

113

‘Everything feels a lot riskier’: The impact of care-experience on graduate decision-making and transitions.

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Care-experienced (CE) people are one of the most under-represented groups in UK HE (Ellis and Johnston, 2019; Harrison, 2017). For those who do access HE and successfully complete their studies, a substantial qualitative knowledge gap has existed (until now) in understanding their transitions into graduate life. This paper presents findings from the first phase of a British Academy funded project which qualitatively and longitudinally explores CE students' transitions out of HE and into graduate life in England and Scotland. Margaret Archer's (2003, 2012) notion of reflexivity is employed to conceptually identify what roles structural enablements and constraints play in these transitions. What emerged was a series of challenges unique to those with care-experience which led to restricted opportunities for reflexivity and agency to be exercised. This meant that opportunities to reflexively define plans for graduate life in line with their 'concerns' - what they cared about (Archer, 2012) - were limited.

Full paper

Introduction

Care-experienced (CE) people (those who have spent time in the care system as children) overcome profound challenges to access

and progress through higher education (HE). These include educational disruption, stigmatisation, and mental health issues arising from childhood trauma (Harrison, 2017). They are one of the most under-represented groups in HE, participating at a rate four times lower than non-CE individuals at the age of 19 (Ellis and Johnston, 2019). Moreover, once in HE, they are 38% more likely than non care-experienced students to withdraw from their studies after their first year (Harrison, 2017).

For CE people who do access HE and successfully complete their studies, a substantial qualitative knowledge gap exists in understanding their transitions into graduate life. Recent research has provided interesting *quantitative* insights into CE graduates' destinations in the UK, showing that they are less likely to be employed in professional employment, and more likely to be in postgraduate study six months after graduation (Baker et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2020). Yet, until now, there has been no qualitative exploration of CE students' transitions into graduate life. This is needed to understand why these patterns exist and importantly, how a background of care may shape these.

How does a background of care affect graduate transitions?

This paper presents findings from the first phase of a British Academy funded project which qualitatively and longitudinally explores CE students' transitions out of HE and through their first 12 months of graduate life. It does so by: a) exploring the influences that inform CE final year students' decision-making and choices in relation to their graduate pathways; b) identifying the structural enablements and constraints that exist during CE graduates' transitions out of HE; and c) exploring what role they perceive their care experience as having in their choices and decisions, as well as the constellations of any enablements and constraints they encounter.

The research employs Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) notion of reflexivity to conceptually identify structural enablements, constraints, and individual agency. Reflexivity is a process whereby individuals engage in internal conversations to mediate between their own subjectivity and objective structures when deciding on planned courses of action, or 'personal projects'. Different

constellations of constraints and enablements are encountered by individuals when taking action to fulfil their personal projects (Archer, 2003). This provides opportunities to explore how participants' graduate 'projects' are structurally enabled or constrained by their own social circumstances, contexts, and care histories.

Leaving HE with care-experience: Unique challenges and restricted opportunities

Phase one of the project (which concluded in summer 2022) has identified what final year CE students' key concerns are leading up to graduation, their planned courses of action (or 'personal projects') for graduate life, the structural constraints and enablements they expect to, and/or have faced when pursuing these plans, and the role of their care histories within these. What emerged was a series of challenges unique to those with care-experience which led to restricted opportunities for reflexivity and agency in the immediate post-graduation period.

During their final months in HE, CE students were negotiating concerns over homelessness upon graduating. This was often due to the absence of family safety nets to undergo 'boomerang' or 'yo-yo' transitions (where graduates return to live in the family home) (Baker et al., 2021; Bengtsson et al., 2018), being unable to locate a guarantor, and/or restrictions placed on social housing support outside of their local authority area. The latter also resulted in geographical constraints when seeking graduate employment, with some CE graduates needing to choose between employment opportunities that were consistent with their graduate projects, and a stable place to live.

As a result of the limited opportunities to attain stability after graduation, CE soon-to-be graduates experienced a lack of 'psychological space' (Stein, 2012) to contemplate their next steps. In facing this support cliff edge, the pressure to find 'any job' to meet their basic needs in the immediate post-graduation period dominated many participants' graduate plans. Consequently, participants engaged in 'survival reflexivity' where internal conversations were dominated by 'profound self-reliance and/or day-to-day survival' (Hung and Appleton 2016, p.43); this was informed

by lived experience of instability during their time in the care system. This meant that opportunities to reflexively define personal projects for graduate life in line with their 'concerns' – what they cared about (Archer, 2012) – were limited. Instead, an unavoidable period of survival reflexivity was anticipated as the first stage of graduate life, delaying concrete actions to realise their concerns (via personal projects) to be taken.

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