Care-experienced Young People: Agency and Empowerment

Abstract

Empowerment discourses have become fashionable in current policy and practice relating to young people, including those with care experience. Empowerment, however, is a slippery and contested concept, associated with neo-liberal discourses. An ecological understanding of agency offers more theoretically nuanced understandings of empowerment, taking account of the complex, temporal, and relational factors, upon which empowerment is contingent. This paper utilises data generated through an 'empowerment group' for care-experienced young people; it illustrates how an ecological understanding of agency, as a heuristic, might further understanding of the lives of care-experienced young people.

Keywords

Agency, Empowerment, Young people.

Introduction

In recent years there has been considerable interest in the discursive shifts associated with the move from 'welfare' to a neoliberal orientation of 'empowerment', and how such global flows, translations and tribulations materially impact the situations of vulnerable people (Sharma, 2008). Agency, within the neoliberal narrative, positions the individual as empowered and as a decision-maker, suggesting changes to a personal situation are their responsibility (Wrenn, 2015). Vulnerable people are thus held accountable for their own demise. Counter narratives to neoliberalism recognise the limitations of individual action, acknowledging the complex interplay of power emerging from social structures. Empowerment, and how it links to people's agency, provides a further challenge, as both concepts have been described as 'slippery' (for example see; Sharma, 2008; Ahern, 2001). Moreover, in relation to children's and young people's agency, researchers (Valentine, 2011; Punch and Tisdall, 2012) have called for greater conceptual clarity about agency in childhood studies. In response to this, this paper employs an ecological understanding of agency, drawing upon Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Biesta and Tedder (2007). The case study recounted here opens up the discourse of empowerment via the theoretical resources provided by this conception of agency, in order to make sense of the lived experiences of a cohort of care-experienced young people (aged between 18-21 years) who had formed an 'empowerment group'. The paper addresses Stein's (2006a) critique that empirical work with care-experienced young people has tended to be detached from theoretical perspectives. The ecological understanding of agency is used to interrogate empirical data. The paper looks specifically at the possible openings the 'empowerment group' offered the young people, to imagine their future lives differently. Furthermore, critical reflections are offered, regarding how more theoretically nuanced understandings of empowerment can be developed through consideration of complex, temporal, and embodied implications of agency (Emirbayer and Miche, 1998). Thus, the paper illustrates how this ecological understanding of agency, as a heuristic, might further understanding of the lives of care-experienced young people.

Discourses of Empowerment

The concept empowerment, for example as utilised in the 1990s by development agencies to address women's marginalisation, is premised on enabling people to have 'the ability to choose, act and speak out' (Parpart, 2013: 16). Empowerment approaches have been adopted across diverse fields including, for example, participatory development (Nagar and Swarr, 2005; Sharma, 2008) and social work projects (Thomson and Thorpe, 2004). Projects, using empowerment frameworks to

work with poor women in the global South, have sought to 'mobilize marginalized actors and raise their consciousness, not with an objective of reversing the existing power hierarchies, but to enable them to make their voices heard and to exercise greater control on the processes that shape their everyday lives' (Weiringa cited by Nagar and Swarr, 2005: 291). In Australia, 'empowerment groups' have been utilised in social work with the aim of promoting self-achievement through the development of knowledge, skills and access to resources (Thomson and Thorpe, 2004). These are understandings of empowerment as a capacity to act, contingent on the relational, cultural and material resources available.

For children and young people, empowerment has been linked to participation (Mannion, 2010). A number of models explore children's participation (e.g.: Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001). Shier's (2001) model incorporates five levels of participation, arguing that 'at the lower levels [1-3] children can be said to be `empowered' only in the weaker sense meaning `strengthened' or `supported', but not in the stronger sense, meaning that those who hold power give up some of it in their favour' (ibid.: 114). This statement conveys an understanding of power as something to be given away and differs from other views (for example Allen, 2003; Kesby, 2007). Interpretations of 'power' are diverse. Whereas Shier considered power as a 'commodity', other readings suggest that power does not reside within someone; instead those said to 'hold' power are simply 'better positioned to successfully manipulate resources in order to produce effects among others' (Kesby, 2007: 2815). Allen (2003) considers different modalities concerned with power. One such modality is associational power or 'power with others', providing a different reading of power that opens up spaces where resistance, as the only response to power effects, can be challenged. Such a reading can be linked to the power effects of participation (Kesby, 2007), and in this way 'empowerment' can be regarded 'as emergent within lateral' (reciprocal) and not vertical (hierarchical) relationships (Mannion, 2010: 337). Power emergent from all types of relationships (for example with colleagues and friends) can provide important relational resources, which a person may mobilise, contributing to their capacity to act.

If empowerment, variously understood above as 'making voices heard', tends in some literature towards a positive valence, other theorists have been more critical (Parpet, 2013). For Parpart, the use of 'voice' is problematic, as it implies that voicing thoughts, having choices and acting freely are associated with empowerment and agency, with secrecy and silence as signs of disempowerment. Silence, as an embodied response to voice, suggests a counter-narrative to the neoliberal discourses of empowerment, where capacity building and self-help are key tenets, but silence is not a recognised strategy.

Sharma suggests that '[e]mpowerment is a contradictory terrain; it is an emancipation tactic that doubles as a technology of government and development' (Ibid.: 29). She argues that all empowerment initiatives, regardless of their end points, look to shape behaviours, and may in practice be framed in 'narrow, individualistic, economic, and political terms' often associated with neoliberalism. A counter-framing of empowerment indicates that '[j]ustice, equality and agency in the form of liberation of and by the oppressed' (Ibid.: 23) may create the basis for empowerment projects. The differences in these two ideological positions illustrates that empowerment cannot be regarded as a neutral concept; it is a political project. Moreover, these opposing positions also illustrate how power emerges differentially. The latter, more reciprocal approach conveys an understanding of power 'with others' emerging from these very relationships. The initiation, development and subsequent evaluation of projects, which purport to empower people, can thus be deeply challenging. As a point of departure, Sharma (2008) suggests that the concept of agency within empowerment projects is crucial. Similarly, the use in this study of ecological agency as a

heuristic affords an opportunity to better understand the effects of an 'empowerment group' initiative on care leavers' agency.

Understanding agency

The concept of agency, along with discussion about its multiple and contested understandings, has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the last twenty years. Ahearn, in 2001, cautioned that 'scholars often fail to recognise that the particular ways in which they conceive of agency, have implications for the understanding of personhood, causality, action and intention' (Ibid.: 112).

An enduring issue within sociology has been the relationship between structure and agency. Evans's (2002) three-dimensional depiction, using structure–agency, internal–external control and social reproduction–conversion as the axes, illustrates how some of the many different theories in this area privilege different factors in different combination. The neo-pragmatist theory of agency, described below, and subsequently drawn upon in this paper, understands agency as achievement, rather than something that resides within a person.

The assigning of some form of agency to adults (regardless of theoretical stance) has generally gone unquestioned. For instance, understandings of adult professional agency (e.g. Priestley et al., 2015) have been utilised to offer alternative perspectives on thorny issues such as educational change and teacher professionalism. Conversely, children are frequently seen as merely passive, done unto, and in need of 'development', before they can engage in the world – let alone shape it through their agency. The New Sociology of Childhood (see, for example, Prout and James, 1990) opened up this debate, considering children as active shapers of their environment, whilst also being shaped by it.

Tisdall and Punch (2012), specifically referring to children's agency, called for clarification in understandings of agency, a call subsequently echoed by Rajala, Martin and Kumpulainen (2016). Developments in the Children's Geography literature introduced concepts such as 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012: 365) and 'everyday agency' (Payne, 2012: 400). These concepts, as Bordonaro and Payne (2012) suggest, move 'beyond current and popular debates about whether and how children and youth's agency is acknowledged, to a discussion about what *kind* of agency is deemed appropriate for children and youth' (Ibid.: 368, italics in original). However, whilst these concepts about *kinds* of agency seek to challenge commonly held views, they do not tease out *how* agency is conceptualised. More recent publications have sought to further theoretical understanding of children's agency (see for example, Coffey and Farrugia, 2014; Munford and Saunders, 2015; Esser et al., 2016; Spryou, 2018; Skattebol et al., 2017). Munford and Saunders's (2015) study, for example, is located in the interaction between structure and agency, discussing the lived experiences of young people transitioning from care, and exploring how context and social structures shape young people's agency. Spryou (2018) uses new materialism as a theoretical framework, in an effort to rethink the concept of agency away from its imbrication in the structure-agency debate.

The research in this paper offers something different, with its exploration of case study data using an ecological theory of agency (Biesta and Tedder, 2007) to help further our understanding. This theory, rooted in work by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), provides a way of re-describing data, within a particular conceptual framework, in order to understand it in a new and different way. It provides a temporal view of agency, and firmly places action as occurring by means *of* relational affordances within specific environments. It is based on the premise that agency is informed by the past and has a future-oriented dimension, whilst taking into account the contingencies of the present context. These three analytical dimensions – the iterative dimension (past), the projective dimension

(future) and the practical-evaluative dimension (present) – comprise the temporal nature of agency, termed the chordal triad (ibid.).

The *iterational dimension* refers to 'the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time' (Ibid.: 971). As Table 1 below indicates, present (manoeuvre) and future (expectation) dimensions of agency become secondary tones in the composition of this chordal triad. Expectation suggests that relationships, for example will be reproduced, whilst manoeuvre suggests that there is an orientation towards past practices. Manoeuvre, however can be expanded, as present day experiences become part of the iterational and can lead to new routines and patterns. This may, for example, shift understanding about relationships leading to changed expectations.

The *projective dimension* provides the space for 'imaginative generation of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future' (Ibid.: 971). The discourse of empowerment, which valorises choice and so forth, theoretically neglects what is actually involved in imagining otherwise. The ecological understanding of agency posits imagining otherwise as critical in responding to uncertainties in everyday life, as actors go beyond the present and consider other possible trajectories, in response to challenging life situations.

The *practical-evaluative* dimension denotes the 'capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations' (Ibid.: 971). Hence, there is considerable potential for using the ecological understanding of agency as a heuristic to understand the data in this study, in terms of empowerment, as it may provide different readings. These three dimensions, the chordal triad, merge to form the temporal phenomenon of agency, as suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). However, in each emergent instance of agency, there may be more or less of each dimension (though each dimension will always be present), depending on the situation: '[it] is possible to speak of action that is more (or less) engaged with the past, more (or less) directed toward the future, and more (or less) responsive to the present' (Ibid.: 972).

Table 1 below summarises the main features of each dimension of the chordal triad (grey boxes) and illustrates the 'secondary tones', which overlap with the other dimensions of agency. This is useful as, for example in terms of the iterational dimension, an actor's past experiences form the repertoire of manoeuvres available to inform the practical evaluative dimension. This may provide an enriched understanding of the conditions necessary for the enhancing empowerment; for instance, increasing the range, depth and understandings of experiences can lead to a broadening of available manoeuvres and hence, the possibility of different actions.

Table one

Table 1: The Chordal Triad of Agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998): table adapted from Biesta and Tedder (2006: 15)			
	Past	**Present**	**Future**
Iterational: Primary orientation to past. Secondary tones – manoeuvre and expectation	*Selective attention* *Recognition of type* *Categorical location*	*Manoeuvre amongst repertoires* (present)	*Expectation (future)* **Expectation maintenance**-
Practical-evaluative – The '*contextualisation* of social experience' (Emirbayer and Mishe, 1998: 994). Secondary tones – characterisation and deliberation.	*Characterisation (past)*	*Problematisation* *Decision* *Execution*	*Deliberation (future)*
Projective – Imaginative generation of different possible trajectories. Secondary tones- identification and experimental	*Anticipatory identification (past)*	*Experimental enactment (present)*	*Narrative construction* *Symbolic recomposition*- *Hypothetical resolution*-

Biesta and Tedder's (2006) understanding of agency is substantially derived from Emirbayer and Mishe (1998). Their original insight is to understand agency as something '*achieved* in and through the engagement with a particular temporal-relational situation' (Biesta and Tedder 2006: 18, my emph.). This is characterised as an ecological understanding of agency. Their incorporation of the term *achieve[ment]* is important, as it clearly shifts the emphasis from agency is a capacity residing within a person to agency as the outcome of a complex relational assemblage:

> [T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment. To think of agency as achievement makes it possible to understand why an individual can achieve agency in one situation but not in another. It also makes it possible to understand the fluctuations of agency over time, that is, in the individual's life course (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 137).

This transactional approach thus understands agency as a phenomenon people achieve and, moreover, as potential to act. In terms of the empowerment agenda, the focus therefore shifts to

reading a given environment, in order to identify its affordances – the physical and social contexts – for a particular individual or a collective to act.

Children's more limited range of experiences, which always form the iterational dimension, constrains their possible manoeuvres amongst repertoires. The acknowledgement that children are creative suggests, however, that their imaginative trajectories provide different possibilities for action in the present. The affordances and constraints of the physical and social environment will shape what is possible, and the unequal power relations and discourses of childhood, which affect children relative to adults, can limit their agency. Here, the temporal aspect of agency is important, as it acknowledges the dynamic nature of events, and always unique situations. Furthermore, the notion that agency may draw more or less from each of the dimensions of the chordal triad, whilst acknowledging that all three dimensions are always present, affords children and young people possibilities dependent on the nature of the environment by means of which they act (Biesta and Tedder, 2007).

In the case that follows, the ecological understanding of agency offers a way to further understand the lives of care-experienced young people, by exploring how an 'empowerment group' space impacts the orientation of the young people's chordal triad, making possible different courses of action in their everyday lives.

The 'empowerment group' as the case study

The case explored here involves a newly formed group within a local authority in Scotland. To maintain the anonymity of this group it will be called an 'empowerment group', as its approaches to empowerment resemble those discussed earlier in this paper (Nagar and Swarr, 2005; Sharma, 2008; Thomson and Thorpe, 2004). Its purpose was to support care-experienced young people to have 'the ability to choose, act and speak out' (Parpart, 2013: 16) and inform local services regarding historical, present and future issues affecting them directly, or other children and young people in the Care system.

Scottish legislation reflects the international discourses of empowerment for children and young people considered above. Scotland has seen a gradual increase in duties on public bodies to consult children and young people in policy making and in personal decision-making (see for example; Scottish Executive, 1995, 2004). The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (Scottish Government, 2014) brought in further duties with regards to enacting Children's Rights and consulting children and young people about Children's services. This suggests a legislative environment that is strongly aligned with discourses of empowerment, with clear duties being placed on public bodies in this regard.

These legislative provisions apply to all children, but there are further requirements for looked after young people and care leavers. Research suggests that this group of children and young people are more likely to experience a variety of adverse issues in comparison to children from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Sebba et al., 2015). Some of the poorest outcomes in terms of, for example, education (O'Higgins et al., 2015), mental health (Sebba et al., 2015) and homelessness (Flynn and Tessier, 2011) affect looked after children and care leavers. Moreover, variability across Scotland, in the interpretation and enactment of current policy focusing on children and young people with care experience, continues to be a challenge and can result in inconsistent and inflexible practice (see for example Continuing Care, Scottish Government, 2019). Paulsen et al. (2018) also suggest that support for young people transitioning out of state care is varied and challenging, despite the range of 'supportive' and 'empowering' legislation in place. These factors shape, to a greater or lesser extent, looked after children's and care leavers' capacity to act in the world.

Using ecological agency as a heuristic to explore the experiences of the 'empowerment group' for care-experienced young people offers insights into the ways in which it shaped their agency. It helps provide a better understanding as to whether this environment maintains or perhaps reinforces the young people's habitual responses to situations or whether it facilitates them 'towards gaining imaginative distance from those responses and thereby reformulating past patterns through the projection of alternative future projectivities' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 1006). There are questions as to whether and, if so, in what ways such groups might open up or limit more positive outcomes for care-experienced young people in terms of their capacity to act. These considerations are important, as there is an acknowledgement that care-experienced people, a heterogeneous group (Ferguson, 2018), should be able to access a range of life outcomes, including similar educational achievement to their peers (Brady and Gilligan, 2018).

Research Methods and Data collection

The research took a case study approach to provide a deeper understanding of some of the nuances that shape people's actions. Flyvbjerg (2006: 237) argues that narrative aspect case studies can offer rich insights regarding the 'complexities and contradictions of real life'. Furthermore, by understanding that a case study has both a subject and an object (Watson et al., 2017), it is possible to go beyond simply providing an account of a situation. In this case, the subjects are care-experienced young people and the object of case study, emerging from the iterative analysis of data, was understandings and assumptions regarding empowerment. In this context, to generate rich data relating to the complexity and contradictions of the young people's lives, three methods of data collection were enacted. Qualitative data were generated, initially through observation of the 'empowerment group' meetings and the production of artefacts by the group (for example, a timeline). Drawing on these data sources, a detailed picture of the research context was formulated, from which themes for the semi-structured interview schedule were developed. Finally, three of the young people agreed to participate in an individual semi-structured interview, which lasted approximately an hour. These interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. This paper uses data generated from the interview process.

Coding as an interpretivist tool (Corbin and Holt, 2005) was applied to the data. Initially, the research used simple or 'descriptive' coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 55), moving to thematic coding. The cross-case analysis of the interviews provided a number of emerging codes. Discussion with a colleague, regarding the emerging codes, provided a further degree of critical reflection, as did a reflexive journal account. Thus, an iterative process of engagement with the research literature and re-reading of the data enabled further mapping of the codes (Ibid.: 71). At this point, the theoretical framework of ecological agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) was used as a heuristic to make sense of the data.

This research followed the principles of the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2017). Key principles and procedures included informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, child protection, potential dissemination of research and recognition of participants' contribution. Work was done with the young people prior to the commencement of the study to illuminate the research more fully and enable the young people to provide as fully informed consent as possible (Denscombe, 2010). Further to this, young people participating in the research were asked each time for their consent. The interviews were recorded at a time and in a place chosen by the young people. In writing up the study anonymity has been upheld, regarding the young people and those they work with, by also ensuring that place identifiers have been removed as far as possible.

The research study participants

The 'empowerment group' was voluntary and informal, with meetings lasting approximately an hour initially (though the group chose to extend this), with between five and ten young people attending. Generally, the group provided a space for discussion, the sharing of food and the generation of ideas, consultation and feedback. After three months of weekly meetings, a care-experienced young person, involved with another organisation, brought information about possible funding. The group applied for this, in order to develop resources for other care-experienced children and to enable the group to access trips, outings and so forth. The group discussed and set the weekly agenda; several different Corporate Parents (in Scotland, any public body or person detailed in Schedule 4 of The Children and Young person (Scotland) Act, 2014) wanted to meet with them to discuss latest policy developments and governmental consultations, and the young people managed their invitations. Following these encounters, some young people were invited to attend more formal meetings within the local authority, such as the Corporate Parenting Committee, involving decision-makers from Social Work, Education, Health, Police Fire Service, third sector organisations.

All the young people in the group had extensive care histories, and had experienced several care settings, ranging from birth family, kinship care, foster care and residential care. Their histories depict changes in placements, both locally and outside the council area, and changes of schools. Hence, as noted by much of the research regarding care-experienced children (e.g. see Hiles et al., 2013), the young people had experienced multiple disruptions to their social networks, as they moved both between different schools and communities. This disruption affected their connections to their birth families, foster families and staff within residential care settings. Moreover, these moves also affected relationships with people at school and with care professionals. All these young people were separated from siblings whilst in care, with contact varying from sporadic to none at all. At the time of the interviews, the three participating young people were all living independently and engaged in differing activities, for example, education or volunteering, which some commentators consider constructive (Schofield, et al., 2017).

Agency as orientated more towards the interational dimension

Research has highlighted that children and young people in the Care system have often experienced stigmatisation and exclusion (Stein, 2006b). The feelings of difference that can emerge from being looked after by the state help shape the young person's identity formation and beliefs (Stein, 2008; Ferguson, 2018).

> I always **feel different** when I go [to college]. Doesn't matter how hard I try to talk to people in my classes and that I feel I am always the one **that is left out** because I am always the one who has much more going on […] But that's what it's like when I go to college each day that's what it is like I try and try and talk to people but people just do not get me (CEYP2).

Vojak (2008) discusses how stigmatisation can be normalised and how children are particularly vulnerable to integrating stigma into their identity, due to their limited life experience, often creating deficit views of the self. This offers an insight into identity formation and how the young person's previous life experiences can lead them to internalise ideas about being deficient in some way. The iterational dimension of agency relates to identity formation, and hence different formative experiences, such as those influenced by being a young people in the Care system, will shape personal identity development. The young person below illustrates this point.

> The way you are now is from what you've experienced in your past life (CEYP3)

Another example of the pervasiveness of the negative discourses surrounding care-experienced children and young people was articulated by one young person, who spoke of their previous belief that being in care limited their future educational possibilities:

> University – no chance I'm not academic enough. I'm a care leaver as well. I've been in care I'm not going to get that far in life. (CEYP1).

These personal identity formations provide an insight into the past patterns of thought, which provide limited repertoires for manoeuvre and projectitivity. Hence, what is possible in the practical-evaluative dimension is not expansive, but has parameters which emerge from the young people's expectations of themselves. The latter comment illustrates that, whilst there is expectation maintenance, a secondary tone of the iterational dimension, it limits, rather than expands, educational possibilities. Agency, in the examples noted above, is more orientated towards the iterational dimension.

The experiences of being part of this group seem to have opened up different possibilities. Emirbayer and Mische (1998:1011) suggest the importance of understanding the ways 'by which actors formulate new temporally constructed understandings of their own abilities to engage in individual and collective change'. The agency heuristic provides possible readings to the thoughts of these young people, regarding their involvement in the group.

Imaginative distancing shifting agency orientation from the iterational dimension.

Based on their past experiences of the Care system, the young people did not appear to have had opportunities to express their views or to explore common perceptions with others. Shared repertoires of experiences emerged, when the young people were asked about having their views heard and included when in the Care system.

> Beforehand, me personally at times no point in bringing up issues about what's bothering you in the Care system – you're not going to get listened to - no one listens to you (CEYP1).

The situation described by the young people below, illustrates how similar past experiences, which offer a similar 'repertoire of stories' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 989), provide the opportunity to construct possible future framings of the Care system that are acceptable to the group. Projectivity arguably includes the capacity to imagine ourselves differently by using the experiences of others as a template. The opportunity of recognition by peers (Ibid:, 990), in this hypothetical resolving of concerns, appears to be an unexpected but valued outcome for the young people, in that they all felt 'comfortable enough' to express their thought.

> For us, as like obviously all young people, we've all had very similar experiences in the Care system, so obviously we know; what's been good, what's been bad and what needs to change; and we've all felt comfortable enough, like you know, what has been crap and this needs to change. Or no this has actually worked or may [be?] you should do this - because this has actually worked and this could be better. We know what could be better or could be worse (CEYP1).

This purposeful, shared space provided the young people with a different way of articulating their views about a system, in which they were immersed. An increase in their repertoires for manoeuvre seems to make the young people more comfortable about their histories, raising their capacity to act in certain contexts.

> I say..to be fair, I can't pin it completely to the group but it has helped with my confidence. I mean you know I'm used to talking more in a group. The thing I went to today I spoke in front of a bunch of strangers that I never really knew. No. If you told me I would speak in front of someone I would have walked out of the door and been like, 'na, I couldn't'. In front of those strangers, a lot of the things that were brought up and spoke about we've actually spoke about in the group. So I think I felt - I was uncomfortable because I didn't know them at all but at the same time I felt comfortable. I knew the topics I knew what I was talking about. Though if you'd asked me to do it two years ago I'd be like, 'what the hell are you talking about I don't know what I'm meant to say'. If that makes sense (CEYP3).

This young person was able to expand their 'stock of knowledge' (Ibid:, 989) and consider different possible responses to the presenting context. Habitual practices, as this young person indicated, would have entailed walking away. However, the experiences from the group provided other possible ways for this young person to act. The temporal focus in this understanding of agency is important; it accounts for the opportunities the young people have to reconfigure their previous action patterns, raising their capacity for possible actions, by altering the composition of the chordal triad in such a way that it is less oriented towards the past.

Decision-makers from the local authority attended the group on a basis managed by the young people. Managers making the effort to visit and listen indicated to this young person that they were being heard and taken seriously.

> It makes us feel quite happy knowing that service managers are coming in and actually listening to what we are saying rather than saying aye aye and passing us off. Making the effort to meet us (CEYP3).

The 'empowerment group', appeared to provide a space that afforded the young people 'imaginative distance' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 998) from their previous habitual, embodied responses to certain situations, for example, remaining silent because of discomfort or feelings of being ignored.

> I feel like I'm more confident. I feel like I am more vocal. I was vocal before but I wasnea as confident to speak up and say, 'well really? Really?' Now I go to Corporate Parent meetings. How much more vocal can you get? (CEYP3).

The lack of opportunities for these young people in the Care system to have their views heard appears to have limited their repertoires of manoeuvre regarding their capacity to act and make changes. These experiences, of being listened to and given the space to voice opinions, seem a necessary aspect of experience: to provide a more expansive range of possibilities, leading to shifts in capacity for action, or empowerment. Furthermore, the 'empowerment group' appears to provide a focal point for consultation by decision-makers from the local authority and other public bodies (Fire Service, Police and so forth). Hence, it afforded opportunities to relate to others, which individually would not have happened. The 'empowerment group' appears to have provided possibilities for the young people to construct new understandings of their ability to engage in change, both on an individual and collective level.

Agency as orientated towards the practical-evaluative dimension

The young people also discussed their increasing confidence and how this affects their responses to certain situations. Their own agentic orientations appear to be undergoing recomposition, enabling these responses to emerge. In order to understand what might provoke this for these young people,

that is, how they can 'loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relationships to existing constraints' (Ibid:, 1008), consideration needs to be given to the cultural and structural aspects of their environment. As Biesta and Tedder (2007: 137) suggest that 'the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors'. They draw our attention to how the practical-evaluative dimension of agency is constituted by social structures, the cultural realm and the material; these afford resources, which shape the possible responses – judgements and actions – young people can make.

The young people identified that the 'empowerment group' initially gave the motivation to get up and have somewhere to go.

> It has also helped me get my motivation up to go to other things because sometimes I really don't want to get out of my bed but out of going to new things and going to different meetings and events and stuff - it has got me more used to going out and doing more things. And it helped me get through some hard times as well. Because at the very beginning, I was going through some tough times and going through it- it gave me something to do when at that time I felt I wasn't doing anything (CEYP3).

The comments above illustrate how social structures and material resources, such as the group, can provide routine and purpose, whilst also helping young people through trickier times. Furthermore, the young people were asked how they would describe the group and some of the features that were important to them. They identified that the consistent meeting of the group every week, breaking only over Christmas for a week, was important as it provided a feeling within the group of being valued:

> Aye cos it shows that they're there to help us and want us to have our voice as well they're not just taking the piss. But you know that's what a lot of councils do – they use young people to make them look really, really good but in the long run the young people don't get anything out of it (CEYP3).

Moreover, the young people also expressed feelings of inclusion. Some of the practices that made the young people feel included were having food available at the meetings and being contacted to give their views even though they might not have attended a meeting:

> Sometimes if I didn't want to go I would get contacted and asked if I wanted to say anything which was nice. […] It makes me feel included. It kind of makes me feel better that even if I wasn't there I have managed to say something even if I didn't say it in front of everyone else. Sometimes you're just saying something out of tiredness - don't want social interaction just really depends on your mood. It does make me feel better afterwards if I have managed to say something even though I wasn't there (CEYP3).

Further to this, the young people had all experienced multiple changes before the group started and whilst they attended the group. Their care histories had significantly fractured their social networks. The cultural and relational resources that emerge from consistent social networks were limited for these young people. However, the young people expressed how the group gave them an opportunity to socialise and make friends with whom they felt a connection.

> Here I feel included. I have friends now. I have friends now (CEYP2)

The consistent and inclusive environment identified by the young people is illustrative of the relational resources made available through this environment. This, in turn, increased the confidence of the young people:

> And being able to like build up my confidence and now part of the Corporate Parent meetings and I get the emails every time they got one coming up – I like that; 'I feel important' (CEYP2).

Feelings of self-efficacy emerged from the relationships within the group, through their dialogue. The young person quoted below recognised there was nothing 'wrong' with them, although they may experience the world differently to others with other life histories. Drawing on these relational resources is helpful, as increasing their own feelings of self-efficacy provides more opportunities to make different judgements about what is possible in presenting situations. Being part of the 'empowerment group' has led to an understanding and a capacity for reflection about past patterns of identity formation.

> You know for years I would just think I was just being an oddball but I 've learned that personal experiences and some of the things we've talked about [in the group] that's just the way I am there's nothing wrong with it but it took me a while to really comes to terms (CEYP3).

The realisation that other young people have experienced the same situations, and the statistics about the poor outcomes for people in care, was particularly shocking for this young person:

> Being kids/early teenagers – didnea really think about what's so much wrong within the system. As you get older you see it and hear other young people talking about this happened to me. Hear other people talking about it – you think that's shocking that shouldn't be happening. When we meet up with people - they give the statistics about people in care. Shocking young people being treated like this (CEYP1).

This particular young person was keen to go on from college to university as they had heard that only 5% of care-experienced young people graduate and they were now keen to be one of those 5%:

> I do want to be able to go to uni. 5% for care leavers – I want to be one of those 5%. Keep going. Want to graduate (CEYP1).

The belief expressed above of 'not getting far in life' had formed part of their life history and shaped, and limited their future imaginings. The relational resources afforded through the group seem to have offered these young people ways of interrupting these negative discourses. The supportive conversations held between the young people with similar experiences, and the professionals supporting the group, appear to have provided a way of thinking differently about, and of making more sense of, their identity. This in turn helps reframe how they negotiate present day situations and the judgements they make about what is possible.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate how this ecological understanding of agency can be applied to children and young people and, if used as a heuristic, how it can provide a way of interrogating data to provide more expansive insights into a person's life compared to the arguably more limited concept of empowerment.

The findings illustrate a number of key considerations about the young people in this 'empowerment group': firstly, the importance of past histories, in terms of identity formation and maintenance; secondly how limited future imaginings can constrain actions in everyday environments; and finally the importance of relational, material and cultural resources in supporting young people to develop a range of possible manoeuvres for action. These findings illustrate how an ecological and temporal heuristic can provide insights, which may generate timely interventions or shifts in understanding and/or practice, to foster conditions that might increase a young person's achievement of agency.

The purposeful nature of the 'empowerment group' seems to provide a space, where the young people had the opportunity to share views, listen to others and respond to external professional questions. In this dialogue, however, the young people are able to listen to the experiences of others, providing them with the opportunities to reframe constraints imposed by a particular identity through imagining differently and hence broadening their capacity to act. However, Sharma's (2008) caution is a salutatory one, as she suggests that this could be framed in neoliberal terms of self-help, rather than a consideration of the environments by means of which these young people act. Constraints, such as instabilities regarding accommodation and financial resources might need to be attended to alongside these types of openings provided by public bodies. This ecological understanding of agency recognises the limitations of an individual's capacity to act, as it acknowledges the constraints of the environment, some of which require systemic change.

The empowerment agenda may provide a permissive environment through which care-experienced children and young people can be engaged. However, attention needs to be paid to the manner in which this is to be enacted, if it is to promote goals of social justice, rather than more instrumentally meeting public bodies' needs to consult. There is also a possibility that groups, such as this one, can re-emphasis difference, and hence discourses of empowerment may not be unequivocally good or achieve intentions. Furthermore, as Sharma's (2008) research shows, unless empowerment discourses are considered alongside welfare discourses, rather than replacing them, structural constraints such as poverty, and its ramifications for lived experiences, will not be acknowledged.

Replacing empowerment discourses with an understanding informed by ecological agency theory is fruitful in this respect. It provides a useful way of understanding young people's responses, and what contextual situations might allow the imagining of different trajectories, thus enabling further responses in the practical evaluative domain. While this is a small data set, and while more empirical work is necessary to further the potential of this theory of agency for understanding the lived experiences of young people, the paper illustrates its potential to displace the problematic concepts of empowerment. This ecological lens, which includes a temporal dimension, offers ways to understand why, in certain environments, a young person's capacity to act might be limited or conversely expansive. In this way it affords a way to interrogate different situations and offer insightful readings of the lives of young people.

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