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**TITLE:**

Reinventing selves and connections through community volunteering: how care-leavers and their supporters create a space for agency and self-work.

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Young people leaving out-of-home care experience higher levels of emotional, social, educational and vocational disadvantage when compared to peers from stable home-care environments. Care leavers' educational trajectories may be interrupted, their development of self-identity during transition through adolescence disturbed, and their social and emotional development disrupted due to their diminished accumulation of social and cultural capital. This paper presents a re-analysis of the qualitative data derived from a mixed-method study of the experience of young care-leavers engaged with a community-based volunteering project in the United Kingdom. We describe how young care leavers developed self-efficacy through volunteering and show how care leavers create spaces for agency and self-work, negotiate and cultivate identities independent from statutory supports, and situate themselves within wider relational and social contexts. Implications for future research, policy and practice with younger people leaving statutory care are explored.

### **KEYWORDS:**

Care-leavers, Young people, Volunteering, Agency, Social capital

### **WORD COUNT:**

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a secondary analysis of the qualitative data derived from a mixed-method evaluation study of the experience of young care-leavers who engaged with a community-based volunteering project in the United Kingdom (UK). The aim of our primary study was to explore and evaluate the impact of guided, community-based activities (for instance, volunteering, urban horticulture, arts, and craft skills) upon the personal achievements and skills development for young care leavers. In the current paper, we draw upon interviews with young care leavers and their advocates in order to explore how young people who are transitioning from statutory care services accumulate social capital through 'self-work', that is, their rehearsal and performance of a range of personal, interpersonal, and social assets, through a range of community volunteering practices.

The United Nations' General Assembly *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* requires that 'Every child and young person should live in a supportive, protective and caring environment that promotes his/her full potential' (United Nations, 2010, p.2). In addition, the needs of young care leavers are indexed by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (United Nations, 2015). It has recently been estimated that 2.7 million children and young people (up to 17 years) may be living in institutional care worldwide (Petrowski et al., 2017). As such, whilst the focus of this paper is the experience of care leavers in a more economically developed country (MEDC), the United Kingdom (UK), the challenges faced by care leavers are of international concern, and community-based interventions, such as those described herein, of wider relevance.

Our research contributes to the understanding of the personal and developmental trajectories of care leavers. Through our analysis, we show the instrumental role that volunteering activities play in care leavers' development of agency and self-efficacy as they uncouple from long-standing statutory supports and the guidance and monitoring of professionals. Moreover, recognising the need for theoretical and methodological development in this area, our analysis demonstrates imbrication of theories of social capital, agency and self-work and their utility within the research of this seldom-heard group.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Care leavers**

The challenges faced by care leavers are complex and multiple. Young care-leavers' social and emotional development may be disrupted due to fewer opportunities for the accumulation of social and cultural capital, for instance family and community networks and the opportunities these provide for positive, identity-affirming cultural experiences and learning beyond the caregiver – care recipient relationship. Additionally, for some care leavers, the experience of abuse, neglect, family dysfunction and suboptimal parenting create an opportunity for the development of enduring psychological harms including stress, relationship difficulties and learning challenges (Furey & Harris-Evans, 2021).

In England, unless a 'staying put arrangement' is negotiated, a young person may cease to be 'looked after' after 18 years of age, a point at which they are no longer the responsibility of statutory authorities (Children's Commissioner's Office, 2020). An increasing number of children are entering the care system and becoming 'children looked after' or CLA, with a

total number exceeding eighty thousand in 2021 (UK Government, 2021a). Inevitably, entrants into the care system ultimately translate into movements out of the care system and, during the same year, over twenty-eight thousand young people ceased to be classified as ‘looked after’, of which over four thousand young people moved into ‘independent living with supportive accommodation’ although a significant number (over eight hundred) moved to independent living with no formalised support (UK Government, 2021a).

A recent and detailed review (Baker, 2017) identified the importance of creating opportunities for care leavers to cultivate enduring relationships with others and make best use of guidance in decision-making and planning for the future. This is important because young people leaving out-of-home care, for instance family-based foster care, kinship care or institutional care, experience higher levels of emotional, social, educational and vocational disadvantage when compared to peers who have been cared for in stable home-care environments. Not only may care leavers’ educational trajectories be interrupted, contributing to their lower participation in Higher Education (Harrison, 2019; Roberts et al., 2018) and diminished vocational opportunities (Martikke et al., 2019), development of their self-identity during transition through adolescence may also be disturbed (Webb et al., 2016) by the absence of taken-for-granted markers and rituals of adolescence.

The labour force survey for 2020 estimated that 11.5% of 16–24-year-olds in England were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (UK Government, 2021b). However, care leavers within this cohort experience much higher levels of educational and vocational disenfranchisement compared with their non-care leaver peers: in the 2020 cohort, 24% of 17-year-old care leavers were defined as NEET, rising to 41% for 19-year-olds (UK Government, 2021a). However, although these data are broadly stable when compared with

to those reported for 2020, some caution may be necessary due to the uncertain impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic upon the experience of care leavers and, more widely, the statutory legal, social and health services that support their transition in and out of care.

For care leavers, professionals and policy makers, the ambition for young people to become independent is also problematic. The heterogeneity of care leavers and their diverse social, cultural and familial circumstances makes the notion of ‘independence’ hard to define.

Moreover, transition out of care may require or demand of the young person significant levels of self-sufficiency (Atkinson & Hyde, 2019). Whilst young people living in care may experience strong bonds with those who care for them, the experience of transitioning or ‘ageing out’ of care also exposes care leaver’s relative lack of social capital, in terms of broader social connections external to formalised systems of care (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Relatedly, a perceived fear of stigmatisation in response to their care-leaver status may strip care leavers of the confidence and agency required to cultivate ‘non-dependent’ relationships with professionals such as health or social care professionals (Häggman-Laitila et al, 2019).

## **Volunteering**

In a recent review (Southby et al., 2019) note how volunteering has been inserted into the policy-making discourse as a means through which the health and wellbeing of individuals might be improved. Although people from disadvantaged communities are less likely to volunteer, and yet have the most to gain from doing so, Southby et al argue that volunteering policy and practice reflects a dominant discourse of individualism: that is, the drivers of volunteering and one’s capacity and willingness to volunteer are inherently tied to presumptions of agency, choice, and a belief that volunteering is open, possible, and

achievable for all. This serves to obscure the structural disadvantages that create barriers to volunteering and compounds the pre-existing inequalities that volunteering may be instrumental in ameliorating. A coalition of social, familial, and personal factors mediate an individual's propensity to engage with volunteering: Mainar et al (2015), for instance, identified how young peoples' engagement with volunteering was shaped not only by time and financial resources, but also via positive role-modelling by parents who themselves participated in volunteering activities. Time, wealth, and resourceful social networks provide the bedrock and motivation for volunteering that care leavers are likely not to possess.

There is a paucity of studies specifically concerned with the experience of care leavers engaged in volunteering projects. Hollingworth (2012) discovered a number of positive impacts for young carers who had engaged in volunteering and related creative activities including 'opening doors', enabling the identification of future career paths, the development of leadership skills and, of relevance to the present study, some evidence of positive effects upon care leavers' self-identity and the creation of opportunities to practise altruism and 'give back' to others. Melkman et al (2015) also noted the benefit of volunteering for care leavers in terms of the opportunity it provides for 'helping others', the sense of normalcy, engagement and connectedness this created for participants, and the creation of resilience; an important 'protective factor' against social or criminal harm or self-harm. Similarly, engagement in voluntary extracurricular activities has been found to result in greater educational aspirations for young care leavers (White et al, 2018). However, some caution is necessary: for young people already in possession of high levels of social capital (through familial contacts and related professional networks), volunteering may be beneficial; for young people lacking such opportunities, the benefits of volunteering may not be as palpable (Hoskins et al, 2020), and, moreover, it is important for volunteering to be truly voluntary;



that is, to activate feelings of self-worth and agency for young people, volunteering must be a choice and not mandated (Hoskins et al, 2020).

### **Agency, self-work and social capital**

As others have noted (Glynn, 2021) the field of young peoples' care transitions is under-theorized. Whilst situated in established theories of social capital, this paper provides a theoretical adjunct to existing theorizations; whilst not minimising the political and economic disadvantage conferred upon many young care leavers, this paper focuses on their accumulation of social capital through 'self-work' enacted during volunteering activities. To achieve this, we must mobilise theories of agency, self-work, and social capital.

The concept of agency describes a person's capacity to choose, act independently, or incorporate self-sufficiency into social relationships. In a comprehensive paper, Wright (2012) describes agency as that which is "enacted in everyday life through interconnected and interdependent processes of social interaction", positioning social actors as "active and reflexive context makers" whose "'selves' are malleable and open to the imprint of others" (Wright, 2012, p.323). We concur with this position: care leavers are often positioned as impressionable social actors who emerge from problematic institutional and developmental contexts (family, state, adolescence), and whose very presence fabricates forms of risk (e.g., unemployment, precarity) that require a policy response and professional intervention.

The concept of self-work relates to the work of Nikolas Rose (Rose, 1998) and the notion that, in contemporary (Western) society, to work on one's 'self' is an essential aspect of personal and social development and a mediator of success in all aspects of contemporary

life, both personal and vocational. Self-work may be invisible to others (e.g., private reflection, prayer, or learning), or may involve interaction with others (e.g., paid work or volunteering); both modes of self-work opportune the development of agency. In this way, our analysis aligns with a post-structural standpoint on the formation of the self (Foucault, 1978) and the duty – in liberal, Western democratic societies – for a person to assume responsibility for their ‘self’. From this standpoint, the capacity to work on one’s ‘self’ is not simply a desirable facet of citizenship, it is compulsory (Rose, 1998).

The concepts of agency and self-work are tightly bound into the concept of social capital. Putnam (2000) describes two principal types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital relates to ‘likeness’ and is epitomised by familial ties or friendships and the nurturing of familiarity, solidarity, and group belonging. Conversely, bridging social capital describes outward connections and networks cultivated between people, groups, or communities. A third form of social capital, linking social capital, has also been described (World Bank, 2000). Linking social capital describes hierarchical relationships of power between people, groups, and organisations. For care leavers, such relationships may be multiple: either directly through the activities of street-level practitioners (e.g., social workers, psychologists, paid carers) or at a distance but always imminent (e.g., the legal system, municipal services, financial institutions). The fostering of all three forms of social capital is contingent upon the development of agency through self-work; correspondingly, agency can be activated or enhanced by involving oneself with others or, indeed, by engaging others with one’s own plans or interests (Reed & Weinman 2019:10).

In combination, these theoretical threads enable us to progress a line of argument and a means by which new understandings of care leavers’ experiences might be understood. First,

unlike most citizens of similar age, young people who leave statutory care typically do so already enmeshed deeply within the disciplinary apparatus of ‘psycho-social’ multi-professional work, for instance the intervention of specialist social work teams, youth workers and, for some, via the therapeutic intervention of an educational or family psychologist. Hence, for many young care-leavers, the means to engage in ‘self-work’ may have been already defined and instigated by professional agents.

Second, young care leavers are rapidly exposed to the obligations of everyday life: no longer in receipt of formal, instituted psycho-social supports, young care leavers are obliged (indeed, demanded by circumstances) to adapt to the demand for self-efficacy placed upon them, both at work and at play. Our analysis investigates how the young people who chose to become involved in this project responded to demands for self-efficacy during their transition from care in relation to the socio-economic ecology in which they live, work and play. Third, and relatedly, the experience of young care leavers is shaped by the acquisition of an ‘adult identity’. Whereas historically, the transition to adulthood might be marked by increasing responsibility for others (e.g., child rearing, co-habitation), contemporary child-adult transition is more likely (in Western liberal democratic societies, at least) to be marked by a primary obligation to self-development (Goodkind et al., 2011), manifested through growing ‘independence’, educational success, and vocational or professional ambition.

Into these theoretical considerations we need to insert the role of social networks in young people’s lives and how these are implicated in building both personal and social capital (Putnam, 2000). Cohering with our position regarding the importance of agential ‘self-work’, Morrow (2004, p.51) suggests that “we need to see children as active social agents who [...] shape the structures and processes around them and whose social relationships are worthy of

study in their own right”. Consequently, our research also explores how care leavers’ cultivation of self articulates with their development of social capital.

## **RESEARCH AIMS**

In this research, we consider how care leavers, subjects produced by the operation of a broader set of social and political discourses, work upon their ‘selves’ through volunteering. The aims for our analysis were threefold:

1. To describe how young people develop self-efficacy through volunteering activity
2. To examine how young people situate their evolving selves within volunteering activity
3. To explore young peoples’ cultivation of self-work and social capital through volunteering

## **THE VOLUNTEERING PROJECT**

The research was undertaken in and around a major conurbation in the Northwest of England (UK), and reports upon a multi-location volunteering scheme (herein referred to as ‘*The Project*’) for looked after young people (aged 13-18) which aimed to support their transition from statutory care to independence. The volunteering project was designed to meet local and regional needs in response to a call by the UK Cabinet Office *Vulnerable and Disengaged Young People Fund* for supportive interventions for younger care leavers (see acknowledgements). Delivered by a regional non-governmental organisation (NGO) in partnership with a range of community stakeholders, the project provided looked-after young people and young care leavers access to discrete volunteering activities and opportunities for longer term volunteering programmes.

Project activities were devised and organised by project workers in coordination with local and regional stakeholders already known to the project team; carer-leavers also helped to co-produce the activities, advising the project team of the acceptability or interest a particular activity might hold for their peers. A range of activities were offered, including accompanied visits to older citizens, conservation work with local voluntary sector organisations, and supporting adult volunteers at a local refugee centre. Whilst most of these activities were performed in groups, project workers also offered bespoke ‘informal learning sessions’ for care leavers who lacked the confidence to engage with group activities from the outset.

## **METHODS**

The primary research project from which the data for this analysis were derived used a mixed-method approach, utilising quantitative data (for instance, demographic and chronological descriptors and psychological measures) and qualitative data (to gather data on the lived experiences and perceptions of young people, their carers, and other significant stakeholders). The primary mixed-method study is described in Webb et al. (2016).

### **Interviews**

A mapping template synthesising key theoretical themes (social capital and antecedents to self-work, e.g., resilience, agency, knowledge) and policy themes (UK Cabinet Office and ONS Social Capital indicators) (TQ1-8, Figure 1) was devised by one of the authors (NC) and from this a semi-structured interview guide (RQ1-8, Figure 2) was created and refined by all authors to ensure comprehensibility and age-appropriateness to the participant group.

Interviews were then undertaken by an experienced community-based voluntary sector researcher (SM) and a university-based research assistant (HC). Building relationships of trust with the care leavers formed an essential part of the interview process. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were undertaken opportunistically throughout the duration of the volunteering project rather than at fixed points, and interviewers adapted their questioning approaches to match the experiences, comprehension, and level of engagement of interviewees. Most interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researchers, although one respondent declined to be recorded and so (with their informed consent) a written synopsis was made of the interview.

	Cabinet Office outcomes	ONS 2011 Social Capital
Theoretical themes	Career aspirations Skills Current activity Self-perception/Self-esteem Resilience Anti-social behaviour Positive & supportive relationships Wellbeing Accommodation Civic Participation Social networks and social support Social participation Reciprocity and trust Views of the local area	
<b>DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL</b>		
TQ1 Bonding social capital		
TQ2 Bridging social capital		
TQ3 Linking social capital		
<b>DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE</b>		
TQ4 Transitions		
TQ5 Resilience		
<b>DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE AND AGENCY</b>		

TQ6 Reflecting														
TQ7 Evaluating services														
TQ8 Influence/help others														

**Figure 1: Prospective and deductive mapping template**

## FIGURE 2 FOR INSERTION

### **RQ1 Have participants gained ‘Bonding social capital’?**

(‘Be close to others, getting by in life’)

*Prompt to ascertain key contacts, styles of exchange with key contacts (e.g., positive, negative, indifference), range and type of social contacts, mode of contact (e.g., face to face, social media), identity/group identity or sense of belongingness/shared interests, values, etc.*

### **RQ2 Have participants gained ‘Bridging social capital’?**

(‘Connecting to get ahead in life’)

*Prompt, e.g., clubs, community centre, voluntary work, place of worship, sports, etc., people or organisations that may be influential, e.g., local ‘characters’, elder members of the community, role models/role families, community leaders, religious leaders, authority figures (e.g., teachers, youth worker, police/local PCSO), local tradesperson/businesses, etc.*

### **RQ3 Have participants gained ‘Linking social capital’?**

(‘Making services work for me’)

*Prompt, e.g., problem-solving/responsiveness/confidence; establish preferred or known modes of establishing contact with agencies/organisations; ascertain resilience and perhaps assertiveness/communication skills; ascertain agency and resourcefulness*

### **RQ4 How have participants experienced ‘Transitions’?**

(‘Turning points’)

*Prompt for key transitional events or experiences; moments of self-realisation or personal or social learning; experiences that have ‘moved people on’ in terms of ‘who they are’; might also include a ritualistic element, e.g., ‘first time’ experiences of social activities.*

### **RQ5 Have participants developed ‘Resilience’?**

(‘Overcoming challenges/coping/adapting’)

*Prompt participant to show/illustrate how they can cope with the ‘real world’ and the challenges they face by providing examples from their project experience; times when they have overcome social pressure, criticism, personal threat/vulnerability/challenge, etc.*

### **RQ6 How are participants ‘Reflecting’?**

(‘Reflecting on what has been learned’)

*Prompt, e.g., self-awareness/reflection and personal knowledge/meaning; looking at ‘the overall picture’ and recognising important or significant experiences*

#### **RQ7 Are participants ‘Evaluating’ services?**

(‘What is good/could be better’)

*Prompt thinking about providing critical feedback, strengths and weaknesses, hints also at skills of assertiveness, being an active and knowledgeable consumer, etc.*

#### **RQ8 Influencing or helping others**

(‘Advice to others like me’)

*Prompt to discover what was valuable/ gain ‘insider’ knowledge; ascertain helping skills/agency/reciprocity and perhaps volunteering/helping others in need*

### **Figure 2: Semi-structured interview guide**

## **Participants**

Our participants comprised young people who had engaged with the volunteering project, and relevant stakeholders to *The Project*, for instance, project workers, carers, and social workers with an existing relationship to the young people. Recruitment to the study was pragmatic, reflecting the accessibility of young care-leavers (a hard-to-reach, seldom-heard community), the expansive fieldwork setting (urban, suburban and semi-rural region in the North of England), and the existing commitments of project stakeholders. Young people were invited to participate either at their point of entry into the volunteering project or during their participation in the activities offered. Stakeholders were invited following project meetings or related routine contact during project delivery. Participants to the whole project comprised twelve males and six females with an average age of 17.25 (N=18, age range 14-21) and eight stakeholders. Ten young people disclosed disabilities. Sixteen identified as white British, one identified as African, and was one recorded as ‘not known’. Fourteen were in full-time



education, and four in ‘no education, employment, or training’ (NEET). For the secondary analysis, qualitative interview data from four young people and five stakeholders, representative of the primary research group, were re-selected from the original dataset (Table 1) based upon the pertinence of these data to the present research question.

**TABLE 1 FOR INSERTION**

Pseudonym	Role
<i>M</i>	Project worker (F)
<i>C</i>	Young person (F)
<i>G</i>	Young person (M)
<i>D</i>	Young person (M)
<i>B</i>	Youth worker (F)
<i>N</i>	Social worker (F)
<i>E</i>	Project worker (F)
<i>K</i>	Young person (F)
<i>W</i>	Social worker (F)

**Table 1: Participants to the research**

### **Analytical approach**

In the primary study, transcribed interview data and fieldnotes were loaded into a qualitative analysis software package (QSR *NVivo 9*) and coded (SM, HC) around principal theoretical questions (Figure 1) using a directed content analysis approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) in order to appraise the comprehensiveness of the interview data across the whole dataset.

Working independently, data were then iteratively re-analysed by two of the authors (SM, NC); all authors then reconvened to rehearse their analytical impressions and agree upon a joint interpretation of the data for presentation.

The revised theoretical position adopted for this paper informed our selection of data for secondary interpretation. Following Foucault and others (Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1998; Mills, 2003), we understood that one's desire to be self-sufficient is not only due to the imposition of professional forms of power (such as that imparted by a parent, teacher or social worker), but also embedded power of a psychological form (*Psy* power (Foucault, 1978)) that obligates the individual to engage in actions that result in self-sufficiency (Rose, 1998). On leaving statutory care, most care leavers become uncoupled from disciplinary authority (e.g., social workers) but become ensconced in a lifelong project of self-scrutiny within a complex social environment. To this end, we selected data in the form of statements, short paragraphs and vignettes for their resonance with our revised theoretical approach.

Credibility and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Cypress, 2017) of data analysis were supported by joint collection and co-analysis of data by several researchers, as described above, and dependability was supported using an interview schedule and data auditing facilities of the *NVivo* software package, also described above. We discuss the transferability of our findings in the closing section of this paper.

### **Ethical procedures**

The research was approved by a local University Research Ethics Committee, and ongoing scrutiny was provided by the host voluntary sector organisation. Care was taken throughout the research to safeguard participants. Potential participants were provided with written and

verbal information about the research, and adjustments made to support individual needs in relation to literacy and comprehension. Initial and ongoing informed consent was obtained from young people and, for assenting participants under 16 years of age, their legal guardians/carers. Participants were free to withdraw from the research at any time without affecting their ongoing involvement in the volunteering project. Digital recordings and field notes were stored in a secure, password-protected location, and interview transcriptions anonymised. To safeguard participants and researchers, all interviews with younger people were conducted in the presence of two researchers. A steering group comprising academic and third-sector community partners was also formed; this group met regularly during the undertaking of the research, providing ongoing scrutiny.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Creating a space for agency and self-work**

Our findings begin to show how volunteering can create a personal and political space in which a young care leaver may practise agency and a capacity for self-work. Conversations conducted during a volunteering activity created a ‘space’ in which the agency of the young person could be recognised, accommodated and announced to others. Rather than subjectified as passive, juvenile recipients of professional intervention, young people felt encouraged to rehearse and perform their growing independence through their making of choices and their contribution to the planning of volunteering activities. For some, this was transformational: here, a care leaver describes how her ‘self-work’ became manifest through her showcasing of leadership skills and her articulation of a new-found confidence:

[During *The Project*] I was always learning and picking up other skills, I had different influences from [project worker] and the other people that were with me. When I was with [project worker] I was mature. [With other young people] I'd try and be the leader and get them to follow me. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't.

[K, care leaver]

Young peoples' developing agency and development of self-knowledge and self-worth was also demonstrated through the befriending, support and encouragement they offered to other participants in the volunteering projects. Analogous to the cultivation of advocacy in other disenfranchised groups (Gerrard, 2015) the performance of (self) advocacy amongst care leavers is accomplished and articulated at the junction between education, learning and social practice; here, a project worker recalls how she witnessed a young person using translation and guidance as a means of advocacy:

One of the young people I work with has a severe speech impediment, [and] another young person has come along, they often come to the sessions together [and] if I haven't understood him, [the second young person] would have understood him, and he will tell me what he has said, being defensive and very protective of him.

[M, Project worker]

Critically, this young person's intervention was neither taught, prescribed nor expected within the volunteering activity. Yet, it does begin to show how young care leavers – through their performance of peer advocacy – can discover opportunities to become active agents in the development of their own selves, the development of social bonds with and between others in their community, and the social (and political) act of representing others.

Our fieldwork also demonstrated how volunteering, as a vehicle for self-work, helped young care leavers initiate or ‘reinvent’ new identities independent of those defined ‘for’ them within statutory care: that is, those imposed via professional classification, or through policy or the exercise of law (for instance, application of the acronym NEET). Here, the researcher notes (in her field records) the pride expressed by a young care leaver, but also her sense of disconnection from others as she gravitates away from her prior ‘life’:

She says: “*I’m the ‘new C’ now. The ‘new C’ doesn’t swear.*” I ask her about “*the ‘new C’*” and whether it was a New Year’s resolution. She said “*Yes*”, and that she had decided that she’d be a “*new person*”, then comments on the fact that some people don’t like the “*new person.*” She tells me how she used to get into trouble and involved with the police and how that had to stop for her to get a good job in her chosen field. “*I haven’t sworn once*”, she says proudly.

[field notes: interview with *C*, a care leaver]

For some care leavers, helping others whom they perceived less fortunate and more in ‘need’ than themselves felt rewarding, both in terms of personal ‘reward’, and from the opportunity it presented to support others in their motivation and sense of civic involvement:

*Interviewer: So how did you feel [on completing the volunteering activity]?*

Amazing, like we thought at the time that when we got there it’s not going to get done because it was a lot of hard work, it was quite hot as well, [and] we were all proper [very] tired and stuff [...]

*Interviewer: So, you were encouraging each other?*

Yea [yes], we were just properly trying to get it done for [names a community centre], it's all disabled people, so we did that, that was a nice thing to do for them, but that took quite a long time to do

[D, care leaver]

Care leavers sometimes struggled with their emerging agency and the opportunities this provided for independence; ostensibly, everyday tasks, such as managing their own money, were unfamiliar to some. One youth worker described how creating an opportunity for care leavers to choose what to purchase for lunch, and to take responsibility for spending the available budget themselves, helped care leavers to begin to feel comfortable in making such choices independently:

[The care leavers] made cakes, and then we had an afternoon at an elderly people's home. And they got so much out of it [...] they've planned all of these [...] One of the rewards was to get something to eat as a group, which was a real eye opener. We gave the [care leavers] individual money to choose whatever meal they wanted [...] and a lot of them struggled to do that. They said, "*We're not normally given a choice*", so we had to encourage them [...] they really struggled with that activity. But it's what they had asked for, so that was a good opportunity.

[B, Youth worker]

### **Activating care leavers' capacity for agency, growth and re-invention**

Some care leavers joined the volunteering scheme through their involvement with statutory agents such as social workers; participants described this using a borrowed, institutional

phrase, 'referral'. When asked to describe the 'referral' process, these agents often described care leavers in terms of their perceived needs or deficits, positioning the (non-statutory) volunteering project as an extension of a 'service'. In this way, care leavers choosing not to take part were described as 'non-engaged':

I think we *did* refer, but it's dependent on the young person [and] if they want to access the service. That's where I struggled [...] just because they were NEET [not in education, employment or training] [...] getting them engaged with anything is really tough. So, when we go out to see them, we would always discuss [*The Project*] and [other] things that we had available, but getting them engaged was very minimal  
[N, Social Worker]

Relatedly, those delivering *The Project* described how agency became stripped from young care leavers during their engagement with statutory services; although services are often described as 'person-centred', project workers found that young peoples' customary encounter with statutory providers could be somewhat different, akin to them being inserted into and processed by a rule-based system:

[Many] times the young people don't often get a choice [...] I think often they are *referred* to [a service] - they don't get to find out what's available and decide themselves. They are often told, '*Right, you need to go to this; you need to go to that*'  
[E, project worker]

Workers on *The Project* nonetheless did recognise that care leavers might bring with them complex personal, social and legal experiences that had, in the past (and quite properly), led

to high levels of statutory and legal interventions. Nevertheless, the non-statutory and voluntary nature of project activities allowed project workers to acknowledge care leavers' complex histories but then 'set these aside' in order to focus upon care leavers' capacity for agency, growth and re-invention:

I always see a very positive side of the young people on [*The Project*]. They chose to come along to it ... they want to take part, they enjoy what they're doing. ... They don't have to show their other side when they come on [*The Project*]. Often, I know certain things about them so I can keep them and other people safe, but that side isn't discussed, so they can come and they don't have to show that side. They don't have to talk about the convictions they've had or that they're sofa surfing [informal, non-permanent residence, typically at a friend or social contact]. They might decide to tell me after they have built up that relationship but they don't have to, I think that's quite an important thing, they're not judged with that label

[E, project worker]

Young people voiced a preference for the non-directive, non-compulsory nature of *The Project*, and recognised opportunities for personal development through self-work that might arise for them. Here, concepts of agency and self-responsibility were folded into this care leaver's descriptions of their participation in *The Project*; this choice was linked to their preference for self-help and the unexpected but pleasant outcomes that might result:

I think it helps you do things for yourself, you've got a choice. You don't have to come [to *The Project*] if you don't want to. In a way, as soon as you join the group, you're practically helping yourself by joining the group. You've already done the first



step of helping yourself, you're given a choice of whether to do it or not and you have to make that choice ... I was talking to people ... that was putting me out of my comfort zone ... I was expecting to do it, but not the way they got me to do it, and that surprised me, but when I had done it, I was like "*Oh, right, I've done that!*"

[G, care leaver]

### **Situating selves in a wider relational and social context**

In the UK, young people can transition from statutory care at the age of sixteen. Many have been ensconced within the statutory care system for a significant period of their childhood. For some professional stakeholders, the opportunity for care leavers to meet and engage in developmental activities with other young care leavers is seen as useful as it allows them to explore the experience of leaving care with others who are also transitioning from the care system:

Usually by the time they're 13 or 14 they have a good insight into why they're looked after. They might struggle with that, but I think by going to the different groups [where] there's other looked after children who might have the same sorts of situations they have the opportunity to talk about that in a safe environment [...] I work with two boys whose father went to prison, so it's not something they would discuss [outside of *The Project*]. So, [being among others with the same experience of being looked after] gives them an opportunity to be able to be themselves, really.

[W, social worker]

However, in providing a volunteering project specifically for ‘care leavers’ there is a risk that they remain socialised ‘within’ the care system by only facilitating contact with a narrow index of people with similar experiences rather than, for instance, providing them with an opportunity to meet people from other social backgrounds or groups. This said, the personal and interpersonal challenges created through their experience of long-term care also creates a safe opportunity for personal growth and development:

For me, what the ... project has done for some of my young people who haven’t been able to access mainstream groups, because maybe of emotional needs and they struggle to fit into that environment. [*The Project*] has been brill [brilliant, a positive experience] because, had they gone to a mainstream activity, they might have been alienated or possibly not fitted in, whereas they’ve thrived in [*The Project*]  
[*W*, social worker]

*The Project* also allowed care leavers to situate and position their new, developing ‘selves’ into a wider social context. Institutionalised within frameworks orchestrated by the social care system (for instance, foster care), or within social environments which have served to constrain their self-development, volunteering served to foster social bonding and bridging, by reconfiguring and extending – but not erasing – entrenched social norms and enabling the parallel construction of a safe, alternative space for interpersonal and social growth:

With my [existing] friends I can [drink alcohol], [but] on [*The Project*] I can’t. [*The Project*] is to help out people, and when I’m with my [existing] friends [I’m] enjoying myself in another way, they’re enjoyable in different ways [...] It’s, like, with [*The*

*Project*] I can do things with them I wouldn't do with my mates [existing friends], and with my mates I do things I wouldn't do with [*The Project*].

[G, care leaver]

For others, whilst *The Project* provided a venue for the establishment of new social bonds, existing connections and friendships often endured. Some care leavers assigned a different status to connections made within *The Project* to those with people already known to them. Whilst this does show the different strengths of social bonds formed inside and outside the context of *The Project* (see Martikke et al., 2019, p.119 on this point), this also enabled young people to rehearse different ways of 'being with' friends and so develop the capability to manage social connections of higher complexity with confidence. This care leaver, for instance, carefully measures and manages her contact with her 'new' friends:

I have [friends from *The Project*] on Facebook. If I get a message from them, I will message them back, but I don't get really involved with them

[K, care leaver]

Young people actively sought to position themselves, both as members of existing friendship groups yet also as members of the (care leaver) volunteering groups. Young people navigate between these relationships and negotiate the priority and status that they give to them. In this written synopsis of an interview, the care leaver differentiates herself from her established friendship group ('her other mates'), although when participating with this group she nonetheless (and openly) announces her care-leaver identity:

I ask her what might be different about hanging out with the people in [*The Project*] from hanging out with her other mates. She says, “None of my friends are in foster care.” When I ask her whether her friends know that she is in care and whether she can talk to them about her experience, she affirms this. What would she do if [*The Project*] didn’t exist anymore, then? “*I’d be happy. I could just stay in my room, go out with my friends more.*” I ask her to expand on how she decides whether to go or not, and she describes how her best mate has family issues and needs her support. This, she reports, is what made her decide to “quit” [*The Project*] for a while until *E* [project worker] and the others “*talked her into coming back*”.

[field notes: interview with *C*, a care leaver]

For others, volunteering provided an opportunity to grow their confidence in forming stable and sustainable social relationships outside the ‘care’ environment; frequent moves and short-term ‘placements’ during childhood can prevent or limit the development and consolidation of these skills:

I found out I can deal with things more than I thought I could, I found out I can actually listen to people. Because I used to be “*Oh, right, I’m not listening to you!*” and walk off, but I’ve started listening to people more and I’ve learnt how to have a conversation more with people as well.

[*G*, care leaver]

Care leavers were also able to translate their own positive experiences of self-work to supporting others. That this is spontaneous, not associated with any planned activity, is suggested by young people themselves. This young person describes a tapestry of ‘helping’

interventions, which served to protect or support others. He does not qualify this in terms of a particular expertise nor intent ('I can't read their mind'), rather, he explains his actions in terms of the personal attributes and helping skills that he believes that friends 'see' in him:

I would help [my friends] if they asked me for help and I would ask what do they need help on and I would try and help them on it. I can't read their mind. I do it with a lot of people but not intentionally, I do it with some of my mates helping them with little bits that they can't do, because I have a mate who is scared of going in shops and I always go into the shop for him. I help out loads of people in little ways but not intentionally. A lot of my mates come to me as I'm a person who you can talk to, they will talk to me about their problems and they ask for advice which I give and they say right I'll try that.

*Interviewer: From your experience with this mate that doesn't like going in shops, would it have been better to go with him?*

I've tried that ... he ended up punching the shopkeeper, so I [said to him] "*I'll meet you halfway you can meet me outside the shop and give me your money*", in some ways you've got to do it for them to help them.

[G, care leaver]

## **DISCUSSION**

Our analysis begins to show how care leavers' participation in volunteering can serve as a useful adjunct to their development of and transition to self-efficacy, a vital component in the self-sufficiency that is required (indeed, compulsory) for individual and social success in the liberal democracies of economically developed countries. Such self-work, however, also

serves to expose the subjectifying and ongoing gaze of the agents and disciplinary architecture (frameworks, policies, procedures) of the statutory care system that care leavers are, paradoxically, obliged to detach themselves from. We discovered that some professional agents pathologized non-involvement using formulaic group identifiers or negative language (for instance, 'NEET', 'non-engaged'). In this way, phrases and acronyms become 'ways of knowing and naming' care leavers and vectors for the exercise of professional and statutory power. Such language, although meaningful in the context of their professional work with young people and reflective of language used within policy, nonetheless serves to position care leavers simultaneously within frameworks of deficit yet also obliged them to become activated social agents, with all the commensurate skills and responsibilities this entails. This said, we remain aligned with critical standpoints on volunteering (e.g., Hoskins et al, 2020) and suggest that volunteering projects, such as that described here, may too easily accept an individualistic, agency-focused approach to human development, albeit disguised as social participation. Such individualistic approaches may simply serve to compound and extend the burden of responsibility conferred upon young care leavers and, in doing so, gloss over the political, structural and socio-economic discourses that scaffold their circumstances and continue to render care leavers at disadvantage.

The analysis also begins to show how volunteering can support young care leavers' integration of (newly acquired) agency into new and often unfamiliar social settings. Volunteering created a space where younger care leavers could engage in facilitated self-work through volunteering with similarly care-experienced peers. This environment allowed for personal reflection and growth in a context somewhat less tainted by the preconceptions of professional agents and the care leavers' sometimes complex personal histories. As such, the experience of care leavers in this project underscored how efforts to 're-invent' oneself

may require a space – facilitated by workers independent from the statutory care sector – in which new selves may be fabricated, rehearsed, and practised safely without professional scrutiny. The provision of such a space served to underscore care leavers' capacity to reinvent themselves where other actors (care leavers, workers) did not necessarily know their 'outside' identity: the choice to disclose personal histories, or not, also provided care leavers an opportunity to further exercise agency.

In relation to care leavers' simultaneous development of personal agency and social capital, the relationships that young people on the programme built with each other, as well as with non-statutory sector staff, as well as casual relations through volunteering with the wider community, were representative of the gamut of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital is often associated with familial and friendship ties; as such, care leavers' cultivation of bonding social capital cannot be presumed. Moreover, the cultivation of enduring friendships – another source of bonding capital – may become problematic due to the stigmatising effects of disclosing and exchanging information with (new) peers about prior life difficulties and the experience of being 'looked after'.

This said, volunteering on the project generated constructive opportunities for the development of both bonding and bridging social capital. Gathering care leavers together as a group established relations between young people with similar experiences and helped to cultivate bonding social capital; volunteering helped to consolidate these bonds. Although strengthening bonding relations with other care-experienced young people might not serve to benefit their acquisition of a broader (post-care) social experiences, such bonding was nonetheless important in as much as it provided a 'safe' transitional space from which 'bridging' relationships with people from outside the 'care system' might be established.

On the other hand, a shortage of bridging social capital was also apparent: some care leavers struggled to disentangle themselves from those social networks that were attached to or embedded within formalised systems of care. As such, although volunteering allowed care leavers to maintain friendships throughout a difficult and precarious period of their lives, the scope of the project did not allow for exploration of peer friendships ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ the context of care-leaving, and so did not provide any insights into, for instance, the risk of loneliness that may entail once they have ‘transitioned out’ of care (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018) or, indeed, the consequences of remaining ‘inside’ extant friendship networks that were established prior to leaving care.

‘Linking’ social capital was intrinsic to the referral process that enabled care leavers to join the project: the knowledge, insights and connectedness of care professionals and other stakeholders was relied upon to create opportunities, broker relations, and orchestrate activities. This said, the relational power differential that characterises ‘linking’ social capital took a specific form within the volunteering project: project workers consciously and deliberately avoided exercising any residual ‘professional power’ during recruitment, and instead emphasised the notion of ‘volunteering staying voluntary’, thereby preserving the possibilities for self-determination and the activation of care leavers’ agency.

## **SIGNIFICANCE TO RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE**

### **Future research**



Whilst these data begin to show the value of engaging care leavers in volunteering projects, the short-term nature of *The Project*, due to time-limited funding constraints, means that the sustainability of the intervention, its transferability to other environments, and its longer-term impact, remains unclear. Future research in this area will need to explore the use of volunteering with a more diverse range of care leavers from a wider range of social contexts, with an explicit focus upon long-term outcomes and impacts, such as engagement with lifelong learning, vocational success, or other contributions to the wider community.

### **Policy development**

Our findings also beg uncomfortable questions about the expectations held of younger care leavers and how these are articulated within policy. The language of policy is important, and by positioning care leavers as people who lack assets, as ‘problems to be solved’ (for instance, as NEET), rather than as active agents for self-work, growth and community contribution, we risk reproducing and deepening the inequalities that they already experience. Work with other seldom heard and pathologized communities (for instance, Cox et al., 2016; Clayson et al., 2018) shows how direct involvement (coproduction) by community members in the production of new evidence may begin to overcome the epistemic injustices that may mark the framing of such communities within policy. As such, evidence-based policies that contribute to a positive appreciation of individuals’ capacity for growth and change may better shape care leavers’ future experiences.

### **Professional practice**

Clearly, many care leavers experience significant and sustained challenges not experienced by young people who have not experienced the statutory care system. Occasionally, young care leavers also present with a complex array of experiences for which highly structured, professionalised and sometimes legal intervention has been necessary in order to safeguard them or others. A temptation persists to revert to disciplinarian modes of engagement with young care leavers, especially when lives are ‘chaotic’ or their behaviour challenging; this project shows a more compassionate, pastoral, and relational approach may be more beneficial, although this brings its own challenges in terms of resource, training and the measurement and evaluation of outcomes.

### **Strengths and limitations**

As explained above, the data incorporated within this re-analysis only represent the experiences of a narrow index of younger care leavers in a specific geographical region of the UK during a year-long project. As such, although particularity can be a strength of qualitative studies, we can only make limited claims for transferability to other populations and settings. Moreover, notwithstanding the hard-to-reach nature of care leavers, our data only represent those young people identified by or through gatekeepers.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Our analysis aimed to describe how young care leavers developed self-efficacy through volunteering activity, examine how they situated their evolving selves within wider social contexts, and explore their simultaneous cultivation of ‘self-work’ and social capital. In doing so, we discovered that care leavers created a space for agency and self-work, negotiated and

cultivated an identity independent from statutory supports, and began to situate themselves within a wider relational and social context. Implications for future research, policy and practice with younger people leaving statutory care are explored.

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Researcher SM was employed by one of the contractors to the funded evaluation from which these data were derived. Researchers NC and LW provided methodological consultancy. Postgraduate researcher HC supported the fieldwork, data collection and analysis.

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