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Exploring the resilience and identity of young carers in higher education: A thematic analysis.

Laura Jones

Exploring the resilience and identity of young adult carers in higher education: A thematic analysis.

**ABSTRACT**

Although previous research has found that young-adult carers can report positive outcomes from their caring experience (Rose and Cohen, 2010). Contemporary research continues to focus on the global, negative label attached to young-adult carers as vulnerable (Green et al., 2017). The aim of this study was to adopt a positive psychology approach to further explore the underlying dynamics surrounding the development of resilience and positive identities in young adult carers studying at college and university. A qualitative, naturalistic inquiry approach to the study was adopted from an interpretative phenomenological epistemology. One-to-one semi structured interviews with a purposive sample of five young adult carers was the method of data collection. Thematic analysis of the data allowed two superordinate themes to be constructed - Motivation and The Self and Resilience: The Transition from Burden to Coping. The analysis found that the young-adult carers interviewed could recall positive outcomes from their caring experience relating to their identity, and their ability to rise to the challenge of higher education. The implications, strengths and weaknesses of the study are also discussed.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>YOUNG ADULT CARERS</b>	<b>HIGHER EDUCATION</b>	<b>MOTIVATION AND THE SELF</b>	<b>RESILIENCE</b>	<b>THEMATIC ANALYSIS</b>
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## Introduction

The 2011 census identified more than 375,000 young adult carers (YACs) in the UK who provide support and assistance to family members and friends (Sempik and Becker, 2014). This number is expected to rise globally in response to advances in medical technology, the number of sole parent households and a growing population of older adults (Pakenham et al., 2006). Therefore, it is estimated that three in five people will be carers at some point in their lives in the UK (Carers Trust, 2015) highlighting the growing need to support informal carers of all ages. However, this does not appear to be the case for young-adult carers. The social exclusion unit report (2006) surrounding the provision of support to young people with complex needs, recognises that support is often age-related, prioritising the needs of adults or children to the detriment of the needs of young-adults, suggesting that there is a real need to improve government action in supporting young-adult carers as they make the transition to adulthood (Becker and Becker, 2008). In recent years, there appears to be a growing recognition by the government to the prevalence of young-adult carers in the UK, as students with caring responsibilities are now recognised in the national strategy for access and student success in higher education (Atkins and Ebdon, 2014) regarding making provision more flexible and accessible to learners from underrepresented groups. However, in terms of psychological literature, this population of 'remarkable young adults' (Carers Trust, 2015: 3) appears to be overlooked by researchers, with Greene et al., (2017) reporting that the unique experiences of YACs have gone largely undocumented.

The distinct lack of research on young adult carers compared to the large body of evidence that exists for child carers, appears to stem from the lack of a unified definition of a young-adult carer. Prior to the study conducted on young adult carers in the UK by Becker and Becker (2008), the understanding of young-adult carers as a separate age cohort to child and adolescent young carers had not been debated within psychological literature. Therefore, the lack of a global definition of a young-adult carer within the research literature, led Becker and Becker (2008: 6) to formally define YACs as those 'individuals aged between 18 and 25 who provide care, support or assistance to another family member suffering from a chronic illness or living with a disability on an unpaid basis'. Following this study, psychologists in particular, now recognise that for young-adults with caring responsibilities this specific developmental period is a key transition phase in the life course and may be an important life stage factor in understanding the psychosocial impacts of caregiving upon young-adult carers and their future life choices (Day, 2015). Subsequently, the contemporary redefining of young adult carers as a distinct cohort of carers in recent years, has led researchers to criticise earlier research in generalising the unique, lived experiences of young-adult carers to those of child and adolescent young carers (Day, 2015).

Unsurprisingly, given the prevalent global understanding of young carers as vulnerable (Greene et al., 2017) the vast majority of studies examining the hidden world of young-adult carers appears to suggest that caregiving comes at a price for young people, with researchers reporting that young carers feel isolated and alone through restricted opportunities to make friends (Bolas et al., 2007) and experience heightened levels of stress (Charles, 2011) However, despite the large body of evidence that exists surrounding the negative emotional impacts of caring on the psychological distress, resentment and guilt of young-adult carers and young carers

alike (Early et al., 2006; Becker and Becker, 2008; Greene et al., 2017). Past research has also found that carers enjoy a meaningful closeness with the person for whom they are caring for, enabling them to develop a positive understanding of themselves as being worthwhile, contributing individuals (Banks et al., 2002). This is supported by Rose and Cohen's (2010) meta-synthesis of qualitative studies into young carers which acknowledged that the experience of caring can impact positively upon individuals in terms of heightened levels of empathy and maturity. While past research has taken a negative focus in an attempt to help young carers by understanding how they are disadvantaged (Pakenham et al., 2006). The negative labels attached to young carers as 'mature before their time' is criticised by some researchers as pathologizing their situation, not supporting them (Charles et al., 2009: 39). This criticism reflects a wider argument within psychology, relating to the growing influence of the positive psychology movement. In recent years, the problem-focused approach in psychology has been brought into question by the father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman (2002: 4) who argues that 'psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage, it is also the study of strength and virtue'.

In light of this growing debate within psychology, surrounding the strengths blindness of psychologists who focus on an individual's weaknesses rather than on the promotion of their strengths (Jones-Smith, 2011). Contemporary studies have attempted to build upon the lack of positive psychological theory surrounding the pre-existing character strengths of young carers that could enable 'optimal human functioning, development and performance' (Linley, 2008: 9). One such study, conducted by Skovdal and Andreouli (2011) used a character strength based framework to understand and promote the resilience of caregiving children in Western Kenya. By interviewing these young carers, it was found that the participants were able to draw on and reinforce a positive caregiver identity that enhanced their well-being and facilitated their resilience. This lends support to an earlier study with a similar sample, which found that positive caring identities were linked to more successful coping (Skovdal and Ogutu, 2009), suggesting that for those young carers who can activate their own internal strengths and coping skills, the more likely they are to experience positive outcomes from their experience (Charles, 2011). Therefore, it appears that young carers can point out the positive and rewarding aspects of caring (Rose and Cohen, 2010). However, it is important to note that these strengths were found in children of a different culture that values the caregiving role, and so are not representative of other young carers outside of this context. Despite this, this study provides a positive psychology framework with which to explore a similar phenomenon with young-adult carers in the UK.

On the other hand, while interest has grown towards understanding the positive identities young carers employ to cope with the demands of their caring role (Skovdal and Andreouli, 2011). Contemporary researchers continue to endorse the negative label attached to young carers, in terms of their perceived maturity. Numerous qualitative studies have found that young carers believe themselves to be more mature than their peers because of their increased level of responsibility (Banks et al., 2002; Clay et al., 2017). However, while some researchers like Becker and Becker (2008) view this to be a positive outcome that enables young-adult carers to cope in complex situations. Other researchers appear to disagree suggesting that young-adult carers mask their struggles with a mature identity that

develops from having to appear competent and in control in challenging situations as a young carer (Charles, Marshall and Stainton, 2010).

This understanding of a young-adult carers shares distinct similarities with Newcomb's (1996) pseudomaturity theory, which suggests that the early timing of adult transition events can generate difficulties later on in life. While the pseudomaturity theory has mainly been used to explain delinquent behaviour in adults who experienced significant psychological stress as an adolescent (Galambos et al., 2003). Cassese (2015: 17) recognises that pseudomaturity is a 'widespread phenomenon'. Therefore, this theory could offer a potential explanation to the "burden of maturity" described by young-adult carers (Becker and Becker, 2008: 41) in terms of their struggles to make friends as a result of feeling different to their non-caregiving peers (Butler and Astbury, 2005; Day, 2015). However, other young-adult carers have reported that the mature identity formed by their caring role can foster personal growth, giving them a sense of confidence as an adult (Pakenham et al., 2006). In response to this, Charles (2011: 29) argued that the pseudo-mature identity formed by young carers could present labelled a 'pseudo-strength', criticising the negative labels attached to this identity as 'blurring the full picture'. Subsequently, there appears to be a distinct need to focus of the factors that promote a positive pseudo-mature identity in young-adult carers, rather than the mainstream focus on the marginalization of young-adult carers with a perceived mature identity (Bolas et al., 2007).

In summary, past research has shown that whilst there is a wealth of research on the difficulties faced by young carers, there appears to be a distinct lack of research exploring the positive experiences associated with caring, particularly in young adults who appear to remain in the shadows in terms of psychological research (Charles, 2011). However, qualitative research has shown that the caring role can empower young carers to develop positive identities and be hopeful for the future (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Therefore, the present study aims to take a positive psychology approach, conducting semi structured interviews with students, in order to report on the underlying dynamics surrounding the development of resilience and positive identities in young adult carers studying at college and university.

To investigate this research aim, the study will aim to address the research questions: *'How the experience of caring has positively formed the identity of students in higher education?'* And *'How the experience of caring has strengthened a young adult carers ability to cope with the challenges of being a student?'*

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

A qualitative design drawn from tenets of Naturalistic Inquiry, was deemed the most appropriate approach to construct rich, evocative descriptions of the positive meanings attached to role of caring in young adults in higher education (Armstrong, 2010). As naturalistic inquiry is considered well-suited to the study of under-researched groups of which relevant theoretical frameworks are limited, an inductive, data-driven approach to the study was taken. Thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews was selected to flexibly draw themes from the data, that not only take into account the ways in which participants make sense of their experience, but that can also interpret its wider psychological meaning (Willig, 2013). Therefore, an

interpretative phenomenological epistemological position was applied throughout the research.

## Participants

Participants consisted of five young adult carers in higher education with an experience of providing informal care for a family member for upwards of 3 years. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling of 19-25-year-old carers currently attending college or university, who are registered with Credu Cymru, a charity supporting informal carers in Powys, Wales (Table 1). Due to the difficulty faced by past researchers in recruiting young carers (Smyth and Michail, 2010), an outreach worker for Credu Cymru was recruited as a 'gatekeeper' to facilitate access to suitable participants (King and Horrocks, 2010: 31). This step was taken to ensure that the sampling size met Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidelines for a study using thematic analysis. Details of the participants are given below.

**Table 1.**

### Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Type of Student	Registered Young Adult Carer	Family Member
<b>Bethan</b>	Female	College	10 Years	Cares for disabled Mother
<b>Amy</b>	Female	University	8 Years	Caring for Father who suffered a stroke.
<b>Rachel</b>	Female	University	4 Years	Cares for Brother with autism
<b>Sadie</b>	Female	University	3 Years	Cared for late Grandmother with terminal Cancer.
<b>Rhiannon</b>	Female	University	9 Years	Cares for disabled Father

*\*Participants names have been replaced by pseudonyms*

### Ensuring Rigour

The procedure put in place throughout the study aimed to meet Yardley's (2007) core principles for ensuring validity in qualitative research. Commitment and rigour was demonstrated in the recruitment of a broad range of young-adult carers that represented an adequate range of views relevant to the research question. Sensitivity towards participants was shown as all interviews took place in the participants local young carers group, a safe, familiar setting to young-adult carers who are found to be extremely sensitive to the context in which research takes place

(Smyth and Michail, 2010). 'Coherence and Transparency' was shown through explicit justification of every aspect of the research design, data collection and analysis, leaving a 'paper trail' to demonstrate to the reader what the analytic interpretations were based on. This was conducted to reflect good practice and ensure that the study could 'understand as completely as possible the phenomenon under study' (Pandey and Patnaik, 2014: 5752).

### **Data Collection**

A one-to-one semi-structured interview was thought to be more appealing to participants as the private setting and less formal, conversational style interview would allow for the sharing of more personal thoughts and experiences, while providing young adult carers with the opportunity to speak freely without interruptions (Smyth and Michail, 2010). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview allowed for the collection of richer data as the interview schedule developed, allowed the researcher to provide participants with some guidance on what to talk about (Kallio et al., 2016). However, there was no fixed phrasing or order to the open-ended questions, enabling participants to lead the interview in new, unanticipated directions (King and Horrocks, 2010). This was important in enabling the researcher to gain an in-depth, unique understanding of the phenomenon (Fylan, 2005).

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for the transcription of verbal data, which included a word-for word written account of participants spoken words. This informed the early stages of analysis, by bringing the researcher closer to the data (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006). The coding process followed the six phases recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013). An overview of this process can be seen in the figure below.



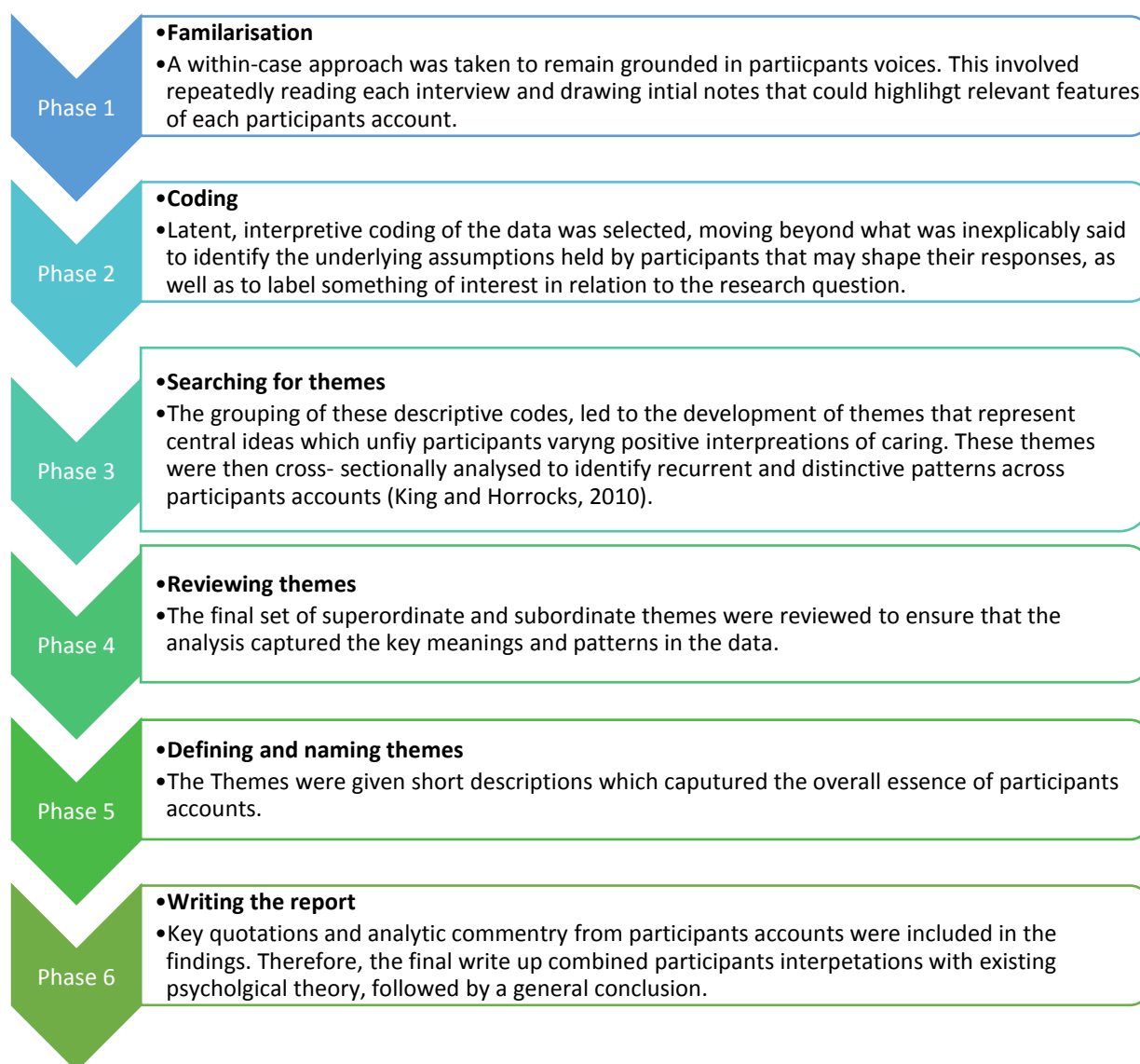


Figure 1: Overview of the analytical process

## Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines set by Manchester Metropolitan University as prior to data collection, an application for ethical approval was submitted and signed off by university staff (see Appendix 1). A letter was also sent to Credu Cymru, asking their consent for the study to recruit participants from the charity's registered YACs (see Appendix 2). Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the gate-keeper was asked to distribute a participant information sheet to participants which fully briefed them about the study (see Appendix 3). Participants were also asked to sign a consent form prior to participation, and were made aware of their right to withdraw. After the interview, participants were verbally debriefed and were assured that their identity would be concealed through the use of a pseudonym. Other identifiable information, including the name of family members were also replaced with pseudonyms or omitted. Whilst steps were taken to ensure anonymity, participants

were made aware that their confidentiality could not be guaranteed as extracts of their interviews would be included in the dissertation write up.

## Findings

The thematic analysis conducted on the interviews with young adult carers resulted in the construction of two superordinate themes: Motivation and the Self and Resilience: The Transition from Burden to Caring. Analysed at a latent, interpretative level these themes provide an insight into the psychological constructs that underlie the resilience and identity of young-adult carers in higher education.

### Motivation and the Self

Upon analysis of the interviews it became apparent that there was a reoccurring link between what motivated young adult carers and how this helped to construct their sense of identity. This context was discussed in a number of different ways.

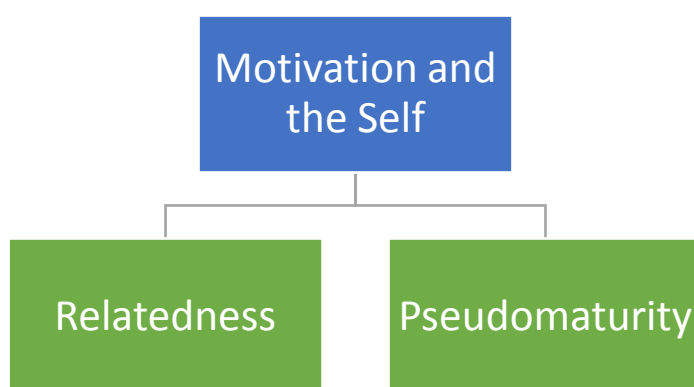


Figure 2: Visual overview of the superordinate theme labelled Motivation and the Self

### Pseudomaturity

A prevalent subordinate theme constructed from the data, focused on how participants understanding of themselves as more mature than other students, appeared to present itself as a positive and negative influence on their lives. This pseudo-mature identity is characterised by a feeling that one is older than their age and an elevated perception of self-reliance (Galambos, Barker and Tilton-Weaver, 2003). One participant spoke about her experience of maturing at a faster rate while caring for her terminally-ill grandmother as a teenager, commenting on the difficulties that she now faces as a young-adult in forming friendships at university.

***“I sort of didn’t like the childishness of the people I was living with, because it was just, you’re still this eighteen-year-old person who wants to go out and get pissed. And I don’t understand that, it made that a little bit difficult with some people, and I don’t think, because not everybody knew about my gran and my relationship and what happened, that they didn’t understand that I was a lot more mature, and that there were a variety of reasons why I was distant.”***

*(Sadie, Line 311-315)*

From this extract, it appears that Sadie's experience of her premature entry into the adult-like world of caring, has not only altered the way in which she views herself, but the people around her. Sadie's struggle to identify with the normative age behaviours of her fellow peers, appears to represent the psychological discomfort faced by young-adult carers who perceive themselves to be different from their peers, with past research reporting that maturity is linked to negative outcomes for young adult carers in terms of making friends and the restrictions placed on their ability to be carefree and spontaneous (Becker and Becker, 2008; Charles, 2011). In terms of the identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2007), the motivational power of Sadie's pseudo-mature identity has contributed to the difficulties she has experienced as a student by perceiving the drinking behaviours of her peers as identity-inconsistent. This perceived inconsistency is what influences individuals to interpret such behaviours as pointless and 'not for people like me' (Oyserman and Destin, 2010: 1001), which could explain the poor fit between Sadie's pseudo-mature identity and her social environment at university. However, the pseudomaturity identity acquired from the caring role appears to have prepared other young carers for the peer pressures placed upon them as young adults.

***“I find that because I was caring, I was very much kept on track, I didn't have the urge to go out and do things that other people do, like drinks, and taking drugs and all that, and I find that caring kept me very focused on my family and what I wanted to achieve in life.”***

*(Rhiannon, Line 45-50).*

On a surface level, it appears that both carers are uninterested in the drinking behaviours of their peers. However, Rhiannon reports a more positive experience, describing how the adult-like caring responsibilities placed on her as a child, in terms of being aware that “*someone was relying on me, rather than me relying on someone else*” (line 28) has now given her the insight to stay on the right path, actively choosing not to participate in risky behaviours of drinking and drug taking that are normative social behaviours for students. Supporting the findings of past researchers who found that caring behaviours can influence the development of an increased emotional maturity in young adulthood, characterised by some degree of control over feeling states (Batson, 1990; Hallam et al., 2014). Overall, the emotional maturity of Rhiannon and Sadie contrasts Arbeau, Galambos and Jansson's (2007) understanding that pseudomaturity is linked to substance misuse in individuals who assume adult roles too early. Instead suggesting that a perceived older subjective age can, enable pseudo-mature individuals to rise to challenges, remain focused and become more socially responsible (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Therefore, the pseudo-mature identity gained by the young-adult carers appears to play a beneficial role in drawing participants away from the risky behaviours of their peers, but can also appear to have a determinantal psychosocial impact on enabling participants to form close friendships.

### **Relatedness**

Participants illustrated how their sense of relatedness to other young carers has driven an inherent need to participate in voluntary work that aims to educate the community about the challenges faced by carers. Therefore, relatedness in this instance, is defined as the 'extent to which a person feels connected to the people

around them' (Deci and Ryan, 2000: 73). The extract below demonstrates how one young-adult carer has found a strong sense of self-worth through her role as an ambassador for young carers.

***“I’ve sort of done speeches and raised awareness for it like in the newspaper and through things like that it’s been really, really rewarding having that ability to speak out about your experience and for other people to listen to it and to know that they are not on their own. So, sort of helping people like that and raising awareness and mainly it helping other people with it through what you’ve been through yourself has been the most rewarding”***

*(Amy, Line 134-139)*

The passion Amy has drawn from her experience of caring, could be interpreted as a motivator to enact further caring behaviours as a volunteer, but could also be interpreted as an opportunity to allow Amy to form friendships with other young carers. This supports Reizer and Mikulincer (2007) who found that motivation can be associated with effective forms of caregiving that can benefit not only the self, but the needs of others. From a psychological perspective, the personal rewards Amy has drawn from her voluntary role, appears to reflect the satisfaction of the three innate psychological needs required for an individual to thrive, as proposed by the Social Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985). By connecting with other young carers, Amy has drawn a sense of relatedness, by raising awareness she has felt competence, and by choosing a voluntary role that acts in harmony with her caring identity she has experienced autonomy (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Satisfaction of these three needs through prosocial behaviours is believed by some researchers to play an important role in the happiness and vitality of individuals who volunteer (Pavey et al., 2011) and this appears to present itself in Amy’s positive recollection of her voluntary role as highly rewarding.

While Amy has been motivated to enact in further caring behaviours. Bethan’s passion for voluntary work is drawn for the difficulties she has faced in getting her teachers at school to understand the challenges placed upon her as a carer. Therefore, this negative experience has encouraged Bethan to seek relatedness with other teachers as a young adult by educating them about the difficulties faced by her and other young carers in juggling the role of student and carer.

***“ I would do these sort of training exercises with them, like it would be such simple things like I would give them a massive box of lego and then while they are doing that task I would be like ‘okay can you go and make a cup of tea for me please’, or ‘can you go outside and just check this car for me please’ and it is just sort of pointing out that like the lego would be homework for instance and trying to get that done in a period of time when you’ve got to go and do all these other things, really isn’t that easy. So, I think it put them in the carers shoes.***

*(Bethan, Line 104- 112)*

Applying this to the Self Determination Theory, Bethan’s motivation to engage with voluntary work which aims to encourage school teachers to emphasise with young carers, appears to support past research that suggests the relatedness is driven by a need to improve relationship quality (Patrick et al., 2007). While on the surface it

would appear that Bethan is largely motivated to volunteer to satisfy her personal goal of improving the relationship she has with teachers. Bethan's willingness to work with teachers, may reflect an essential feature of learning to care beyond self-interest (Smits et al., 2011) by emphasising with the fact that other young carers in education could benefit from this voluntary work, even when such empathy may involve a further caring effort for Bethan in terms of taking on additional responsibilities as a volunteer. The importance that Bethan and Amy place on forming connections with the people around them, is a common theme in previous literature on young adult carers, which suggests that caring helps to build an empathic capacity and desire to understand the feelings and needs of others (Aldridge, 2006; Charles et al., 2012). Thereby, suggesting that the young-adult carers interviewed, were able to draw a sense of purpose from their voluntary work by keeping the needs of other young carers at the forefront of their minds.

### Resilience: The Transition from Burden to Coping

This superordinate theme is intended to capture how young adult carers have learnt to rise to the challenge of higher education. Resilience in this context is understood as resulting from the negotiation between individuals and their environment (Ungar, 2004).

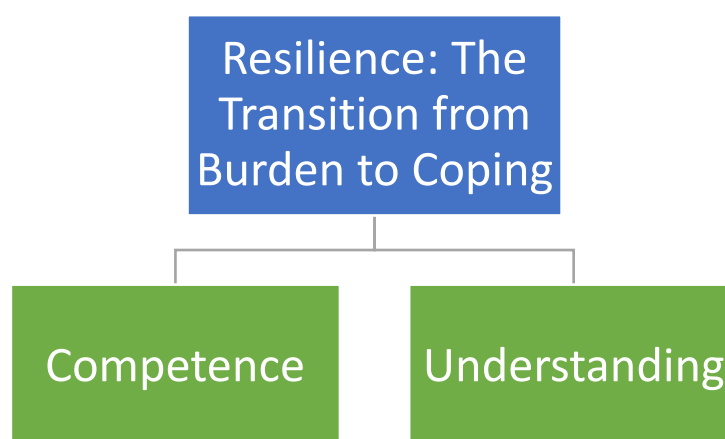


Figure 3: Visual overview of the superordinate theme labelled Resilience: The Transition from Burden to Coping

### Understanding

A recurring theme that emerged from participants accounts surrounded the resilience value they placed on their support network in providing them with the opportunity to draw upon the support of people they felt were understanding and supportive of their caring role in times of need. The following extract outlines how one young-adult carer makes sense of the supportive relationship she has formed with her lecturers at university.

***“My lecturers have been absolutely amazing, most. I have been given the opportunity to have exceptional factors, which I’ve taken once, I try not to, but that support is in place if I need it. Some lecturers have just given me time to talk, you know, because, you just don’t have lots of time to just get stuff off your chest, you are either doing uni work or caring. A few lecturers just sit me***

***down and just go let it all out, which is quite nice, it's quite like a therapy session."***

*(Rachel, line 73-78)*

While Rachel is happy to lean on the support of her lecturers and voice her worries, her caring experience appears to have made her very-self-reliant. This can be seen in her conscious effort to try and avoid making use of the exceptional factors policy in place for students to extend their coursework deadlines. From a psychological perspective, Rachel's process of emotional self-control can be termed self-regulation, which refers to a set of resilience like competencies such as self-direction, problem-solving and adaptability that are used to help an individual reach their desired goal (Anderman, 2011). Like Rachel, while Amy understood that support was available to her at university should she need it, she also chose to overcome challenges by drawing upon the emotional strength she has built as a carer *"to just deal with anything and everything that comes your way"* (line 199). The beneficial use of resilient and self-regulatory behaviour by the young-adult carers interviewed, draws similarities with Charles (2011) who argued that more young carers can activate their own internal strengths the more likely they are able to be able to cope with the demands of their caring role. This also offers further support to Lee et al., (2012) theory which acknowledges a relationship between resilience and self-regulation in the positive development of students at risk of adversity.

For one young-adult carer, the close bond formed with their family, was viewed to be an important, supportive lifeline to draw upon when faced with the unpleasant predicament of feeling homesick at university.

***"I was really badly homesick in my first year. Because we're such a close-knit family, because of dad's disability. It was so hard to leave and the unknown as well, because of not being up to date every day with what was happening at home. I overcome that by thinking about how much I've done with my family and how proud they were of me and using that to focus on myself."***

*(Rhiannon, line 84-89)*

Applying this to the protective factor model of resilience (O' Leary, 1998), Rhiannon's experience of homesickness can be viewed as a significant risk factor to Rhiannon's psychological well-being, particularly in individuals like Rhiannon, who are sensitive to new and unfamiliar contexts (Boyce and Ellis, 2005). This model notes that protective factors can moderate the effect of a negative experience. Therefore, it appears that Rhiannon's family serves as a protective buffer against her homesickness. This can be seen in the 'resource-focused techniques' (Yates et al., 2014: 778) adopted by Rhiannon as she drew upon her family bond as an asset that could promote her resilience, counteracting the homesickness risk that threatened her ability to remain at university. The adoption of such techniques by Rhiannon, is found in the benefit finding behaviours of young caregivers, particularly those who felt that their family valued their caring role (Cassidy et al., 2014). Therefore, while it appears that the young adult carers interviewed, differed in their reliance on the support networks available to them. The acknowledgement that they had a support network of people to fall back on who understood their situation and would support them in their struggles, appeared to play an important role in giving these students

the confidence to draw upon their emotional strength and overcome significant challenges.

### **Competence**

Young-adult carers reflected upon the confidence they had gained from their caring experience and the effect it had on their ability to juggle the demands placed on them now as a student. This sense of competence is understood from a resilience framework as the 'capacity to adapt successfully and meet individual expectations despite exposure to adversity' (Yates et al., 2014: 775). One participant reflected upon the belief she had in herself to work towards her goal of finishing college, sacrificing her sleep to lengthen her day in order to ensure that she would keep up to date with her college work.

***“I’d wake up earlier than I wanted to, but you just sort of get into it. Like you wouldn’t shower every day because you’d need that half an hour to be writing an essay. I knew I was capable of getting really good grades and doing what I wanted, that it was worth getting up at five in the morning and sitting in bed with a cup of tea before anyone else in the house was awake, as I was writing an essay.”***

*(Sadie, line 229-234)*

The ability of Sadie to complete her college work to a high standard, despite the strain placed on her to care for her terminally ill grandmother, embodies Cassidy (2015) view of a resilient student as an individual that can maintain high motivational achievement and performance even when faced with stressful events that place them at a severe risk of poor performance. The persevering mindset and sheer grit demonstrated by Sadie to sustain the confidence and effort required to strive towards her goal of getting into university, has been found in some students to be a better predictor of academic success than IQ (Duckworth, 2007). Like Sadie, Bethan’s persevering mindset enabled her “carry on and go into college and do my work” when her mother would be having an operation. This lends support to protective factor model of resilience (O’ Leary, 1998) which acknowledges the protective role that competence plays in enabling individuals to continue to perform daily activities at an optimal level.

In a similar way to Sadie, Amy’s confidence has also grown alongside her caring role and appears to have prepared her for the challenges of being a university student.

***“You are so used to having a very stressed and high demanding sort of lifestyle, and that other people are so dependent on you that you had to be organised and sort your weekly routine and everything out that it actually does the opposite, and it completely preps you to be university student, it’s that transition from being a teenager to being an adult where are learning to be by yourself, so being a young carer benefits that one hundred percent because you’ve had to do that anyway as a child .”***

*(Amy, line 189- 192)*

Amy’s sense of competence stems from her positive recollection of being able to “fend for myself and cook and clean and do the shopping” (line 162) as a child. Therefore, the development of these skills as a child could be seen to have

empowered Amy to successfully navigate the growth in independence that fosters the transition to university. This appears to link to the findings of past research which reports that competence is strongly associated with the enhanced self-efficacy young caregivers can experience through the development of caring skills and knowledge (Pakenham et al., 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2016). The self-efficacy of caregivers like Amy is recognised as an important protective factor in overcoming adversity by Zuasiniewski, Bekhet and Suresky (2010), as the caregiver's belief that they are competent and confidence in looking after themselves and others as a carer, is believed to have a positive effect in strengthening their ability to be resilient, flexible and strong. Subsequently, it appears that young-adult carers appear to benefit from the competence developed from their caring role.

## **General Conclusion**

The primary aim of this study was to gain an insight into the factors that shape the positive meanings young-adult carers attach to their caring role, in order to identify how the global strengths of informal carers are presented in the caring experiences of a group of students from South Wales. Therefore, in relation to the global research question, the two superordinate themes captured the individual strengths and resilient qualities of a group of young-adult carers who have overcome significant adversity to become strong, effective students in higher education while retaining the empathetic, mature identity formed from their caring role. Therefore, the findings demonstrate that there is a need to explore in-depth the positive factors that allow young-adult carers to adapt to their dual-identity as a carer and student in higher education, and demonstrates how the activation of these internal strengths and coping skills can enable young-adult carers to experience positive outcomes from their role.

## **Strengths of limitations**

The use of a qualitative approach in the present study can be considered a key strength, as the use of a naturalistic inquiry approach (Armstrong, 2010) enabled the study to produce an in-depth account of an under-researched group, addressing a research gap pertaining to the dynamic, positive meanings and experiences students attach to their caring role. Another strength of the study can be found in the methods taken to ensure the rigour and credibility of the study. While the study aimed to take a positive psychology approach to report on the personal strengths of young-adult carers in higher education, it was difficult to ignore the caring burdens and negative experiences that frequented participants accounts. Therefore, the analysis was open to reporting the negative interpretations that arose from the data in order to stay true to participants accounts. While this could be viewed as a limitation, disconfirming cases are considered to ensure the rigour of qualitative research by assuring the reader that the researcher has presented findings that are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants, rather than the selection of data that fits the researcher's original presumption surrounding the phenomenon (Yardley, 2007).

A further limitation of the study was found in the lack of heterogeneity of the sample. All the participants were registered with Credu Cymru, a charity that works to support young-adult carers, therefore it could be argued that these young-adult carers will have different experiences to other carers not receiving any formal support. However, considering the difficulty faced by past researchers in accessing the hard



to reach population of young-adult carers (Kennan, Fives and Canavan, 2012) it would have been difficult to have ethically recruited participants in any other way.

### **Implications**

By exploring the positive meanings young-adult carers attach to their experience of caring within the specific context of higher education. The findings presented in the study may have important practical implications in presenting feasible ways of achieving the main targets of realising and releasing educational potential in carers and supporting a life beyond caring, outlined in the Carers Strategy in England (Department of Health, 2014) and Wales (Welsh Government, 2013). Therefore, the findings could draw attention to the successful mentor system in place within higher educational contexts that enable young-adult carers to feel valued and supported in their role, and the personal strengths employed by young-adult carers to rise to the challenges of their dual-identity as a student and carer. This strength-based understanding of young-adult carers could have far more of an impact in addressing these targets than previous attempts to understand how young carers are disadvantaged.

### **Future research direction**

While this study helped to address some key gaps within the existing literature, further questions could be posed based on the findings. Future research could seek to build on the understanding of the ways in which young-adult carers could act in line with a perceived pseudo-mature identity, by conducting a longitudinal study to assess the motivational power of the pseudo-mature identity from its development in childhood to its identity-formation in young-adulthood

### **Introspective Reflexive Analysis**

By acknowledging that the personal assumptions, interests, beliefs and experiences of a researcher have the potential to impact upon the research process (Lazard and Mc Avoy, 2017), I reflected on how this may have contributed towards the validity of the study (Yardley, 2007). Having been a young carer for my mother since the age of eight, I myself can attribute certain personal attributes to my caring experience. While undertaking my degree, I also became a full-time carer to my late father, which drew my attention towards understanding the personal strengths of other young adult carers in a similar situation. This experience formed the basis of the study.

I was aware of the risk of bias that my personal experience could bring to the study, therefore I endeavoured to keep a reflexive diary to engage with notion of creating transparency in the research process by making the thinking, experience and values behind my decisions, visible to both myself, and the reader (Ortlipp, 2008) While I made a decision to adopt a student-tutor interview style in order to value the opinions of the interviewees and place emphasis on the fact that the participants were the expert (Adams and Cox, 2008). When one participant discussed the difficulty, she faces now in telling people about her caring experience, by emphasising with her situation I chose to reveal my caring identity.

This led me to worry about 'how much of your non-research self can be present without distorting the interview' (Glense and Peshkin, 1992: 83). However, on reflection I feel that by sharing my caring experience with Sadie, I could build rapport

with the participant, enabling them to trust that they could share more personal thoughts and experiences with me (King and Horrock, 2010). On reflection of the nervousness of some participants in sharing their personal experiences with a stranger, one option might have been share my caring experience with all of the young-adult carers interviewed.

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