on family support especially when making the transition to live independently. Kirk *et al* (1991) suggested that a young person would need at least £1,500 for essential furniture and equipment. The leaving care grant in Kirsty's local authority was £500 and when you add to this the fact that the house was in serious need of decorating it seems woefully inadequate. Kirsty was able to call on her foster parents for financial support when necessary. The practical assistance they provided in relation to decorating and looking after Rachel should also be taken into account and seen as a vital part of her supported transition.

Kirsty was distinct in this respect regarding her supported transition. Even those young people who communicated a sense of connectedness and more positive relations with their family did not have access to such levels of emotional, financial and practical support. Janine had contact with her mum

which did involve limited practical support in relation to child care and also a more personal, emotional aspect but this was to a certain extent obstructed by the difficult relationship with her step-father who had previously physically abused her. It was the same for Beth who also received a measure of support from her mum but in the background lurked her step-father who had played a major role in her being admitted into care. Hannah and Tara also had limited contact with their families. For Hannah with her mum, and Tara her aunt; again this was limited and did not in any way provide a sense of the supported transition Kirsty's story imparts. Nine of the young people participating in the present study had been placed with foster parents and although some did have prolonged contact it was only Kirsty who receive continual and often unsolicited support. It might be that the unsolicited nature of the support Kirsty received from her foster parents was critical. Support from the corporate parent in the form of Scheme assistance and involvement is primarily support which is solicited by procedures or by the young person seeking help. Here support is about 'service users' and 'services delivery'. This is so different from the support that transpires from affectionate and caring close family where assistance is given rather than sought. Suzanne's story conveys the way in which she felt offended and hurt when she wasn't given support from the Scheme but was expected to seek it.

Kirsty's foster parents provided a sense of connectedness and a supported transition while the Scheme offered a transition with support. The with support seems crucial, being based upon the young person seeking assistance when necessary. The reality for Suzanne and others was that they were unable and/or unwilling to seek out support which they felt should have been provided in a far less philanthropic and consequentially demeaning manner. Once again we come up against the independence ideology which appears to be ingrained within the state parenting system. The social expectation of young people being able to cope on their own not only permeates the state system and thus the support it offers; there is also the consequence of young people interacting with such an ideology.

The ideology of independence may work to distance young people from services provided to support them. If a young person needs to seek out leaving care services does this situate them as failing to comply with the ideology of independence? Therefore, are young people unwilling to solicit services from a distant and diffident corporate parent because to do so is to admit failure. This is not meant to imply that Scheme workers were found to be in any way distant and diffident, more that the ideology surrounding not only the services they provide but the whole concept of independence

creates veiled obstacles for young people leaving care. Biehal *et al* (1995, p297) talk of 'entitlements' and a 'needs led service' where young people's choices are maximised. This maybe moves some way to addressing this issue of seeking out services yet the ideological impact of independence is still left intact.

Returning to Kirsty; she had the support of her foster parents and thus she rarely sought out Scheme assistance. The Scheme had been involved in her securing the council tenancy and assisted when she moved into the house but in terms of her daily life and in relation to her isolated position she had little if any connection with the Scheme. Her way of interacting, keeping herself to herself, ensured that she did not seek assistance or have any significant connection with leaving care services. She had the connection with her foster parents but she seemed reluctant to make other connections which might have brought her into contact with other young people and enabled her to in some way reduce her isolation. Kirsty seemed to be not only aware of the boundaries of corporate parenting in relation to her foster parents. There appear to have been other boundaries where she avoided making connections with services.

Living life at a distance

I have thus far presented Kirsty's story as one determined very much by the prevailing ideologies within her social world. It is so easy when trying to make visible the way in which a young person might negotiate their developmental pathways to place the analysis at a socio-structural and a socio-cultural level. However, within her story there is an explicit storyline which shows Kirsty to have impact in her own life, opening up another avenue of analysis in relation to why she may not have sought to make connection with Scheme services.

When I began to tell Kirsty's story I explained the way in which she kept me at 'arm's length'. For Kirsty this seemed to be a consistent way in which she interacted with those around her. This was not something that I encountered among other young people participating in the research, other than with Kirsty and Hannah who were both deemed to be within the *actively cautious* characterisation groupings. Maintaining contact with Hannah was arduous and therefore I have much less information to base comparisons upon, nevertheless, there are certain similarities in their stories that warrant

acknowledgement. Hannah had, similar to Kirsty, been involved with social services from quite a young age and she too had a child who had been placed on a Supervision Order. Just as Kirsty spoke of keeping herself to herself, Hannah accessed services reluctantly preferring to manage on her own. When making these observations of caution and distance relating primarily to Hannah and Kirsty, I do not intend to imply that other young people participating in the study were never cautious about who I was and what I might be about. Such a view would be incredulous in the extreme and probably untrue, however, most young people seemed to relax and feel able to talk relatively unguarded. Kirsty did become more friendly and accessible but always I was aware of her maintaining a certain distance - of her keeping herself to herself as she puts it.

By drawing on Runyan's (1982) interactional model of life course a degree of insight can be made into why Kirsty and possibly Hannah may have taken such a position. I return to his conceptualisation of life course as a sequence of processes: *behaviour-determining*, *person-determining* and *situation determining*. Kirsty's past experiences, her past sequence of interactions, seemed to have had considerable impact in relation to her, then current, way of interacting. The abhorrent behaviour of her father may have been highly instrumental in terms of Runyan's *person-determining* processes. At a young age her interactions with other people were treacherous and damaging and thus her distancing behaviour could be interpreted as a consequence of past trauma. The processes and procedures of corporate parenting may also have played a significant part in the *person-determining* processes with its muted but, nevertheless, omnipresent contractual footing. Indeed can any young person parented by the state feel totally secure or is there always a need to keep a distance?

Her *sequence of interactions* with Rachel's social worker were founded upon needing to create a distance. However, this 'arms length' approach seems to have been more intense. The never voiced anxiety for Suzanne was thought to be that a social worker might take her children. Kirsty gave voice to her fears and also to the frustration she experienced; being fearful of the consequences of letting the social worker too near. She explained how if the social worker had known of Dave's staying the night at her home Rachel might be removed by the social worker and later she said, '*Sometimes I feel like they're the mother and I'm just the childminder. I'm trapped in a prison with that order.*' Might it be that Kirsty's guarded approach to life might simply be her way of dealing with the apprehension and disappointment her life course pathways have necessitated to date. Her past experiences and her present life situation continue to determine Kirsty as a person and the behaviour she exhibited.

Kirsty was *actively cautious* in her interactions not only with strangers but also in her close relationship with Dave and to a certain extent with her foster parents.

However, was Kirsty really so different from Suzanne or was it more that Kirsty the individual found a different way of coping with a similar but not the same set of circumstances. The contrast between the way Suzanne sought to be approved of by those around her, the way that she presented the happy functioning family, can be compared with Kirsty's behaviour which was far less approval seeking. For Kirsty the situation had been both behaviour and person determining. However, if I take Runyan's explanation for *situation determining* processes whereby people select, create, and influence the situations they encounter I would hope to persuade the reader of Kirsty having had influence in her own life. Kirsty was effective in managing her relationship with the social worker in a way that enabled her to cope. She also managed her relationship with her foster parents, in that possibly by keeping a certain distance she was better able to cope with the inevitability of 'moving on'. Her relationship with Dave while being founded upon a certain passivity did seem to suggest that she continued to maintain her 'arms length' approach to life. The way in which he was a side issue in her story I believe reflects the role he played in her life.

Although I have made visible an interpretation of the way in which Kirsty appeared to influence the situations she encountered and have placed this in a positive light there were also consequences. I spoke earlier of how Kirsty was isolated and found it problematic making connections that might be helpful: Scheme contact, friends of her own age, people living around her. I don't want to imply that Kirsty was solely responsible for her isolation but her way of interacting was to a certain extent *situation-determining*. This brings the issue of solicited assistance back into the analysis. If Kirsty's sequence of interactions to date have been *behaviour-determining* and *person-determining* in the way I suggest then this might offer insight into why some young people choose not to access leaving care services. Not only is there an explanation rooted in an independence ideology there is an additional one indicating that some young people are *actively cautious* and thus they negotiate their pathways in line with such caution. By operating an *independence model* of support the corporate parent, in this local authority, may run the risk of further confining those young people who have learned to 'live life at a distance'.

Rescued but no escape

I implied earlier that the image of child rescue is questionable. Kirsty was irrefutably saved from the unthinkable prospect of a continuation of the sexual abuse her father subjected her to. Once she moved into her own flat, leaving the security of her foster home, her life became hardly any different from that of any other care leaver: hazardous accommodation, unemployment, early parenthood and financial hardship. Is Kirsty's story really that different from Peter's - was she too misled by the corporate parent? Kirsty was shown a different life but once she left care she was returned to the confines of the social norms relating to her gender and social class.

Her foster parents may have alleviated the worst excesses of her position but they couldn't change the structural and social context of her environment. Managing on benefits with little prospect of any change in the near future was problematic for almost all of the young people participating in the research not only those young people involved in the biographical phase but also at the 'exit interview' stage. However, it might be argued that Kirsty was in a more secure position than many young people in that she had the support of her foster parents. The contractual nature of foster parenting was to an extent overcome, however, Kirsty did speak of not expecting too much from her foster parents and therefore generally she managed on benefits alone. Kirsty's life experiences, cared for by the corporate parent, had failed to secure her more than a basic education thus making finding employment difficult. Kirsty did imply that she went to a 'Special School' but seemed reluctant to say more, it may have been that the state in the form of her foster parents did make a difference in relation to her educational attainment. Nevertheless, she was subsequently caught up in what appears to be the gendered life course trajectory for female care leavers; that of motherhood.

In terms of understanding more fully the impact of her gendered social position there is a need to look in more depth at her relationships with the men in her life - Scott and Dave. Her expectations in relation to partners were of a particular kind. Griffin (1985) in her research with '*young working class women*' raises the way in which the young women she interviewed were pressured into heterosexual relationships. There was no sense in which heterosexuality was a chosen sexual preference it was simply predestined. She makes reference to other feminist writers who had referred to this predestined life course trajectory as 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980, Rubin, 1975 cited in

Griffin, 1985). When reading Kirsty's story it is very hard to feel any sense of her making choices when entering her relationship with Scott, and then later Dave. There seemed to be more of an expectation that she would follow a path already mapped-out for her, one that specified; women engage in heterosexual relationships. In her story there is a great sense of inevitability in that her relationships are not founded upon any kind of deliberate agenda setting regarding what she might want, rather it feels as though they: Dave and Scott, happen to her.

Tara was in a comparable position to Kirsty in that she too lived in a council tenancy, caring for her small son from a past relationship. She was also lonely and isolated feeling trapped by her circumstances. Tara had a brief sexual relationship with a neighbour which similar to Kirsty's intimate relations exhibited no real sense of choice. There was more an awareness of the inevitability of heterosexual relations which Tara hoped would fill an emotional void.

Her 'ex' is still refusing to cooperate with the CSA. She said little about him but she did say that she 'needed a man.' I asked what she meant by this and she went on to tell me that she wasn't really sure, 'I don't even like sex so it's not that but I just feel I need a man to be about - you know it gets lonely on your own. You need someone to come home to and talk to.' (field notes)

The next door neighbour is also still on the scene. Tara said that she had not seen him for several weeks because she thought that he was just coming next door whenever he wanted a 'shag'. She said that she had told him this and he had stayed away. However, last night he had arrived with two bottles of Hooch and she let him stay. She told me that she is lonely and she needed the company. (field notes)

Tara managed to disentangle herself from the neighbour who merely wanted a 'shag' but she was desperately lonely. A couple of months later Mark moved in. Mark was in the process of undergoing gender reassignment and as a consequence both Tara and Mark were subjected to taunts and gibes from neighbours. Mark presented himself as a male yet both Tara and Mark had to overcome the intolerance of those around them who were familiar with Mark's former name and gender. Mark's gender reassignment was a complete divergence from the social norm of heterosexual relations between one male and one female. To those around them they were doubly different in that they

were at that time physically two women having a lesbian relationship, this was then made more distinct in that one of the women was in the process of becoming a man. If we return to the notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality' it might be argued that with time they would fulfil the requirements but I can't imagine that they would so easily be allowed to mould into the background. Tara's story shows the way in which there is a price to be paid for taking a different pathway in life.

Except for Tara, all the young women participating in the biographical research entered into heterosexual relationships with men. Some of these relationships were short lived and others more enduring. It was not the duration of the relationship that generated interest in terms of analysis, rather it was the foundations they seemed to be based upon. Kirsty seemed to have expected very little from her relationships but was willing somehow to acquiesce to the role of submissive homemaker and compliant sexual object. When talking about Scott she was aware of his shortcomings: having a relationship with her sister, not sharing the care of Rachel and of his being abusive toward children. Nevertheless, she says that it was her *'fault too'*. She perceived that she should share the blame for the failed relationship. Was this willingness to accept the blame born out of a retrospective analysis of the situation or did it relate to the gendered nature of Kirsty's experience and interpretation of the social role of women?

Her relationship with Dave was also founded upon a continuation of the unequal relationship she had with Scott. He lived in her house even though she was unsure about her own desire for him to do so. She felt guilty for falling asleep after having had a long day with Rachel. Instead of falling asleep she felt that she should have fulfilled her sexual obligations toward Dave. Even in relation to what her father subjected her to she seemed to have been expected not to talk about such a dreadful experience because Dave might feel offended. What seemed prevalent for Kirsty was that her relationships were characterised by 'non-reciprocity' (Halson, 1991). She would take a passive part in servicing Dave's sexual needs but in turn her needs could remain unmet with both Dave and Scott taking no part in caring for Rachel, nor sharing her considerable emotional burden. I say passive in relation to servicing Dave's sexual needs because this also seems to characterise her relationship with him in that she does not seem to make any choices rather she passively goes along with what is happening.

Kirsty was not alone in this non-reciprocal arrangement. Only two of the young women with children: Janine and Suzanne, received help caring for the children and a degree of understanding in relation to how their past might intrude upon their present lives. When making this observation I do not suggest that their relationships were idyllic but at least there was a sense of reciprocity. However, does non-reciprocity and passivity offer an authentic interpretation of Kirsty's relationship with both Dave and possibly Scott? Dave shared Kirsty's home but rather than contributing by helping with the care of Rachel and the cost of maintaining their home he borrowed money from her and placed her future income in jeopardy. It might be that her relationship is better characterised as one based upon exploitation but her story also conveys Kirsty as having some control. Although she expects little in the way of emotional or practical support, she holds the tenancy and she doesn't appear to place too much store in his presence, which may be a facet of Kirsty's distancing. This ability somehow to maintain control is not one to be found so readily in the stories of some of the other young women in the present research.

Lindsay's story also conveys a relationship based upon her providing a comfortable home but as with Kirsty's story she received very little from her partner in the form of emotional support. Unlike Kirsty she seemed to have had very little control and the extent to which she was exploited by her partner was disturbing.

Lindsay told me that Dennis gives her £5 per week pocket money and that he keeps the rest to pay bills and buy food. I asked if she was happy with this and she shrugs her shoulders saying that, 'you can't buy much with £5 can you.' Lindsay is always dressed in very old looking and unfashionable clothes for such a young woman. This as much as anything else sets her apart from the other young people at the Scheme.

The most striking thing about her is her complete lack of any self worth. She tells me that he (Dennis) is violent toward her. After the incident with the man, (she had got drunk and spent the night at another man's flat) when she came home he beat her and shouted abuse to her outside the flat in full view of the neighbours. Lindsay views this as what she deserves, 'I asked for it.'

Lindsay also spoke of another man, a friend of Dennis's', trying to have sex with her. Throughout the conversation this is related as her fault and the fact that she must do something that makes this happen. Later she said , 'Dennis does his best but he can be hard to live with too. He hits me sometimes and says it's for me own good.' (field notes)

For Lindsay the acceptance of a heterosexual relationship, offering very little in terms of emotional comfort, seems to be a facet of a relationship built upon absolute control. This control was absolute to the extent that her needs were not considered to have any kind of currency; they were completely submerged beneath those of the man who beat her and took her money, handing out 'pocket money' but giving nothing to Lindsay and plundering any self-esteem she might have possessed.

It seems obvious that Kirsty's relationship with Dave was far removed from Lindsay's. Nonetheless, there are parallels to be drawn. It might be that Lindsay's partner was a brutal and callous individual but it might also be said that for both Kirsty and Lindsay a similar set of expectations held sway in that neither had any significant awareness that a heterosexual relationship might be based upon a more reciprocal arrangement.

Changing life course trajectories

The realisation that Kirsty seems to have expected so little from Scott and Dave brings us back to the ideology of rescue and life course trajectories. Kirsty did stay with foster parents who it might have been hoped could, and would, make a immense difference to her developmental pathways and subsequent life course trajectories, in comparison to other young people leaving care. This observable change appears not to have taken place but there are some instances in her story that might be interpreted as offering an understanding of why her life course trajectories remained similar to other care leavers. I indicated earlier the way in which the corporate parenting system is based upon young people being aware of the contractual nature of their care. For Kirsty this may have accounted for not only the way in which she viewed her stay at her foster parents as being 'in care' but also may explain why she left at seventeen. Also, there is the way in which her foster parents felt unable to interfere with her life when they felt things should have been different. This maybe reflects the contractual relationship that may have existed for all concerned.

Kirsty's story also demonstrates how the lives young people experienced before they entered the care of the corporate parent cannot be omitted from any attempt to understand outcomes. Nor can the sobering acceptance that once young people reach an age of 'maturity' they will be expected to move on, or as was the case for Kirsty move 'back' to the structural confines of the care leaver. However, one of the most forceful storylines within Kirsty's story and the subsequent analysis is that she takes a degree of control. Kirsty developed a strategy for managing the situations confronting her; this may arguably be a reactive strategy rather than any kind of planned enterprise. Nevertheless, the effects of her distancing strategy can be located within Bandura's (1986) reciprocal determinism where the relationship between the external environment, internal personal factors and behaviour interact.

Chapter Eleven

Getting on with living in the present

In this chapter I tell the last of the four stories which aimed to present young people's experiences in a more comprehensive and illustrative way. This final story is Beth's; she was characterised in the *positively active* grouping where her first encounter was coded as: *committed and caring, tenacious, sensitive, indifferent* and *angrily frustrated*. Many of the themes present in the lives of Suzanne, Peter and Kirsty can be seen to be echoed within Beth's story. Beth had heterosexual relationships which, similar to Kirsty and other young women included in the biographical phase, appear not to have been founded upon a basis of reciprocal support. She also appeared to subscribe to the independence ideology of Scheme support where she sought help when necessary which might often be related to 'managing the crisis'. However, there are some dramatic differences within Beth's story when compared with those told earlier. Beth's story tells of a changing landscape where she does not seem to be engaged in constructing her account within the past. Her life was impacted upon by both the past and the social context within which she operated. Nevertheless she seemed to be actively influencing her life course trajectories in a way which was distinctive. However, when her outcomes are evaluated in the objective sense Beth's outcomes become almost indiscernible from Suzanne's or Kirsty's - a child, a home and responsibilities. Once again the diversity of experience and the differing interactional nature of the life course are found to be obscured behind the 'official knowledge' reading of their lives. Hopefully as Beth's story is told the unsatisfactory nature of such a view will become apparent.

Beth's Story

For a number of reasons it was very difficult finding a point at which to begin Beth's story both in a practical and a reflexive sense. The obvious way in which the past played a part in constructing the present for other young people was not so evident in Beth's own account. Therefore, while being conscious of a need to explain Beth's past I was also mindful of the way in which, for her, the past did

not seem a defining factor. This sense that her life was not constructed around the past meant that I was uneasy presenting her life in a chronological manner, as this might give an emphasis which Beth had not conveyed. Moreover, with Suzanne and Kirsty their observable starting points, in relation to the research, also their lives had similarities when the research ended. Both had children, a home and the emotional and practical responsibilities that engendered their lives. I was able to contact them at the same place and I could be reasonably confident that their lives would not have changed entirely when I next visited them. Even with Peter there were periods of stability when contacting him became less problematic. With Peter there was also the residential home who could be relied upon to maintain some kind of link with him. For Beth it was very different her life might change dramatically in what seemed to be an instant.

Beth was eighteen when she first became a participant in the research. She had been 'living independently for a little over a year. I stayed in contact with Beth for a period of eighteen months during which time I might see her often - at the Scheme or she might be with other young people participating in the research. However, there were times when it became almost impossible to make contact or to keep abreast of the continual moves and differing directions her life might take. There was no sense of permanence to her life only continual disruption and movement. However, Beth was not like Peter, as her story is told it becomes evident that she had far more influence regarding the directions of her life. Beth did not so easily accept the pathways others might contrive for her, nor did she appear to feel the censure of other people in the way that Suzanne, and to an extent Kirsty, seemed to have done. Indeed the 'first encounter' presented in chapter five clearly demonstrates the way in which Beth was not readily swayed from the course of action she had decided upon.

Imposing a starting point

I implied that I did not feel comfortable telling her story in a chronological fashion, however, I think it prudent to explain Beth's reasons for becoming 'looked after' and her care experiences. When I impose this starting point for her story I am very conscious that this was not how her story unfolded during the research. She did not feel the need to explain or enlighten me regarding her past- why should she? Indeed, Beth did not refer to her past in the way other young people appear to have done; seeming rather to be getting on with living in the present. Even though it might be said that her

present was aligned to and arguably in many respects determined by her past, Beth did not seem to dwell on such issues.

Prior to entering 'care' Beth lived with her mum, two younger sisters and her step-father. Beth and her brother were children from a previous marriage having no contact with their biological father. Her brother did not live at home, he was physically and mentally disabled, at that time attending a residential school. She spoke affectionately of Jason, looking forward to visiting him and seeing him at Christmas and other holidays. Beth attributed her relationship with her step-father as the main cause of her entry into local authority 'care', explaining that he had been 'OK' with her sisters because they were his children but he had very little time or patience for her. He drank heavily and Beth spoke of terrible arguments resulting in physical violence toward both Beth and her mum. However, Beth did seem to feel that she had a level of responsibility saying that she took drugs and 'kicked off' at school.

Beth first entered care when she was almost thirteen initially being found an emergency foster placement. Beth experienced two further foster placements and four residential care placements while 'looked after'. Beth's placements were interspersed with times when she would return to live with her family. When returning 'home on trial' things were fine at first but they would quickly deteriorate.

'At first it was great to be back at home. Then it would all start again, me havin to stay in an babysit all the time, never bein allowed out. I just hated it then - an it would all start again.' (field notes)

Beth's feelings regarding the care and support she received while 'looked after' were mixed. Of her second foster parents she said:

'The Harris' they lied to me mum because they said I wanted them to be me mum an dad. It does my head in that sort of thing cos I never said that - I never would.' (field notes)

This placement terminated with Beth beginning a disrupted residential care career. There were periods at an assessment unit, a community residential home, a residential unit with education and a residential unit for young people who were difficult to place (all within the local authority). In residential care Beth's encounters seemed to become more hazardous with Beth often referring to the dangerous and potentially harmful environment she was exposed to. However, Beth again accepted a level of responsibility regarding her ominous outcomes.

'I sniffed loads in the kids home. If someone said don't do this, I'd do it more. Most kids go into care without a criminal record but come out with a long one. (field notes)

While in residential care she developed a very close relationship with Matt. Her relationship with Matt appears to have been both poignant and bleak. Beth spoke of times when she and Matt would leave the residential unit and 'live rough'. It was difficult to discern if Beth lamented or cherished these times. You are left with an awareness of two very young people facing the cruelties of the world together.

Int: What would happen to make you leave B..... (residential home)?

Beth: We just got pissed off - like me an Matt we would just say sack it an take off. It was real hard livin on the streets but what else could we do? But Matt he would look after me an that. That's why I try to look after him now he's got locked up (he's in prison). (taped interview)

At her third foster placement, when she was sixteen years old, Beth spoke of both positive and unpleasant experiences. She remembered affording her foster mum a position of trust with this then being violated.

I could talk to her (foster mum) at first but then when I was in hospital that changed. I knew I was miscarrying with the baby. They said it was cos of stress. Later I was really mad with em; (foster parents) I told Della (foster mum) not to tell anyone. I wanted to tell em in me own time. She went out and told em all in the waiting room what had happened. I was so mad; disgusted. They did my head in but they did

help me a lot. They were there for me. Helped me with drugs - they got this drugs woman to talk to me. (taped interview)

Beth obviously had conflicting feelings about her local authority placements while acknowledging that she may have had a part to play in the disruption and dangers she experienced. She did say that she had taken drugs prior to entering care, therefore attributing her risky lifestyle to the care system would be unjust. Nevertheless, it would seem justified to suggest that the corporate parent may have failed in many respects to fulfil its obligations to Beth.

Exiting from care and getting on with living

I make a point of saying that Beth exited from care rather than leaving. There was no leaving care plan for Beth more a need to manage a situation that had developed. She had been staying with her third foster parents but there had been a problem. She had *'run away'* and been missing for ten days. Beth referred to this as a period when she just *'kicked off'*. After her absence, during which time she had been staying with various friends, she arrived at the Leaving Care Scheme homeless. At this time Beth had just had her seventeenth birthday. Beth said that her foster parents were willing to have her return to live with them but that *'they (Social Services) said I couldn't go back'*. The Scheme found Beth hostel accommodation in the next town. Beth's understanding was that she would have to stay at the hostel before if might be possible to obtain a council tenancy. In Beth's words, *'it was awful in that hostel, scruffy an dirty, it was just bloody awful.'* She spoke of being frightened of all the other people who were resident there saying that they were *'weirdoes'* and *'druggies'*. She only stayed a couple of weeks, returning home to live with her mum and step-father because she *'didn't want to live there away from me friends and family.'*

My first detailed conversation with Beth was conducted on the door-step of her mum's home shortly after one of her moves back home. When I arrived she was in the process of making sandwiches for her sisters, it was the school holidays and Beth was *'childminding'*. Our conversation took place on the front doorstep because her mum had been working nights and was in bed. We had met previously on a few occasions but never really talked in depth. I had asked to tape our conversation

but the quality of the tape recording was poor because of passing traffic. Beth said that her living at home was very hard on everyone.

'Well me mum she lets me stay because like she said, she can't see me on the streets. But I don't get on with me step-dad an all that arguin well it's not fair to my mum. I'll just stay here till I can manage to find something else or until they (The Scheme) get me a flat.' (taped interview)

Beth was unemployed but explained that she would like to find employment. She told me that she found it difficult impressing prospective employers saying that she had been excluded from school and therefore did not finish her education. Beth was acutely aware of the difficulties of finding employment with no qualifications. However, she hoped to go to college but she felt this was impeded by her appearance. Beth had small tattoos on both her wrists and a *borstal* mark (a dark, almost black spot) on her cheek. Once again she was aware of the barriers that existed saying, *'I want to go on a beauty therapy course, but they won't have me with these,'*. Beth had been to her GP to enquire about having the tattoos removed - there was a two year waiting list.

A few weeks after this meeting Beth moved into a private tenancy; one that she had secured with Scheme support. The Scheme also supported her during the move and with the process of spending her leaving care grant of £500; to decorate and furnish the flat. The flat was in a timeworn Victorian building on the edge of the town centre. There was an old rather dilapidated pub next door where Beth had an interview for bar work. I did try to visit just after she had moved into the flat. Beth left messages for me at the Scheme but when I arranged to call she was out. When I did manage to visit Beth's flat it was under quite disastrous circumstances.

Rebecca another of the young women participating in the research also had a flat in the same building. I had been in contact with Rebecca and on this particular day had arranged to call. When I arrived Rebecca was distraught. She had not stayed at the flat that night and when she arrived home in the morning her flat had been broken into. The door was off its hinges and the flat looked as though it had been ransacked. While I was with Rebecca - Beth arrived, her flat had also been broken into. It transpired that the police had made a forced entry to both Rebecca and Beth's flats.

Beth's mum arrived as did her keyworker and the Scheme Manager. The Scheme Manager intervened on their behalf phoning the police asking for an explanation. The police had 'entered' Beth's flat based upon information that a known offender was residing there, it seemed that Rebecca's flat had been 'entered' by mistake. The Manager said that regardless of the justification both flats should have been made secure and not left open for someone else to gain entry. She also said that she would be making a formal complaint as in her view both of the young women were left in a highly vulnerable position with homes which were no longer secure. In Beth's flat there was more evidence of 'ransacking'; this it seemed was the consequence of a police search. Her keyworker was visibly upset, telling me that she had helped Beth to decorate and get the flat looking neat and tidy, *'the way Beth likes it and now it's a complete mess.'*

Beth seemed far less distressed than Rebecca, who was by this time in tears and finding it difficult to see how she might be able to continue to live in her flat. It was evident that Beth's supporters had rallied round; her keyworker and her mum, also the notorious Dean, (often spoken of with trepidation due to his customary run-ins with the police - burglary, etc. which were often drug related) were all there. This contrasted markedly with Rebecca's much more solitary and unsupported position. This difference in support was reflected in the coping styles of Rebecca and Beth. Rebecca was absolutely distraught, Beth was relatively cheerful, appearing to be relaxed and pleased with the assistance her mum was providing. The Scheme Manager offered to find overnight accommodation for both Rebecca and Beth. Beth declined the offer saying that she would stay with friends. A few days later I was told in passing, by a friend of Beth's, that she was moving to Southampton with her new boyfriend. This news of her impending move surprised me as when we last met she had spoken of Matt, making plans for their future. Workers at the Scheme were concerned about the move while acknowledging that Beth had the right to make her own choices. However, six weeks later I ran into Beth at Sally's; she was also participating in the research. Sally was in 'care' with Beth staying at the same residential home and attending the same school. She looked well and was in the process of writing a letter to Matt.

'He's in court next Friday to be sentenced. When I got back I went to see him. I knew he'd been told about me goin off. I just lied about it - I thought he might kill me but he just let it go. I know he knows I lied but he said I could go an visit again so it's OK.' (field notes)

Beth was once again living in her flat but she was due to be evicted. It was Christmas time when I next saw Beth, she was staying with her mum but this was only possible because her step-father had been 'kicked out'. When I called to see her she was in the middle of tidying the house - her mum was out shopping and her sisters were at school. This situation was expected to change because her step-father was to be allowed to return before Christmas. With his return Beth's position would inevitably change.

Beth feels sure that she will be asked to leave. 'He'll say what's she doin here and I'll have to go. I don't feel comfortable when he's around. I'll go before he comes back.' There is no sense in which Beth feels she has any rights as her mother's daughter - she is the outsider and she will have to go. (field notes)

I asked about her move to Southampton and her subsequent return.

She seemed very relaxed about the whole episode - she got bored and missed home, her friends and family. The guy she went with is now classed as a 'bit of a dickhead' Beth's mum sent money for the fare home and she had cleaned the flat ready for Beth's return, 'mi mum missed me too.' (field notes)

I asked Beth how she had managed sorting out her benefits since her return. There had apparently been none of the usual delay and hardship experienced by many other young people, participating in the present research, when making a 'new claim' with Beth saying, 'I went for a crisis loan and they gave it to me.' Beth went on to tell me that she had told some elaborate lie in order to get the loan, she used the following justification, 'If I'm not lyin they don't give me money - if I lie it's OK.'

A great deal of the conversation was taken up discussing Matt. She spoke of recently becoming pregnant during a relationship with a young man who lived 'around the corner'. The pregnancy had

miscarried but she was still concerned that Matt might know about it and how this might affect their relationship. Beth spoke of her cousin who was, *'on the run from the police.'* He had been *'thieving'* and had stayed at Beth's flat in order to avoid arrest. She spoke of him smoking *'drugs'* and taking other drugs - he had recently been arrested and sent to the prison where Matt was then confined. Beth was worried that her cousin would tell him details about her life with the result that Matt would be furious with her. She went on to talk more about Matt and how she hoped to start a family and get a *'nice home'* together for when he was eventually released from jail.

When I next met Beth it was at an Open Door session where she arrived with Sally and another young woman who had also been in 'care'. She had moved back into her flat but was due to be evicted at the end of the month. Her keyworker had asked if she would consider moving into the local hostel (the same one Peter stayed at) her response was as might have been expected, *'she must be joking, it's full of druggies and thieves.'* While at the session she asked to use the phone. Permission was reluctantly given for her to use the phone in the room where everyone was sat around chatting. Beth phoned her mum asking the whereabouts of her stepfather and if he was *'pissed'*. Beth was extremely concerned about the situation at home calling her stepfather a *'bastard'* and constantly checking that her mum was OK. Her outbursts of frustration, while on the phone to her mum and afterwards, were not acknowledged by either Scheme workers or other young people in the room. It seemed merely to be viewed as what might be expected of Beth and so the conversation simply moved on.

Beth's distress is somehow not recognised or taken seriously. The fear of her stepfather's violence is real, however, I did not see any member of staff discuss this with her. Beth is not a demonstrative young woman, she does not appear to get upset or seek a sympathetic ear. I have come to know Beth fairly well; she is deeply affected by the situation within her parents home. Maybe I judge too harshly and don't see the times when Beth is given space to talk and show her more uncertain self.' (field notes)

After this meeting there followed a period of three and a half months when I found it impossible to contact Beth. I called at the Scheme, leaving messages for her, but she didn't get in contact. Her keyworker said that she was staying with another care leaver - Janice. A few weeks later Beth's new

boyfriend moved in too. Later that month I heard that she had moved out but she was not in contact with the Scheme. Her keyworker asked me to tell Beth to contact her if I managed to see her. Beth was to be recommended for a council tenancy but her failure to keep in contact was placing this in jeopardy. The following month her keyworker said that Beth had tried to ring me at work but she had got through to the ansaphone and hung up. Her keyworker said that Beth was due to call in later that day and if I wanted to stay I might catch up with her. I waited but Beth did not arrive.

Her keyworker, with Beth's permission, gave me her new address saying that she seemed happy and has started her college course. Beth didn't keep the next appointment nor did she arrive at one with her keyworker and a representative from the Housing Department. Her worker was worried about the effect this would have on her case, *'if she can't keep appointments then the Housing Officer is not going to think that she can cope in a flat of her own, It doesn't look very promising for her.'* Beth's keyworker said that she would try to persuade Housing to give her another chance but that this was the second time Beth had missed an appointment. Later that week one of Beth's friends mentioned in passing that Beth was pregnant.

A couple of weeks later Beth rang me at work - she said she was in a rush but we arranged to meet. She was staying in a flat quite a way out of town and at least ten miles from her mum's. As I drove up Beth was sat on the door step waiting for me. The flat was above a chip shop and Beth made the obvious joke, *'at least it's handy'*. As usual Beth had the flat pristine, she seemed to be always in the process of cleaning someone else's place. As we sat down she said, *'Well, where the fuck have you been keepin yerself.'* I didn't know whether to laugh or become indignant. I spent the next ten minutes defending myself explaining that I really had been trying to contact her. She eventually put me out of my misery saying that she knew I'd tried but that things had been *'happening'*.

The flat was in Beth's boyfriend's name, *'Luke got it before he got put inside.'* She was sharing the flat with a man aged about twenty five. Beth introduced Jake as Luke's friend; who had himself recently been released from prison. He looked pretty scary with his array of tattoos and shaven head. Another man came in and both men went into the bedroom. Beth said they were *'doin a bit of business'*.

I gave Beth an inquiring look and she grinned saying 'I know he's a bit dodgy but he's OK an I'm only sittin here aren't I?' I say very little to this as I am aware that I am not here to exert influence on Beth. Beth is JUST SITTING THERE and so am I!!! Beth seems to be forever on the fringes of 'dodgy business' (field notes)

Beth began talking about the baby she was expecting telling me, *'I don't drink no more or go out. I've got a lot older in me ways lately. I used to just kick off but now I'm gettin better think it's cos I'm happier now with Luke an the baby comin.'* She then gave me an abridged account of what had been happening to her over the last three months. During the period when Beth had been hard to contact she had been living with her friend Joanna but this had been terminated because Joanna's mum thought Beth was a *'bad influence'*. Beth laughed at this saying, *'I only took at lad back for coffee.'* Beth had once again been involved with the police.

Beth told me that she is again involved with the police regarding 'aggravated TWOC' (taking a vehicle without the owner's consent) . 'We didn't do it we got chased by the police.' She then looked at me and laughed and said that she was in the car. I asked her why, *'Cos we wanted a buzz, at the end of the night we got chased by the police an crashed. We got locked up by the police at 1.30 am an they let us go at 7.00am. It didn't bother me gettin locked up. I just wanted to get out in time for Matt's court appearance.'* (field notes)

Beth went on to tell me that she was glad she had eventually been evicted from the flat.

Beth said that she hated it at the flat and that she was scared when she was there. "The caretaker he was always coming in pissed and complaining about things I do. ' Beth had her mum's dog in the flat for a while - this was not allowed, however, it is understandable if you are eighteen, alone and afraid. Beth went on to say, 'I don't like men who are pissed, I phoned the police about him but they did nothing cos it was me.' (field notes)

Beth gave an account of her recent appearance in court - she was given a 12 months ban from driving (Beth couldn't drive) and probation. Beth said that her probation officer was due to visit the following week. I asked about her relationship with the probation officer and her reply was very similar to her approach to social services staff, *'Well I've not seen her for ages but she's comin out next week to see me. I phone her up all the time - she's a real soft touch.'* Beth was also very excited about seeing the midwife. There followed more telling of her court appearances where she had been fined £130 for deception and £250 for assault. Her giro was depleted as fines were taken out of it prior to Beth being in receipt, however, she seemed to be unconcerned about any financial hardship she might incur.

Beth moved the conversation back to Luke and the baby saying that they were planning to get married upon his release from prison. Beth went on to talk about the baby, *'When I first found out I were really fed up - I were real mangy an I cried for hours.'* Beth said that she wasn't sure she wanted a baby yet, she had suspended her college course and was worried about how she would cope. I asked how Luke had reacted to the news. His retort was, *'What's up don't you know whose it is then.'* She said that he didn't really mean this and that he is very pleased *'now'*. Beth went on to say that her mum was, *'funny with him at first cos she thought Luke beat me.'* She went on to insist that he was not violent explaining that, *'He winds me up all the time an then I start arguin.'* This was said with the implication that she should not argue and any ensuing problems may indeed be her fault.

When I next saw Beth (there had once again been a period where I had arranged to see her and been unsuccessful) she had moved into her own tenancy on a large council estate where Luke's parents also lived. This estate was about eight miles away from her mum's and would require two buses when travelling there. As usual Beth had the house organised and she was looking forward to Luke's release and the birth of her baby. When I arrived she rushed to the door saying *'you're early I wanted to make a fire and get changed.'* I didn't think I was early but it seemed fine. We embarked upon lighting a coal fire which seemed to be beyond the capabilities of both of us. While attempting to light the fire she said that she was, *'sick of this house. I'm sick of bein here on me own.'* She talked of friends calling round and of her keyworker visiting but that she still needed to become used to being there on her own. However, Luke was due to be released for a 'home visit' later in the month. She spoke of *'dreading'* these visits saying that their relationship was strained. A more foreboding aspect of this dread seems to be related to his *'moods'*.

'He got so angry that he'd throw some of me clothes out of the bedroom window.

But this was cos of his moods bein in prison an that.' (field notes)

Beth asked if I had seen Matt and if he looked OK. I told her that I had seen him and he had asked if she was well. She explained that she still cared for him, talking nostalgically of their shared 'care' experiences. This was said with, what seemed to be, a trace of regret.

I saw Beth one more time after the birth of her son. Luke had been released from prison, although he was not at home when I called, and Sally was there with her new born son. Beth was her usual self telling me quite emphatically that I was not to take notes. In order to respect this request I can include very little from this visit only saying that she seemed happy. She spoke of going shopping with her mum and of her often calling round and phoning, however, the same problems prevailed with her step-father. Her relationship with Luke's family had shown promise with Beth saying previously that they were supportive, however, this had deteriorated. This last visit with Beth was enjoyable, humorous, informal and relaxed; rather different from that initial somewhat menacing first encounter.

Contending with and facing up to life

At the beginning of Beth's story I suggested that she did not live her life with the past unceasingly interceding and influencing her everyday interactions. Yet, when her continual disruption, risky lifestyle and bleak employment prospects are scrutinised it seems unavoidable to concede that, although Beth does not occupy herself with the past, it is nevertheless there; shaping life course trajectories and influencing her interactions. Her unsettled lifestyle both while 'looked after' and beyond would appear to be a formidable indictment upon the corporate parent if outcomes are to be objectively evaluated. Beth's experiences exemplify the distressing 'official knowledge' which prevails in the research literature on care leavers: homelessness, instability, unemployment, offending and early parenthood. However, if the interpretation disseminated on Beth's behalf is the 'official knowledge' one, where the ideological message is of the passive endurance of dire social

circumstances, then this is an erroneous account. Such a reading of her life would not only be false and unsatisfactory ; denying Beth's tenacity and resilience. In the analysis and interpretation which follows I once again move beyond the objective evaluation of outcomes trying to appreciate in more depth what lies behind the 'official knowledge'.

Resilience: 'moving on' and facing up to the world on its terms

The term 'moving on' can be located within the independence ideology which prevails in the literature surrounding the transitional experiences of care leavers. I have made reference within other stories to the possible consequences of such an ideological accounts regarding the interactional process outlined by Runyan. However, while the term 'moving on' can still be situated within an ideology of independence when interpreting Beth's story it nevertheless signifies something far more obvious. She looked to be constantly 'moving on' from one situation to another, from one relationship to another, from one residence to another. Within her story this was not merely about freedom it was also about necessity and the need to manage the complexities of life while at the same time accommodating her personal aspirations. Beth's constant 'moving on' is viewed in a negative light in the literature but was this always the case? Would it have been preferable for her to stay at the hostel and become disheartened and distressed in the way Peter had done? Beth possibly could have isolated herself from those people around her who might accompany or lead her into unlawful acts but would this have been preferable for Beth? When making an interpretation of her continual movement and risky lifestyle consideration should be given to the alternatives and the possible consequences for Beth.

Beth could be viewed as having moved on in another sense; I made the observation when beginning to structure her story that Beth did not seem to be distracted by her past - she had 'moved on'. It might be that she merely chose to tell the story of her past elsewhere with other people and at other times. It may be that Beth, as with Kirsty, developed a facade beyond which access was granted rarely if at all. However, it should not go unnoticed that in her often mundane but sometimes deeply personal conversations she did not construct her then current life in deference to her past experiences. Beth might tell of a past event but it was often conveyed, not with indifference but in a journalistic manner - a point of information. The information communicated might have the effect of explaining something

in a much clearer light rather than any instrumental assessment of how she might better understand or construct her life in the present.

This observation in relation to the past may once again be about starting points and individual difference. The traumatic experiences of young people should not be used to make neat comparisons, however, the nature of past events and the way in which a young person is able either to find resolution or 'move on' would be an important factor when trying to understand and evaluate outcomes. Outcomes in terms of 'moving on' in an affective sense may be equally as important as practical 'objective' outcomes, i.e. accommodation, employment, etc. The two essential points would be that evaluating the extent to which young people have been able to 'move on' from past events may be extremely challenging. My interpretation of Beth's behaviour may be flawed and I could not imagine Beth responding to overt questioning or therapeutic interventions, therefore, how might an evaluation proceed? Nevertheless, this should not then mean that such outcomes remain clouded behind an array of more easily identified outcomes. The second point is that observable outcomes are probably frequently influenced by more affective outcomes. Making efforts better to understand the interactional processes would be important if an evaluation is to be based upon a comprehensive foundation.

Staying with the theme of 'moving on', Beth's story conveys the sense that she is making decisions based upon what is happening at the time not in relation to, or because of the past. It may be that these decisions were problematic but she nevertheless seems to convey the belief that she was in control. Beth's unstable lifestyle may have been confined by the available alternatives but there does not exist in her story the feeling of inevitability which blighted Peter's life. Nor can the need to gain approval which was evident in Suzanne's story be recognised in Beth's story. As her story is told it can also be seen that Beth does not find it necessary to keep control by maintaining a distance in the way Kirsty so obviously needed to. Beth seemingly confronts her life as she finds it; not spending time lamenting a past which she can do little to change or developing strategies to contend with the sanctions others might place upon her.

In her story there are many occasions when she appears to have taken action; refusing to align herself to the plans made on her behalf. It was *'bloody awful'* at the hostel so Beth left. She was aware of the awkward situation at home with her step father choosing to leave before problems ensued. Having

moved to Southampton Beth missed her family so she came home. Beth maintained the friendships she had made while 'looked after' and when confronted with her wrecked home she did not break down in the way Rebecca did. Beth managed to face up to her life in a way that is both admirable yet gives cause for concern. She seems to personify a mixture of both freedom and determinism that is rooted in coping with whatever life seems to place in front of her; embodying Runyan's (1982) interactional model of the life course. However, the more disturbing aspect to her life can be located within alternatives with which she was presented. Her social environment was crowded with potential hazards. It might be argued that Beth merely reacts to the changing circumstances she is confronted with. However, her apparent resistance to any level of compliance with the role of victim in relation to her past would seem to mediate against any simplistic reactive reading of her story.

It would seem appropriate to look at theoretical work on coping and self-efficacy when trying to explore Beth's interactions and the level of self-determination and control she exerts. Frydenberg (1997) in her review of theoretical and research perspectives on adolescent coping claims that the concept of self-efficacy is accounted for to a certain extent within the concept of *coping*. She maintains that self-efficacy is, 'the hallmark of people who judge themselves as able to handle situations that would otherwise be intimidating or overwhelming' (p27). However, being able to cope effectively is seemingly an issue of individual difference with research into resilience focusing upon the 'identification of stable traits or qualities that distinguish resilient children from those who are maladaptive' (p44). When discussing effective coping she maintains that three broad factors can be used to distinguish the qualities of resilient children: individual disposition, family circumstances and the availability of support systems. These factors would appear to limit the notion of individual distinguishing qualities as an explanation for effective coping, indeed two thirds of these qualities can be located beyond the individual and within the social context. Nevertheless, she goes on to say that it is generally agreed that flexibility, managing to master their environment and not blame others for any failures and not viewing themselves as helpless; are the determinants of an effective copier. Beth was consistent in her willingness to accept responsibility for the part she may have played regarding her past experiences. It would be hard, although not impossible, to conceive of a scenario where Beth might admit to being viewed as helpless. Therefore, when making an attempt at unravelling the interactive life course of Beth and her ability to be what might be deemed an 'effective copier' consideration should be given to Beth and her individual starting point and to the levels of social support evident in her story.

Beth's life was populated by a diverse range of relatives, friends and acquaintances. I have made reference in the stories of other young people regarding the importance of family support. Although Beth's mum might not provide the 'supported transition' featured in Kirsty's story there was a level of what might be seen as 'fall back' support; her mum can be relied upon when all else fails. This support was very different from Peter's where he had been placed outside the family. Beth conveyed a sense of belonging to her birth family which did not resound within any of the other stories which have been told in detail. Therefore, in relation to coping and resilience this might be an important factor. A feeling of belonging was also evident for Janine, Sally, Hannah and Natasha. Their relationships with their families often remained strained, in a similar way to Beth's; past difficulties had neither been transformed or resolved. Nevertheless, there appeared to be an awareness of a 'fall back' position where support would be made available when really necessary.

What needs to be considered is how this impacted upon the self evaluations young people might make in relation to themselves. If we return to ideological accounts it might be that to have a family who are willing to provide 'fall back' support is 'normal'. In the first chapter reference was made to the way in which parental support is an expectation of young people who leave home (Jones, 1995, Noller and Callan, 1991). Having a family to whom you can go and which can be relied on must surely have some impact in terms of self-efficacy. Research into levels of self-efficacy and social support has shown that supportive relationships can enhance self-efficacy (Duncan and McAuley, 1993). The model of reciprocal causation which characterises social cognitive theory located within the interactional theory of life course can be related to Beth and her experiences. Social support is not a 'self-forming entity waiting around to buffer harried people against stressors. Rather people have to go out and find or create supportive relationships for themselves' (Bandura, 1997, p159). Beth does not distance herself from those around her in the way Kirsty was felt to do. Neither can she be seen to distance herself because she feels a sense of injustice in that she is required to ask for support, which was exemplified in Suzanne's story. Here then seems to be the import of Beth and her story. She goes out and both creates and finds supportive networks. Yet, would Beth have been so active in her relationships if she did not have the 'fall back' position of her mum? She was not estranged and disconnected from her family in the way that other young people had been. This might be both *person-determining* ; where she has enhanced self-efficacy, and *behaviour-determining* because this enabled Beth actively to seek social support.

It might be that her social support and relationships were not always, either successful or beneficial, in a way that might be viewed as instituting and maintaining the transition to independence which is portrayed as preferable in the leaving care literature. However, Beth was able to cope effectively with the independence model where she was expected to manage with minimal levels of support. The Scheme provided support and although Beth might at times have been derisive there is evidence in her story that support from the Scheme was considerable at times. Even so her story conveys confidence in the belief that even if Scheme support had not been available to help 'manage the crisis' Beth would have managed herself. Indeed Beth was able to, at times, manipulate a system and the people within it to be supportive in the way she saw fit. However, what would need to be given considerable thought is her life course trajectories. Due to the prevailing circumstances of her life Beth has needed to negotiate separation, disruption and change. Beth's ability to face up to the world on its terms might be on the one hand a validation of her resilience and effective coping. Alternatively, she experienced developmental pathways which may prove difficult, to escape from, and/or change.

'Dodgy business' and life course trajectories

Evident in Beth's story is an ongoing level of law breaking and/or '*dodgy business*'. This might have involved simply being around when something illegal was transpiring or actually committing an assault or being involved in a car theft. One of the main issues for this research when reflecting upon Beth's level of involvement in criminal activity would be the influence of state parenting when taking account of Beth's life experiences as a whole. The question would seem to be one which primarily relates to Runyan's (1982) interactional processes and the extent to which the Beth was *situation-determining* or was the environment she experienced *person-determining*. What part, if any, did the 'care' of the corporate parent play in relation to Beth's ongoing involvement in '*dodgy business*'.

In Biehal *et al's* (1995, p156-159) study over one half of those taking part (42 young people) had never had any involvement with the police with a quarter (18 young people) having 'minor' problems. Three young people were involved in more serious or a greater number of offences while in 'care', this being linked to their time in a residential children's home, however, none had offended since leaving care. Only six young people were found to have an 'incipient criminal *career*'. When using this term it is qualified by explaining that connections between pre-care, care and early post-care were evident.

All those within Biehal *et al's* study with such 'careers' were male for whom drug use and crime were generally 'closely interwoven'. However, when expressing these findings they draw attention to the problems of self report studies which may lead to under-reporting or indeed over-reporting. However, in their study reference is made to serious persistent offending being linked to young people experiencing multiple placement moves where young people had 'mentioned the peer culture in children's homes as a factor influencing criminal behaviour, some sharing the excitement of infringing laws, others felt pressured to conform.' (p158)

There is evidence that for Beth too, there was the initial drug use with multiple placement moves and the cultural factor of residential homes. Her involvement in criminal activities seems to be that of the 'incipient criminal career'; where both the past and the present were infused with continuing instances of offending. Of the fourteen young people participating in the biographical phase of the research only Kirsty, Suzanne and Lindsay appeared not to have become involved in some aspect of *dodgy business*, in relation to drug use or offending. Although, when making this interpretation I am aware of instances when young people worked while claiming benefits and/or did not notify the Benefits Agency when they were cohabiting. These behaviours might be seen as criminal activity, however, they would not appear to characterise the criminal activities labelled '*dodgy*' by Beth. Rebecca, Tara and Shaun all spoke of having experimented with drugs and/or having been involved on the fringes of criminal activities. Eight of the young people had either been prosecuted by the police or made reference to a level of police involvement in their lives. The offences young people had been prosecuted for included: *criminal damage, shoplifting, assault, fraud, going equipped, burglary, drugs related offences* and *TWOC*.

For Natasha her involvement with the police related to an outburst while in residential care, when she had assaulted another young person. She deeply regretted the incident explaining that she had managed to '*keep meself out of trouble till then.*' It seemed the same for Peter; an unfortunate set of circumstances resulting in him becoming involved with the police. However, for many other young people criminal activity and police involvement did not seem to consist of isolated incidents, resulting from a particular kind of pressure and stress. Rather there seemed to be an accepted cultural environment of offending, prevalent in many of the residential care placements young people had experienced, which may have resulted in their subsequent involvement in criminal activities.

Beth had said that, *'most kids go into care without a criminal record but come out with a long one'*. This would seem to be a strident claim. Nevertheless, while accepting that Beth had taken drugs prior to entering 'care', it would seem that once in residential care, she may have been subjected to an environment offering few solutions but numerous opportunities to continue, not only taking drugs, but to become involved in a diverse range of hazardous and potentially fatal behaviours. This might seem a strong statement to make, based upon one young person's experience; yet the continuing police involvement evident in Beth's story can be seen within the accounts of other young people with Janine, Sally and Hannah all having very similar 'care' experiences. The difference seems to be primarily one of when the offending started and also of how long it continued. For Janine and Sally their persistent offending began once in residential care where for Hannah and James, as with Beth, there was a pre-care past of drug use and offending. The following excerpt from field notes demonstrates the way in which the environment within 'care' may have brought about a particular life course trajectory for Sally.

She proceeded to tell me that she had, over a period, been charged with 7 counts of 'criminal conduct', and other offences including 'going equipped', burglary, shoplifting and aggravated assault. All this happened once she had experienced residential 'care'. 'I never did nowt before I went into care.' (field notes)

This sentiment regarding the liability of residential care was shared by many other young people participating in this phase of the research. Both Tara and Lindsay had moved from a residential home because of the culture of persistent offending which had prevailed in the residential homes where they had previously been placed. Lindsay moved to a foster placement; her refusal to become involved in the risky behaviours of other young people had the effect of her being ostracised within the residential home. Tara was also moved to another residential home. In her account there was a similar theme to that of Lindsay's, where in order to avoid being labelled as an outsider there was a necessity to become involved. Also, Tara made reference to the impact of residential care upon her education.

Tara: I hated every minute of it (at her first residential placement) . There were eight kids there. It were a real jump again from a family environment to a unit, an it was a unit. There was eight kids an six out of the eight kids were drugs dealers or drug takers or thieves or criminals It was a really bad environment an at that point in time I was doing really well at school, that were the only aim I had - to do well at school cause nothin else were workin - me dad had been found not guilty, me mum just didn't want to know me an I'd been taken from me foster parents, I'd been dumped here without any choice.

Int: What brought about the move?

Tara: I moved because it was partially a request from me and a request by staff that I moved. There was two girls in there they were awful people and they were into drugs. I got on with em alright that was the problem - I knew I was gettin involved in situations that I couldn't handle. I turned round to staff an said that if I don't go now I'll start takin drugs, cause they were so there an so available you became an outsider if you didn't take em. I went to staff an they said that they knew and thought the same. They said that I was gettin involved in other trouble that was goin on. It was the drug scene that frightened me. (taped interview)

After the move Tara did manage to complete her education achieving five GCSEs at grade C or above. Nevertheless, she resented that she had not done better, blaming this on the atmosphere and conditions she experienced in residential care. Things did improve at the second residential placement but she felt that she had lost ground due to the previous placement.

Therefore, while conceding that Beth may have brought difficulties with her into 'care'; drug taking and difficulties at school, there seems to be a serious issue regarding how effective such an environment might be in relation to improving the life course trajectories of young people. However, there was evidence of young people making a 'fresh start'. Janine had a similar view regarding the relationship between residential care and her subsequent involvement in criminal activities, however, her offending stopped abruptly once she became pregnant. For Sally the offending continued after she had left 'care' but declined and eventually stopped when she met her boyfriend; who disapproved of

her offending and of her relationships with other care leavers, mainly Beth. Evidence of a 'fresh start' can be seen in other research (Hutson, 1997, Biehal *et al*, 1995) where the incentive for change came from new or changed relationships. When the research ended Beth too had become a mother and it might be that this change would bring about a 'fresh start'. Graham and Bowling (1995) found that 'domestic and housing' transitions were associated with an abrupt and conscious end to offending among females; males tending to drift away from crime much more gradually. Thus the likelihood of a 'fresh start' for Beth should be viewed in the light of her then current relationship, where her partner was also apparently engaged in criminal activities.

Furthermore, when reflecting on the viability of a 'fresh start' consideration would need to be given regarding the long term effects of offending. Janine's account clearly shows the effects of offending in other areas of her life.

Janine spoke of school while 'looked after', 'They don't tell you to go to school they bribe you. They give you ten cigs and leave you at school, you don't go in you just go back to the home.' I asked if she managed to get any GCSEs, 'no I was always off offending.' Janine then talked of 'smashing B... (residential home)' Later she was prosecuted twice for possession, as a consequence she , 'went on the run to Reading,' The police 'tracked' her down and Janine spoke of wanting to go to the toilet on the way back, 'They handcuffed me and took me in the Little Chef, it was really degrading, all those people with small kids.' Janine said that she breached bail 45 times, and said that, 'as soon as they (police) take you in they treat you like shit cause you're from B.....' (field notes)

For Janine there was the recognition that offending had disrupted her education but there was the additional humiliation and subsequent labelling she was to be subjected to. Beth also made reference to the way in which she had become known to the police and how this might have affected the level of assistance she could expect from the police. Rather ironically, both Sally and Natasha had hoped to join the Police Force but they were agonisingly aware of the impact of their offending upon such aspirations:

'I want to get a decent job, I don't want to settle down nowt like that I like to enjoy goin out with me friends. I want to join the POLICE but I might not be able to.' Natasha went on to tell me that she had been 'conditionally discharged' for assaulting a resident at the residential home. *'I was under a lot of stress I was due to leave. I don't understand why I did it an I know it was wrong an I'm not about to do it again but they'll never have me in the Police now.'* (field notes)

I asked Sally what had happened with the court case of shoplifting and she told me that she had received a conditional discharge and a £50 fine. This amused her as she was to pay 1p per week. I was incredulous at this and so she got a file out of a cupboard and found me the relevant paper work and there it was 1p per week. Sally told me that this was her 'crime file'. (field notes)

Making a 'fresh start' is not without difficulties. The 'stigma' of care is often referred to, where a common representation of young people who have spent time cared for by the corporate parent is one of 'trouble' (Biehal *et al.*, 1995). Biehal *et al.*'s research would seem to strike a chord of optimism, in relation to young people's involvement in 'trouble', which could not be so readily heard in the lives of young people participating in this research. Although frequently criminal activity seemed to have either been curtailed while in 'care' or when something or someone else came into their lives there is still cause for concern. The life course trajectories of young people were affected by the past, even when young people did not continue to engage in 'dodgy business'. For Sally and Natasha there was the belief that they had ruined their chances of taking up their chosen career. For many young people there was the impact of offending in terms of their education. The research literature gives a graphic account of the prevalence of low educational attainment and its effects among care leavers in relation to employment and transitional trajectories (Willis, 1984, Banks *et al.*, 1992, Furlong, 1993, Hickman, 1997). There also appeared to be the more indirect and hidden effects of stigma. Young people had been labelled by services which they may later need to look to for support. To subscribe to a view which might see offending as a temporary pathway not having permanently damaged life course trajectories would seem misguided.

When giving theoretical insight into criminal activities, Walklate (1998) says that by focussing on criminal behaviour attention is drawn to the individual and the role of individual difference in the

production of crime. She explains both classical and positivist schools of thought regarding crime and how if a classical approach is taken then the individual committing the act is making a rational calculative decision. With the positivist approach an individual's criminal behaviour is seen to be determined by their biological and or psychological make-up (p17 - 20). Both of these individualist explanations would appear simplistic in relation to the experiences of young people represented in this research.

Within a similar environment different young people seem to have become involved in similar behaviours. This would suggest that common situational factors played a primary role rather than the individual pathology of the young person. Also, in terms of making a rational choice it would appear that rationality might be steered in the direction of becoming involved in crime; to do otherwise might have consequences in terms of 'care' relationships which might already be strained. Existing research evidence supports the case for attributing an individual's involvement in criminal activities within the situational domain. Smith (1995) argues that poverty, unemployment and housing problems may contribute to an individual's propensity to crime. Furthermore, Bright (1996) points toward underlying reasons such as poor parental child-rearing and social/economic disadvantage when trying to explain youth crime. These situational factors may not only relate to residential care, yet they are nevertheless, part of the general milieu within which young people's lives are experienced. When seen as a whole, rather than as a discrete section of a life, residential care would seem to offer respite from previous pressures which are then replaced with a different set of potential risks and liabilities.

'Victim' or 'perpetrator'

Griffin's (1993, p129) insight would seem particularly relevant when trying to reflect upon the biographical account of Beth's experiences. She refers to 'stories' about 'delinquency' which,

'juggle the contradictory representations of young people as victims (of other 'delinquent youth', environmental conditions, physiological and/or psychological characteristics) and perpetrators (of 'delinquent activities').

Trying to explain or interpret Beth's life in relation to 'victim' or 'perpetrator' would be accepting of the simplistic dichotomy which is storied around the lives of young people. It would be accepting of 'official knowledge' showing an inability to conceive of a different story where Beth is not only reacting to situational factors but one where she is given some level of commission. Stories which tell of either 'victims' or 'perpetrators' fail to engage with the interactional nature of life course and the ways in which different young people might negotiate their own pathways. Peter's spiral into a level of police involvement was very different to Beth's far more complicated social interactions where criminal activity was part of her situational environment. In order for Beth to negotiate a different pathway there would need to be some recognition that Beth would be taking part in influencing the consequences for herself. It might be that Beth's trajectory changed with the birth of her child where she maybe could be cast as the 'victim' of a gendered life course. Yet, to cast Beth as victim would seem to be not only structurally confining it would be a perilous underestimation of the different levels of control young people are able to exert within their own social environment. If young people are to be viewed as influencing their own lives; making 'rational' choices, then there is a necessity to try to understand their lives as a whole. Beth's story presents a young woman who confronts and faces up to the environment she finds herself within. Therefore it is essential to ask probing questions about the nature of the social context within which she conducts her life. What were Beth's choices, and what might be the consequences of the choices made, in terms of developmental pathways and life course trajectories?

Chapter Twelve

Exposing invisibilities

In the introduction to this thesis I made reference to the work of Broad (1998) who had found that very little appeared to have changed in recent years regarding the lives of young people leaving care. Young people were still experiencing high levels of unemployment, unstable accommodation and a move to 'independence' characterised by hardship and adversity. Obviously such evidence would suggest that the measures in place to assist young people leaving 'care' are either inadequate or they are not working. In Chapter Five, under specific statistical headings, the 'official knowledge' outcomes for care leavers were once again confirmed. Young people, having left care earlier than those 'moving on' from their parental home, experienced alarmingly high levels of unemployment and unsettled accommodation; with their lives often classified as 'risky'. Once this had been established it was not taken to be in any way a complete picture; *rather a point at which to begin to relate statistical headings to real lives*. Throughout this research I have argued the necessity to look further than the 'official knowledge' explanations of young people's lives. I did not labour to dispute the majority of 'official knowledge' held in relation to the lives of young people who have been 'looked after', rather I share the concern of Broad and others regarding the 'objective' outcomes of care leavers. What this research strived to achieve was a different standpoint from which to evaluate the lives of care leavers. I aimed to avoid making uncritical assumptions which may be based upon limited information. The purpose of this research was not only to evaluate, but to try to 'demystify', (Reinharz, 1992) and therefore to circumvent 'claims making' (Best, 1989) with a move toward exposing some of Stanley's 'invisibilities' (Stanley, 1990).

The latter part of this thesis showed that the young people participating in this study were not a homogeneous group; their stories and their accounts manifest diverse and complicated lives where differing levels of interpretation and explanation could be drawn in relation to observably similar outcomes. I would hope that this diversity and complexity succeeds in relating 'official knowledge' to the lived experiences of the young people participating, and that I have not, using the words of Liz Stanley, allowed the 'numbers' to be 'divorced' from the detailed information about particular lives. By

adopting a biographical life course approach I have hopefully been able to assist in a process whereby a small number of young people, and their lives, have been known to a far greater degree than when outcome assessments are seen accurately to reflect their lives.

Uncovering the life course continuum

Life course theory was used as a framework to explore the lives of young people, promoting the view of life as a continuum with differential timing and connectedness. Within this theoretical framework life is formulated as the continual interplay between social and developmental trajectories as individuals progress through their life course. However, young people who have experienced a period 'looked after' by the corporate parent can find their lives defined and categorised by that one event. The fact that they have been 'in care' becomes something which sets them apart making them different and distinct from other young people. While not intending to lessen or underestimate the repercussions of separation and disruption I would argue that the stories told in this thesis are those of quite ordinary young people who have needed to cope with painful, traumatic and distressing events as they progressed through their life course.

Within the biographical life course approach, young people's lives were shown to be so much more than the 'care experience', sustaining Jones's (1988) view of life as a continuum lived in different spheres: families, their peers, the labour market, etc. (Jones and Wallace, 1992). Adding to this multiplicity of experience was the way in which young people's lives were interconnected, being a 'series of linked states'; very much in the way that Elder (1997) suggests. Young people did make numerous transitions but these were always linked in some way to what had gone before. It becomes far more difficult trying to measure outcomes when taking account of not only social and cultural factors but also the unique way in which each life differs and is interconnected with past experiences. Trying to make any kind of straightforward and neat evaluation of specific aspects in young people's lives becomes highly problematic when faced with these two factors.

When contemplating upon life as a 'series of linked states' the account given in Chapter One, where it was stressed that young people's lives could not be evaluated without an appreciation of their 'life before', becomes a primary issue. Much of what had been said in the literature about children and their families could be seen in both the stories told in depth and the supporting accounts of other young people taking part in the biographical phase. Young people had recurrently experienced Packman's (1989) 'merely sad' and/or 'truly dreadful' childhoods with sexual abuse, physical abuse and/or a lack of care featuring in their lives. Thus, the lives young people were able to make for themselves were not only to be located within historical and social time, in a cultural and structural sense, there was also the impact of distinctive personal past experiences.

Suzanne, but also an alarming number of other young people participating in the biographical phase of this research, had self-harmed principally *because of the way in which their past experiences* pervaded their (then) present lives. The past was shown to have the potential to progress a life course trajectory where despair, anguish and tragedy might ensue. I do not mean to diminish the magnitude of the problem or the formidable task which would need to be confronted if young people are consistently and effectively to be assisted in finding a less treacherous reconciliation with their past. However, when life is conceptualised as a continuum the past is shown to be inescapable and directional; shaping interactions, and developmental and social life course trajectories.

If the corporate parent is to ensure the long-term well-being of those children and young people in its care, then there is an imperative which must not be underestimated and that is the past and the specific reasons surrounding why they entered care and the impact this may have on affective outcomes. Ward (1998, p205) argues that all 'unmet needs are detrimental to children's long-term well-being, although some are of course more damaging than others'. The Looking After Children (LAC) materials are used primarily as a way of 'gathering information' from social workers, children, parents and carers which can be useful for 'setting agendas for direct work with children, determining responsibilities and improving care planning' (Ward, 1998, p207). It is too early to tell if this means that the transition into care is being managed in a way that is more responsive to the concerns of young people. However, to fail to take account of 'linked lives' and either ignore or underestimate what has gone before, is not only dismissive and dangerously neglectful, it may also prove to have organisational repercussions in terms of the state perhaps proving to be disastrously unsuccessful in parenting the young people in its care.

Transitions taking place behind statistical headings

It was not only in relation to what I have termed affective outcomes that Elder's 'linked lives' were in evidence. I have constantly exposed the trouble with outcomes: difficulty with when to assess, what to assess and how to assess being plainly observed within young people's stories. Should Peter's outcomes have been assessed when he first moved into the supported lodgings thus omitting the disastrous life course which followed? Would assessing Beth's level of criminal involvement have given an effective account of her life and how she managed to cope? How could an assessment of Suzanne's outcomes have taken place without giving extensive thought to how the past constructed her present? What of Kirsty? Would it have been possible to gain more than an objective evaluation of her outcomes if she continued to distance herself in order to maintain control?

Although Biehal *et al's* (1995) distinction between 'final outcomes' and 'intermediate' outcomes' seems useful it does not accommodate the way in which life is part of a continuum with linked transitions and a ubiquitous past. Using society's structurally defined measures to evaluate outcomes has limited utility. For example; being employed is viewed as a conventional indicator of a successful transition but placing this as an important issue when evaluating the outcomes for care leavers may be appropriate for some young people but completely inadequate when considered in light of more extensive information about the life course continuum of a particular young person.

Of the four stories told in depth only Peter, at one point, had a job; this being one which exploited his eagerness to work, where he was in receipt of a low wage and experienced poor working conditions. If Peter's outcomes had been evaluated when he was employed would this have been recorded as a plus on the side of the corporate parent with Beth's failure to secure employment denoted as a negative? Is securing employment to be seen as positive regardless of its more malevolent implications? In Peter's story there were reasons and consequences to him not being able to secure and maintain suitable employment but how useful was the 'official statistical' knowledge that he was either employed or unemployed without any appreciation of the interconnected nature of his life. Would a labour market explanation have been enough to interpret Beth's statistical categorisation as unemployed or would this have been another instance of claims being made from an incomplete set of information where invisibilities abound? Accounts which portray the effects of unemployment in terms of a labour market conditions, 'broken transitions', loss of citizenship or self-esteem may be

authoritative but do they impart the advantages, disadvantages, reasons and causes which were evident within the interconnected lives of young people told here?

The Government White Paper, *Modernising Social Services* (DoH, 1998, p42), states that one of its three main priorities in relation to services for children is to 'improve the life chances of children in care'. The stories of Peter, Suzanne, Kirsty and Beth offered an opportunity to look behind statistical headings, such as employment figures, exposing numerous invisibilities which would severely impair the life chances of young people leaving care. There was the linking effect of poor educational achievement but this could be linked back to different starting points and dissimilar social environments; thus the linking of lives continued where various transitions could be identified. Perhaps it is the managing of these transitions as part of the continuum of individual lives that is the key to assisting young people in a positive negotiation of their social and developmental pathways; improving life course trajectories. A great deal is written about the youth transition to independence but maybe this is too far along the life course continuum. If the state is to be effective in improving the life chances of care leavers then it would need to consider the consequences of its focus upon accountability and child protection and the implications of Saunders *et al's* (1996) research where after-care support aimed at helping children to achieve a more positive readjustment following abuse was placed at the bottom of a prioritised list.

The new *Quality Protects Programme* (DoH, 1998b) may promote a different approach but there is still an emphasis on outcome evaluation and assessment which raises familiar concerns. The lives of young people are made up of tangled and interconnected elements. Evaluating only that which is measurable may result in 'claims making' which fails intrinsically to appreciate the complex everyday experiences of the young people and the personal transitions they make as part of their life course continuum. It may be that by implementing a range of new initiatives: clearer objective setting, identifying the needs and expectations of children, improvements in assessment and the involvement of children in decision making (DoH, 1998, 3.29) the goal of improving life chances can be moved forward. Taken at face value these new initiatives do seem to be responding to a need to accommodate personal transitions, while at the same time undertaking an evaluation of effectiveness.

Although evaluating the effectiveness of services is essential, understanding transitions and the way in which individual differences might influence the developmental life course is a central issue. A

variety of factors have been noted which influence the negotiation of developmental transitions; 'development before the transition, the timing of the transition, and the context within which the transition occurs' (Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1996, p768). This hardly appears to be an innovative observation but it would seem to be one that would need to be given serious thought in light of the evolving story told here, where personal stage of development, timing and context transpired to have only scant - if any, part to play when both determining and assessing 'objective' outcomes. If life is to be acknowledged as a continuum, which the stories told here clearly endorse, then the lives of young people can only genuinely be understood and evaluated when located within situational and personal context.

Young people make numerous transitions but these are located within an individual life course continuum where some transitions have more gravity than others in relation to life course trajectories. The framework of *turning points* in development (Pickles and Rutter, 1991, Rutter, 1994) seems to be useful here; where transitional periods or events have the potential to bring about lifelong change. While I have a certain unease with the idea of turning points, (in the same way that I feel outcomes are too conclusive, often closing down the accommodation of diversity and difference) nevertheless, there is a certain relevance in relation to life course as a continuum and the way in which transitions are negotiated. Viewing the entry into care as a developmental transition which has the potential to bring about lifelong change could provide the opportunity to increase the realisation of improved developmental trajectories. While being eminently aware of the shortcomings of the 'looked after' system and the necessity to avoid viewing such interventions as problem free, I would argue that there is still an opportunity that is being passed over. Negative experiences of the 'looked after' system did not engulf or even overly occupy the stories young people chose to tell. This in no way diminishes the effects of continual movement, poor educational provision or the unhappiness that some young people expressed. Indeed the procedures in place to provide protection for young people were often experienced as distressing and oppressive (Butler and Williamson, 1996, McGee and Westcott, 1996). However, when viewing their stories as a whole, the care experience formed only part of their 'linked lives', with the context surrounding their entry into local authority care imparting far more significance for the young people in terms of *turning points* and transitions. Based upon the experiences conveyed in this thesis it would seem that when dealing with life as a continuum it is important not to only value and acknowledge those transitions which have been

historically and socially defined but to recognise individual and personal transitions which might have the potential to have lifelong reverberations.

Life course trajectories: ideological accounts and consequentiality

In Chapter Three I acknowledged the way ideology might influence how the biographies of young people were told. I spoke of the way in which consideration should be given to the possibly divergent ideologies of different accounts and how these might manipulate the way stories were both told and interpreted. In addition, the influence of ideology was said to be 'often expressed within a discourse of competing voices which have organisational or other material consequentiality within social life ...' (Stanley, 1992, p18 cited in Chapter Three). When Elder (1997) talks of human lives in relation to historical time and place such consequentiality can be seen directly in the ideological accounts prevalent in young people's stories. Individual, social and historical time, and the way in which the pathways people follow in their lives is said to be influenced by social norms and historical change (Garbarino, 1985). Thus, the ideological accounts young people interacted with were crucial when trying to understand their life course trajectories. This was not only seen in how the young people storied their lives, and any subsequent interpretation made, but also in relation to how they interacted in their lives which in turn impacted upon their life course trajectories.

Billig (1988) talks of changing times and the move toward a 'rhetorical psychology' which recognises that everyday thinking can be processes of ideology where the wider social context should be seen as consequential. Understanding these processes entails accepting that the time and the place where people live will affect how people think; where the contents of everyday thinking,

'the maxims, values and opinions which are commonly held etc. - are themselves cultural products. In ordinary thinking, people use a 'common sense' which they do not themselves invent but which has a history. This means that common sense not only has a wider history, but that it also possesses present functions, which relate to patterns of domination and power' (Billig, 1989, p1).

For all the young people there was the 'common sense' everyday ideological account of independence expressed within a discourse of freedom, autonomy and liberty. Griffin's (1993) identified construction of adolescence as a transition point between the dependency of childhood and the economic, social and psychological independence of adulthood was evident. Leaving care could be located within this discourse where young people were prepared for, and expected to move on to live independently in an adult world. Indeed, the Scheme which supported young people making the transition from 'care' appeared to exemplify this account being located within an 'independence model' of support (Stein, 1990). To say that this ideological account represented a pattern of domination and power in the way Billig suggests might seem rather belligerent yet the consequences were evident in the stories and life course trajectories of the young people. They were often seen to be powerless and intimidated by the magnitude of what the 'common sense' account implied was expected of them. Their individual stories provided an alternative narrative where independence was depicted as oppressive, harsh and often solitary.

McLeod's (1997) persons as social beings, referred to in Chapter Three, was clearly evident where young people did indeed 'live in and through a culture and its stories'. There was evidence of Stanley's (1992) 'material consequences' in that for Peter and for a number of other young people participating in this research, a specific ideological account of independence appeared to have been established by the corporate parent's expectation of life course and *social timing*. The corporate parent had the power to extend its care and therefore delay the social timing at which a young person 'moves on' to independent living (Department of Health, 1993). There was little evidence within the stories of young people participating in this research which would suggest that the state might have resisted the impact of an independence ideology, which fanfares eighteen as an age at which young people are ready to take their place in the adult world. It was irrefutable that Peter experienced a forced transition where the corporate parent was all powerful. He was required to leave care at eighteen; seemingly regardless of the appropriateness of such a move - an ideological account has therefore had consequences in material practice.

Consequences in terms of *person, behaviour, situation* interaction

The material practice consequences of an ideological account of independence in terms of freedom and autonomy can be seen in other stories but where Peter accepted his fateful *social timing* other young people did not. Suzanne, Kirsty and Beth managed to supplant the state's ideological account of *social timing*. Within their stories there was more a sense that they interacted with a particular ideological account of independence rather than complying with the corporate parent's time tabling of independence. They were seemingly aware of an expectation that they were reaching an age where they would be expected to 'move on', making the transition to independent adult. Should we be surprised when young people respond by either leaving 'care' early, as was the case with Kirsty, or that they respond stoically to their responsibilities, as was the case with Suzanne. Research evidence which can be conceptualised as 'official knowledge' often draws attention to the early *social timing* of independence in relation to young people leaving care. What this research had done is to bring into the frame the frequently invisible interactional processes which operate and influence the *social timing* of independence for care leavers. While the general population of young people is being encouraged to delay independence and experience an extended transition, young people leaving care are still located within an ideological account which holds particular expectations in relation to life course event timing.

Broad (1999) refers to the 'rumour' that the age at which local authorities will continue to support young people leaving care may be extended to 25. However, this may have little relevance for young people who are interacting with an independence ideology which might operate to distance rather than acquaint young people with the services available to support them. This observation relates to the way in which ideology interacts and can be *behaviour, situation* and *person-determining* (Runyan, 1982). When considering ideology as *behaviour-determining*, Suzanne's acceptance of her obligations and her reluctance to seek assistance from the Scheme can be located within an ideological account. This account designates the move to independence as a change in status where becoming a good citizen, and thus a responsible adult who can manage without needing to seek additional support, is the norm. Moreover, an ideological account of independence has been *person-*

determining in that she accepted her change in state, where she perceived herself to be independent and therefore self-determining. Such an account was *situation-determining* in that she did not receive assistance which might have improved her personal circumstances. This may indeed form one possible explanation for why 35% of young people eligible to receive services from the Leaving Care Scheme did not seek access. If young people have accepted an account of independence which projects the view that, '*James needs to move on, to stand on his own two feet*' (field notes, p195) then it would seem feasible that they would view accessing leaving care services as signifying failure on their part thus deciding to distance themselves rather than seeking support.

A similar case could be made in relation to a gendered ideological account of heterosexual relationships and motherhood. An ideology of how to conduct relationships had the effect of seemingly determining the type of relationship some of the young women settled for; where 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980, Rubin, 1975) was expected. Within their stories there was no tangible expression of choice, rather an expectation that they would become intimate with a male partner, with these relationships often characterised by 'non-reciprocity' (Hanson, 1991). Moreover, within many of the accounts of those young women who had children, there could be identified a particular ideology of motherhood to which these young women were unable to comply; due to age and frequently the lack of a regular male partner. Thus these young women were doubly in deficit being both 'young' and 'lone' mothers. The consequentiality of this ideological account should not be minimised. For Suzanne and Kirsty, and other young mothers, there was the possible consequence of the construction of a 'spoiled identity' (Croghan and Miell, 1998) and the considerable effects that such a construction might have in relation to distancing them from services, impacting upon self esteem, and consequentiality in terms of life course trajectories.

Young people who are contending with their pasts, who are often coping with a range of quite oppressive obligations and responsibilities, are also bombarded with ideological accounts which are not only unrealistic but are demanding and judgmental. It is the case that, 'Good parents do not abandon their children unaided to face the challenges and chances of life alone at the age of sixteen or even eighteen' (DoH, 1998, 3.32). Nor should responsible parents collude with and perpetuate myths that are potentially damaging. Most young people do not live independently rather they either continue to live with their parents (Jones, 1995) or they 'live away from home' (Leonard, 1980). Most young women are responsible and competent mothers (Phoenix, 1991); plain and unadorned

accounts which although they may not be prevalent in 'common sense' ideological accounts are nevertheless based upon dependable research.

Acknowledging young people as active agents: from stereotypes to biographies

I have argued for the recognition of life as a continuum, rather than an array of measurable components. Young people's lives have been shown to be influenced by *historical and social* ideological accounts but it is necessary to provide balance. The shaping effects of past experiences and the consequentiality of ideology should not be denied. However, if we pursue this view too far there is no accommodation of the young people, and the way in which they were seen both to influence and negotiate their own unique pathways.

This research has continually woven the 'official knowledge' narrative throughout its write-up but could such knowledge also be viewed as a stereotype. Young people leaving care are stereotyped as 'trouble', failing to find employment, failing to secure and maintain stable accommodation, experiencing early parenthood. Even within the leaving care literature I would argue that there is a particular stereotype of a young person who is fairly acquiescent to the situation and circumstances they find themselves subjected to. When attempting to understand and interpret the everyday experiences of young people I tried to uncover the way in which they might be active in their own lives moving away from stereotyping by enabling them to be more extensively known. Via the process of drawing characterisations from constructed first encounters, it was observed that young people had differing ways of interacting within and upon their social, historical and personal location. The characterisations made: *positively active, actively cautious, estranged* and *responsive* revealed the diverse ways in which young people interacted in their lives. Each young person was different and although some of their circumstances might be similar their way of interacting often differed immensely.

The stories of each young person presented numerous opportunities to communicate young people being active in their lives but it was the stories of Peter and Beth that revealed stark dissimilarity both in terms of individual difference and in relation to being active agents. Peter's story portrays a life

symbolised by passivity and acceptance. The analysis of his first encounter brought forward a characterisation locating him in the *estranged* grouping where *powerlessness, meaningless* and *isolation* prevailed. Beth was the antithesis to Peter's passive acceptance being characterised in the *positively active* grouping where her interactions were interpreted as efficacious, in that she was seen to take control and make things happen. Breakwell (1992, p38) suggests that efficacy and estrangement are not simply two sides of the same construct where, 'Efficacy largely lies in the domain of personal and interpersonal action; estrangement lies in the domain of social understanding and compliance.' Both of these issues: interpersonal action and compliance have resounding significance in relation to improving life chances. If young people are to be acknowledged as *much more than* passive recipients of social care policy and practice, the theoretical understandings of life course theory and its incorporation of human agency in relation to levels of self-efficacy is invaluable. In this theoretical account, personal factors interact with environmental events and conditions impacting upon behaviour. Peter's passive acceptance should not, and could not merely be, explained away within a purely socially determined reductionist account nor could Beth's resilience be attributed to her personal characteristics as an 'effective copier'. These young people were individually different, both in a personal and situational sense, therefore the way in which they interacted was distinctive.

However, whether complying or engaging in interpersonal action there still existed the structural and cultural confines within which young people interacted. I have highlighted how young people exercised different levels of control in their lives but this was constrained by the nature of the choices they were able to make. Coffield *et al* (1986) proposed that although political and economic factors are portrayed as dominant - they do not suggest 'that they *directly* control the lives of individuals rather, national and international economic forces impose constraints on the choices available to young people' (p214). Although, their research had a different focus this observation would appear to sum up one of the more obvious implications in this research. The young people clearly did negotiate and influence the way in which they interacted in their lives but this was limited by the number of alternative choices available. The stories of Suzanne, Peter, Kirsty and Beth illustrated that even within an unequal social environment where opportunities were limited and hurdles were placed before them they still developed strategies which utilised the resources available to them. However, within their stories there was significant variability in terms of both personal and family resources, which did not seem to be adequately compensated for, either within the 'looked after' system or leaving care provision.

Broad, (1999) when researching the effectiveness of leaving care services, says that while he found many examples of good practice leaving care teams 'were hindered by decisions about planning, restrictions, regulations and budgets made at central, and local government levels' (p89). He refers to 'a damaging and hostile social climate' using the example of 16 or 17 year olds sharing unsuitable accommodation, much in the same way that Peter had to endure. At a theoretical level Broad says that the nature of the problems confronting young people leaving care can be seen as a mixture of 'social justice' where structural exclusions and inequalities prevail, one of 'social welfare' with poor and/or inadequate parenting and 'technical difficulties' resulting in skill deficiencies and shortcomings. All of these problems were present in the stories of the young people told here, severely restricting choice.

The view of child abuse as, 'any act of commission or omission by individuals, institutions, or society as a whole' (Gil, 1970, p16) links convincingly into Broad's point regarding a damaging and hostile social climate. If levels of self-efficacy are determined by *mastery experiences*, *vicarious experiences* and *social persuasion* then the corporate parent would need to evaluate how effective its current practices might be in fostering self-efficacy. The young people were interacting in an unjust social environment providing insufficient opportunities for *mastery experiences*; they *vicariously experienced* the crisis of those around them. They experienced a cultural environment where ideological accounts provided levels of *social persuasion* which often hindered rather than assisted in the development of self-efficacy. It is therefore to be expected that some young people would succumb to the mounting tide, complying rather than taking action in their lives. Other young people with different personal characteristics take action, and as with Beth this may not always be the kind of action that society requires from good citizens. Beth was a survivor drawing on her personal characteristics to cope effectively with the unique situational environment she encountered.

Making a case for encompassing a 'welter of detail'

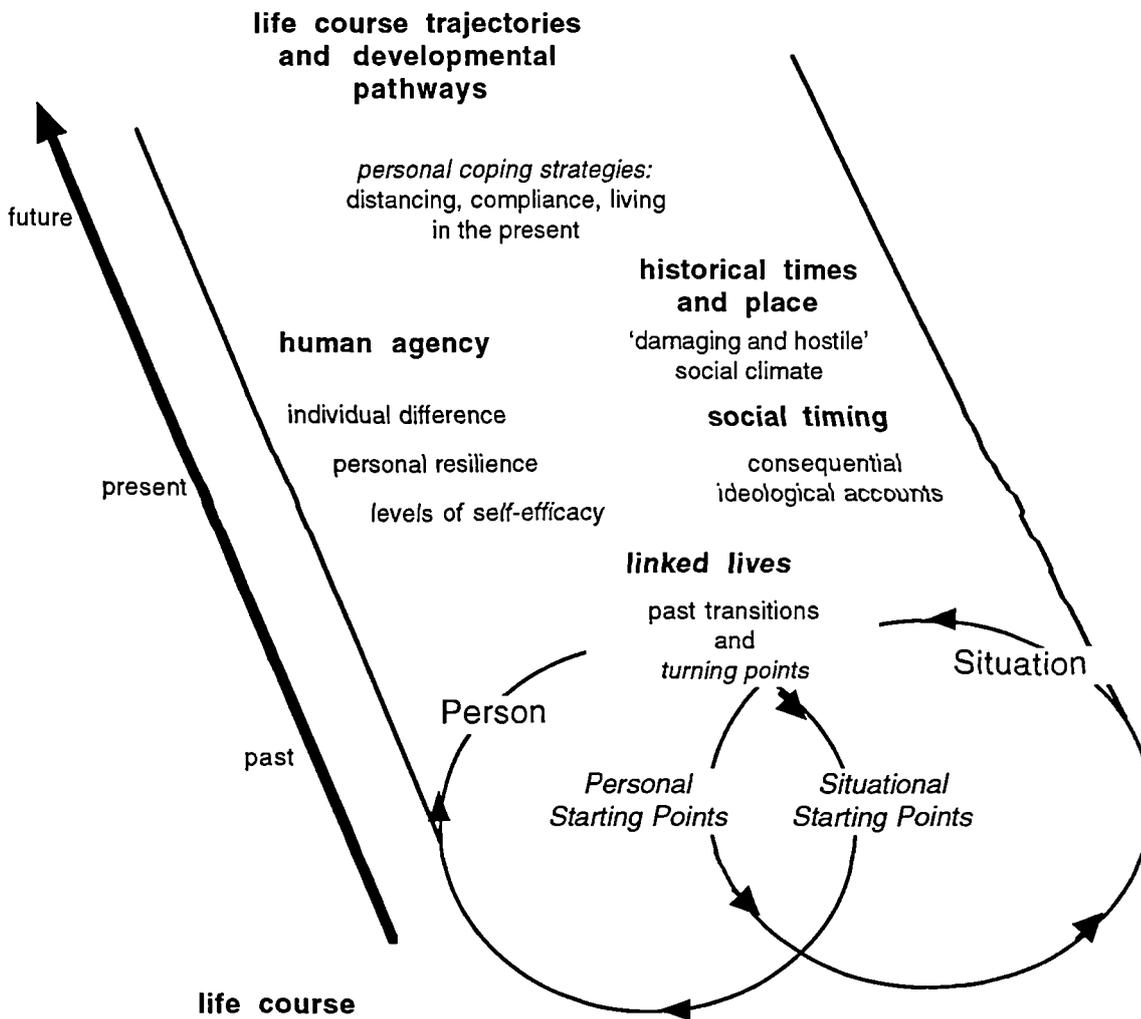
Biehal *et al's* (1995) comprehensive research on leaving care schemes maintained in their concluding chapter, that showing outcomes in separate areas of young people's lives 'presents only a partial picture' (p278). While voicing such reservations they nevertheless argued that:

'it is difficult to work with a multiplicity of outcome measures and at the same time take account of individual histories and circumstances, without losing sight of indicators for policy and practice in a welter of detail. To put this more colloquially, there is a danger of not seeing the wood for the trees' (279).

Is this 'welter of detail' necessarily some kind of hindrance to developing indicators for policy and practice? The stories of young people told in this thesis show how detail develops into an elaborate yet arguably more comprehensive understanding, both at a theoretical and pragmatic level, of how young people experienced their everyday lives.

The emergent model presented over leaf (fig. 15) offers one way of dealing with this 'welter of detail' while at the same time recognising the implications in terms of policy and practice. However, Runyan's interactional model of the life course shows an individual and society dichotomy which seemed less identifiable within the stories of the young people told here. The person and the situation appeared less distinct being expressed within the emergent model in a more integrated manner. This could be accounted for in that young people were not only interacting with historical time and place where a 'damaging and hostile social climate', in terms of socio/economic conditions, prevailed. Their interactions were infused with, and constructed within, unfavourable ideological accounts around: social timing, motherhood, relationships and the nature of independent adulthood. The lives storied in this thesis could be located upon a life course continuum where personal and situational starting points and historical and cultural context could be viewed in a more integrated and holistic manner. Nevertheless, making distinctions between the person, the situation and behaviour expedited a theoretical accommodation of human agency making visible the influence young people found themselves able to exert within their lives. This showed how different young people with a range of individual resources developed personal coping strategies, again influencing and forming part of their life course continuum.

Figure 16 : An emergent model based upon Runyan's interactional model of the life course



However, even when told in detail there is the need to be ever mindful of Stanley's advice about the nature of auto/biographies where they are 'artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product,' (Stanley, 1992, p4). While constantly acknowledging this point I would argue that such depth has produced a more detailed and authentic account of the experiences of a small number of care leavers where the similarities and differences highlighted would be useful rather than a hindrance when developing policy and practice. The stories told about and around the lives of young people brought into view not only the complexity of their everyday experiences but also the interconnectedness of situational and personal factors. *Of course there were similarities which could be identified.* However, it would be almost impossible to have failed to grasp how each young person and their experience were conclusively different.

The stories of Suzanne, Peter, Kirsty and Beth did revealed a discernible difference in the way that they negotiated their unique set of circumstances. Kirsty and Suzanne can be recognised to have had similar 'starting points' in terms of family poverty, low educational achievement, a past where sexual abuse had been acknowledged and where separation from family occurred resulting in foster care. Still, when their way of interacting with the world is captured, in the telling of their stories, it becomes so marked that in terms of negotiating pathways young people were dissimilar. Kirsty negotiated her own way by developing a strategy of distancing herself. Suzanne took a different path. She tried to fulfil the ideal that she felt had been set in terms of mothering her children. With outwardly similar starting points, personal and situational factors may have interacted to produced dissimilar personal coping strategies.

Yet, prominent similarities can be seen in the lives of young people in this research. Living on benefits, early parenthood, relationships built upon a foundation of non-reciprocity and a certain dissatisfaction with life were featured in the stories of Suzanne, Kirsty, Beth and other young people who participated in the research. This similarity would seem to show the forcible impact of situational factors, where even when young people were shown to be very different in the way they interacted, when they were shown to have had different personal experiences, they still progressed along a similar path. The most striking story was Kirsty's where there was the impression that she had been rescued. This was discovered to be an unsustainable hope with her life course trajectories being comparable to those followed by other young women participating in this research. Therefore, similarity or difference when making an interpretation of starting points appears to have merged into a familiar life course trajectory, one characterised by responsibility and dependence. This would seem to offer support for Stanley's rejection of psychological-reductionist accounts making a persuasive argument for the acceptance that people are indeed 'social and cultural products through and through' (Stanley, 1992, p5). Is this level of acceptance, where there seems to be so much emphasis placed upon the social and cultural, limiting?

While recognising that the lives of young people were impacted upon by historical time and place; and that the cultural environment they operated within was instrumental in shaping their lives, can we so easily dismiss the impact of the young people as active agents? What might it have been that enabled Beth apparently to put her past behind her? Was this about social and cultural experience or might we find some level of explanation within Beth the person. Therefore, when developing policy and

practice there would be an essential need to not only consider the way in which the situation determines the individual but also give serious thought to how young people negotiate and operate with their social, historical and cultural location. Parker *et al* (1991) highlighted that different perspectives and interests will determine what and how an outcome is evaluated. Clearly the stories told in this thesis have shown that it is not only the nature of the evaluation that is important. The young people and their complex lives will significantly determine what, how and even if outcomes are evaluated.

In terms of policy and practice this emergent model has certain implications. Primarily it is obvious that 'damaging and hostile' social conditions have implications in relation to the life chances of young people leaving care. If the state is substantially to improve life chances for the diverse population of young people leaving care it should take account of young people not only as passive recipients of services but as active agents in their own lives who will mobilise available resources to survive. Surely it is the difference between survival and living that is being taken issue with here. Within a hostile environment young people will at best survive by finding strategies to 'manage the crisis'. The aim should be to sustain a more favourable situational environment where 'managing the crisis' is not paramount; within which opportunities are not so restricted, and where individual difference is taken into consideration.

Having raised the issue of the damaging effects of ideological accounts, which are embedded and ingrained within society, it is difficult finding any kind of conclusive resolution. Nevertheless, reverting back to improving life chances there would be a case for a reassessment of the way in which leaving care is not only managed but how it is presented to young people. A discourse of independence is highly problematic; setting young people, workers and society ideals which have little or no relationship with lived experiences. A subtle but crucial change is called for in the way leaving care is presented, with a more flexible approach to the management of leaving care responding to the personal biographies of young people rather than being located within a historical and social account which is at best outdated, at worst sheer illusion. This change would be based upon an acceptance of the way in which the lives of young people leaving care are located within, and form part of, an interactional process where ideology has material consequentiality.

Finally, using the word outcome implies a clear beginning and a distinct end and even though the word is invariably questioned the process of outcome evaluation continues. This research provides further justification for unease with the term outcomes. The concept of a life course trajectory may encompass similar difficulties, however, it does move away from a discourse which perpetuates an 'official knowledge' interpretation of young people's lives where statistical headings are important rather than the experiences of the individual. Within the term 'life course trajectory' there is an acknowledgment of life as a continuum; a series of 'linked states' where beginnings and endings are less clearly defined but where the past is not overlooked. The importance of 'linked states' is that there is no denial of change but these changes and transitions are seen to be embedded in trajectories (Elder, 1997) where continuity remains. Unless serious consideration and regard is given to what has gone before the possibility of improving the developmental pathways and life course trajectories of young people will be considerably inhibited. If the corporate parent is to fulfil its remit to provide safe and effective high quality children's services (Department of Health, 1998b) then this should be given earnest thought.

Thus the key implications emanating from this research are foremost that young people should be viewed and acknowledged as active agents with differing starting points. Possibly this failure to accommodate such diversity is a consequence of 'corporate parenting' but such a failure runs the risk of omitting a vital dimension and one that has the potential to nullify any solutions policy makers may hope to impart. Part of this failure to accommodate diversity can be located within an emphasis on assessing outcomes where there seems to be an assumption that such assessments provide comprehensive knowledge. The diverse lives of young people cannot so readily be conveyed by, or within, statistical headings. Young people with diverse and interconnected lives require a much more detailed and elaborate approach if any comprehensive understanding of their life course trajectories is to be expressed. There is also the a critical necessity to consider the potentially damaging discourses which form a significant part of the 'hostile social climate' within which young people interact. The discourse of independence has been shown, through the stories of the young people told here, to be persistently harmful and unrealistic. Changing such a dominant discourse, and thus presenting a more tenable and achievable account of what living independently might require from young people, may prove to be an onerous task. However, paradoxically unless confronted young people may continue to keep their distance from services made available to support them in their efforts to live independently.

Broad (1999) maintains that a commitment to social welfare is at the heart of any long-term solutions; although he points toward new developments he appears to remain unconvinced that the plight of young people leaving care will greatly be improved. When talking of social justice and social welfare it might be argued that the ideology of 'corporate parenting' is itself nothing more than a chimera - a foolish fancy which is itself an illusion that serves the hopes and aspirations of children and young people unfavourably. The provision of welfare and justice is located within the remit of the state but is that what the term 'corporate parent' implies? Young people who are not 'looked after' generally experience a style of parenting that is not time limited, in a climate where hostility is thwarted whenever and wherever possible. If young people are to be encouraged to accept the state as compensatory parent then every effort should be made to fulfil this aim. Alternatively, if this is not achievable young people should be presented with a different ideological account where parenting, and what this implicitly promises to deliver, is not intuitively expressed. *Parenting young people who become 'looked after', all of whom bring with them a kaleidoscope of personal and situational starting points, is a challenging responsibility requiring diverse and innovative policy and practice.* The stories presented here are not those of young people who have been successfully parented. They are those of young people who have often been disappointed and disillusioned by their parents' and the state's failure to sustain a caring, devoted and supportive environment within which they could grow. If the state is indeed to be a parent, then there is an obvious need to reflect in more depth on what the term 'parent' fully represents.

Taking a life course biographical approach has allowed such invisibilities in young people's lives to be brought into view. This enabled the *questioning not only of a potentially damaging 'hostile social climate'* which is easily observable but also consideration of those aspects of social interaction which are hidden from view in more conventional social research. Without the in-depth biographical stories it would have been difficult to appreciate the way in which outcome research creates a neat but often incomplete, and at times, false account of how social, historical and individual time intersect. Yet, the biographical stories do not aim to stand alone. They formed, and were part of, a much larger picture where a level of shared experience prevailed and where any changes made have the potential to impact not only upon one life but upon many.

Further research, utilising the theory and methods outlined in this thesis, might have as its main focus one particular issue, for example: unemployment, motherhood, age at time of leaving care.

Concentrating on one issue but at the same time operating within a biographical life course theoretical framework, where the interconnectedness of a life is accepted, would allow a more comprehensive understanding of what lies behind such statistical headings. Yet, it would be naive not to acknowledge the difficulties entailed in undertaking research which accommodates the 'welter of detail' in, and around, the lives of young people. I have given a detailed, and at times I think powerful, account of how challenging and time consuming biographical life course research can be; not only for the researcher but also for the researched. However, such an approach does not aim to replace, or undermine, the more mainstream methods of gathering information around the lives of young people leaving care. Rather the hope was to add to, and broaden out, the way in which the lives of young people leaving care are assessed and evaluated. Indeed life course theory need not necessarily to be used as part of a micro biographical interactional process. At the macro level there is much to commend taking a life course approach where social and historical change could be monitored and evaluated in terms of how they might impact upon young people leaving care. Hopefully, what this research offers is a different way forward where a particular theoretical interpretation opens up the potential to consider active and individual young people within a more collective social system.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING CARE

Name of Interviewer:

Date and time of Interview:

Community Team Information:

OFFICE USE

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PART A: General Information

1. Name of young person:

I.D.

--	--	--	--

2. Age: yrs

3. Date of Birth:

D.O.B.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

4. Sex: M/F

Sex

--

5. What is your current accommodation situation?

- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Own flat/bedsit | 2. Shared flat/bedsit | 3. Hostel |
| 4. Bed and Breakfast | 5. Lodgings | 6. With family/relatives |
| 7. With friends | 8. No fixed abode | 9. Other (specify) |

Accom.

--

6. What is your current employment/education situation?

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Unemployed | 2. Employed full time | 3. Employed part time |
| 4. Training scheme | 5. College full time | 6. College part time |
| 7. School | 8. Other (specify) | |

Employ.

--

7. What was your last placement in care?

Placement

--	--

8. What type of placement was this?

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1. Residential | 2. Foster Home | 3. Agency placement |
| 4. Other (please specify) | | |

Type

--

9. How long (approximately) were you in your last placement?

--	--

 yrs

--	--

 mths

Length of time

--	--	--	--

10. What other placements have you had in care?

Other

Name of placement	From	To	Why did you move?

T B: About your time in care

Now want to ask you some questions about your time in care. If there's anything you
don't want to answer or are unsure about just ask me to go to the next question, OK?

If you've lived in more than one place whilst in care, have you found that some
helped you better than others?

Uncoded

What things made them better?

(prompt: what were the good things about the places you lived?)

(prompt: what were the less helpful things)

The law now says young people should be helped to keep in contact with their
family if they want to. Did you want to keep in touch with your family while
in care? 1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

Contact

Comment:

If yes, how easy/difficult was it for you to keep in touch? Did you get the help or support you needed to do so?

Uncoded

6. Can you give me some idea of how often you had contact with family:

With your parent/s:

- 1. More than weekly
- 2. About weekly
- 3. Every couple of weeks
- 4. About monthly
- 5. Less than monthly
- 6. Hardly ever
- 7. Not at all
- 8. Not applicable (no parents)

Parents

Comment:

With your brothers/sisters:

- 1. More than weekly
- 2. About weekly
- 3. Every couple of weeks
- 4. About monthly
- 5. Less than monthly
- 6. Hardly ever
- 7. Not at all
- 8. Not applicable (no brothers/sisters)

Siblings

Comment:

7. With any other relatives or people important to you:

- 1. More than weekly
- 2. About weekly
- 3. Every couple of weeks
- 4. About monthly
- 5. Less than monthly
- 6. Hardly ever
- 7. Not at all
- 8. Not applicable

Other

Comment:

8. I now want to ask you about the help you got from social workers. Did you have a social worker whilst you were in care? 1. Yes 2. No

S/W

9. Was there any time when you did not have a social worker? 1. Yes 2. No

No S/W

17. How often did you see your social worker whilst you were in care?
1. Weekly 2. Fortnightly 3. Monthly
4. Every six weeks 5. Every three months 6. Less than that

S/W how often

18. Do you have a social worker now. 1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

S/W now

19. If so, how long have you had your current social worker?
1. Less than a month 2. Between 1 & 6 months 3. Between 6 months & 1 yr
4. Between 1 & 2 years 5. Over 2 years 6. Not applicable (no S/W)

S/W how long

20. Can you tell me what you've found helpful about social work support?

Uncoded

What have you found unhelpful?

Uncoded

21. I now want to ask you some questions about your health and education whilst in care. When you were in care how well would you say the people looking after you took care of your health.
1. Very well 2. Reasonably well 3. Not very well 4. Not at all well

Health

Can you give me any examples?

2. If you don't think your health was cared for properly, how could it have been better for you?

Uncoded

3. If you needed to see the Doctor were you supported/encouraged to go? (if you wanted support). 1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

Doctor

4. Were you given support to attend regular dental appointments? (if you wanted it). 1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

Dentist

5. Now about your education. When you were in care do you think your educational needs were looked after? 1. Very well 2. Reasonably well 3. Not very well 4. Not at all well

Educ.

Can you give me any examples?

6. Were you helped or encouraged to take part in any sport or leisure activities whilst in care? 1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

Sport

7. Were there things you would have liked to do which you did not feel able to do whilst in care?

Uncoded

8. I now want to ask about any problems or difficulties about your time in care. If you'd had a personal problem of any sort whilst in care what would you have done?

Uncoded

Would you have felt able to confide in any of the adults looking after you?

Uncoded

If not, why not? -

Some young people may have different experiences in care perhaps because they are Black or Gay or Disabled. From your observations and experience if you'd been different in any way what would it have been like for you?

Uncoded

Did you experience anything in care which you felt shouldn't have happened?

Uncoded

Were you given information about the complaints procedure whilst in care?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Don't know

Complaints

2. If you'd had something to complain about whilst in care, what would you have done?
 (prompts: who would you have gone to etc)

Uncoded

PART C: Preparation for leaving care

Now want to ask you some questions about the preparation you had for leaving care.

3. First of all, thinking about practical things, did you have preparation for the following:

If yes, where from:

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|--------|-------|-------------|
| i. Cooking | 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Not sure |
| ii. Managing money | 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Not sure |
| iii. Shopping | 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Not sure |
| iv. Looking after yourself | 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Not sure |
| v. Comments: | | | |

Cooking

Money

Shopping

Looking after

4. Did you get help with any of the following:

If yes, where from:

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------|-------|-------------|
| i. Getting somewhere to live | 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Not sure |
| ii. Sorting out benefits | 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Not sure |
| iii. Getting a job or training | 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Not sure |
| Comments: | | | |

Live

Benefits

Job

Many young people experience difficulties in getting used to living out of care. It's normal to feel a bit lost and lonely. Did you have any help in preparing yourself for these sorts of difficulties?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

Lonely

Comments:

Overall, how would you rate the preparation you had for leaving care?
1. Very good 2. Reasonably good 3. Not very good 4. Bad

Preparation

Any other comments:

Out of Care

Now want to ask you a few things about your life now you've left care.

Do you feel you have the support you need now that you've left care?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

Support

Comments:

Do you have contact with any of the following now that you've left care:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|
| a. A social worker | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| b. A project worker (Wakefield Accommodation Project) | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| c. A befriender (Wakefield Accommodation Project) | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| d. Someone from a previous placement
(eg a residential worker or a foster carer) | 1. Yes | 2. No |

Is there anyone else you have contact with (who provides support now
you've left care)?

1. Yes 2. No

If yes, please specify:

What sort of things have been helpful since leaving care?

Uncoded

What sort of things have been difficult?

Uncoded

What sort of things would you have liked to have seen available
which have not been?

Uncoded

2. Looking at education/training opportunities. Do you have any training needs which are not being met now? 1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

What are they: -

Training

p. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your present situation?

Uncoded

PART E: Looking Back

just want to finish by asking you to think about the care system in Wakefield from your point of view - as someone who has experience of it.

4. What do you feel residential/foster homes or social services could do to improve things for young people in care?

Uncoded

5. If you were talking to a group of young people just entering care, what sort of things would you want to say to them?

Uncoded

6. If you were a member of staff or a foster carer, what sort of things would you do differently? How would you improve things?

Uncoded

7. What do you feel has been your overall experience of being in care in Wakefield?

1. Very good 2. Good 3. OK 4. Not too good 5. Bad

Overall

8. What has made the deepest impression on you?

Uncoded

9. Finally, thinking about your own future, what are your main hopes and expectations?

Uncoded

10. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Uncoded

11. Would you be interested in helping us further? We are hoping to work with some young people over a longer period to check out what sort of services help and what don't. If you'd be willing to help, may we contact you again?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Not sure

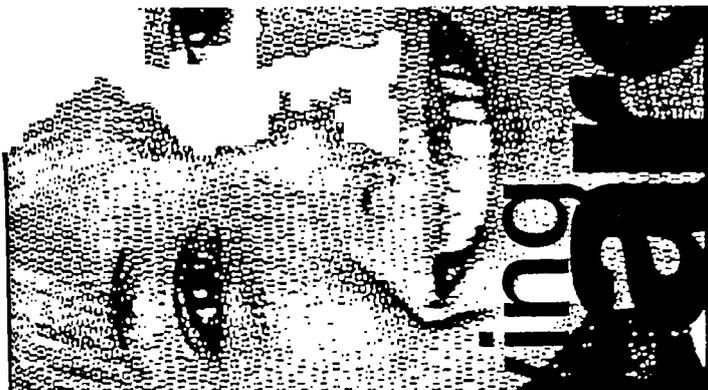
Further

If yes, what is the best way of contacting you?

Address:

Contact Number:

Community and
Social Services
Department



leaving Care

**Please
tell
us**

What were the good things?

Did we do anything we
shouldn't have?

Could we make it better for
others in future?

**Your
views
count**



**Your
views
count**

Please forward this form to

The Quality Assurance Officer

Community and Social Services Department

Service Quality Section

1. Identification number of young person
2. Gender
3. Date of birth
4. Ethnic origin
5. Date of referral
6. Date of registration
7. Number of moves while registered with project:

Planned
Unplanned

8. Type of accommodation in:

- own tenancy
- residential care
- foster care
- no fixed abode
- supported lodgings
- supported housing
- custody/bail hostel
- out of area placement
- other

9. Worker's name:

01	04	07
02	05	08
03	06	09

10. Area currently living:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

11. Status

- care order
- accommodated
- looked after
- homeless
- voluntary (no order)

12. Level of involvement

- minimum weekly
- fortnightly
- monthly
- occasional

13. Risk

- low
- medium
- high

14. Number of dependent children under 5

15. Day time activity

- 01 Employed
- 02 Unemployed
- 03 Full time college
- 04 Part time college
- 05 School
- 06 Exc school
- 07 Voluntary work

Characterisations - First Encounters

(Chapter Seven)

Note: Interpretive analysis will be in bold typeface with characterisation in plain, italic typeface. Where possible five characterisations will be made for each first encounter.

Sally

Sally was a tall, athletic looking young woman, constantly dressed in the most up to the minute sportswear. My first encounter with Sally was at the 'Open Door' drop-in where her entry was rather dramatic. Sally and a friend arrived breathless, convinced they were being pursued by the police. They had apparently been '*banned for life*' from the local shopping mall for persistent shop lifting, this information being conveyed with more than a little pride. Sally was in prison for shop-lifting when the interviewer had initially tried to contact her after she had consented to give an *exit interview*. She seemed to be a regular user of the drop-in; the staff appearing to enjoy her company, actively seeking her conversation, laughing and joking.

It would seem necessary to make some kind of characterisation from the information above but an initial reading proved to be ineffective. Yes, there was the shoplifting; yes, openness in relation to the activities she had been engaged in and yes, she seemed to be popular with the workers. How to interpret diverse information? Her behaviour regarding the shoplifting could be characterised as *risk taking* and her behaviour in relation to the Scheme staff showed *confidence*.

Sally was unemployed at that time, living on her own in a council flat having left care six months earlier. Problems relating to furniture were high on her agenda - she didn't have a sofa to sit on, '*How would you like it with nowhere to sit in your living room?*' One of the Scheme workers suggested that she should go to the '*Stores to see what they have*'. This was a Social Services storage where furniture which had been donated was sold cheaply to people considered to be 'in need'. This suggestion was met with utter disdain - apparently Sally had been on numerous occasions and there was nothing suitable.

Sally's willingness to express her dissatisfaction and to relate this to the workers again demonstrates confidence but there is also something else relating to a level of self worth.

It was difficult to engage her in conversation; she continually moved around rarely standing still let alone sitting down. Sally had a portable phone belonging to her boyfriend which she used constantly during the Open Door session. This first meeting with Sally left me a little breathless, I didn't get an opportunity to speak to her nor did she seem concerned with me - why should she? The Scheme workers introduced me but she was preoccupied with her recent experience in the shopping mall.

Here Sally appears to use the phone to effectively create a distance between herself and any other action taking place. Her behaviour could be interpreted as rude, however, a more fitting characterisation might be indifference, which seems to be shown both in terms of her behaviour toward my presence and the excluding effect her behaviour might have upon others attending the drop-in.

Sally became 'accommodated' at fifteen years old initially being placed with foster parents - after three days she ran away. During her two and half year period 'accommodated' by the local authority Sally experienced eight placements, three of which were foster placements, two residential community homes, a further three week period in an assessment unit on remand and six weeks in bed and breakfast accommodation. Her final placement was with foster parents where she remained for the whole year prior to leaving care. Sally talked of her foster mum with affection:

'My last foster parents were great, my foster mum was just like a friend. She even came to visit me when I got locked up - you know: picked up or in custody.' (exit interview, doc. 15)

My field notes make the following observation in relation to Sally:

The impression is one of confidence with an air of indifference. She is confident in her interactions answering quickly and effectively any comments made by workers but I was left feeling that she was indifferent to both their concern and disapproval regarding the shoplifting . (field notes)

This rather cold observation was based upon one meeting but maybe it conveys the importance of first encounters. I had no prior experience to draw upon using only what I saw at that time to place her. It might be argued that as a researcher I should not have been situating her, however, my research is concerned with describing and interpreting what I encounter. Furthermore, is it not exactly what society in general will do and therefore my first impressions, as with those of others, are of vital importance; they are part of an ongoing interactive process and as such are important. Yet first encounters as with assessing outcomes do not operate with perfect knowledge. Might my positioning of Sally have been different if I had been aware of an unsettled and maybe traumatic two and a half years spent 'looked after' by the corporate parent?

Sally's continual movement might suggest some inability on her part to settle and maybe respond to the support offered. Yet her comments relating to her foster mum show a softer more *sensitive* side to her behaviour.

Characterisations:

risk taking
confidence
indifference
self worth
sensitivity

Peter

I had met Peter at the Leaving Care Scheme twice before but only briefly, on the first occasion he had still been 'looked after' and was at the 'drop-in' for the first time. He was rather withdrawn and kept to himself with staff working to involve him in the usual chatter. The second time we met he had left care and been living in supported lodgings, he had just turned eighteen. His worker had suggested to him that he might take part in an exit interview. I was actually at the Scheme meeting with another young person when the worker rather formally introduced us. Peter agreed to complete an exit interview if it was at the children's home where he had lived for two years prior to leaving care and on the understanding that I would be the interviewer. Peter appeared more chatty and relaxed but his insistence upon my doing the interview seemed to convey a certain shyness.

This first encounter with Peter conveys a level of distance but also shyness. However, when reading the account these can be interpreted as consequences of his vulnerability.

The interview took place in the 'back room' of the residential community home which was a comfortable, private room where the young people sat and chatted. He seemed to be in an ambivalent situation in the home - the young people living at the home swept him along as one of them yet Peter seemed uneasy as if he shouldn't really be there.

He told me that he called at the home fairly regular but that it was difficult as he was living quite a distance away. Peter spoke of his keyworker while in residential care:

'she was real good to me, give me a cuddle if I was ill. I wish she was my mum, I'd have been OK then.' (field notes)

Peter spent eighteen months 'accommodated' by the local authority all of which were at this same residential community home. His *exit interview* made poignant reading, when asked about the leaving care process his reply was:

'They kept me here as long as they could before they let me go. I'd have stopped here (residential community home) forever, I loved it here. It's a good children's home and you get spoilt here. The staff are reliable and sound people to live with. I wish I'd come here when I was a couple of years younger.' (exit interview, doc. 35)

Insecurity is clearly evident due to his change of circumstance in relation to the community home. He has obviously moved from insider to outsider. This insecurity is all the more forceful when confronted with his thankful appreciation of the time spent at the community home.

His residential care keyworker was on duty when I arrived to interview Peter; she showed obvious concern asking him how was coping, encouraging him to seek assistance from the Leaving Care Scheme. Peter seemed to be listening but his smile looked to be more passive than any kind of active acceptance of the pertinence of her advice.

One of the questions asked in the course of the *exit interview* related to how young people had found living independently, his reply was unexpected, 'OK if you call livin the back of a car alright.' Peter went on to tell me that he had 'trouble' at his supported lodgings placement. Peter had found himself a summer job fruit picking; the supported lodgings provider had disapproved and insisted that he either inform the Benefits Agency or stop working illegally. Peter refused to do either and subsequently left. He was not angry when telling me this rather resigned; feeling that he had not been unreasonable because he needed the extra money for a new stereo and there was no other way to afford one. Nevertheless, his situation at that time was pretty dire, he told me that he was living with a friend at his parents' house. 'I sleep on the floor but they don't really want me there.' I later dropped him off at his friend's glancing into the rear view mirror as he walked toward the house. His walk was very slow almost reluctant as though he were unsure of his reception. I realise that this is my interpretation but it is based upon my reading of our first encounter. He gave his address as 'no fixed abode' asking me to contact him through the residential community home.

Evident in much of the later part of this first encounter is a state of *passive acceptance* which is also tinged with his own *reasonable*.

Characterisations:

vulnerable
insecure
thankfully appreciative
passively accepting
reasonable

Natasha

Again, as with Peter, I had very briefly met Natasha on a number of occasions, first at a residential children's home when Natasha was still 'looked after', and more recently at the Leaving Care Scheme. She was an extremely attractive young woman with short blonde hair and the usual trendy sportswear. On our first meeting at the home, while she was still 'looked after', she was very loud, shouting to and at staff.

When considering Natasha's behaviour in the home you get a sense of an *assertive* young woman able to speak up for herself.

My first real conversation with Natasha was at the local bowling alley when I was invited to a social event which the Scheme had organised and was funded by the voluntary child care organisation which shared funding for the Leaving Care Scheme. At that time Natasha was working as a clerical officer for a local firm on a YT scheme. A number of young people had gone along to the bowling evening with staff, supported lodgings providers and other people who had a degree of involvement with the Scheme. This was a popular event with the young people - bowling, burgers and for those old enough an opportunity to share a beer with the Scheme workers. Natasha came up and said Hi, she was very cheerful and told me that she has just moved into her own flat. Her cheerful mood was curtailed when I asked when she had moved in - she said '*today*' going on to tell me that she had moved in by herself, '*nobody helped me, I help all me mates but nobody helped me.*' I was surprised to say the least by this revelation as I had become increasingly aware of the effort and care Scheme workers took when a young person first moves into their own accommodation. However, Natasha clarified that this was indeed her second flat; moving in the same block but to a different flat to gain more space.

Natasha was one of the few young people to be employed when first becoming involved in the research. Also she engaged me in conversation rather than the opposite being true. These factors might be interpreted in terms of *self-sufficiency and confidence*.

When speaking of her distress she told me that evening that what really hurts was:

'I thought the staff (at the residential unit) really cared for me but probably not, I was there a really long time an none of em come to see me.' (field notes)

She was eager for me to leave the bowling evening early in order to see her flat, I had to decline as there were many young people at the event whom I had contact with and it would not have been appropriate for me to leave with Natasha. Natasha's distress at the lack of commitment on the part of the residential staff was evident. She was obviously neither prepared for nor aware of the boundaries which might exist in relation to roles and responsibilities. I did have concerns that I too had compounded this by my inability to call round at her flat that evening.

Much of what is written here shows Natasha as a young woman who was disappointed by those who she thought she could rely on resulting in her feelings of *resentment* in that her expectations went unfulfilled.

Natasha had entered care at the age of two being 'permanently' fostered for ten years. This placement broke down when Natasha made allegations of physical abuse against her foster dad. She was placed at the local authority Assessment Unit but requested she be move back to living with a family. Natasha then experienced four other foster placements in quick succession with six months being the longest. Her *exit interview* gave insight into why she was unable to settle:

'No matter what anyone did for me I never felt secure in a family environment. It wasn't the foster parents' fault - it was just me, just how I felt. It didn't matter where I was I never felt secure. I don't think I'd be able to feel secure even now in a family.' (exit interview, doc.. 35)

Evident here is Natasha's ability to evaluate fairness but this evaluation of her foster placements seems to show more forcefully a personal level of *insecurity*.

The residential community home where she was subsequently placed proved more stable and she stayed there for two and a half years prior to leaving care at seventeen.

Characterisations:

assertive
self-sufficient
confident
resentful
insecure

James

James was one of the first young people I met when undertaking this research, I introduced him earlier when highlighting the ethical tensions that might arise. Whenever I called at the Scheme James seemed to be around, his countenance was a little daunting to say the least with his shaven head and dishevelled appearance. He was nineteen and unemployed when I first met him and had been living out of care for just over a year. His continual presence at the Scheme was problematic as there were set times when young people could call in for tea and a chat; at other times it was very business like with appointments and specific issues to be dealt with. Although staff were friendly with James I became aware that they were unwilling to set some kind of precedent that enabled James to drop in and stay until he was ready to go.

James' continual presence at the Scheme would suggest a certain level of need which might be characterised as him being *dependent*.

This was a continuing issue for the Scheme throughout the duration of my research and not one that related only to James. As mentioned earlier the Scheme shared space and facilities in a community centre, there was neither the space nor the staff available to provide a continuous level of social support based at the Scheme office. Nevertheless, James's need to be there should be acknowledged.

On a number of occasions when I had first seen James he had been homeless and seeking same night accommodation at various hostels. His *exit interview* reflected this movement:

It's difficult (accommodation) I don't like livin in the hostel, I've been to loads of hostels and places but I don't like movin around it makes you kind of lonely.' (exit interview, doc. 1)

The staff at the Scheme allowed him to use the telephone furnishing him with accommodation telephone numbers, it seemed to be a usual occurrence for James to be seeking crisis accommodation. On one particular occasion James was on the phone at the Scheme continually - moving on to contact Careers inquiring about employment. Previously James had found employment

but had not been able to stay in work. Later telephone calls were with the police in relation to his impending court appearances. At this meeting I had no insight into what his level of police involvement might be. James was not at all shy on the phone being calm and polite even charming. His keyworker later joked that James should find a job in tele-sales he was so confident on the telephone.

Although James' homelessness would support the characterisation of *vulnerable* his ability to utilise the Scheme services and his aptitude on the phone displays both *resourcefulness* and *confidence*. It might be argued that the phone provided a certain distance therefore aiding his ability to act with confidence. Nevertheless many young people would have been very apprehensive in a similar situation.

James entered care at fourteen, although, he felt that he '*shouldn't have gone into care, I should have been left at home with me brothers*' (exit interview, doc.1). His first placement was at the local authority residential community home which provided on site education - James had not been attending school for some time. He later moved into a residential community home where attempts to reintegrate him with his family were unsuccessful with James staying there until he reached eighteen.

Overall when considering James' continual presence at the Scheme and his persistent homeless status a notion of *unconnectedness* in relation to personal support is suggested.

Characterisations:

dependent
vulnerable
resourceful
confident
unconnected

Suzanne

Suzanne was 16 when she became involved with this research. I had not seen her at the Leaving Care Scheme and one of the independent interviewers working for the Local Authority had undertaken the *exit interview*. On completion of the interview Suzanne had agreed to become involved in further research. I wrote to Suzanne enclosing an information sheet briefly outlining the research and giving a time when I would be able to call. I also enclosed a telephone number where I could be contacted if she wanted to rearrange the appointment. I arrived as arranged, a delicate looking, slender young woman opened the door holding an infant who looked only days old. Suzanne had forgotten our appointment and had friends round. She was very apologetic and I had to insist that it did not matter and that I could easily call another day before she would allow me to leave. I was relieved to note that Suzanne seemed keen for me to call again.

Suzanne's agreeable manner when confronted with a stranger calling at an inconvenient time and her James for me to call again convey both *friendliness* and a degree of *sensitivity* in recognising my obvious embarrassment.

There were two toddlers playing on the floor with the usual array of toys, the house was very comfortable and cheerful. Suzanne was particularly concerned about my arrival because her 'boyfriend' was in the kitchen decorating and as a result she felt the house was a 'mess'. There was another young woman there, one of the children belonged to her, Suzanne explained that they had called in to see the new baby. The other toddler playing on the floor was Suzanne's eldest child Jordan, she had recently had her second child Kayne - he was the child in her arms as she opened the door.

Both the home environment and Suzanne's concern regarding my arrival and the disarray in the house suggest a young woman who is *anxious* regarding the impression she projects. Also, it might be interpreted that a degree of *vulnerability* was evident in that she was very young with two small children to care for.

Suzanne entered the care of the local authority when she had just turned fourteen. Her entry was a direct result of the sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of her stepfather coming to the attention of social services. She spent a week in emergency accommodation with foster parents, the

following placement did not work out with Suzanne giving the following explanation:

'At Mrs Deakin's I was left on my own a lot because she would go out and meet people on dates, you know she's with this dating agency and he's about seventy. She still does it, she was too old to foster anyway.' (exit interview, doc. 29)

Although the mention of sexual abuse does convey once again images of vulnerability Suzanne's evaluation of the foster placement shows her to be discerning.

Suzanne was moved to different foster parents where she remained for eighteen months prior to the birth of her first child when she left care.

Characterisations:

friendly
sensitive
anxious
vulnerable
discerning

Tara

I had seen Tara briefly before our first scheduled meeting - she had been with another of the young women I had been visiting in connection with the research. On this very brief meeting Tara seemed confident and although friendly she maintained a distance. I had also heard her name mentioned numerous times at the Leaving Care Scheme in relation to supported lodgings and the birth of her son Stephen. Tara was seventeen at this time. I was aware that she had recently moved into her own house and that there were problems. However, I was not familiar with what the problems were only

that her keyworker had spent a substantial amount of time recently trying to 'sort things out'. Again, as with Suzanne, I had not met her at the Leaving Care Scheme and I had not been involved in the *exit interview* she had given so I had arranged to visit in response to her agreement to be involved in further research.

I do not intend to use the obvious characterisation of distance rather I see it as more appropriate to interpret Tara's polite distancing as a *mature* and understandable reaction to someone she had little knowledge of.

Tara has a council tenancy on a large rather notorious council estate on the edge of town. I was late for the appointment, I had serious problems finding the house. Many of the street signs were missing and I had to stop various people and ask for directions. When I eventually arrived Tara was waiting patiently and laughed when I explained why I was late telling me that it was impossible to give anyone directions because of the kids '*nickin*' the signs.

Tara's acceptance of my lateness and obvious amusement with my plight made me feel at ease and leads one to interpret her behaviour as *friendly*.

As I entered the living room it was hard not to notice the walls. Tara had decorated the lounge with the help of Scheme workers when she moved in, however, she explained that there had been a problem with damp and thus the council had needed to undertake major work; so the decorating was ruined. The living room was stripped ready for wallpapering with green distemper showing through but Tara didn't have the money to buy fresh wallpaper. Tara later told me that she couldn't be bothered tidying the house, '*Why bother, it still looks like a shit heap.*'

Her response to the dire surroundings she is required to tolerate is one that could be interpreted as *angry acceptance*. I thought of using resignation but this seemed inaccurate failing to convey the way in which she was aware of and angry about the whole situation.

Stephen, Tara's small son, played while we talk she was attentive and caring constantly bringing our conversation around to him. I had been a little apprehensive about this first meeting - especially as I'd managed to be late. This apprehension was not particularly about Tara but more about my somewhat unnatural route into the lives of strangers. Yet I found myself chatting easily with an amusing and very articulate young woman.

Tara's first placement with the local authority was at the age of fourteen and was related to her mother's physical abuse. Her return home was not successful and her re-entry into local authority care again resulted in a short term foster placement where Tara was happy and settled but had to move because of the short term classification. She then moved into a residential community home but requested a further move because she felt at risk due to the prevalence of drugs and criminal behaviour at the home.

'There were eight kids ranging from 11-18, six offenders who used drugs with only two staff on shift at any one time. I felt isolated. I had to break a rule to get attention as an individual.'

'I came close to bein raped there. I shared with another girl who let two males in at the fire escape door an it got out of hand. She was goin out with one, so the other thought he was there for something from me.' (exit interview, doc.34)

Her last placement was at another local authority residential community home and this proved more stable with Tara feeling that, 'the staff didn't just treat you like another kid in care.' Tara remained there until she became pregnant with Stephen. Tara was then 'discharged' ceasing to be termed 'looked after', she moved into supported lodgings where she remained until after Stephen's birth, she was very settled and happy there.

Tara has an ability to be retrospectively *analytical* both in terms of her actions and the surrounding circumstances. Also evident is a capacity to articulate and interact with *confidence*.

Characterisations:

**mature
friendly
angry acceptance
analytical
confident**

Janine

Although Janine did not regularly attend she did make an occasional appearance at the 'drop in'. At our first meeting one of the Scheme workers had given Janine an *exit interview* leaflet and subsequently asked me to explain to her what the initiative was about. Janine promptly said that she thought *exit interviews* were a '*good idea*' and filled in the leaflet. I was very much aware that Janine was putting me at my ease rather than any misconception that I might be expected to fulfil that role. Her manner was both friendly and understanding and I felt she was aware of my somewhat contrived presence at the 'drop-in' session.

Janine's manner is one which would be easily interpreted as *friendly* but she was also *accommodating*.

Janine had her small son Elliot with her - he was just over twelve months old at that time. He was a very robust and extremely appealing child who proved popular with both Scheme staff and the young people, therefore Elliot was entertained while Janine chatted. It would be difficult to discern if Elliot was popular in his own right or if his popularity was a consequence of Janine's cheery and sunny disposition.

Her obvious ease and amenable manner mean that Janine is *popular* with both the young people and Scheme staff which in turn might imply a level of *consistency* in her behaviour.

Janine shared a council house tenancy with Damien, her partner, their house was located on a peaceful cul-de-sac on the edge of a large housing estate. Janine and Damien both said that they liked and '*got on*' with most of the neighbours. However, Janine did make reference to the police helicopter constantly flying overhead and the '*no hopers*' who lived '*round about*'. Damien had also been 'looked after' by the Authority, he was fine with Janine being involved with the research and his involvement in respect of his relationship with her. However, he forcefully refused to become involved at any other level saying categorically that he did not want to give an *exit interview*. Janine explained that Damien's life had been more fraught than hers and as a consequence he just wanted to leave it behind. Throughout my contact with Janine I respected Damien's wishes making no attempt to actively involve him. Nevertheless, my contact was informal and Damien was often in the house when I called, he was seeking employment at that time, and he often stayed and joined in the

conversation to a limited extent. I did on several occasions check that he was comfortable with my making a record of any comments he made as part of any conversations I had with Janine.

Again evident is Janine's capacity to accommodate other people - she does not offer a partisan justification for Damien's refusal to become involved in the research. Rather she explains his reluctance thus working toward an accommodation that enables both myself and Damien to feel more comfortable.

Janine was fifteen when she entered care first being placed with foster parents. She stayed with her foster parents for four months, leaving because in Janine's words they, '*didn't get on*'. The next placement was deemed to be only temporary with Janine staying at the Assessment Unit for three months. Janine then moved to a residential community home where she stayed for a year before becoming pregnant with Elliot. Her final placement was with foster parents where she remained until the birth of Elliot and the subsequent move into her current accommodation. Janine still has contact with her last foster parents, visiting regularly with both Stephen and Damien.

Some young people feel the need to air their grievances in relation to past placements. Janine chose to say simply '*we didn't get on*' which might be interpreted as showing a level of *discretion*. This discretion could also be inferred from her limited explanation and earlier accommodation of Damien's refusal to be involved in the research.

Characterisations:

friendly
accommodation
popular
consistent
discrete

Shaun

It is difficult to relay a first impression which is not somehow influenced by the *exit interview* which Shaun gave; thus reflecting the way in which past interactions impact upon the present. The interview left a resounding impression - a young person who 'left' care ('left' seems an inappropriate term, Shaun seems to have been 'moved on',) very early; just before his sixteenth birthday. While 'looked after' Shaun had been placed at a residential school out of the local authority area. On

completion of his statutory education he was required to leave the school and thus became the direct responsibility of the Authority and the Leaving Care Scheme. His exit interview tells of leaving the school, where he had been very settled, and moving into a bed and breakfast in his home town. The *exit interview* conveys a level of confusion on Shaun's part as to why he would have been found such accommodation and expected to cope on his own.

'I was only sixteen and I thought I could go to stay somewhere else but nobody seemed to know what was happening. Social Services put me straight into bed and breakfast accommodation. I only had one meal a day, that was breakfast. I had no say, no money - nothing like that.' (exit interview, doc 5)

this first encounter with Shaun leaves the impression of *vulnerability* in that he appears to be very young to be living independently. But there is also a sense of *abandonment* whereby he seems to have simply reached the end of a particular road with no further plans having been made.

As with some of the other young people involved in the research I had not met Shaun prior to his agreement to become involved when completing an *exit interview*. His keyworker had expressed concern that it might be difficult to contact Shaun who had by this time left the bed and breakfast and was leading an unsettled lifestyle. Shaun had arranged to meet his keyworker at the Scheme and the worker had asked Shaun if I might see him later - he agreed to this arrangement. Shaun arrived at the Scheme as arranged; the staff all felt that Shaun would not keep his appointment, (a Scheme worker had rung Shaun in order to remind him of his appointment). He was dressed in a rather garish tee shirt and shorts which did not really co-ordinate with his Dr Martin boots the result being that he looked rather comical with Scheme workers joking about his appearance. Shaun seemed relaxed and at ease with the staff but he looked very young.

His key worker took Shaun into the private office to check through some claim forms which Shaun needed to take to the local Benefit Office. I was surprised to be asked by a member of the Scheme staff, if I would like to accompany Shaun to the Benefits Office. I was informed, once I had rather reservedly accepted, that Shaun wanted someone to go with him because he was afraid of passing a hostel where he had previously been a resident. Staff assured me this was more an *'imagined'* fear of Shaun's rather than a realistic threat.

This was one of the times when I was unsure if I was actually crossing a line in some way. Should I have been 'riding shotgun' in this way? Should I have been fulfilling the role of a Scheme worker in this way? Should I have been so quickly placed into the milieu of Shaun's life -would he have preferred a more extended transitional period in terms of our relationship? I have no real problem with going to the Benefits Office, the aim of the research is to access a more everyday appreciation of young people's lives, if young people wanted me to go then fine. However, I did not feel I was invited to participate in Shaun's life; more that I was available so I could go along. I must say however, that Shaun did not seem in any way concerned with the turn of events - quite the reverse. As we walked to the Benefits Office on a bright sunny morning he was more than willing to chat and did not seem at all troubled by my presence.

The most marked impression here would seem to be that of Shaun's unquestioning acceptance of me and my uninvited presence in his life. Also evident was indifference in relation to who I might be and what I might learn about his personal circumstances.

Shaun informed me that he had recently finished a scheme (YT) - while he was relaying this information he became a little confused. It became unclear as to whether Shaun had 'quit' the scheme or if it had finished, nevertheless, he was at that time unemployed as his trip to the Benefits Office was related to his need to claim Income Support. He told me as we walked along that he had moved into Derwent House a week ago, this was a recently opened (approx 12 mths) purpose built hostel for a diverse range of people; age and circumstances. Shaun informed me that he moved from his previous accommodation; due to other residents attempting to force drugs on him. He told me that he had reported 'them' to the police, and as a consequence, 'they're after' him. This would probably relate to why I had been asked to accompany Shaun to the Benefit Office. I asked Shaun if he told the staff at the hostel; he shrugged his shoulders and said that they knew but did nothing about it. I then asked if he had told his key worker; yet again he shrugged his shoulders and said, 'he don't listen to me; he just carries on with his writin and stuff.'

Shaun told me that he was taken into care at seven and a half, after his step father at that time, had physically abused him. He returned home with the support and involvement of social services, however, he re-entered care at nine being placed in a residential community home. Shaun remained at the residential community home for five months moving out of area to a residential community home with education. Shaun completed both his junior and senior school education at two out of area

residential units with education, moving back into the local authority area when his statutory education was completed.

This encounter with Shaun convey a young person who is used to being moved about and coping with change which may in turn suggest a high level of *resilience*.

Characterisations:

**vulnerable
abandoned
unquestioning acceptance
indifference
resilient**

Hannah

Arrived at Hannah's, the flat is on the second floor of a new housing association block of maisonnettes. Hannah's flat is the only one with a broken window. I had written in response to Hannah's positive reply to become involved in further research given on completion of her *exit interview*. Nevertheless, she seemed surprised by my arrival but when I explained she rather indifferently invited me in. A young man named Asraf was at the flat with Hannah and her infant daughter Amber. He stayed for about half of my time there and was very chatty, at times it was difficult to make conversation with Hannah as there was a need to somehow get past the surface conversation of Asraf. He informed me that he was the cousin of Hannah's former partner; Amber's father. Hannah told me that Amber's father was in prison and that she was more than relieved that this was the case.

The obvious characterisation to make here would be indifference but maybe that does not convey effectively this first encounter with Hannah. A more explicit way of describing this encounter would be *unconcerned*.

Hannah was just 18 but she looked younger, however her manner was not that of a older teenager more that of an experienced woman in her mid twenties who was reluctant to be too familiar at a first meeting. I actually found this more comfortable than the unquestioning acceptance I had

encountered with some of the young people. Amber was born when Hannah was sixteen, she became pregnant while in care. Although distant and more than a little reserved when I arrive, by the end of the visit she is talking freely and telling me that I would be able to see Amber again on my next visit who by this time had herself begun to chat and relax in my company. Before I left I was encouraged by both Hannah and Amber to take a look at Amber's bedroom, it was cheery - lots of yellow and sky blue; Hannah had just finished decorating it herself.

This first encounter with Hannah is primarily one where she presented a *mature* image but also maintained an effective distance. This later developed into a more relaxed interchange but still it would be too much to suggest Hannah was friendly in a similar way to other young people. Rather than saying her behaviour was distant a better interpretation might be that she was *cautious*.

When Hannah first entered care she was aged twelve and placed with foster parents. This foster placement only lasted for three months when as a result of, in Hannah's words, '*me absconding*' she was placed in an out of area secure unit. She made some distressing and disquieting comments about this time:

'I don't think they should put you in a secure unit at twelve years old, especially when there are some doing TWOCing (taking a vehicle without the owner's consent) and more. I was just running away. Lots were doing more than me and not sent away. The more they put me away the worse I came back, I'd pick up all sorts of tricks, you know learning new things each time. I was the only one at twelve who was there for running away.' (exit interview, doc.. 26)

Hannah's account of her placement in the secure unit shows obvious *resentment* at what she believes to be a serious injustice which she experienced. Taking up the injustice she felt leads to a characterisation of *disillusioned* - she expected to be treated better.

After three months in the secure unit Hannah returned to her local authority and was placed in a residential community home but again there were problems with absconding and now offending resulting in Hannah again being placed out of area. This time the placement was a residential unit with education where Hannah was much more settled staying for nine months. On her return to the local authority area she was placed at a different residential community home where she stayed for almost

three years. Her departure was due, again in Hannah's word, to her becoming '*involved in trouble*'. After two very brief stays at two further residential community homes run by the local authority she moved to a mother and baby hostel where she stayed for three months while pregnant with Amber.

Characterisations:

- **unconcerned**
- mature**
- distant**
- resentful**
- disillusioned**

Rebecca

In chapter three I introduced Rebecca and the way in which she, maybe more than anyone else, made me aware of my essentially powerless and contrived position. She was seventeen when we first met yet her demeanour was of someone much older. This impression may relate to her outward physical appearance which was very smart and adult with carefully applied make-up. However, her conversation was also very practical and matter of fact relating to finding employment and her current relationship. Although this account seems accurate it does not convey the more extrovert side of her behaviour which was often present during our first encounters.

Both Rebecca's appearance and her manner would lead to the characterisation of *maturity* .

Rebecca lived alone in a privately rented bedsit in the centre of town. She had recently started a job as a DJ in a local pub. Her keyworker encouraged her to give an *exit interview* but on this occasion she declined. I made no effort to persuade her as the initiative was about ensuring that young people had a choice, however, I did feel that her refusal was most distinctly about taking control and her refusal directed more at me. This interpretation may be a reflection of my vulnerable position at that time. Nevertheless, Rebecca did eventually give an *exit interview* after a number of her friends had done so (did she choose to or was she merely compliant not wanting to seem different?).

Her ability to take control could be interpreted as *assertive*. Rebecca's circumstances: private accommodation which she found herself, working as a DJ in a pub projects a persona of someone who is *self-sufficient* but also *strongly independent*. I interpret her attitude to my presence as a demonstration of this independence. She would give an interview when she decided to do so, not when encouraged by a worker or even pressured by my being there.

Rebecca's first local authority placement was with foster parents when she was two years old. This placement lasted for a couple of years, Rebecca had no real recollection of the placement or why it ended. She then moved to another foster placement where she remained for six years, however, again Rebecca cannot recollect why she moved but she remembered vividly being moved:

'I hate them. To the back end of it they said they wanted to adopt me, they were going to adopt me but turned round and said to them (Social Services) 'take her back'. I still don't know to this day, Can you imagine what that feels like at nine or ten years old - 'take her back,' and you don't know why?' (exit interview, doc.23)

This disappointment and rejection was followed by a short term placement before being placed with another set of foster parents. Rebecca stayed with Pat and Jeff for six and a half years, speaking with a great deal of affection about her time there constantly refer to them as Mum and Dad and emphasising that they acted toward her as if she was, *'their own kid'*. In her mid teens her 'real' father re-entered her life and Rebecca went to live with him and his new family; this didn't work out with Rebecca later being placed in a residential community home where she stayed until leaving care at seventeen.

Rebecca's words taken from the exit interview might easily be translated into resentment but that may be a simplistic interpretation. When reading her words several times you are struck with the obvious distress and unhappiness she experienced, therefore a more fitting interpretation might be *desolation*.

Characterisations:

mature
assertive
strongly independent
self-sufficient
desolate

Kirsty

Kirsty was a small even petite young woman with elfin features. At the beginning of the research she was eighteen yet she looked much younger - nearer to fifteen. She had an eighteen month old daughter Rachel by a previous relationship and was at this time 'seeing' Dave. She lived with Rachel in a council tenancy situated in a row of council properties that appeared to have been on the whole sold to the sitting tenants. As I arrived I subjected Kirsty to my usual but on reflection all too superficial friendly facade. I say this with a degree of cynicism as reading the field notes makes me once again remember how difficult this meeting was:

It was hard to engage Kirsty in conversation - many of her answers were limited to one word responses making me feel like some kind of interrogator. I seemed unable to strike up any kind of rapport with her, finding her distant and remote. (field notes)

The word *remote* probably best characterises this first encounter. Many of the young people seen to exhibit a degree of distance and maybe this should be expected when meeting someone for the first time. With Kirsty it was different the distance was tangible and therefore remote would seem a more appropriate interpretation.

I had no way of knowing at that time if Kirsty was ordinarily hard to make conversation with or if this was actually related to her unfamiliarity with me as a person. This first contact where I outlined the research and its aims was, for me, far from encouraging. I left feeling unsure about how Kirsty's involvement would progress and decidedly worried that she might feel I had intruded in some way. The aim of the research was to access a descriptive and interpretive account of her life and this could only be achieved with the accord of the young person. I did not embark upon any significant conversational topic that might provide any real appreciation of Kirsty and her life rather I simply outlined the research

and how I thought we might proceed. Kirsty made no objection but nor did she seem in any way enthusiastic. As I left I again stressed that she could change her mind and need not be involved in the research - she declined and we arranged another meeting.

I almost feel the need to say that Kirsty was reluctant to engage in conversation but this is maybe more a reflection upon my discomfort at the time as a result of not being able to gauge Kirsty's attitude to both myself and the research. Therefore I make the characterisations of both *indifference* and *reserve*. When I use the word *reserve* I do not suggest shyness rather that she chose to withhold herself - to hold something in reserve.

Kirsty was first fostered at twelve years old. This first placement lasted a year but Kirsty was not happy and was thankful for the social worker who brought it to an end:

'My first foster parents, they were crap. They were religious people, they didn't understand my problems. They shouldn't have been foster parents in the first place, they weren't kind to me and my sister. My first social worker (one of 'loads') was helpful because he got me out of that first foster parents'. He used to take me and my sister out to dinner sometimes.' (exit interview, doc..10)

Her second foster placement was much more successful with Kirsty remaining there for four years, leaving when she became seventeen because she wanted to be independent. She had continual contact with her foster parents who provided ongoing support for both Kirsty and Rachel.

Kirsty did leave care at an early age and although I say at the beginning of the encounter that she looks very young her manner is far from juvenile. Her reserve and the way in which she is able to effectively and succinctly evaluate placements would lead to a characterisation which portrays Kirsty as *discerning* and *mature*.

Characterisations:

remote
indifferent
reserved
discerning
mature

Emma

I first met Emma at the Leaving Care Scheme at the now familiar 'drop-in'. She was with two other young women who accessed services at the Scheme. Emma appeared to be much more reserved than the other young people she was with - she smiled a great deal but said very little. Her appearance was in line with most young people of her age; casual with the usual named trainers, etc. Emma sat away from the main conversation but gave the impression that she wanted to be part of the group. At this time Emma had just turned eighteen and was living in her own housing association flat.

This first encounter clearly suggests *shyness*, however, I have reservations in that this may be far too simplistic, nevertheless, this is an analytic device and as such should be viewed with a degree of incertitude.

It would be unfair not to provide the reader with the information I already held in relation to Emma and as a consequence my reservations regarding her inclusion in this research. Emma had a prolonged history of 'mental health' difficulties which she outlined in the *exit interview*. These difficulties were visible on meeting Emma. She self-harmed and the injuries were evident on her arms, neck and to a limited extent on her face. My main concern was; would the research process prove to be detrimental in some way to Emma? Young people in the research process are to be given the opportunity to tell their 'story' might this lead to some kind of adverse effect for Emma in light of her past history.

Emma had in effect made the choice and given an *exit interview* she had also chosen to consent to her involvement in further research. Was it now appropriate to render her powerless and make choices on her behalf? It was decided in consultation with the Scheme Manager and my research supervisors that Emma should be included. However, this was predominantly influenced by the Scheme Manager's belief that to exclude Emma, when she would be aware that other young people she had close contact with had been actively encouraged to be involved, would itself have possible detrimental implications.

In light of such knowledge it would be difficult of make a characterisation which did not use the terms *distressed* and *vulnerable*.

A further and probably just as important issue is one that questions the notion not only of representativeness in research but that of equality of opportunity. Would it have been discrimination

to have quietly sampled Emma out of the research. It might be that her story was less mainstream but is that not the main strength of this approach to research? The individuality and diversity of each young person can be, as far as possible, taken into account and made visible subsequently leading toward a more in-depth understanding of individual outcomes.

Marshall's (1996) research used the term *powerfully powerless* and maybe this is a helpful characterisation of Emma's position. Her inclusion in the research was taken out of her hands to some extent but her seemingly powerless position did in reality make her powerful in that we were unable to choose alternative courses of action because of the specific positioning of Emma.

Emma's care history reflected the level of mental health difficulties she had suffered. She entered care when she was sixteen first placed in a one month emergency placement with foster parents. Emma then moved to a residential community home staying for six months after which Emma moved between various placements, residential and foster placements which were intersped with short stays in local psychiatric hospital units because she was seen to be a '*danger to herself*'. Her last placement before leaving care before leaving care at eighteen was the Assessment Unit because according to Emma:

'it was the only place that would have me.' (exit interview, doc. 6)

The final comment here again suggest powerlessness but there is also a level of *resignation* she is aware of her position and is resigned to it.

Characterisations:

shy
distressed
vulnerable
powerfully powerless
resigned

Lindsey

On first meeting Lindsey you are aware of how different her appearance is in relation to the majority of young people who accessed leaving care services. This may be a generalisation but in my experience, which at the time of writing had amounted to three years contact with both the Scheme and young people leaving care, Lindsey was different. Most young people dressed in either sportswear or fashionable clothes, Lindsey's appearance was of someone much older. Having met her at the Scheme I observed that she seldom entered into conversation with other young people nor did she arrive with anyone. While at the Scheme I did not observe any other young people chatting or being familiar with Lindsey. Occasionally a young person might say Hi but this was not followed up with any conversation. Lindsey was at the bowling evening, mentioned earlier, she was vibrant even silly, she was drinking Pils and I think by the end of the evening she had had a pretty good time. However, she was on the whole with Scheme workers not mixing with the other young people present.

This first encounter would seem to signify a level of *isolation* which may or may not be a consequence of her dissimilarity with other young people.

At the Scheme, Lindsey usually chatted with staff where much of the conversation was about trying to encourage Lindsey to feel more confident and comfortable with herself. These conversations might relate to her going out more, as it seemed she stayed at home a great deal or discussing how she might improve her situation through finding a job or going to college. Throughout Lindsey was self-effacing and polite.

Rather than using the words self-effacing and polite to characterise Lindsey it would seem more appropriate to use the more inclusive term of *passive*.

On my first arranged visit Lindsey was not in, however, I wrote to her again with a rearranged time and this time she was at home. When I arrived Dennis her boyfriend was there - he looked far older than Lindsey (she later told me that he was 42). He was polite and said he was going out so we could talk in private. Lindsey said that he had gone up to his parents' house. The flat was very tidy and I felt even

more aware of the acute dissimilarity with Lindsey and other young people I had met. There was no evidence of a young person's belongings: posters, stereo, CDs, trainers etc. rather the flat had the ambiance of a much older couple's flat. This may reflect Dennis's age but I felt it more reflected a different way of life, one which separated Lindsey from the more mainstream.

Again the *dissimilarity* of Lindsey is evident and therefore should be included in the characterisation.

Lindsey had been in the care of the local authority since infancy. Her first foster placement lasted for fifteen years; the breakdown of the placement left her feeling that she'd '*lost her family*'. As a result of the foster home breakdown Lindsey moved into a residential community home where she stayed for a total of seven months, moving out because:

'I didn't fit in there. I didn't steal or do drugs and they (other residents) did and I wouldn't go with them so there was always trouble.' (exit interview, doc. 7)

Her final placement was with foster parents whom she found helpful and supportive easing the move into her own bedsit when she became eighteen.

This account of Lindsey's past again reinforces the notion of isolation both in terms of her loss of family and her not fitting in. In this brief encounter there is a sense of her life being *unfortunate*, there is also a sense of *vulnerability* in that she does not fit and is somehow isolated.

Characterisations:

isolated
passive
dissimilar
unfortunate
vulnerable