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Preserving and memorialising relationships: exploring young people's experiences of foster care through the lens of social capital

Journal Item

Preserving and memorialising relationships: Exploring young people's experiences of foster care through the lens of social capital

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Abstract

This article presents findings from research into how young people growing up in foster care in the UK manage the relationships in their social networks and gain access to social capital. Social capital is a concept that highlights the value of relationships and is relevant to young people in care as they have usually experienced disruptions to their social and family life. Qualitative methods were used and the findings show that despite experiencing disruption to their social networks, the young people demonstrated that they were able to maintain access to their social capital. They achieved this in two ways. Firstly, they preserved their relationships, often through what can be seen as ordinary practices but in the extraordinary context of being in foster care. Secondly, they engaged in creative practices of memorialisation to preserve relationships that had ended or had been significantly impaired due to their experience of separation and movement. The article highlights implications for policy and practice, including the need to recognise the value of young people's personal possessions. Furthermore, it stresses the need to support them to maintain their relationships across their networks as this facilitates their access to social capital.

Keywords

Foster care, young people, social capital, preserving relationships, memorialisation,

Introduction

This study explores the ways in which young people growing up in foster care manage the relationships in their social networks and gain access to social capital. In 2017, there were 93,000 children and young people in the UK care system, more than 80% of them living in foster care (NSPCC, 2017). Given their needs and backgrounds, they constitute a vulnerable and disadvantaged group. Schofield (2003: 6) describes how these experiences mean young people come to foster care with 'a history of a developmental pathway that is likely to lead to some developmental risk'. This foster care pathway through childhood is also often further disrupted. Admission to care requires young people to adjust to living within a different family and for many it also means living in a different area and changing school. Research also suggests that many experience placement breakdowns that result in multiple moves (Biehal, 2010; Schofield, 2003). Morgan (2011), for example, found that the average number of placement moves for a young person in long-stay care is four. These instabilities mean that young people inevitably undergo repeated disruptions to their relationships and social networks.

Berridge (2007) has described how much of the literature on the lives of young people in foster care is often atheoretical; Rittner and colleagues (2011) argue that even when it is not, it is over reliant on psychological theories of attachment, both of which can limit understandings of the young people's experiences. This study offers a different theoretical perspective by drawing on the sociological concept of social capital. In so doing, it still acknowledges the importance of young people's attachments to their caregivers and family. However, it also provides a broader understanding of their needs and behaviour by examining how they interact across their wider social networks when these are likely to be disrupted by their being in care.

The concept of social capital has been used to examine the psychosocial resources in a person's social network (Hammond, 2018). Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2001) have been cited as the key writers on social capital and it is accepted that they share a broad definition of what it comprises, albeit with some slight diferentiations (Kawachi, Subramanian and Kim, 2008: 176). It can be defined as 'a theoretical representation of the tacit understanding that a person's social networks are a resource which has value' (Field, 2003:14). In this article, special attention is paid to the concept of 'bonding social capital' which Putnam (2001:22) describes as 'sociological super glue' that helps people 'get by' on a day-to-day basis. It is a resource that provides emotional support and so it is particularly useful to young people in foster care coping with the impact of traumatic life experiences and subsequent separation. Bonding social capital can also be understood as providing a foundation from which to build a network of relationships that can facilitate a person's ability to access 'bridging social capital' (Putnam, 2001) and to 'get ahead' and achieve social mobility. There is a growing body of literature where the concept has been applied in research with young people in a broader UK context (Holland, Reynolds and Weller, 2007; Morrow, 2001; Weller, 2006) and it has been described as a useful heuristic device (Morrow, 2001) to examine children's lived experiences. It has also been used as a way to measure interactions within networks (Putnam, 2001), although there are criticisms that this quantitative approach is difficult to operationalise (Field, 2003). Despite these variations, there is a growing consensus within the social capital literature related to young people, which suggests the concept's greatest value is as an analytical device in qualitative studies (Holland, 2007; Morrow, 2001; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004).

This article is part of a broader research enquiry. The wider findings showed the important role that foster carers play in supporting young people's practices to maintain and develop both their

bonding and bridging social capital (Rogers, 2017). For example, they encouraged children to access cultural and leisure activities, such as cadets and dance classes. Such activities have been noted in previous research as being key in developing social capital in networks and communities (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001). Previous research also recognises the crucial role foster carers play in developing children's relationships through social and family contacts and helping them make sense of their experiences (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). Although the influence of carers is briefly discussed in the findings of this article, the focus is on the practices the young people themselves engage in to manage their access to social capital. It analyses their experiences and perspectives to best understand what they are doing and considers practical ways to support them. The research question, therefore, is in what ways are young people in foster care engaging in practices and processes to access social capital?

This article will firstly outline the research design and methodological approach, then findings will be presented on two of the key themes that emerged from the analysis: (1) preserving relationships and (2) memorialisation. It concludes with a discussion on the implications for policy and practice.

Method

The study adopts a qualitative methodology and was undertaken by a sole researcher who is a registered social worker with experience of working in fostering and adoption. Purposive sampling was used to select the study group. Eighty-six children who were the responsibility of a local authority family placement team and who were currently placed in foster care were scrutinised; 14 were found to be aged between 12 and 14 years, and so met the inclusion criteria.

Two of the 14 young people were deemed by their social workers to be too vulnerable to engage in research and two chose not to participate. Thus, 10 young people took part in the study (five males and five females, median age = 13.4 years, age range 12-14 years). All the participants had been living in foster care for at least six months with plans to remain there long term.

Two interviews were conducted with each participant. Eco-maps and photo elicitation methods were used to gather the data (Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Hunt, 2008). These were completed with the young people in the first interview. A free form approach was used in which the young people were invited to draw circles that included the names of the people, places and things that were important to them. This provided a visual representation of a person's social networks, showing their relationships with their families, friends and communities (Coulshed and Orme, 2006). The material generated by these visual methods was complemented by discussions with the young people about the meaning of the images and the practices they engaged in within their social networks. Photo elicitation methods were introduced at the end of the first interview. The participants were given a digital camera for two weeks, with the brief to take 10 photographs of places and things that were important to them.

The visual methods were useful in helping to build a rapport with the young people and made them active participants in the research. The approach also recognised and built on the participants' competence and, importantly, also promoted a research study that was completed 'with' the young people and not 'on' the young people (Williams and Rogers, 2016).

The university, as well as the governance panel in the local authority where the 10 participants lived, granted ethical approval. All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. At the point of transcription, people's names were replaced with pseudonyms and any other identifying information was fully anonymised.

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings section below presents an analysis of two key themes that emerged: *preserving relationships* and *memorialisation*.

Results

Preserving relationships: ordinary practices in extraordinary circumstances

Nicola demonstrated a strong commitment to preserving her relationships and access to bonding social capital. She provided a detailed account of how she did this by engaging in ordinary day-to-day interactions in the extraordinary circumstances of growing up in foster care. She was 12 years old at the time of the interview and the eldest of five siblings, all of whom were in care although placed separately from her. She has been in foster care for four years and has lived with three different families. Contact with her birth family is supervised and arranged by her social worker and carers. Outside of these supervised six weekly meetings, she actively communicates with people across her social network by, as the following quotation shows, using different methods of communication for different people:

> Nicola: I do talk to my aunties and uncles on the phone sometimes but I mainly like to keep the phone to my mum and my nan, and sometimes my friends but we will mainly BBM [Blackberry messaging] and stuff. So I kind of keep my uncles and aunties to Facebook on the computer because I don't want them to think that I'm not like listening to them, but I kind of leave the phone to my mum and nan.

This demonstrates how Nicola is not just a passive actor in her social network, reliant on adults to manage her relationships and arrange and supervise contact with her family. On the contrary, it shows how active she is in managing her own relationships. She is making clear choices about

whom she contacts and how she does this. For example, she explains how she predominantly keeps the phone for talking to her mother and her grandmother, whereas she uses the computer to contact her aunts and uncles and sends instant messages to her friends using BBM. These efforts to manage the important connections in her social network serve to preserve her access to social capital and highlights an important finding – namely that despite the potential constraints of growing up in foster care with supervised contact, outside of this young people can adapt, exercise agency and manage the relationships in their networks on their own terms. It shows how actively engaged young people are in social networking sites, making choices about the ways they communicate with the family members, friends and acquaintances in their network (Fursland, 2011; Livingstone, 2002). Therefore, it seems that Nicola is engaging in what could be seen as 'ordinary practices' to manage her relationships with family and friends.

However, it is important to reiterate that the context of Nicola's living situation means that something quite remarkable is occurring. The family court has ultimately made a decision that has resulted in her being removed from her mother's care and placed in a foster home. Putting to one side the appropriateness of this, it has served to disrupt her closest family relationships as well as her wider social network. Further placement moves have compounded this disruption. So given this context, the day to day sociability in which she is engaged may appear similar to those of her peers, but she is doing this in an extraordinary set of circumstances that create a new set of complexities and challenges. For example, she continued by describing the complexities of being 'friends' with one's mother on Facebook:

> Nicola: My friends sort of add my mum as if they know her. It's quite scary because Kerry and Dawn they do know my mum. Chantelle doesn't. But Kerry and Dawn do because I've kind of grown up with them so they talk to my mum and I didn't

know what they're talking about, so it kind of like annoys me because I want to

know what they're talking about, and if they're talking about me or something.

INT: Do you ever ask them?

Nicola: I do normally go to them in the morning, like it's normally the first thing I say to

them. 'Have you been talking to my mum on Facebook?' This morning I walked

in school, and because they're so used to me saying that, when they walked in

they went, 'I haven't been talking to your mum.' So now they sort of just

automatically say if they have or they haven't…she called me one night and it was

quite obvious my friends had been talking to her and I didn't know. And she

called me up and said 'What's this I hear about you wanting your belly button

pierced?' She went mental.

Nicola went on to explain how this involvement from her mother was, in her words, 'annoying'

but she explained that the reason why her friends were allowed a piercing was because 'their

mums don't really care, so my mum obviously does'. Therefore, despite the limitations that

being placed in foster care has imposed on Nicola's face-to-face interactions with her mother, the

work Nicola has put in to adapt to the circumstances has had its benefits as the communication

serves to reassure Nicola that she is still cared for by her. Adapting to this situation has also

meant that she has developed ways outside of the formal contact sessions to preserve this

relationship and, along with being able to talk on her mobile phone, describes how valuable

Facebook is in enabling this. As the transcript suggests, this has not always been a very

straightforward adaptation; she has had disagreements and arguments with her mother about

baby photos and piercings. Arguments and disagreements between a teenage girl and her mother

could be described as commonplace but given these set of circumstances, where Nicola's physical contact is constrained, her ability to continue to interact with her mother is significant.

All the other participants gave similar examples of how they were actively preserving their relationships within their social networks. Practices like this enabled relationships to be built, managed and preserved, which illustrates how participants access important stocks of social capital. Like Nicola, the others engaged in these practices of preservation through seemingly commonplace interactions, again in quite extraordinary contextual circumstances. For example, Jade who was 14 years old at the time of the interview, had been in care for four years and a year prior to this her mother had died. She has had four different placements and has recently been informed that she will be moving again, as she is in a 'bridging placement'. She explained how she preserves a relationship with a valued friend, Sharon, in her network. She lived next door to Sharon in one of her previous placements, explaining that they had a very close relationship, 'like sisters'. They used to see each other every day, they walked to school together and they sat next to each other in class. Jade's move to a new foster placement far away from her friends disrupted this relationship and stopped her from seeing her. She went from seeing Sharon every day to not having seen her at all during the two months since her move. The following excerpt shows how despite the physical distance, Jade is working to preserve that friendship:

> Jade: I spend my day waiting for other people to come home from school so I can get on Facebook to chat to them.

> INT: Right, so Sharon she is one of your good friends. How often do you see her now?

> Jade: Not that often. I don't see her but Facebook helps me stay in touch with her.

The quotation 'I spend my day waiting for other people to come home from school' reinforces the high value that Jade places on interacting with her friends. These relationships are so important to her that even when she is not interacting with them, they are still at the forefront of her thoughts and she spends her day waiting to interact with them. For Jade, Facebook is a key tool that enables her to do this and access what, for her, comprises social capital.

Jade's recent placement move meant she was also waiting to start a new school. Therefore, this new placement meant that she no longer saw any of her friends connected to her previous placement. This affected her relationships with the very people who were so important to her and whom she spent her day waiting for 'to come home from school'. These important friendships represent the emotional support in her social network and serve as a resource of bonding social capital that Jade is clearly working to preserve. In the following excerpt, she goes on to explain how she is preserving a relationship with one of her previous foster carers. She explained that she lived with Kate for just over a year, moving on through her own choice:

> *INT*: So do you share the same sort of stuff with your carers on Facebook as your friends?
>
> *Jade*: No way!
>
> *INT*: So can you set it up in a certain way so you share certain stuff with your friends and certain stuff like with your carers?
>
> *Jade*: Yeah, it's like privacy settings, you select which ones you don't want to see you and set that setting to it so they don't actually have to see it…so you can use it to stay in touch with people who are important to you even if you don't want them to see all your photos, like your nights out with friends or whatever

This excerpt highlights the nuances of the practices Jade engages in. It shows how through the privacy settings, she is selecting what to share with different people and consequently how she communicates with them in different ways. This is evidence of the competence and agency that young people have and how they actively manage this process and make sophisticated choices. Her account also demonstrates that young people in foster care work on relationships across a wide range of social networks, not just with family, again showing how they manage and maintain access to their social capital.

Memorialisation: continuing bonds within a disrupted network.

The results presented so far highlight the ways in which the young people maintain their present-day relationships on a physical level. However, some of them are also active in practices that memorialise and continue their bonds with people with whom they have no physical contact, often pursuing this on a purely emotional level. The following discussion shows that even though relationships may initially present as being limited or lost in a physical sense, evidently they still serve as a valuable source of bonding social capital on an imagined or emotional level. Memorialisation is a concept used primarily to understand and explain how people engage in practices to remember the deceased (Woodthorpe, 2011). It can be understood as a means to help process loss and as a desire to continue bonds (Valentine, 2008). However, the concept also has relevance in its application to young people in care, as the following examples will show.

The participants' social relationships were often significantly constrained or severed through events such as bereavement, adoption or parental imprisonment, and any interaction had to be at an 'imagined' level. Nevertheless, these still represented a powerful source of bonding social capital that can offer young people considerable emotional support. For example, Jade described

her love of horse riding, illustrating the powerful relational importance of leisure activities and how they can highlight the significance of relationships from the past.

INT: OK, so what about things that you do, things that you are most interested in?

Jade: Horse riding… when I was living with Angela I started horse riding and I was doing it for about three years and I stopped it because I moved to Sharon's and she couldn't get me there and I haven't really started again, but I still love doing it.

INT: How often did you use to do it?

Jade: Every two weeks for about three months, it's quite an expensive thing to do horse riding.

What is significant is that when asked about the activities that were most important to her, Jade went straight to horse riding without hesitation. By her estimations, in her previous placement she rode every two weeks over three months, which means that she went in total around six times. It became apparent in the second interview why these horse riding sessions were so significant and important for her, as in this next extract where she talks about her mother who died shortly before she came into care:

INT: What was your mum like?

Jade: Pretty… and she loved horses.

INT: Oh, so that explains about your love of horse riding.

> Jade: Yeah, like we used to walk hours trying to find somewhere for me to go riding… my mum was so insistent that I went but we never found anyone…because she used to work at a stable when she was 17.

Discussing the activity of horse-riding enabled Jade to start talking about her mother which is something she said earlier that she did not do very often, stating that she 'did not want to make people feel upset or awkward by talking about my mum'. Across the two interviews, Jade's mother presented as the most important relationship in her life and she expressed a strong attachment to her and sought to preserves her memory. Her relationship with her mother can be understood as a continuing bond (Valentine, 2008) which means that despite the relationship ending in a physical sense, she works hard in many ways to preserve it and continue the bond on an emotional level. This acts as a powerful symbolic and memorialised form of bonding social capital that is of great value to her.

The relationship between Jade and her mother could also be viewed through the lens of attachment theory and the important bond between child and caregiver analysed from this perspective. However, the findings of this study show how young people preserve their bonds with people right across their social network; this reinforces the value of analysing their behaviour through the lens of social capital. For example, returning to Nicola, during her second interview she presented a photograph of her cuddly toy collection. On first glance, it seemed like an unexceptional bedroom shelf containing a collection of soft toys, as one might expect to find in a 12-year-old's bedroom. However, the following excerpt highlights the importance of this display and the symbolic meaning attached to every item, her relationship with them and the range of people that they represent:

> INT: So that's a close-up on the teddy bears.

Nicola: All my teddies. I've took them everywhere I gone . . .

INT: So where do they all originate from?

Nicola: That Chelsea bear is important to me because that's my first ever bear…I had it when I was a baby… my mum's always supported Chelsea. I used to have a little Chelsea football kit. I think my mum's still got it. It was like diddy. The shorts are like that big… and she got me that teddy and that was in my baby photos next to me all the time. So I've kept that Chelsea bear because my mum gave it to me to take with me when we left and came into care… and this one was last Christmas – my teddy. That one I've had since I was a baby. That one I got from my granddad when I first met him. That one I got this Christmas. It's like an elephant teddy but the elephant was in my bed. This one was my brother's teddy and he gave it to me when I left his house. So he's got like a teddy that he gave me…because he thought I was going to forget him.

INT: Right, so he made you take his teddy with you?

Nicola: Yeah. This one I got from my first carer when she went to Australia…This one was my Nan's teddy. She gave it to me when we first came into care… And this one I got for my ninth birthday and it sings 'Happy Birthday' to you.

INT: So every one of these teddies – it's not like you could go down the shop and replace all these teddies.

Nicola: I couldn't replace them. I have to keep them… teddies and photos are my special things.

INT: What about when you're 40 years old Nicola, where would these teddies be?

Nicola: They'd be still on my bedroom shelf. They're not going anywhere.

It is apparent from this transcript that these toys are in effect a display of Nicola's important relationships across her social network; they show her connections to family, her mother, her siblings, her grandmother, as well as her previous carers.

In the photo-elicitation interview with another participant, Samuel, three of the 10 pictures that he had taken were of framed montages that he kept in his room. These presented as a symbolic representation of his social networks. In one of the frames he had his family, including his mother, his grandparents, aunts and uncles. In another frame, there was a mixture of photographs which included family members and previous foster carers. He explained the importance of one particular photograph he took which was an image of his previous carer:

INT: So what is in this photo?

Samuel: Well that's me obviously and that's Dave and that's Angie…Beth took the photo but my last carers got it framed and gave it to me so I would remember them when I came here…the other people they are Dave and Angie's son and his friends and some other kids who lived round there… It was down the park in town. We played for ages… Dave was a good laugh. They were good carers.

Samuel also had a photograph of his old rugby team for which he played when he lived in his last placement, which he presented in the interview alongside a photograph of a rugby trophy. Like Nicola's teddy bears and photographs, Samuel's collection of personal possessions, his photographs and his trophy represent his social network on display in his bedroom. The practices needed to display his possessions showed how much he valued the relationships represented in

these items. In this instance, they comprise past relationships with previous carers whom he no longer sees and his friendships in the rugby team he no longer plays for.

Returning to Jade, she presented a photograph during the elicitation interview of her collection of ceramic angels and the excerpt from the transcript highlights the importance that she places on displaying them:

> Jade: Yeah, that one and the one at the end they are my mum's. And then like the four ones sitting down holding their face, I bought them. My friend bought me the silver one and that one I bought myself. That one I bought myself. And that one my dad bought me. I've got a gold one as well that my carer bought me…I've got more upstairs she got me too, but I just cannot fit them all in one picture… I've got a really high one... and then my mum got me one, another one, and it's on a horse and swings, and they glow up...my mum just got me into them so now I love them and now everyone knows I love them so I get them as presents.

The display of angels is important to Jade because, as she describes, her mother got her 'into them'. For her, it serves as a memorial to her mother and enables her to continue her bond with her. Furthermore, when I asked Jade to tell me about the angels, she chose to recall who gave them to her, so they also serve a secondary purpose of reinforcing her relationships with the people who are close to her as well as strengthening the importance of the memorial to her mother. As she explained, the angels were gifts from people close in her network, such as the friend who bought the silver one, her dad and her previous carer:

> INT: They must be some of your most special things that you own.

Jade: Yeah, I got loads of my mum's clothes as well and they just smell of her so I just sit there literally smelling them. I love that… all that stuff's like really important to me…I've got like two of my mum's 'meaty' teddies and she's also got me into them…

INT: How are you going to pack all these up when you move on?

Jade: Well, I do have at least six or seven bags when I move so I have quite a few bags. And I even have to carry stuff separately sometimes like my teddies. It's quite hard. So I try to move as little as possible. It's quite hard to move because I've got to get everything into a car and stuff…I'm kind of scared that I'm going to forget them or something so they always go in the bag first before my clothes. Sometimes I get my carers to pack them so if something breaks or gets lost I can blame them.

Given that these displays of possessions enable Jade to continue her bond with her mother, it is unsurprising that they hold such significance. She has been in care for four years and has lived with four different carers, so it is understandable that she has some anxiety about her possessions when her care experience is marked by continual movement.

Anna was another participant who had experienced complex family dynamics that included the upheaval of being separated from her siblings. For her, the move into foster care resulted in her losing access to possessions that are important to her, as her parents went to prison and her family home was repossessed. These missing possessions could have enabled Anna to maintain her relationships and social capital, albeit in a memorialised form. Through adoption, Anna had lost a physical connection with her siblings; however, she expressed her hopes for reunification. She also conveyed the strength of her bond with them and her desire to find them in the future.

This significant disruption to her relationships made the loss of possessions, such as photographs, more keenly felt. She has been in care for a year and has been in two different placements, yet she was still awaiting personal possessions that she had left at home. Anna's newly appointed social worker clearly had an awareness of the importance that Anna placed on getting these back. She or he had made unsuccessful attempts to locate them through the housing department and by contacting extended family members. However, this was 12 months after Anna's entry into care.

These findings highlight that personal possessions are a key way by which young people preserve and maintain their relationships, networks and subsequent access to social capital. It was also apparent that during the year Anna had spent in foster care, her ability to engage in practices of memorialisation through her personal possessions had been limited. This has meant that her ability to utilise her sources of social capital during a time of severe disruption had been seriously impaired:

> INT: Tell me about this teddy bear.

> Anna: I love him, I sleep with him all the time…I got it here, but it's like my old one that I had at home which I haven't got.

> INT: So it's like a replacement for a teddy that you had?

> Anna: Yeah…Dani my foster carer got me that one…Yeah, but it's a bit lighter. My other one was really dark and I used to call it Chocolate. It's still at my old house…

> INT: Have you had any news on that, where it is or anything?

Anna: Nope. I keep asking

It can be seen that Anna's new foster carer was sensitive to the impact that these lost possessions had on her and that she had attempted to compensate for the loss by providing a substitute teddy, as well as by replacing Anna's favourite DVDs which featured in another of her photographs. These attempts to replace the items while waiting for Anna's original possessions to be located are an example of good practice on behalf of the carers which Anna recognised and valued. However, despite this compliment, it does raise the question how Anna could have gone for over 12 months without these items being found or any contingency plan to replace them. Furthermore, it raises questions about professionals' understanding of the value of 'objects' and 'things' for children's well-being even though this has long been recognised (Stevenson and Winnicott, 1954). Objects can support a child through transitions such as a placement move (Fahlberg, 1994) or enable a young person to continue their bonds and preserve their relationships and networks which serve as a source of bonding social capital.

It is clear that the children and young people in this study are not ambivalent about their possessions and that systems and professionals may not always give enough attention to the real value of children's 'things'.

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that relationships across social networks for children and young people in care can be complex and any form of contact presents risk. Children and young people can find contact challenging and upsetting and there is potential for them to even experience further abuse (Moyers, Farmer and Lipscombe, 2006). This article has chosen not to focus on the risks, as this is well documented (Fursland, 2011; 2013; Research in Practice, 2014). Instead it

presents, and indeed, privileges the young people's experiences to show how they are interacting within their social networks and the bonding social capital they receive from this. This is important as children and young people are growing up in a system that can prioritise assessment of risk and safeguarding over awareness of the risk affecting access to their social capital.

This article highlights how these young people engage in ordinary actions in exceptional circumstances to overcome barriers. It shows that despite these barriers, the young people can adapt and improvise through practices such as memorialisation to continue to draw on resources in their social network. This demonstrates that existing networks matter a great deal to the young people. Through them they hold affective bonds with people that are important to them and as such represent an important stock of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2001).

The participants also showed in a variety of ways that these established relationships never go away, no matter how great the disruptions or barriers. The social networks described are the foundations on which they build their access to social capital. The young people have been moved from the care of their parents to that of foster carers, and this initial disruption to their social networks is often compounded by multiple placement moves. However, the findings show that young people have a remarkable capacity to minimise potential damage. They achieve this in myriad ways. At times they preserve their access to social capital, just like everyone else, by engaging in the most prosaic of ongoing practices with people in their networks; for example, through sending text messages to family members or by simply adding a 'like' to a friend's Facebook status update.

On other occasions, the practices that the young people engage in are nothing short of heroic, with young people demonstrating a strong, lasting commitment to maintaining and preserving relationships, vigorously keeping their access to their bonding social capital alive. The examples

presented from Nicola, Jade and Samuel show how they achieved this through memorialisation, with their displays of possessions in their bedrooms symbolically representing relationships that serve to continue their bonds with people important to them.

Whether these practices are best described as heroic or prosaic, ordinary or extraordinary is to some degree immaterial, because what is truly remarkable and holds the lessons for social work policy and practice is how these young people persevere and maintain their networks. Those in this study were clearly working hard to manage their access to social capital, sometimes with the help of adults but often without it. This presents lessons for practitioners and carers on ways they can help with this, first, by learning how the young people they are supporting are maintaining their social networks and, second, by considering how their capacity to manage and develop their access to social capital can be respected and supported.

Conclusion

This study presents two messages for practice. First, young people are actively preserving their relationships across their social networks, so it is important for practitioners to engage directly with them to identify and assess these. Then, by working in partnership with the young people, practitioners could plan ways to best support to promote sustainable relationships that provide access to social capital. Second, personal possessions matter for those in foster care, particularly in situations where relationships have ended in the physical sense. The young people participating in the research found creative ways to access bonding social capital in their networks through memorialisation.

This study reinforces lessons that we already should have learned from seminal writers on child development and family placement, such as Fahlberg (1994) and Stevenson and Winnicott

(1954). As practitioners and carers, we need to be mindful of the importance of young people's personal possessions on entering care and during any subsequent moves in placement. In this context of disrupted pathways through childhood, possessions hold a powerful symbolic value and these 'things' are vital to young people's well-being.

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