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Care leavers and representational efficacy: a praxis-based approach to moving theory and practice forward

Matthew Bunn, Emily Fuller

University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper joins together the strands of research and equity practice with people with care experience entering HE study in an Australian university. It comes from two colleagues who have worked on tangling, untangling and entangling theory, policy and practice experience while conducting an international review of care leaver literature exploring the representational efficacy of care leavers as an equity category. We invoke the notion of 'praxis' (Burke, 2018) to develop a theory of representational politics (Bunn, 2021) of people with care experience in higher education while also working to support care leavers through relational navigation (Burke et. al, 2021). This paper explores how we have incorporated these two views as we attempt to develop a meaningful theory of social justice for care leavers' participation in higher education.

Full paper

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theory of representational politics (Bunn, 2021) of people with care experience in higher education on the one hand and working to support care leavers through relational navigation (Burke et. al, 2021) on the other. This paper explores how we have incorporated these two views as we attempt to develop a meaningful theory of social justice for care leaver's participation in higher education.

The first issue the paper brings to light is the risk of the perpetuation of forms of 'absence' (Santos, 2014), whereby associated experiences of marginalisation become more muted or invisible. Care leavers are more likely to experience high rates of poverty, homelessness and incarceration. However, these social indicators reflect broader forms of suffering and disadvantage related to wider social structural inequality, poverty and marginality. Care experiences are often entangled within these broader relations of marginality. Indeed, these are being deepened as neoliberal policy has modified social welfare into a punitive tool (Wacquant, 2009; 2012) and led to social supports becoming a vector of discipline for marginalised populations (Wacquant, 2010). Access to these supports have become a 'Trojan Horse' (Wrennal, 2010) by which hyper-surveillant assemblages (Fong, 2020) gain greater means for regulation and governance of marginalised communities.

The representational efficacy of the term 'care-leaver' is hence problematic in its policy mobility from different 'silos' of Australian government departments and community services into the broader discourses of higher education and equity policy and initiatives. As higher education takes up the term care-leaver, it risks reducing the level of complexity and difficulty associated with its production and use in other governmental areas (such as social work). This is through the dual means of reducing the experiences of marginality to individual attributes and through ignoring epistemic questions of representational efficacy through leaving untroubled who is missing both from within the care-leaver category, and who has similar experiences of marginality that many care leavers face but who lack any formal recognition and for whom no representations exist within HE equity policy and practice. We contend that to understand care leaver experience requires a more robust, rigorous and contextualised theory of marginalisation in neoliberal societies that is sensitive to the contexts of care, social welfare and broader

marginalised populations that become hidden in equity representations.

However, these theoretical and research-based insights risk overlooking the pressure and urgency of everyday equity practice and support, and the means to which these more methodologically 'convenient' representations allow for meaningful counter-hegemonic approaches to develop and create practical opportunities for support and advancing equity agendas. They have allowed for the development of HE programs, including our own, Live, Learn, Grow (see Fuller, 2018), to identify and provide tailored support to 'care-leavers' that have faced significant barriers to entry to higher education. Programs like Live, Learn, Grow work with understandings of sector-based issues and the on-the-ground daily encounters and struggles care-leavers navigating HE face. Moreover, they show the broader population who experience similar marginalisation but do not fit neat categorisations to which equity HE demands.

Praxis-styled approaches provide footings for the development and evolution of programs that can accommodate and contribute to the way experiences of systemic marginalisation and structural violence are understood. The ambition of this praxis-based approach is to push beyond currently recognised equity categories. We contend that HE representations, couched in increasingly bureaucratised accounts of equity, must be more accountable to the broader relational characteristics that produce marginalisation. This can be done through engaging more robustly and rigorously with the conditions that characterise care-leaver experience, and the experience of people positioned similarly in terms of social marginalisation. We thus conclude by arguing for the need to maintain an iterative relationship between theoretical insights and practical expertise to develop new and important insights into new ways forward for equity research and practice.

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