

Embedded in relations—Interactions as a source of agency and life opportunities for care-experienced young adults

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Abstract

This paper explores how young people who have been in out-of-home care develop a positive agentic capacity. The analyses are based on longitudinal biographical interviews with 24 care experienced young people (age 16–32 years) living in Norway. At the time of the interviews, they were in the education system or working and described themselves as ‘doing well’. Through the application of a relational understanding of agency, this paper provides in-depth insights into how relations shape the biography, identity and decisions of young people with care backgrounds, scaffold positive possibilities and enhance their life opportunities.

KEYWORDS

care experience, life opportunities, relational agency

INTRODUCTION

Researchers in recent years have paid increasing attention to which factors may support positive life trajectories for care-experienced children and young adults. Most studies have found that positive trajectories are associated with helping young people to become educated, because school performance can open up educational pathways and enhance future life opportunities (Höjer & Johanson, 2013). Key factors found to facilitate educational achievement are strong personal motivation, the existence of a close supportive adult, having stability in care and school placement, and experiencing satisfactory accommodation and financial help (Höjer & Johanson, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012;

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Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). While such empirical work is no doubt important, scholars (e.g. Brady & Gilligan, 2020) have pointed out the need for the application of wider social theory and more sophisticated explanations. A growing body of studies now use sociological theories of human agency as a lens when analysing children and young people who are or have been in care. Examples include recently published analyses from the *Against All Odds?* study that have noted how a lack of flexibility in systems can inhibit agency (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018). Berridge (2017) has attended to young people's own agency and has analysed the school experiences of young people in care. In his study, he highlights how young people are agentic and make choices that wider society, or key adults in their lives, may deem to be good or bad. In a more recent publication, Brady and Gilligan (2020) used a life-course conceptualisation of agency to investigate how agency helps to shape educational experiences. They analysed how small agentic actions and positive and negative expressions of agency occur across the life course in relation to education and affect educational pathways over time.

Rather than examining *how* action is exercised or *what* agentic action is (Hitlin & Elder Jr, 2007), this paper will provide insight into processes that underlie and influence agency. The aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of the role that interactional experiences play in agency, with a focus on young people's own narratives related to agency and how these narratives are structurally shaped by context and social relations. The analysis is inspired by Burkitt's (2016) sociological approach to agency. The analysis builds on qualitative longitudinal interviews with 24 young adults living in Norway. The interviewees had all been in care for at least 3 years and now perceived themselves as 'doing well' by being engaged in education, employment or volunteer activity at the time of the interviews. In this paper, I focus on the young adults' own perceptions and reasoning of why they had managed to succeed 'against the odds'.

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO AGENCY

In general, one can understand agency as a necessary aspect of being human while we try to adapt and make sense of our environment; being alive requires actions that involve choices, analyses and reflection (Hitlin & Elder Jr, 2007). But 'agency' is a complex and disputed term (Burkitt, 2016; Hitlin & Elder Jr, 2007). One source of dispute is related to whether agency is an individual possession that is centred on reflexivity—where people are agents who consciously choose different courses of action in circumstances where they might act differently—or if agency has to do with people producing particular effects in the world and on each other through their relational connections and joint actions, regardless of whether these effects are reflexively produced. The latter outlook implies a relational understanding of agency in which individuals are seen as *interactants* rather than as singular agents or actors (Burkitt, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, I draw on the latter understanding of agency.

According to Burkitt (2016), this approach to agency also implies an interest in analysis of the relational connections between interactants (both personal and impersonal networks of relations and interdependencies) in which interactants and their joint actions are embedded. Power imbalances tend to emerge within such networks of relations and interdependencies as some attain more power or control over key resources than others. According to Burkitt (2016, p. 331), this situation has implications for agency because how we act, the power we accrue or the constraints upon us do not depend on our relations to structure but on the nature of our interdependence with others and how that interdependence shapes our mutual interactions. As *interactants*, agents are interdependent, vulnerable and intermittently reflexive possessors of capacities that can only be practised in joint actions; such agents are capable of sensitive responses to others and to the situations of interaction. Agency emerges from our emotional relatedness to others as social relations unfold across time and space. Referring

to Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945]), Burkitt (2016) suggests that most of our intentional actions begin in non-conscious areas of life, such as habituated activities, which only become subject to reflexive deliberation at certain points or under certain circumstances. With reference to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Burkitt argues for an understanding of agency as ‘a temporally embedded process of social engagement’: one that ‘is informed by the past (in its habitual aspects) but oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagining alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)’ (1998, p. 963).

What I have found particularly useful in analysing the material for this study related to this theoretical approach to agency is an insistence on the importance of relations and temporality. In the analysis of the young people's narratives below, I will examine the importance of social relations for agency related to their social engagement (among other factors) and the choices the young people make. I will also examine how their present agency is informed by past relations and by their views of their possible futures.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research presented in this paper reflects the Norwegian portion of the cross-national study *Against All Odds?* (which also involves Denmark and England). The overall research questions of the project were: ‘Why do some care leavers, against all odds, end up doing well as young adults and what does it mean to “do well”?’ (see Bakketeig et al., 2020). The study includes qualitative data from interviews with care-experienced people in all three countries. In total, 75 people took part, 24 of them (aged 16–32 years) from Norway. The participants were recruited through residential units, local child-welfare services (CWS), non-governmental organisations for young people with care experience, and via social media.

During recruitment, the aim was to enhance sample diversity rather than to construct a representative sample of the heterogeneous population of care-experienced youth. The young adults had to be in training, employment or education to join the study, and they had to be willing to identify as ‘doing well’. This sample is well equipped to shed light on the overall research questions, as well as for the analysis in this paper. However, the selected sample also imply a higher probability that these young people will illuminate experiences that reflect more dimensions related to agentic capacity than if we had included a broader sample.

Using a multi-method qualitative longitudinal approach, we invited the participants to take part in two main interviews approximately 1 year apart. They also took photos, which we later interviewed them about, and we used a life chart (for a more comprehensive description see Boddy et al., 2019). The analyses in this paper are based on these two main waves of interviews. The first interviews were used to gather information about the participants’ present living situations. The life chart (Thomson & Holland, 2002) was used to map the interviewees’ experiences related to living situation, family, education/employment and free time. The second round of interviews, which took place a year later, addressed the same areas as the first interviews but focussed on their present lives and any changes that had occurred since the previous interviews. These interviews provided richer data on each person in our sample. The two main interviews lasted 1.5 hr on average. All interviews were recorded with the young person's consent and were later transcribed. The quotes in this paper have been edited for clarity in English, although the editing has not affected the quotes’ meaning in any way.

The total sample consisted of 10 males and 14 females. Although these young people defined themselves as doing well, they had not experienced any less hardship than most people with care experience. Except for one interviewee, all had for instance moved several times, both when they were living with their birth parents and after the CWS had taken responsibility for their upbringing.

Analysis

The analytical process for this paper consists of a combined phenomenological and interpretive approach (Malterud, 2012). In this process, I centred my analyses around the young people's own biographical narratives related to their past and present experiences and hopes for their future. I started the analytical process by reading each case by attending to individual experiences over time and looking for factors and experiences that could explain why this group of young adults had ended up 'doing well' despite their difficult childhood experiences. I then compared the cases by looking for common factors and experiences before again attending to the particularities found among individual narratives. What the analyses disclosed was that social relations and interactional experiences strongly influenced these young people's choices and agency. To develop and validate the analysis, preliminary findings were continuously discussed in the research group; the paper has also been presented and discussed with colleagues involved in the project. The cases used in the paper are emblematic: they were chosen to exemplify findings in our sample that in different ways illuminate the relationship between the young people's presentation of self, agency and relational experiences.

Ethical considerations

The project was conducted in accordance with relevant ethics requirements in all three countries. The Norwegian project was approved by the National Centre for Research Data. I have avoided including details from the informants' accounts that could increase the risk of identification as well as any descriptions that could inadvertently lead to stigmatisation. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and I have changed certain aspects of their background information to protect against recognisability.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONS FOR AGENTIC CAPACITY

Work-life participation is widely stressed as important in Norway today, and education is a key to obtaining an interesting job (and often to getting a job at all). Against this wider societal context, it is perhaps unsurprising that most of the Norwegian participants could relate to this normative framework, which implies that they saw formal education as an important part of a good outcome (see also Bakketeig et al., 2020). In this light, the sampling criterion of being engaged in education or work was an indicator of success for all the participants, especially when compared to the dominant narratives of the risk of poor outcomes for child-welfare clients. It was also clear that challenging those negative discourses was part of why they had volunteered to participate. Accordingly, the connection between normative societal expectations and the dominance of negative depictions of child-welfare clients was present in nearly all their narratives and influenced the way they described their personal goals. For example, Jade (an 18-year-old student) said:

My classmates were surprised when I got into that school after all I'd experienced, saying things like, 'I didn't think you'd get in'. So, that [outlook] relates to others' expectations of you as a child-welfare kid, and they don't have high expectations. But my thought was that if others can make it, why can't I?

Another related theme was the need to redefine themselves and their prospects on a personal level, in relation to their previous experiences as children in care. Greta (student, 23) commented that 'it's been

extremely important to actually show myself that I'm good at something'. Together, these two quotes represent narratives that illuminate how societal expectations and experiences shape agency. To examine these points further, I turn now to the case of Anna. Rather than being representative of the sample as a whole, she provides an emblematic case (Thomson, 2011) that illuminates considerations which are relevant to the diverse experiences of the other young people in the study. Anna's case exemplifies the foundation for developing an understanding of who they are and want to be (identity), personal agency, and the importance of a supportive environment.

Anna's story

Anna was 21 years old at the time of second the interview. She had finished her vocational training and was now taking an extended year to gain general university admission so she could start her education as a social worker. Anna had moved in with her foster parents at the age of 6, because of her parents' struggles, and she described a relationship with her foster parents that indicated that she felt she had experienced good quality of care. For example, she commented that her foster carers had taken an interest in her well-being and schoolwork and had treated her as one of the family. Despite their continuous encouragement, she did not do well in lower-secondary school. According to Anna, the reason for her poor performance was her difficult relationship with her birth parents, who had an agreement of regular monthly visits with her. Anna described this relationship as being difficult due to her parents' instability, which she said affected her ability to concentrate on school and made her aloof in her relationships with her peers:

I was way behind when I started in upper-secondary [school]. I think, when I was younger, I was very introverted. I was so tired of everything that was going on, and I had so many questions and focussed more on what was going on with my parents.

Anna said she had tried to change the arrangement, but her experience was that the CWS was more considerate of her parents' wishes than her own: 'I felt like I was being used to calm down my parents... It's been a bit like [the CWS has] been listening more to my biological parents than to my foster parents and me'. One way to conceptualise her experience is that the influence of the important (although negative) social relationship she had with her birth family, and not being listened to, both hampered her agentic capacity. At the beginning of her last year in lower-secondary school, Anna had been assigned a new caseworker who, in contrast to the first one (according to her), took her seriously by listening to her, taking her perspective on the relationship with her parents and responding to Anna's request to see a psychiatrist who could explain her parents' problems to her. She said 'I wanted to find out so that I could relate to [their problems] in a better way, and since I didn't know how to go about finding out myself, I asked her [the caseworker] to help me'.

Her experience suggests that, despite the care and support Anna had received from her foster carers, her agency in managing the difficult relationship with her birth parents had relied on the support of a professional who would listen and act on her concerns. The possibility to know and understand more about her background and her parents' problems was a turning point in her account of herself (Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014). This understanding enabled her to appreciate her foster parents' involvement, focus on her schooling and orient herself towards a possibly different future. She explained:

Eventually the bubble burst, and I started to tell and reflect upon my experiences together with my foster parents. I went off from there, learned more about my

background, and that my birth family is the way they are and that I can't do anything about it – I have to live with it, you know. It came to a point where I needed to prove to myself that I could manage. I felt that I had to make a choice—half of my biological family have problems with drugs, mental illness and that kind of thing—and I don't want to fail like they have. So, I've been strengthened by wanting to prove that I'm better, which has helped me move forward ... [in] talking and learning about my background, and that there are things that I can't do anything about but have to live with—that's helped. And then I became obsessed with making it at school and getting an education, to show that I could make it.

Anna's emotional relatedness to her birth parents had hampered her agency, but coming to terms with her family history and distancing herself from their problems had made her see that she could make her own choices. Her focus on school thus became subject to reflexive deliberation. But she also underlined the importance of her friendships in her doing well in general and at school:

Anna: My friends are fixated on education. They all want to make it [in life] and value it highly, which has been very stabilising for me. There's no unrest, or that sort of thing. I'm quite a calm person, and so are my friends.

Interviewer: Have your friendships been very important for you doing so well?

Anna: Very important. They've helped my development. When I look at my brother, who's a drug addict, he has a totally different circle of friends, and he got in with the wrong friends, so I do think having the right friends is of great importance. I do think that having stability and safety is important for what a person becomes.

Through her account, Anna described a change in the way she understood herself, and how this understanding in turn had shaped her relationships with others. She said that, after coming to terms with her background, she had 'different kinds of friends after I started in upper-secondary [school]. I've become much more social than I was. It's become easier for me to create new relationships'. Anna's experiences in the past and her new orientation towards the future had also influenced her leisure-time activities. She did volunteer work at an association for child-welfare clients because she wanted to use her own experience to benefit others, even as she hoped doing so would support her own future career aspirations.

Anna's case illustrates the ways in which agency is contingent on the interdependency and vulnerability of young people; her case also reveals how easily young people's agentic capacity can be either undermined or bolstered. The response from her new caseworker had multiple positive consequences that then influenced her understanding of who she was and who she could be, thus enabling Anna to gain agentic capacity. This case also exemplifies how past experiences inform present activities and orientation towards the future.

The building of an agentic self

As Anna's case shows, the relationship that care-experienced people have with their birth families can be crucial for their identity and experience of agency. Some young people in our sample were fortunate to have had a good relationship with their birth parents, and they experienced that their foster parents had reinforced this relationship by helping them make meaning out of personal events and by assisting them in articulating what they believed their stories said about who they were. In our study we found several examples of how foster parents had helped young people in their care to nurture a

positive view of their background, thus providing opportunities for young people to feel that they had been influenced and shaped by their biography in a positive way.

One example was provided by Samuel, who was 18 years old at the time of the first interview and was interviewed together with his foster mother. Samuel was in his second year of upper-secondary school, got good grades and was determined to go to university to study. He described having a good relationship with his birth mother; he said she had always had high hopes for him and his future and that she wanted him to get a good education. When Samuel was 11 years old, he moved in with his foster parents, and his mother wanted a court order to have him moved back home with her. Before doing so, however, she asked Samuel for his opinion about where he wanted to stay. When he answered that he wanted to live with his foster parents, she accepted his choice and dropped the court case. By choosing to involve Samuel in this difficult decision and by respecting his choice, his mother had allowed him to exercise agency. At the time of our interview, Samuel reflected that he admired her for this decision; he further explained that they now had a close relationship and met regularly. Samuel's relationship with his birth mother seemed to be reinforced by his foster mother's way of talking about her, as was visible in her linking of positive qualities that characterised both Samuel and his biological mother. In supporting Samuel's account of his positive relationship with his mother, for example, his foster mother explained:

Samuel has a very strong mother, and that's why she's managed to handle the situation. She's mentally strong, and you [Samuel] have inherited that from her—that willpower, if you decide to go for something, you stay in it—you have that firmness of spirit, which is something that you're born with.

This way of reinforcing reflection on the positive qualities of parents who have lost custody over their children, and of highlighting the parents' connections to the young person, can help to develop a positive view of the young person's background and personal qualities, thus avoiding a binary conceptualisation of the birth family as either 'good' or 'bad'. Samuel's birth mother's and foster mother's responses both accentuated a strong impression of Samuel as a 'strong' agent who could influence his own biography, thus helping him to develop a positive view of himself and a belief in his own capacity. For instance, when the interviewer asked Samuel to pinpoint the most important factors that had made him do so well, he answered, 'Well, it's my mother, the stable home I have here and my good friends'. His foster mother stepped in to address a crucial omission in this list: 'I would have added one more thing, and that's you!'

Interdependence—a source of agency

Compared to living in a foster home, living in residential care entails the circulation of personnel and inhabitants. In this context, people in the study described exercising agency by being selective in their approach to the adults they met within this setting and establishing closer contact with one or a few social workers whom they felt comfortable with. Moreover, all the participants who had lived in residential care highlighted the importance of feeling appreciated as unique people with individual needs and potential. For some, this feeling depended on meeting *that one* person who would take them seriously and see them as unique individuals. Adam (23, employed) described one worker in his residential home as follows: 'My feeling was that most employees worked for their pay cheques, but she showed genuine interest ... she addressed me according to my level, not as a professional'. Many of those who had been in residential care said that they thought the special relationship they had established with this one significant person was the main reason for their success, mainly because of the role that person had played in helping them believe in themselves and building their self-worth. Young adults who no longer lived in residential care also emphasised the importance of having continued support, and most of them said they still maintained strong relationships with the one employee who had been so significant for them (even after they had re-established a relationship with their birth parents). They

described that these key people had called on them to see how they were doing and were people they could call on whenever necessary.

Previous studies have acknowledged that young adults prefer to and profit from becoming independent through a process of *interdependence* (Propp et al., 2003; Storø, 2018). Social workers for young people who are leaving care, however, often view *independence* as an important goal, and independence is often thought of as being mutually exclusive from interdependence (Storø, 2018). The people interviewed for this study wanted to be self-sufficient and independent, but they also underlined the significance of interdependence, thus highlighting the importance of recognising and supporting relational identities. My analysis has indicated that the participants' acknowledgement of their interdependence was related to having had experiences with adults taking them seriously and being trustworthy. Mona (24, student who was formerly in residential care) described several people in the system who had helped her. Her account of the person who was responsible for following up her after-care arrangement exemplifies the relationality of independence and agency in being able to effect changes in one's life: 'She's helped me to be independent, taught me how to live on my own, and how to handle things in daily life'. Mona had also experienced receiving personalised and emotional support from her case worker who 'really cared about me and listened to what I had to say and what my needs were'. Moreover, she still had regular contact and celebrated every Christmas with one of the employers at the last residential unit where she lived.

For young people with care experiences, asking for help and assistance seems to be an active choice they must make, where youth with more stable family situations may be able to take such things for granted (see Boddy et al., 2019). Thus, a definition of agency must incorporate an understanding of identity that involves recognising the need for others' support and asking for help and assistance. As Mona explained, 'It's essential to be good at asking for help. You must admit that if you can't make it by yourself, you must ask for help and understand that doing so isn't embarrassing'. Mona's observations resonate with research by Iglehart (1994), who reported that young people with care experience felt that asking for help was a sign of responsibility, while at the same time finding it difficult to obtain such help after leaving care from the persons in the system with whom they previously had a relationship (see also Munford & Sanders, 2016; Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Mona's agency in recognising her need for others' support may be interpreted as a result of recognising her interdependence, which in turn seems strongly related to her experiences with people who she felt really cared for her and that she trusted.

Most of our informants told stories about how they had asked for help and assistance, something that they said aided their pursuit of their goals. What they had in common was the experience of adults in the system that cared about their well-being as well as providing practical help and guidance, both when in and after leaving care. Mohammad (26 years old), who had lived in the same residential unit from he was 16 until he was 20 years old exemplified how interdependence is mutually shaped through interaction and may evoke the capability of sensible response to others. According to him, he used to be very shy and hesitant about asking people for help but 'I have got good training at doing that [asking for help] at the residential unit'. During his stay he said the staff always payed interest and involved in the youth's everyday life trying to motivate their schoolwork, showed concern when they struggled and engaged in conversations regarding their future. Mohammad said he still called the unit when he needed help. For example, when he experienced that his mental health interfered with his educational progress, he asked the employees at the residential home to help him work out a plan. With their help he was able to finish his education as a social worker. However, he also called them to inform about his progress, for instance when he finished his university degree. According to Mohammad 'they [staff] are so proud when we do well, so involving them is the least we can do'.

The findings indicate that young people's willingness to engage others in their challenges is a result of their interactional experiences with social workers that goes beyond the limits of their remit. Underlining the relational aspects of agency (Burkitt, 2016), although the situation might go beyond such factors. Experiences such as these help young people to understand that they can influence their environment and activate support to effect changes in their own lives, and hence to understand themselves as being able to overcome obstacles. Furthermore, such experiences confirm their agentic interdependence.

Reinterpretation of the past as a source of renewed agency

The young people in the study described the ways in which relational experiences had influenced their hopes for themselves and their views of their prospects. Beyond these connections, also our longitudinal data illustrate the *temporality* of their agency, through changes in their accounts between the first and second interviews. The young adults' views of their prospects (and thus their agency) were informed by their past experiences. But what was observable in some of the interviews (conducted at different times) was how their social engagement had changed, which had consequences for their views of their past, present and future. Ivy's interviews provide an example of the ways in which understandings of agency shift over time.

Ivy was 21 years old during the first interview, and 23 when we interviewed her again. At the time of the first interview, Ivy had just finished her first year of study to become a social worker. She explained during this interview that she had moved back and forth between her divorced parents and foster homes and had lived in several residential units during her teenage years. Although she had had diverse experiences with social workers, she said she had regularly met some who engaged with her in a positive manner. They corrected her conduct in a respectful way and emphasised that 'if you want to, and don't give up, you'll make it'. She believed that these encounters had helped in creating a sense of belief in her own capacity. As she said, 'I don't think I would've gained this insight or developed into the individual I am today if it hadn't been for the good work they did'. Ivy said that her encounters with people who had expressed belief in her abilities had also given her the confidence that she could shape her own biography. She managed to go to university and was getting good grades, had got a part time job and she had also established new friendships.

But Ivy also expressed a sense of the future as being fragile or precarious. When asked where she thought she would be in 10 years' time, she replied:

I don't know.... I'm afraid. It's like I've become more and more positive—at least I try to have a more positive view of life—but inside my head things go to hell.... I think I'll always be discontented and worried, or when things are going okay, I'll always worry that things will soon turn out bad.

Although she understood herself as agentic and able to achieve things from positive encounters, she lacked confidence in having a stable and predictable future. Thus, she did seem to have a reduced capacity to contextualise her present achievements into her future projects. According to Arnett (2000, 2006) the transition from youth to adulthood in general is characterised by instability (although more so for people who have been in care), possibilities and identity exploration, and is not always experienced as enjoyable (Arnett, 2006). Despite such characteristic, and in contrast to Ivy, most 18–24-year olds have an optimistic view of their future, thinking that they will get where they want in life (Arnett, 2000 p. 474). Thus, I would argue that Ivy's outlook could have been related to her weakened sense of agency due to her difficult childhood experiences and lack of involvement in decisions that were important to her.

At the time of the second interview, Ivy was 23 years old and had started her third year at university. This time, she reflected differently on her past, for instance by stating:

Earlier I thought the whole system was brain-damaged, and that they [social workers] were idiots. But now—I don't know if it's because of my education or if I've become smarter or if it's because I've become older—I have another perspective on things. So instead of blaming others or the system, I see that I could've done things differently; I could've done them the way I was supposed to.

In relation to her educational experiences, she said:

I think I see things in a more correct perspective, and I believe it's because I take social work [classes] and learn how one should think and how to see the whole context. If I hadn't, I don't think I would be where I am today. I'd blame others if something went wrong, so I'm glad I started this education—that I have some new perspectives in my head.

According to Ivy, interacting with new ideas through her education had changed her perspectives, had made her see her past in a new light, and helped her reconceptualise her past actions. Such changes may be related to what Arnett (2000) describes as a change in worldview due to new insight gained through education. Ivy's statements indicate a process from seeing herself as a victim to reaching an understanding that she must take responsibility for her own actions. This new capacity to contextualise her experiences also seems to have helped her develop a stronger sense of agency and self-confidence.

Making difficult childhood experiences a source of agency

Most of the young adults in this study emphasised how transforming their childhood experiences into something meaningful had been important for their choices of education, work and leisure-time activities. Choosing an education and line of work where they could help others was common (they included health workers, nurses, psychologists, teachers and personal assistants); in addition, four were (or were studying to become) social workers, and two worked in residential care. For example, Sara (a 26-year-old social worker), said, 'I wanted to use my experiences for something constructive, to be a resource to others—that's my driving force'.

Ten participants were also involved with associations that worked to improve the system for child-welfare clients. The foremost reason they provided for this voluntary work was to meet others with similar stories and to be able to speak freely about their experiences without being stigmatised. Many also highlighted that the work enabled them to process their own experiences. As one said, 'It's like therapy, just in a totally different way'. They also described that the work allowed them to transform their difficult childhood experiences into something meaningful and positive; the work provided a feeling of being agentic through the opportunity to change the system. As Anita (26 years old) said when asked why she had chosen to work for a voluntary organisation concerned with improving child welfare in Norway:

I like working with people, and particularly with child-welfare clients, because we understand and tolerate each other in a different way than those who haven't had the kinds of challenges that we've had. I also think it's nice that I can use my experiences to provide advice [on the system] so that others can avoid the unpleasant experiences I've had. Such work also makes my experiences feel less meaningless.

Finding meaning in past experiences may also help people who have faced adversity to set long-term goals by scaffolding a sense of identity that will then enable motivations and agentic capacity. John (20 years old), who worked for a voluntary organisation and at a residential unit, explained:

To do something that's more important than I am, as well as feeling that I have a say in things that are important to me, is an important driving force. I also see that it's important for my own future, and together these things give me strength.

These accounts illustrate how this social engagement involves processes informed by the past, in a way that gives meaning to the present and a capacity to orient towards the future. The social engagement also underlines the participants interdependency.

DISCUSSION

This paper has shown how taking a relational approach to agency can provide insight into which factors enable young people with a care background to develop an agentic capacity and a positive view of themselves and their prospects. The young people demonstrated their agency in their efforts to make changes in their own lives by asking people to help them solve relational issues or more practical tasks; they also provided narrative accounts of how they made choices related to education, work and friendships. These interviews have illustrated how the young study participants were actively involved in constructing their own lives (James & Prout, 2003); they were not passive subjects of social structures and processes. Whether these actions that emerged from 'being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]) were consciously reflexive or not varied, and their actions are difficult to separate because the analyses are based on retrospective narratives. Narrating one's life story involves telling about the past, present and imagined future in a way that creates a certain degree of unity and purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013). But narratives are not necessarily consistent or static over time (Andrews et al., 2009). What has become evident through the longitudinal approach used in this study, as exemplified in Ivy's case, is that the participants' narratives shifted over time. The temporality of their experiences appears in their re-interpretation of past experiences, in how they gained new insights and could look back from new perspectives. The main point is that their stories provided accounts of agency and, more importantly, how their agency was relationally connected to both personal and impersonal networks of relations and interdependencies (Burkitt, 2016).

The key supportive figures in young people's lives do not operate alone in a landscape but rather within a structural context. The present research has illuminated the distinctive ways in which young people who have been in care are embedded in social relations that can lead to a lack of control and constrained and contingent agency (see also Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018; Munford & Sanders, 2016). However, in accordance with Munford and Sanders (2016) the research also illustrates how systems shape possibilities for agency. The analysis shows that while young people are agentic, their agency is interactionally shaped and depends on the responses they receive from others. Receiving sensitive and timely responses from supportive social relations builds understandings and expectations of agency and enables young people to construct meaning and make sense of their pasts. In turn, these experiences help them to build a positive view of themselves in the present and to envision a positive future.

In accordance with findings from other studies, this scenario underlines the importance of the interactional responses that these young people receive from social workers (caseworkers, residential-care workers) or others with everyday responsibilities, such as foster parents, residential-care

workers or teachers (Brady & Gilligan, 2020; Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Adults in these key professional roles can encourage and cultivate positive agentic capacities by their responses and by showing their commitment to these young people, who have a strong need for emotional and practical support, both when in care but also after formally leaving care (e.g. Paulsen & Berg, 2016). The findings also indicate that young people's identification as being interdependent rests on interactional experiences with people who are willing to help (see also Paulsen & Thomas, 2018), which implies that it is crucial for young people to be encouraged to seek help and to receive positive responses when they do. The analysis shows that receiving positive responses to help-seeking is crucial in recognising oneself as an interactant—a possessor of capacities that can only be practised in joint action.

In common with other young people who have been involved with CWS, the interviewees in this study had experienced significant adversity during childhood, including in their experiences with their parents. Their accounts revealed how these experiences could shape a sense of security or insecurity in relation to who they were and their future aspirations. In general, for young people who have lived away from home in public care, having knowledge and understanding of their background and personal history has been linked to positive identity formation (Stein, 2005). As illustrated in the present study, however, such knowledge can also be linked to positive agentic capacity, particularly if young people are able to reframe their personal history, because, as Boddy (2019) has shown, young people's biological families are likely to continue to be a dynamic and relational factor in their understanding of their past, present and future.

Having informal relationships such as peer support in the form of friends, but also more formalised support in the form of participation from peers in voluntary organisations, was found to be psychologically helpful. Such participation helped the study participants to sort out their experiences but also to make their experiences meaningful. In line with Munn-Giddings and Borkman (2018) study of people who suffer severe health issues, the present study has shown that such participation had a transformative and empowering effect. By gaining awareness of others' experiential perspectives, young people from a care background receive support to help them evolve from seeing themselves as victims—where they blame others for their problems, which could hamper their agentic capacity—to seeing themselves as people who can make a difference through actions that can help change the system.

The study's findings show the importance of perspectives that include temporality and a process-oriented approach to agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). A banal but still significant point to make is that identity and agentic motivations, choices and goals are temporally embedded processes that are intertwined and mutually reinforcing and can have a transformative effect. Experiencing mastery leads to increased self-confidence, which in turn leads to a belief that one can master new accomplishments and challenges. And, as Hitlin and Elder Jr (2007) have pointed out, people who perceive that they have more agency will be more likely to persevere in the face of problems, either within situations or in encountering obstacles that represent structural impediments.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights the importance of relational experiences for agency and broadens the understanding of how care experienced youth may enhance their life opportunities. Focussing on young people who are or have been in care as interdependent interactants underlines the important and critical role that other people and in particular representatives of the child-welfare system (CWS) have for these young people's ability to execute agency, make good choices and develop a belief in their own capacity. Approaching agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement allows for seeing how the foundations for agency are not static but change over time as young people encounter new interactional experiences. The ability for care experienced people to continuously develop their

agentic capacity are interdependent and rest on mutual interaction with people they feel that they can trust and who continue to be there for them.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

There is no potential conflict of interest according to the authors knowledge.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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