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'I Know I Have Some Trauma Responses, but it's Not my Identity': Complicating the 'Master Status' of Care Experience and Estrangement for Students in English Higher Education

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Abstract: Care experienced and estranged students face acute barriers in UK higher education (HE). However, whilst there are institutional and sectoral imperatives to tackle these obstacles, they do not tell the whole story. We must also foreground the complexity and richness of students' lives to resist them being interpreted solely through the 'master status' of care experience or estrangement. Drawing on feminist theory, this paper seeks to amplify such students' voices to explore their HE experiences from their perspective, recognising their position as valid experts and knowledge producers. The paper explores 11 narratives of students from a post-1992 setting, with analysis coproduced with participants. It highlights diverse lived experiences across many domains including stigma, relationships, belonging, education and professional horizons. In concluding, the paper makes a case for creating space for plural experiences of students to be heard, complicating simplistic narratives and recognising them as subjects of value.

Paper: Research demonstrates that care experienced and estranged students can face many barriers in UK higher education (HE) including lower rates of access (Centre for Social Justice, 2019); isolation (Harrison, 2017); stigma (Spacey, 2019); financial inequalities (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2018); insecure housing (Pinkney and Walker, 2020) and mental health difficulties (Ellis and Johnson, 2019). There are also extant degree awarding gaps (Office for Students 2020a) and precarious graduate transitions (Stevenson *et al*, 2020). However, whilst these dynamics demand our focus, they do not tell the whole story. In part, this may be because questions remain over whose voices are most and least heard (Arnot *et al*, 2004). We must decisively integrate care experience and estrangement into equity agendas whilst also foregrounding students themselves because stories solely of struggle over-simplify, limiting possible horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). This is particularly acute as care or estrangement can operate as a 'master status' (Becker, 1963), an inalienable label shaping the way students are seen by others.

Reflecting on these tensions and silences, we adopt a feminist theoretical perspective recognising situated knowledge (Haraway, 1992), valuing students' different standpoints (hooks, 1994), to interrogate what the experiences of care experienced and estranged students in HE is, from their perspective. Accordingly, we seek to amplify their stories to reject any perceived inadequacies (O'Shea *et al*, 2016). However, we remain wary of the '*politically illegitimate*' implications of speaking for others and the limits to 'giving voice' (Alcoff, 1991:6; Ellsworth, 1989). This paper draws on a two-phase narrative study at a post-1992 institution in England. 11 interviews were conducted with

students recorded as either care experienced or estranged, as the latter captures those in informal kinship care arrangements (Shuttleworth, 2021). First interviews traced students' trajectories into and through university, whilst the second involved analysis coproduction. This recognises students as expert knowledge producers and the need to produce recommendations from the perspective of people that the issues affect (Kolar et al. 2015). Analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006): immersion in the data, applying the research questions and established frameworks, allowing new themes to emerge and refining a narrative.

Firstly, stories demonstrated significant heterogeneity. Students entered diverse care arrangements at different ages, for different reasons, with varying stability and precarity. Some had gone through formal placement breakdowns, fractious fostering relationships or struggled living alone in their late teens. Others described how a wide range of concrete, long-lasting relationships – with partners, housemates, colleagues, friends, teachers, extended family – were powerful resources to navigate university (Mayall et al, 2015; Simpson and Murphy, 2020).

Analysis also revealed that stigma manifested to differing degrees. Some spoke with pride about sharing their biography, especially with younger people in care. Other narratives highlighted more profound exclusions, such as 'troubled child' and 'oppression' labels being automatically applied to students in adulthood (Bluff *et al*, 2012). Stigma also conflicted with self-concepts, as although pasts were challenging at times, participants nonetheless described themselves as subsequently more independent, mature and financially literate than their peers in HE (Simpson and Murphy, 2020)

Whilst at university, some spaces were sites of connection and kinship, whether through friendships, close teaching relationships or a love for the cultural heritage of the city. Indeed, some stories suggested that individual flatmates or HE staff may be offering '*much of the nurturing and support for an individual that it is assumed a family might provide*' (Spacey, 2019:11). However, interviewees more broadly indicated they did not feel like they 'fitted in' due to perceived demographic, cultural and wealth disparities with peers (Costa *et al*, 2020).

Challenging narratives about low educational attainment (Spacey, 2019), several articulated clearly-formed learner identities; study had often been a place of solace or excitement. HE was thus a welcome space to embrace learning passions and emerging specialisms (Reay *et al*, 2010). Concurrently, many had clear plans for (additional) postgraduate study, including fleshed out PhD topics. However, educational disruption also manifested, either because students worked punitive numbers of hours to gain income (Harrison, 2017) or were struggling with the 'hidden curriculum' and idiosyncrasies of HE (Hauri *et al*, 2019). Nonetheless, almost all had clear desired career horizons, particularly for socially-altruistic professions, potentially reflecting a broader generational shift towards meaningful work (Hu and Hirsh, 2017).

In reflection, it is clear that care experienced and estranged students are not lesser than the 'typified' contemporary HE student. Rather, they embody a wealth of powerful resources, strategies and horizons because – not in spite – of past experiences. This does not lessen the importance of tackling material inequalities. However, it underscores the need to introduce parallel narratives which recognise care experienced students as subjects of value (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).

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