

86 Climbing the ivory tower: educational and career pathways of care-experienced academics in higher education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

There has been increasing interest in understanding the higher education experiences of students who spent time 'in care' as children. Members of this group tend to have to overcome strong barriers to educational success, including social disruption, trauma, stigmatisation and low expectations from professionals. Nevertheless, care-experienced students often thrive in higher education, although little is known about those who choose to build on this success to pursue an academic career.

Our presentation seeks to explore the educational trajectories and working lives of care-experienced academics in the United Kingdom. An online survey was used to map the size and nature of the population; 31 valid responses were received. The survey was also used to identify potential interview participants, leading to 21 semi-structured online interviews. We use thematic analysis to represent their diverse journeys into higher education careers, including the challenges, precarities and enabling factors encountered.

Full paper

Rationale

Roughly 100,000 children are in the care of the state in the UK (e.g. with foster carers or in children's homes), usually due to neglect or maltreatment. Individuals who spent time in care are often referred to as 'care-experienced' and it is increasingly understood that their average educational outcomes are significantly lower than those of the general population (Sebba et al., 2015). Factors include the legacy of childhood trauma, educational and social disruption, societal stigma and low expectations from professionals.

Nevertheless, many care-experienced people thrive within the education system and achieve highly. The most recent official figures for England (Department for Education, 2022) show that 13% of those in care at 16 enter higher education by 19; this is substantially lower than for the general population (43%), but numbers appear to be growing and care-experienced people often choose to study later (Harrison, 2020). Furthermore, Harrison et al. (2022) have estimated that around one-quarter of care-experienced graduates progress immediately into postgraduate study and therefore toward professional careers. Almost nothing is currently known about those approaching the top of the academic ladder.

This study therefore explores the experiences of care-experienced people who are now pursuing an academic career (i.e. as professors, lecturers, research fellows and similar), addressing the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What insights do the lived lives of the participants offer into successful pathways into and through higher education for people with experience of children's social care?
- **RQ2:** Why did the participants choose a career in academia, what challenges have they had to address to establish their careers and how have they overcome these?
- **RQ3:** What mechanisms, if any, exist within universities to support the professional development of care-experienced academics (e.g. mentoring or funding streams)?
- **RQ4:** How have the participants navigated issues of identity formation/renegotiation and communities of practice in academia?

Methodology

We believe this is the first study to engage with care-experienced academics as a group of interest. Our first aim was therefore to learn more about the group's size and composition, based on an assumption that the numbers are very small. To this end, we devised a short online questionnaire and publicised an anonymous weblink that was distributed extensively through relevant organisations, online forums and key individuals, aiming to reach as many care-experienced academics as possible.

After four months, we received 31 valid responses, providing a minimum measurement of the overall population. The majority were working in social science disciplines, but there was a mix of ages, institutional types and career lengths. Roughly two-thirds were women, while one-sixth were drawn from minority ethnic communities and a similar number identified as disabled.

The questionnaire's second purpose was to collect contact details for those interested in being interviewed. Twenty-five were invited, of whom 21 agreed. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 70 minutes were undertaken using Microsoft Teams, professionally transcribed and carefully anonymised, before being uploaded into Nvivo for analysis. A brief interim report was then circulated to the interviewees by e-mail as a form of member checking and to invite any further thoughts. The British Educational Research Association's 2018 guidelines for ethical research practice informed the study.

Findings

At the time of writing, analysis is on-going. We are using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2021), drawing on the critical realist tradition which combines realist ontology with interpretivist epistemology. This is powerful when seeking to understand the lives of individuals who encounter rigid societal structures, such as the care and education systems (Pawson, 2013). Critical realist enquiry particularly seeks to shed light on how those systems can be adapted to challenge deep-rooted inequalities and support marginalised groups. In particular, we use Archer's (2007) concept of reflexivity to explore the balance between individual agency and societal structures.

This presentation will focus on the themes that relate to the process of entering an academic career, including challenges, precarities and enabling factors. It will also explore how educational experiences during childhood influenced pathways into academia and the formal/informal support received subsequently. It will conclude by looking at our participants' suggestions for the policy and practice changes needed to seed an increase in the number of care-experienced academics.

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