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"Making a tiny impact?" Listening to workers talk about their role in the transitions to adulthood of young people housed by the state.

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature: ....

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'MAKING A TINY IMPACT?' LISTENING TO WORKERS TALK ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN THE TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD OF YOUNG PEOPLE HOUSED BY THE STATE.

Summary

This is a small scale, qualitative research study, based on focus group and interview data from eight participants across two workplaces. The participants are workers involved in supporting those young people who are unable to live with their families during their transition to adulthood: they are drawn from two services within the same local authority, leaving care and a specialist adolescent support service which provides housing and support for homeless 16 and 17 year olds. A review of the literature in this field identifies a gap in the research, with few studies focussed on the voices of workers engaged in this specific area of work.

I have used three analytical frameworks (thematic, narrative and voice-centred relational) to explore the data from different perspectives. Positioning the data in this three-dimensional framework has enabled me to produce an in-depth analysis, considering more than simply the content of participants' responses. My findings are presented as a reflexive account, exploring how the respondents talk about their work.

The data suggests that the talk falls into two broad areas: workers positioning themselves within a framework of organisation(s) and workers positioning themselves in relation to individual young people.

A picture emerges from the data of two quite different workplaces. The relative structure and clarity of the leaving care personal adviser's job role appears to unite this group of workers around a more coherent script for talking about the work they do. In contrast, the workers from the specialist adolescent service openly acknowledge that there are differences of approach within their organisation, and appear to lack a shared way of articulating their role. The way in which the workers position themselves within the organisation also differs between the two groups: the leaving care workers talk passionately about the division between 'us' (workers) and 'them'

(management). The specialist adolescent workers barely mention their managers, and there is little talk of a group identity (an 'us').

These workers talk about the relationship they develop with individual young people as an intervention in itself. This relationship is conceptualised in various ways, with the clearest construct being parent-child. There appears to be a difference between the two organisations in the way in which this parent role is enacted: leaving care workers talk of an organisational corporate parenting responsibility, whilst workers from the specialist adolescent service talk more freely of thinking and acting as a good parent. In relation to their direct 1:1 work, the majority of participants describe using conversation to facilitate the development of problem solving skills, encouraging reflective thinking through the process of co-creating narrative. These emotional and cognitive skills are talked about as more valuable than specific practical independent living skills.

The data suggests that emotional labour is acknowledged and managed very differently in these two workplaces. The leaving care group found it difficult to talk about the emotional aspects of their role, and this plays out in different ways in the interviews. Some participants describe struggling to manage the emotional impact of their work, otherwise struggle to articulate the emotional content of the work. As a group, they retreat from talk of emotional involvement with young people, distancing themselves by stating that it is beyond what is possible within their role. In contrast, the workers from the specialist adolescent service talk more comfortably about their emotional responses to the work: they appear to feel safer using themselves in their work, and seem better able to contain this emotional labour within the overall professional boundaries of their role.

Workers talk of 'making a tiny impact' - acknowledging the potential for their support to make a positive difference in young people's lives, whilst also highlighting the limitations of their role.

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Chapter One: Introduction

OVERVIEW

The opening chapter of this thesis describes the backdrop to the study. The first section explores how my professional experiences underpin my research interests. I have set out my motivations for embarking on the doctorate six years ago: for me, this study genuinely has been 'passionate research about passions' (Cooper 2009, p.432).

Two substantive pieces of work have already been submitted during the course of this doctorate and in the second section I have reflected on my learning from these. The experience of completing a small-scale exploratory study has had a significant impact on my understanding of the ways in which an abstract research question translates into conversations with real people. The detailed and systematic work involved in producing a critical analytical review of the literature in my research field has also been an essential building block in the overall process of completing this wider study.

The third section considers the research question. I have explored the ways in which the focus of the research has shifted during the course of the study. The development of a research question has been an ongoing process throughout the project, influenced by changes in my circumstances and in my thinking. The final research question is articulated, along with the sub-questions which frame the scope of the study.

Finally, in the fourth section I have set out an overview of the whole thesis. I have outlined the key points from each stage of the study to give an overall picture of the context, the process and the findings of this research.

1.1 Background to the study

Since qualifying as a social worker in 2003, I have worked with young people who are making the transition to adulthood whilst living in accommodation provided by local authorities, because they are unable to live with their families. This study reflects my professional interest and experience in this area of practice. I made the decision to embark on a professional doctorate six years ago. By this point, I had been working with young people in their late teenage and early adult years for long enough to be aware that, beyond the statutory requirements, there was little clarity or consistency about what workers actually did. Fundamentally, my motivation for pursuing academic study was (and still is) to understand frontline practice better, in order to do it better. Initially my aims were modest: I wanted to develop my own understanding in order to improve my own practice. However, as my professional role has shifted to include supervisory, consultancy and practice educating responsibilities, so my aims have broadened to encompass supporting the learning and development of other practitioners.

For much of my career, I have worked with young people during their transition out of the statutory care system. The poor outcomes for this group are well documented: they are over-represented in official statistics relating to any number of socially excluded and disadvantaged groups. Working within a system which consistently produces such negative outcomes raises questions about the role and usefulness of support services in these young people's lives. There is a wide range of research demonstrating and describing these poor outcomes, but relatively little which seeks to ask questions about what needs to change in practice. Much has been written about the need for support to be provided whilst young people are in care, preparing them for the challenges they will face when they leave and maximising their chances of making a positive transition into their adult life. Leaving care work has been subject to increasingly prescriptive legislative guidance in an attempt to improve the life chances for this disadvantaged and vulnerable group of young people.

Initially my research focus was the work being done to support young people in care and care leavers. However, a change in my professional role during the course of the

doctorate has led to a widening of my field of interest. Three years ago I moved from leaving care work into a consultant social worker post within a specialist service which provides support to young people across a range of remits: I have specific responsibilities for Child in Need services, including housing and support for homeless 16-17 year olds and ongoing support for 18-19 year olds who were previously homeless. My experience of working with these young people suggests that the differences between them and their care-experienced peers are not clear cut, with both groups likely to have had difficult and disrupted childhood experiences. For me, these similarities justify including within my area of research the work done with both homeless and care-experienced young people.

Overall, my motivation for undertaking this research can be summed up by my response to this statement, taken from the introduction to a recent review of the housing and support being provided to vulnerable young people:

> 16 and 17 year olds who cannot live at home with their families are very vulnerable and need a great deal of support and care if they are going to be able to enter adult life positively (Crellin and Pona 2015, p.4).

For more than 13 years I have worked in a range of organisations responsible for providing 'support and care' to this group of young people. I hope that this study is able to contribute to our understanding of what this support and care looks like from the point of view of those delivering it.

1.2 Learning from the early stages of the doctorate

INITIAL EXPLORATORY STUDY

In the early stages of this doctorate, I completed a very small scale exploratory research study, which has ended up becoming almost a pilot project. The research question was "What do leaving care workers think are the main purposes of their role?" Interview data from three participants was analysed thematically. The findings suggested that there were four broad aspects to the role:

> Responding to individual young people.
> Bridging the gap between young people and the rest of society.
> Being part of the wider social work system.
> Having a role within a network of services.

The three interviewees knitted these four dimensions together in very different ways, to construct their version of the professional role. This was a very simple, small project, as useful for the experience of carrying out the research as it was for its findings. It provided the opportunity for me to discover that my interest is in depth, rather than breadth of study: it was the nuances of the differences and the details of the respondents' accounts which interested me, rather than broader, more generaliseable themes. The findings of this study were useful in guiding my thinking about the direction in which to take my research. It helped me to begin the process of articulating my research interest more clearly, as its broad findings suggested several possible aspects which could be explored in more detail.

The experience of completing this pilot project was instrumental in the thinking underpinning the methodology of the current study, especially in relation to decisions about analytical frameworks. I was struck as much by the ways in which respondents talked about their practice, as by the content of what they said. In particular, the process of analysing the data began to uncover questions about the ways in which workers were positioning themselves and their role within complex frameworks. One quote in particular has stayed with me throughout the process: *"You're walking that interface all the time – on frontlines all over the place." (Interviewee One, pilot project).* The thematic approaches used to analyse the data from this project did not enable me to interpret these aspects fully, but this feeling that there was something

more to be explored was a useful indicator that I needed to consider other ways of analysing and making sense of the data in the subsequent study.

CRITICAL ANALYTICAL STUDY

Picking up on one aspect of the findings of this first study, I became interested in the concept of 'preparation for independence' or 'preparation for adulthood'. This was the focus of my Critical Analytical Study (CAS), a detailed and critical review of the literature (the second substantive piece of work undertaken in the course of this doctorate). In this study I aimed to explore how the concept of 'preparation for independent adult life' is constructed in the context of social work practice with young people as they leave the care system. The CAS considered material in relation to policy context, evaluation of services, outcomes for care leavers, young people's experiences and the views of workers. This review suggested that the legislation relating to leaving care services is based on historical evidence that care leavers have poorer life chances than their peers. Current thinking appears to be that if young people are 'ready' to leave care then this will lead to better outcomes in their adult lives. Taken in its context of wider policies relating to young people, the legislation adds to a model of successful independent adulthood as one which includes economic participation through paid employment.

There has been very limited research specifically exploring how this mandate to prepare young people for independent adult life is operationalised: through the course of this review it was difficult to gain an insight into how it is translated into practice. General research in the field of leaving care work tends to focus on outcomes for young people, rather than the process and experience of workers' practice. Evaluation studies are problematic, due to the difficulties of defining interventions, and grey literature evaluates services in relation to policy or agency agendas. Studies comparing young people who have received leaving care services with those who have not, do not produce clear findings which could inform our understanding of preparation for independence as a construct. From the limited research base, it appears that housing, accommodation, health and education are all accepted to be

important in establishing a positive independent adult life. Services tend to construct young people as the sum of their outcomes, rather than considering individual transitions to adulthood.

This distinction is reflected in young people's accounts of their experiences of leaving the care system. There are a range of qualitative studies exploring preparation for independent adult life from the perspective of young people. The findings from these studies imply that young people prioritise emotional and psychological (rather than practical) aspects of the transition. These studies suggest that young people's understanding of what they need in the process of preparing for independent adult life differs from the priorities which underpin policies and services.

There is some qualitative research evidence exploring workers' accounts of their practice. Overall these studies suggest that workers perceive their role as concerned with the practical aspects of young people's preparation for independent adult life, apparently at the expense of emotional aspects of the transition. Leaving care work is understood as the co-ordination of services, with the aim of improving outcomes for young people in defined areas of their lives (housing, education etc.). The review found no research exploring professional motivation or values in this specific area of social work, and therefore no evidence to draw from in considering the extent to which this perception of the role fits with workers' underlying professional identities. Considering the wider research in this area, studies have been completed with student social workers which suggest an increasingly individualised view of social issues, and a correspondingly individualistic view of the role of social work. In comparison with historical values of social work and also qualitative studies exploring the views of experienced practitioners, this suggests a shift in underlying professional values. If these changing values are representative of leaving care workers, then it may be that there is a tension between the ways in which 'independent adult life' is understood by workers and the young people they support. I identified this tension as the intended focus of my research study.

1.3 The development of the research question

The initial proposal for this study was to explore how leaving care workers understand the concept of 'independent adult life'. This was the broad research question which underpinned the study design and the first round of fieldwork. The plan for the project was to gather data via focus groups and interviews with five leaving care workers in each of two local authorities. However, having completed a focus group and individual interviews in the first leaving care team, progress stalled and what followed was a long period of unsuccessful attempts to re-engage with the research. The first barrier was a practical one: it proved to be impossible to gain access to the second local authority I had identified as a possible site for the second round of fieldwork. By this stage I had already begun to suspect that I was more interested in exploring the topic in more depth, rather than considering a wider breadth of data. This combination of factors led to a decision to change the design of the study, such that, instead of interviewing a second group of participants, I would conduct follow-up interviews with the existing participants to discuss and reflect on my initial analysis. However, this decision served only to create a different block and a change of professional role compounded the feeling that the project had lost its way. I was unable to get past the first hurdle of knowing what it was I wanted to know and so the project entered another dormant phase.

Eventually it became clear that a significant factor in the struggle to progress with the study was the widening gap between my research question and my professional role. As discussed above, by this point I was no longer working with young people in and leaving the care system. Changes to leaving care services mean that it is highly unlikely I will return to a role in this area of social work. I had embarked on the professional doctorate with the explicit intention of exploring and understanding my direct practice with young people: I needed to return to this aspiration in order to re-engage with the research. Having reached this understanding, I was able to shift the perspective of the research to include the work being done by the service within which I was now working, which is responsible for supporting homeless 16-17 year olds. I reverted to the original study design, and repeated the fieldwork (focus group discussion followed by individual interviews) with four workers from my own organisation.

Having redefined the subject of the research and gathered the data, the process of analysis was also a key stage in articulating a coherent research question. Decisions about which approaches to use in my analysis were guided by a determination to do more than simply categorise the respondents' words. The analytical approach which has emerged is based on elements of three models, which combine to create a framework within which I have located and made sense of the data. This framework highlights positional and relational dimensions of the data, producing a reflexive interpretation which is consistent with the overall methodology of the study.

Reflecting on the evolution of this project, it is clear that the focus of my research has changed over time, influenced by circumstances as well as by developments in my thinking. The research question has become broader whilst also narrowing its focus: the study is no longer restricted to leaving care work or to the specific concept of 'independent adult life', but the focus has tightened to **how** workers talk about their role.

Thus the overall research question for this study is:
How do workers talk about their role in the transitions to adulthood of those young people who are unable to live with their families?

Within this, I have considered:
What are the similarities and differences in the ways in which workers make sense of their role in the process of these young people achieving 'independence'?

Are workers' conceptualisations of their role linked to the organisational and legislative context in which the work is done?

Do workers experience a tension between their own understandings of independence and those of young people, or those of the organisation within which they work?

1.4 Overview of the thesis

Chapter Two reviews the legislative, theoretical and research literature relating to the research question. The statutory framework is explained in relation to young people housed by local authorities, both within and outside of the care system. The research evidence suggests that various concepts of independence, autonomy and self-reliance have become tangled up in our understanding of what it means to be an adult, and I have explored this in the context of the dominant social discourses of individual choice and responsibility. Studies focussing on young people's experiences highlight the central importance of emotional support, which services seem ill-equipped to provide. The final section of this chapter considers what is known about the services being provided to support vulnerable young people through their transitions to adulthood. A large proportion of the research in this field are studies which evaluate the outcomes for young people. These provide useful insights as to the aspects of young people's lives which are thought to be important and worth measuring, as well as an overall picture of the effectiveness of support services. However, they generally contain little detail of the actual work being done. The literature review identifies a gap in the research in relation to detailed exploration of workers' experiences of supporting vulnerable young people in the current social context.

Chapter Three sets out the design of the study and the methodological framework on which it is based. I have outlined the development of my thinking about the type of knowledge I wanted from the study, to show how Alvesson's approach of 'reflexive pragmatism' is consistent with my aims (Alvesson 2003). The research instruments and practical arrangements for gathering the data are discussed, along with information about the participants and their workplaces. I have used elements of three analytical approaches to analyse the data: these three approaches are explained, as is the rationale for combining them in this way. Finally I have reflected on the different dimensions of the interaction between the researcher and the participants.

My analysis of the data suggests that the respondents talk about their work from two perspectives: Chapters Four and Five explore the findings in relation to these two distinct ways of making sense of the role.

Chapter Four considers how the participants position themselves in relation to the organisations and systems within which they work. Factors which constrain and restrict the work are discussed, with time emerging as a key concept on several levels. Workers' time is a scarce resource, but also the passing of time is hugely significant in services where eligibility is determined by age. These time constraints create a sense of urgency in the work, with participants describing a feeling of 'moving young people on'. This then raises questions about the ways in which workers are making sense of what independence or adulthood will look like for their young people. Finally, I have explored the participants' talk of unity and difference, to consider how the participants position themselves within their own organisations.

Chapter Five reflects on the ways in which participants talk about their role in relation to the individual young people with whom they work. As a broad starting point I have used a narrative analytical approach to explore the stories told about the work. Participants cast themselves in various roles in these stories, with a key theme being their role as an educator or role model for young people. Much of the work described by the participants is done within the individual relationship between worker and young person, and I have explored the ways in which workers make sense of and manage these emotional dimensions of their role.

Chapter Six considers the study as a whole. In this final chapter I have reflected on the process and experience of carrying out this research, and set out the significant themes emerging from the findings. Locating my analysis of the data within the wider context of the literature, I have explored how the voices of these participants fit into the overall picture of what is known about the support being provided to vulnerable young people during their transition to adulthood. Findings which are particularly useful or relevant to practice are discussed. The study design is critically evaluated to consider the overall strengths and weaknesses of the project. The process of analysing the data and synthesising the findings with the broader perspective has raised some

questions which suggest possible directions for future research. To conclude, I have considered the extent to which the study has achieved its aims and set out the key aspects of what I believe to be my contribution to the overall knowledge in this field.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

OVERVIEW

In this chapter I have reviewed the legislative, research and theoretical literature relating to my research question. My search for relevant literature has been revisited, refined and expanded during the course of the project, in line with the development and refocussing of the research questions (described in Chapter One). Initially the search was centred on care leavers and therefore I restricted the time boundaries of my search to the period from 2002 (post implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000). As the scope of the project extended to include homeless 16-17 year olds, my literature search also had to be extended: for the purposes of consistency and comparability I maintained the date range (post 2002) but the search terms had to be more variable and creative in order to capture relevant literature. Overall what has emerged is not a systematic literature review, but rather a map of the context within which this research was undertaken. The results have been shaped by decisions taken about relevance, which reflect my areas of particular interest.

The first section maps out the current landscape in which young people make the transition to adulthood. Firstly I have outlined the key aspects of social care legislation which set out the mandate for services supporting young people. I then move on to consider the wider context, the social discourses around independence and adulthood, and how these are operationalised in policy decisions.

The second section explores the theoretical and research knowledge base underpinning our understanding of young people's experiences of the transition from childhood to adulthood. The importance of consistent caring relationships is considered. Findings from studies relating to young people's often complex and contradictory constructions of independence and adulthood are discussed.

The final section of this chapter sets out what is known about practice in this area of work. There are relatively few research studies which describe or evaluate the direct work being done, but some insight can be gained from studies which track outcomes for young people. I have considered the findings of studies which explore the work

from the perspective of workers, alongside theoretical writing relating to work which requires the use of emotions and relationships.

2.1 The social context in which vulnerable young people are making the transition to adulthood

SOCIAL CARE LEGISLATION

For those young people who are (or have been) in local authority care, as in most areas of social work with children and families, the statutory framework is underpinned by the Children Act (1989). The first major piece of legislation specific to this area of work was the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000), which came into force in October 2001. The Act expanded on the provisions for care leavers set out in the Children Act (1989), and aimed to standardise the services for these young people. It was a response to a mounting body of evidence demonstrating the poor life chances of care-experienced young people in comparison to their peers. The Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000) set out local authorities' duties to support their care leavers and transferred responsibility for supporting them from other mainstream agencies (specifically council housing departments and the Department of Work and Pensions) until they are 18 years old. The Act explicitly aimed to delay discharge from care, and to improve planning and preparation. This legislation created the specific role of Leaving Care Personal Adviser, and also the Pathway Plan as the tool for the assessment of need and means of planning a structured route to independence.

The government continued to review support for care leavers, as part of the general overhaul of children's social care services. The Care Matters reports produced during 2006 and 2007, set out recommendations which were incorporated into the Children and Young People Act (2008). The provisions of this Act were brought into force via the Care Leavers (England) Regulations (2010), which became mandatory in 2011. The overriding aim of this guidance, stated at the outset, is:

> To make sure that care leavers are provided with comprehensive personal support so that they achieve their potential as they make their transition to adulthood. (p.2)

The main themes of these regulations are that young people should always have a say in decisions being made about plans for them, and that they should not leave care before they are 'ready'. This is stated repeatedly through the guidance, but the concept of 'ready' remains undefined. There is no clear explication of how this

guidance is constructing what it means to be 'prepared for independent adult life'. Much of the guidance is taken up with setting out the duties of local authorities and the concomitant entitlements of care leavers. Where preparation for adult life is mentioned, it is presented as an uncontested concept and the process is not explored.

For those young people who are housed by the local authority without being legally taken into its care, the statutory legislation is less prescriptive. The support to which they are entitled falls within the general provisions for children 'in need' (section 17 of the Children Act 1989) which merely mandates the local authority to provide such services as the young person needs to ensure that they achieve and maintain a reasonable standard of health and development. Where this support includes accommodation, 16 and 17 year olds are also subject to wider housing legislation (specifically the Housing Act 1996) which sets out the duties of local councils in relation to homelessness. The way in which the two sets of responsibilities are operationalised varies considerably between different local authorities, with a range of local arrangements in place to assess and support young people who present as homeless between the ages of 16 and 18. These arrangements are scrutinised in a recent review carried out by the Children's Society (Crellin and Pona 2015). The authors are clear that they believe the law requires children's services to offer looked after child status to every 16 and 17 year old assessed to be homeless. However, their research demonstrates that this is not happening routinely and suggests that more than 20% of 16-17 year olds housed by local authorities are not looked after children.

CURRENT SOCIAL DISCOURSES OF 'INDEPENDENT ADULT LIFE'

The ways in which wider society constructs what it means to be an independent adult will also have a significant impact on young people's transitions to that status. The multiple meanings and interpretations of 'independence' are explored in a qualitative study completed by Goodkind et al (2011). (This study was completed in a US context, but the findings provide some insight which I believe can be transferred to a UK context). Underpinning the study is the view that modern Western society's definition

of what it means to be an adult is constructed within an individualist frame of reference:

> Adulthood is equated with independence, particularly financial, but also...making independent decisions and taking responsibility for one's actions and their consequences.   (Goodkind et al 2011, p. 1040)

The study is based on the hypothesis that young people leaving care extend these ideals of independence as 'being able to take care of myself' to include emotional self reliance. Interviews and focus groups were based around three questions: Why do many young people choose to leave the system at 18? How do they understand the transition to adulthood? What are the successes and challenges associated with the transition? The study's findings demonstrated that young people were keen to leave the care system in order to achieve more autonomy in their lives. Reflecting on the difficulties of defining their identities during the transition, young people described feeling as if they were no longer children, but were not yet fully adult. Participants also espoused a strong aversion to seeking help or admitting that they could not do everything for themselves:

> Many youth view relationships as their greatest challenge, yet fail to recognize how their socially mandated attempts to be independent, resulting from their internalization of the societal equation of adulthood with independence, often impede them in this area.   (Goodkind et al 2011, p. 1046)

The researchers suggest that their findings indicate a need to uncouple our understandings of adulthood and independence, such that being an adult does not have to mean being self reliant. They also argue that supportive relationships are more important than the specific life skills conventionally used as a measure of 'independence'. (This theme is picked up later in this chapter, in relation to young people's experiences of their transition to adulthood).

Goodkind et al also argue that it would be beneficial for the care system to uncouple autonomy from independence, such that young people are enabled to make (or at least have a voice in) decisions which affect them, without this being the catalyst for the withdrawal of help. Maintaining a false dichotomy between dependent-child and independent-adult creates a cliff edge at the point when young people leave care, and forces an unnecessarily 'all or nothing' situation. Allowing children and young people

more self-determination whilst they are in the care system would allow them to assume control of their lives in a gradual way (Goodkind et al 2011).

Similar recommendations emerge from research carried out in the Netherlands, in which homeless young people took on the role of peer researchers. Interviews with young people and subsequent discussions with workers highlighted the need for services to be set up in such a way as to allow young people to participate actively and routinely in decisions about their care. The findings explored young people's feelings of ambivalence about support services: on one hand they identified a need for help in many areas of their lives, but on the other they expressed a strong desire for independence and were very resistant to services interfering in their lives. De Winter suggests that young people need practice to develop the decision-making and negotiation skills they will need as adults, and that this practice needs to be woven into their everyday life as it is for their peers (de Winter & Noom 2003).

This confusion between concepts of independence, self-reliance and autonomy is also hinted at in the research of Dixon et al (2006). In this large scale longitudinal study, more than 80% of the young people reported feeling 'very' or 'quite' well prepared to leave care, but there was no correlation between this and the level of support or information young people reported having received. There was also no correlation with leaving care workers' reports of the level of support that had been provided. Although the design of this study did not allow the researchers to explore this apparent anomaly further, they speculate that the reason may lie in the complex meanings attached to the concept of being 'ready to leave care'. It is similarly difficult to untangle the meaning of the findings of a longitudinal American study which explored care leavers' perceptions of their unmet needs (Katz and Courtney 2015). This study found that young people who stayed in care for longer (post 18) reported higher levels of unmet need. The researchers suggest that one reason for this could be that young people who feel 'ready' will leave care earlier, meaning that those who stay on in care are necessarily those who don't feel ready, i.e. those who perceive themselves still to have unmet needs (Katz and Courtney 2015).

These findings highlight the need to distinguish between a desire for more independence or control, and an opinion that one has the necessary skills and knowledge to manage independent adult life – either of which could be understood as a 'readiness to leave care'. These different meanings are acknowledged retrospectively by the young people in Dixon's study (as they were similarly by the young people participating in the research of both Goodkind et al (2011) and Samuels and Pryce (2008). Dixon et al's study also found (again similarly to the US studies) that for those young people who chose to leave the care system before the statutory endpoint, a desire for independence was a strongly driving motivation (Dixon et al 2006, pp. 32-38).

Taken together, the findings of this group of studies suggest that there is a dangerous conflation of the concepts of independence and self-reliance with adulthood and autonomy. Young people are absorbing the message that they must eschew help and support (particularly emotional support) in order to consider themselves (and to be considered by society) as adults – and crucially, in order to gain the capital to have a say in decisions affecting their lives.

This individualised perspective is reflected in the wider debates in our neo-liberal society, where 'everything is presented as a possibility' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, p. 3). Individuals are held to be responsible for their own life course, making choices in a world in which 'everything that used to be natural (or traditional) now has in some sense to be chosen or decided about' (Giddens 1994, pp. 90-91, cited in Ferguson 2003, p.701). Ferguson embraces this concept of 'life politics' for social work, arguing that it represents a more realistic framework for practice in modern society than more traditional emancipatory aims. Other writers, however, express serious misgivings about this acceptance of individualisation and the underlying assumption 'that individual skills and decisions are crucial to the determination of outcomes' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, p. 17). The arguments against this model are particularly relevant for vulnerable young people who begin their adult life with multiple disadvantages. As Garrett (2004) notes, the life politics approach fails to take into account that in reality, people's choices are restricted and constrained in multiple ways, for example by gender, class, social structures. There is a dissonance between society's individualised

view that young people are in control of their choices and that outcomes are directly attributable to personal efforts, and the reality of the lives of young people experiencing social exclusion on multiple levels and lacking in the social capital which is a pre-requisite for having access to a full range of choices (Bynner 2005). As Brannen and Nilsen put it, 'in a society where individualism and choice are a dominant motif, the privileged stand a better chance of being the choosers' (2002, p.531).

Considering how these ideas can be used to understand the transition to adulthood experienced by care leavers, Pinkerton (2011) suggests that social capital and resilience are key concepts which interact within a young person's social ecology of support. Social capital is understood as deriving from the support provided by the networks within which young people are embedded (both formal and informal), whilst resilience is an intrinsic quality of the individual. Pinkerton uses this as a framework to consider the reasons why some care leavers do better than others, suggesting that differences in outcomes:

> can be seen as reflecting difference in the extent to which social capital and resilience have been garnered as developmental assets by care leavers from past and present engagement with their social ecology of support (Pinkerton 2011, p2413).

Brady et al (2017) use these concepts to explain the processes by which a mentoring programme works to support young people. One aspect of this is that the mentor provides 'bridging social capital' (p.268) giving the young person access to the mentor's connections and facilitating links to wider networks of support (Brady, Dolan and Canavan 2017).

Barker (2012, 2013 and 2014) explores the concept of social capital in the relation to the experiences of homeless young people. His view is that the family is the foundation of social capital, reliant on the relationships within the family network, the amount of social capital amassed within that network and the framework of trust and reciprocity which govern those relationships. For the group of young people who enter their adult life unable to live in the family home, it is likely that their families will be unable to provide them with social capital. These young people do not have the same access as their mainstream peers to resources (material or cultural) (Barker

2012). It is therefore problematic to conceptualise the transition to adulthood as a self-directed process, limited only by the efforts and choices of the individual. Fopp (2009) makes this point with regards to the language used in wider discussions about homelessness. He highlights the growing trend toward models of homelessness as a 'pathway' or 'career' and suggests that this terminology implies choices and opportunities which do not fit with the reality of most homeless people's experiences.

The ideas of self-reliance and individual responsibility which underpin this thinking are operationalised in other areas of government policy. There have been developments in the legislation around young people's education and training, which have an impact on vulnerable young people both directly (as part of the mainstream cohort) and also as a factor in the landscape, explicitly promoting and legitimising one version of adulthood. This is particularly clear for care leavers, whose entitlement to increased support set out in the 2010 Regulations was made subject to strict conditions. There are distinct overtones of 19th century models of philanthropy:

> Endeavouring to promote certain kinds of moral conduct by coupling the provision of financial aid with conditions as to the future conduct of recipients. (Rose 1999, p. 129)

For care leavers, financial support (and other forms of support post-21) is contingent on engagement with an approved programme of education or training. At the same time, for all young people the school leaving age has been increased, with corresponding withdrawal of financial support (either directly, or to parents) for those young people who are not engaged in education or employment. The government's overall vision is that paid employment is the route to social inclusion, and there has been a significant increase in the number of schemes aimed at increasing the numbers in education or training, with the explicit aim of increasing the proportion successfully securing paid employment as adults. This construction of adulthood is explicitly articulated within the Every Child Matters agenda (legislated in the Children Act 2004) which sets out five positive outcomes for young people. The fourth and fifth outcomes are 'make a positive contribution' and 'achieve economic wellbeing', thus setting up as an ideal the young adult who is a net giver to society. Within this political and legislative context, independent adulthood is achieved through financial independence

from the state, based on engagement in paid work. This has implications for the expectations put on statutory services providing support to young people:

> Young people in general, and socially marginalised young people in particular, are seen as requiring targeted state investment to ensure their capacity to be economically productive is realised (Mendes, Pinkerton and Munro 2014, p.3).

In line with this discourse, there has been a well-documented tightening up of welfare benefits administration and an increasing expectation of claimants to be working or engaged in some other sanctioned form of constructive activity. Jensen and Tyler (2015) discuss this 'increasing emphasis on the deservedness of claimants' (p.485) as part of a wider shift in public attitudes to welfare benefits. They argue that the dominant discourse has become an 'anti-welfare commonsense' (p.471) within which those claiming benefits are increasingly stigmatised, and pitted against the morally superior 'fiscally autonomous, 'hardworking' families' of the rest of society (Jensen and Tyler 2015, p. 485).

CHRONOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

If our individualised concept of adulthood is problematic, so too is the way in which we make sense of the chronological process of transition from child to adult. Uprichard (2008) discusses the opposing theoretical constructions of children as either 'being' or 'becoming': understanding children as either social actors in a constructed childhood, or as adults in the making. Uprichard argues that creating a false dichotomy between the states of adult and child sets up a false division between the current and future self. Explicitly combining the two perspectives shifts the focus to the interaction between present and future, which generates a more holistic understanding of the transition. Uprichard also points out that ideas of what it means to be an adult or a child are socially constructed (Uprichard 2008). This point is picked up by Thomson et al (2004) who suggest that the transition to adulthood has become fragmented in the UK. Fixed markers (rights and responsibilities) are not consistent or coherent, whilst expectations related to rites of passage (such as leaving home, marriage, parenthood) are increasingly divergent between social classes (Thomson et al 2004). Data from the

Office of National Statistics in 2014 showed that 49% of 20-24 year olds were still living at home with their parent(s) (ONS 2014). The young adults in Brannen and Nilsen's study (2002) were all older than 18 years old, and yet they expressed the view that the status of 'adult' was something in the future for them.

Amongst these confused messages of when someone can or should consider themselves to be an adult, the age of 18 stands out as a fixed point: legally this is the age at which a child becomes an adult, and social care legislation revolves around this delineation. Vulnerable young people are particularly affected by the stark divide between children's and adults' services. Crellin and Pona (2015) highlight the similar needs and vulnerabilities of all young people who cannot live at home with their families. They contrast this with the difference in entitlements and support post 18 between care leavers and young people housed under other arrangements. Some young people face an abrupt withdrawal of support when they turn 18. Whilst to some extent this is smoothed out for care leavers, who maintain the continuity of a leaving care service until they are at least 21, they too must begin to navigate the very different landscape of adult services in relation to many aspects of their lives (Crellin and Pona 2015). Services have fixed criteria and are not able to be responsive to individual need, so young people must transfer from child to adult support at 18. In their exploration of the experiences of homeless teenagers, Mayock et al (2013) describe this as an attempt to 'impose structure through bureaucratic certainty' (p456). Services for young people tend to be holistic (including leaving care) with workers currently encouraged to use strengths-based approaches to identify the interactions between different factors. In contrast, adult services tend to be far more fragmented, increasing the effort and skills needed to access and co-ordinate support (Mayock et al 2013).

2.2 How is the transition experienced by young people?

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND FEELING 'CARED FOR'

In common with several studies with looked after children (for example, National Children's Bureau 2006, McLeod 2010) qualitative research with care leavers suggests that of central importance is a stable and reliable, one-to-one relationship with an adult. Studies indicate that the meaning of this relationship goes beyond the practical function of having someone to turn to for help, and highlight the importance of young people having a concrete sense of being 'cared for'. In her semi-structured interviews with 10 care leavers, Gaskell (2010) asked them to reflect retrospectively on their experiences of the care system. The study does not directly explore young people's views of leaving the system, but the themes which emerge have some relevance within the wider picture of what comes next for these young people. All the participants picked up on the semantic dissonance between their position of being 'in care' whilst feeling that the people around them did not genuinely care for or about them. Gaskell suggests that the young people's accounts indicate systemic failures to provide opportunities to develop relationships with trusted adults who take a personal interest in them and value them as individuals.

Collins and Barker's research with homeless young people also supports this finding. This study explored young people's perspective on the help they were offered by keyworkers in an emergency hostel. Participants expressed a need to believe that workers had a genuine interest in them, and that their offers of help were based on more than simply their job responsibilities (Collins and Barker 2009). The researchers point out that it is particularly important for services to make their support accessible and acceptable to these young people, because as a group they are less likely to have robust, consistent informal support networks (family and friends). These ideas are also explored by McGrath and Pistrang in their research, again interviewing young people using emergency hostel accommodation. This study highlighted the importance to young people of feeling 'special' to their keyworker. Young people valued a relationship in which they felt known and understood (McGrath and Pistrang 2007).

Emerging into adulthood without at least one strong, stable relationship is picked up by several researchers as a significant hindrance to the ability of young people to make a positive transition into their independent adult life. Geenen and Powers (2007) gathered data through a series of focus groups, with a total of 88 participants. Young people, foster carers and professionals all highlighted the importance of caring, stable relationships – and all rated this as more important than young people's knowledge or use of formal support services. This study suggests that young people are better placed to move on into independent adult life when they have reliable relationships which make them feel valued and cared for. In this respect 'services cannot take the place of meaningful relationships' (Geenen and Powers 2007, p. 1098). Although this study was completed in the US and therefore reflects the experiences of young people in the American care system, the themes explored are also reflected in UK studies (for example, Wade 2008 and Rogers 2011) and the findings are therefore useful to add to the wider picture.

This theme is explored further by Snow (2008) in her detailed analysis of young people's accounts of their care experiences and their reflections on the emotional impact of being cared for by the state. Again the findings should be understood in their context (the study was carried out in Canada) but it is reasonable to assume that the contexts are similar enough for the main themes to have relevance for UK practice. Snow applied critical discourse analysis to the transcripts of 27 telephone interviews carried out by care experienced young people with their peers. Snow's analysis focuses on the language used by young people: the content of their responses, vocabulary used and syntax. Again the findings emphasise the importance to young people of an enduring and consistent relationship. Similarly to Gaskell (2010), Snow interprets this as signifying a need for tangible evidence of 'care':

> What young people ask for consistently is enduring and meaningful interpersonal relationships... This single consistent relationship is not optional in children's healthy development, it is crucial and despite the numerous obstacles faced in trying to provide such relationships institutionally, we must commit to orienting our services towards meeting this aim. Young people require stable and consistent support and assistance to navigate independence with supports similar to those received from parents by their non-care peers... Sustained and long-term relationships are presented as highly important and as evidence of genuine caring and belonging (Snow 2008, p. 1296).

The experiences of young people explored in Rogers (2011) provide an insight into how it feels for young people when this need for one to one personal support from a trusted adult is not met. Rogers completed detailed biographical interviews with five UK care leavers aged 18 to 20 years old, all of whom had continued their education post-18. She asked young people specifically about their experiences of leaving the care system:

> Each of the young people spoke only negatively about their experiences, speaking passionately about the lack of emotional support they felt as care leavers (p. 417).

The young people's accounts reflect a sense of being abandoned by social workers and other professionals associated with the care system, such as foster carers.

> There was evidence to suggest a clear disparity between the nature and quality of personal contact social worker teams had provided young people, and the contact young people felt they needed following the difficult transition into becoming a 'care leaver' (p. 418).

Young people felt that this withdrawal of support represented professionals' view of their work as a statutory contractual task: support was offered by both social workers and foster carers because it was their job to do so. Echoing the themes raised by both Gaskell (2010) and Snow (2008), these young people felt the lack of an adult who genuinely cared for them as an individual. Asked what had been most difficult about the transition out of care, the young people identified the withdrawal of emotional support as a critical factor, more important and damaging than the removal of practical or financial supports (Rogers 2011).

These studies focus on the importance of relationship-based support from professionals, but the research indicates that this applies equally to more informal sources of support. The importance of family relationships and a sense of 'belonging' is highlighted in several studies. Barker's participatory research study with homeless young people in Ireland found that the desire for an ongoing connection with family was resilient and persistent, despite (in many cases) young people's repeated experiences of being hurt or disappointed by these relationships (Barker 2012). Similarly Mayock et al (2011) found a correlation between ongoing or renewed relationships with family members, particularly parents, and positive transitions from homelessness to stable housing. Both of these studies suggest that workers

supporting young people should guard against treating them as isolated individuals: consideration should always be given to whatever strengths there are in wider networks, and services should actively work with young people and families to build on these.

This theme is also reflected in the findings of a small scale study with care-experienced young people. Holland (2010) suggests that the young people participating in the study were actively engaged in a range of relationships with other people, and that these relationships often involved reciprocal care (i.e. young people were givers as well as receivers of care).

> Individual pathways towards becoming autonomous, economically self-sufficient adults were profoundly affected by their interpersonal care relationships...[which] were likely to be particularly involved and complex (p. 1678).

Holland's discussion normalises this interdependency as part of everyone's social existence and representative of 'normal' adult life. She argues that more attention and value should be ascribed to supporting young people to develop and sustain relationships with those they care about (and who care for them). This is supported by the findings of Katz and Courtney (2015) in a study which asked care leavers about the perception of the support they were receiving. This research suggests that those young people who reported a higher level of social support, also reported a much lower level of unmet service needs.

THE PROCESS OF ADOLESCENCE

The findings of these studies are in line with psychodynamic theories about the 'adolescent process' (Anderson and Dartington 1998, cited in Briggs 2008). Considering adolescence and the transition from child to adult as a particular life phase, Briggs suggests that there are parallels with infant development, with the re-emergence of infant feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and power. Similarly to the process of infant development, the adolescent is reliant on a relationship with an adult who can contain these feelings and demonstrate that the young person is consistently being held in mind. Adolescence is a period of instability, involving significant changes

(both internal and external). Drawing on Bion's theories (Bion 1962, cited in Briggs 2008) to conceptualise this period, Briggs suggests that this instability leaves young people very vulnerable to fears of fragmentation. In order to cope with this, young people will draw on their experience of being parented: the transition to adulthood tests out the quality of the containment and the internalisation of a reliable parent that was acquired during infancy. Clearly this is likely to be problematic for the vulnerable group of young people who have had less than adequate experiences of parenting (Briggs 2008).

The importance of acknowledging these theoretical understandings of the transition process is taken up by several researchers, who suggest that workers could better support young people if more account was taken of what is known about identity formation during adolescence and young adulthood. This issue is raised anecdotally by participants in some studies – for example, foster carers taking part in focus groups noted that the teenage period was more difficult for young people in care as they often do not have a solid family or cultural background to rebel against or test, in the way that would be considered normal for their peers (Geenen and Powers 2007).

Exploring these ideas in more detail, Ward (2011) uses data from a wider longitudinal study to explore the usefulness of theoretical models of identity formation in understanding the specific issues for young people leaving care. Using as her starting point the concepts developed by Chandler and Lalonde (Lalonde 2006, cited in Ward 2011), Ward analyses qualitative data gathered from interviews with 49 young people and 25 follow up interviews 12 months later. Ward's findings raise questions about the extent to which support services acknowledge the importance of the transition to adulthood as a period during which identity is re-negotiated, and the ways in which this process may be more complex for vulnerable young people. Ward bases her discussion on a theoretical model which suggests that:

> In order to develop a robust sense of self, we must all learn to reconcile two seemingly contradictory factors: the need to change and develop alongside the need somehow also to remain the same (p. 2512).

Ward suggests that a perception of self continuity is central to the development of adult identity, and that this poses a particular problem for those young people 'whose

lives are characterised by multiple discontinuities' (p. 2513). Young people with an unsettled history (homes, schools, relationships) are particularly vulnerable to the stress of the multiple transitions inherent in the shift from child to adult. Ward suggests that this stress is even more acute for young people leaving care, who are expected to make the transition at an earlier age than their peers and over a shorter time (which applies equally to young people who leave home at the age of 16 or 17). Losing their sense of self-continuity, young people become less able to think of themselves in the future, rapidly reducing their inhibition against self destructive or nihilistic behaviours. Ward suggests that these vulnerabilities should be taken into account within the policies and services supporting young people as they leave care, such that the transition, rather than being 'premature, compressed and accelerated', is instead 'protracted and sequential' (Ward 2011, p. 2517).

These studies begin to shift the discussion to consider the extent to which work with vulnerable adolescents takes into account theoretical knowledge about the emotional and psychological transition to adulthood. Many writers explore the ways in which transition theories could and should be influencing social work practice in supporting young people during this period, when there will inevitably be a desire for more independence and autonomy. In particular, many researchers pick up on the fact that the transition pathway expected of this vulnerable group of young people is markedly different from that experienced by their mainstream peers in today's society (Stein 2006a and 2008, Ward 2011, Osgood 2010, Mayock 2013). The most significant failing is that the system lacks the flexibility to provide a version of the gradual, sequential transition experienced by most other young adults. For example, in her interviews with five care leavers Rogers (2011) found that young people reported that if they did not take up offers of support immediately, it was withdrawn and not offered again subsequently. Independence was taken very literally and young people felt that they were left to fend for themselves with no support. The experience of these care leavers was that there were no opportunities to move back and forward between dependence and independence, as would be expected for their peers growing up in mainstream society.

These themes are also reflected in qualitative studies with American care leavers. Young people contributing to focus groups in Geenen and Powers' study (2007) also stated that the system offered no opportunities to learn from mistakes. Their accounts suggested a lack of participation in decision making while they were in care, which meant they had had little or no practice or experience of control in their lives before suddenly being expected to take full responsibility for themselves once they had left care. Professionals, including foster carers and leaving care workers, also recognised this significant gap in the provision of support. Similarly to Rogers' conclusions from her interviewees' accounts, in these participants' experience there was no safety net and no allowances made for young people who needed to move forward and back through the transition period.

> Youth were generally described as eager to get out of care and direct their own lives. Often however, they did not fully realize the challenges of adulthood until they experienced it first hand....if they [could] go out and fall on their face and still come back, that would make all the difference (Geenen and Powers 2007, p. 1096).

Similar themes are identified in the research of de Winter and Noom (2003). This was a large-scale peer research project, involving interviews with 190 homeless young people and follow up discussions with workers and policy makers. The research was carried out in the Netherlands and therefore care should be taken in extrapolating the detail of the findings, but the key themes are interesting within the wider picture of studies carried out in various countries. Young people expressed a feeling that services did not allow space for them to get things wrong and learn from mistakes (de Winter and Noom 2003). Stein also advocates the need for more gradual transitions, which allow young people more space and time. He describes a three-stage model of transitions: leaving or disengagement, transition and integration. For young people leaving care, Stein argues that there is little or no time allowed for the crucial middle phase, during which their peers have space to test things out, take risks and make mistakes (Stein 2006b, 2008 and 2012).

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON INDEPENDENCE

Several studies have attempted to explore how young people think about independence and how this impacts on their engagement with support during the transition to adulthood. The most detailed and reflective exploration of these themes is offered by an American qualitative study undertaken by Samuels and Pryce (2008). A level of caution is required in extrapolating the findings to the UK context, although the aims of the research did not relate specifically to policy or practice issues, which would be more likely to be context-specific. Instead the study explores young people's understanding of the transition to adulthood and their concepts of what it means to be independent, and therefore is highly relevant to my research question. Samuels and Pryce (2008) completed semi-structured interviews with 44 young people between the ages of 17 and 21 (24 care leavers, 20 still in state care). Interview questions were based around young people's history (their understanding of why they were in care), their relationships with family members and carers, their perspectives on society's view of 'normal' development and how this relates to their own life, the impact of foster care on their lives as adults, and finally the advice they would give to other young people and professionals. In their responses, interviewees highlighted self reliance and survival as positive products of their (negative) experiences. Young people described dependence as a negative state and something to be avoided. Samuels and Pryce coin the term 'disavowal of dependence' (p. 1205) to encompass a resistance to seek help or admit vulnerability, and they separate these emotional aspects from young people's inclination to use and make the most of material services or resources. Paradoxically, participants were able to talk about their self reliance as a source of great pride, whilst also acknowledging it as the biggest hindrance to their progress in the adult world.

> Being a self-reliant survivor means that youth perceive themselves as both their own most valuable advocate and source of hope, while also viewing themselves as their greatest enemy and threat to success (p. 1207).

Samuels and Pryce situate their findings in the wider context of a society which 'attributes positive meaning to surviving hardship through self-reliance and disavowing interpersonal dependence' (p. 1207) and suggest that, seen in this light, it is unsurprising their study demonstrated that 'youth linked surviving without help as an

indicator of independence and clearly associated this with success' (p. 1208). Although the researchers were referring to US societal and cultural norms, there is evidence to suggest that similarly individualised constructions of adulthood also underpin UK values, both in theoretical writing (see for example, Furlong and Cartmel 1997, Bynner 2005) and in the views of young people (see for example, Dixon 2006, Ofsted 2012). Therefore these findings could reasonably be assumed to bear some relevance to my research question.

Studies of wider groups of vulnerable young people highlight similar concerns about the ways in which independence and self-reliance become problematic:

> The brand of defiant self-reliance and independence encapsulated in the strategy of autonomy has emerged from the personal histories of homeless young people and is the primary strategy that they know they can rely on to survive. The instability and chaos of their lives has led them to disproportionately invest in their ability to look after themselves, to take control of their lives (Barker 2014, p. 775).

Collins and Barker (2009) found that young people using emergency hostel accommodation were reluctant to ask for help. Interestingly these studies present a more nuanced picture of the context in which young people make decisions about asking for (and making use of) the support available. Several point out that this is not only related to a desire for autonomy and prizing of self-reliance, but is also a product of learning from experience. Asking for help is difficult: it requires both emotional and practical effort. Young people who have been let down or rejected, or simply not helped, by those they have relied on in the past, will understandably be less willing to make these efforts again (Collins and Barker 2009). Young people may choose self-reliance as the more desirable option – or it may simply be the only option they feel is open to them.

The positivity attached to becoming an 'independent adult' is discussed in psychodynamic theories of transitions, which are underpinned by the concept that adolescence involves a re-balancing of the adult and child aspects of the self. Briggs (2008) discusses the split between the adult (independent) and child (dependent) as a particular concern in working with young people leaving care. He suggests that young people's experiences of disrupted relationships leave them hurt and defensive, and in

this context it is unsurprising that they strive for the 'independence' of becoming an adult.

> The adult, independent position is often more appealing, since the disappointments and pains of relating to parental figures have left mistrust of others and a painful residue of damage. (Briggs 2008, p. 181)

Similarly to Holland (2010), Samuels and Pryce question whether a completely independent and self-reliant existence is a useful or realistic goal. Instead they too suggest that 'normal' adult life is characterised by interdependence, with a sense of connectedness to other people being essential for wellbeing. Whilst acknowledging that a degree of self reliance contributes to young people's resilience, there are more negative and damaging aspects which should be taken into account when this self reliance comes by default – young people rely on themselves because in their experience there is no one else.

> Their independence emerged from a place of emotional insecurity and a sense of interpersonal disconnection. (Samuels and Pryce 2008, p. 1209)

The message from both research and theoretical writing appears to be that consistent, genuine emotional support is crucial for young people during their transition from childhood to adulthood. For those young people unable to live with family as they make this transition, inflexible systems are a barrier to the gradual, experiential learning which characterises this period for their mainstream peers. This is compounded by young people's desire to be independent and to take care of themselves.

2.3 What do we know about the work that is done?

RESEARCH EXPLORING PRACTICE

Initial searches of published research studies suggested that there are few descriptive studies of the one to one work being done with vulnerable young people as they make the transition to adulthood. There is very limited research evidence relating to independent living skills programmes, none of which relates to recent practice in the UK. Considering the wider research, a systematic literature review carried out in 2006 was not able to address questions of which aspects of programmes were effective, for which young people or why they were effective (Montgomery, Donkoh and Underhill, 2006).

There are more detailed evaluation studies of specific independent living programmes (see, for example, Georgiades 2005 and Goyette 2007). However, these are all based on research completed in the US, where such programmes are more established as a discrete entity (although there is still considerable variation in content (Stein 2010). Katz and Courtney's (2015) exploration of young people's perceptions of gaps in service provision does suggest that those care leavers who reported receiving support in specific areas were less likely to report later that they had unmet needs in this area. However the researchers point out that independent living skills support varies hugely, and there is little consistency about what is done or by whom (Katz and Courtney 2015). Even in US studies, less than a third of young people report receiving specific support to develop practical independent living skills prior to leaving care (Courtney et al 2011).

In the UK, although many young people receiving support services will have access to some form of independent living skills training, it is not a standardised or clearly defined intervention. Participants in several research studies discuss the importance of developing young people's practical independent living skills, but there are widely differing views of what this includes, and who is (or should be) delivering this support. Several studies reflect workers' views that these types of skills are better learnt in an informal 'natural' setting, and therefore is primarily the responsibility of carers and accommodation keyworkers (Stein 2010). The findings of Dixon et al (2006) illustrate

the problems caused by this lack of clarity: workers reported that young people were not engaged with a formal independent living programme, but were still able to list work that had been done to develop the independent living skills of these young people in preparation for leaving care. It appears that support to develop practical skills is acknowledged as part of the transition process, but the findings do not pursue the question any further and provide no detail of what actually goes on in practice (Dixon et al 2006). In common with many other areas of social work, it seems it is not possible to consider the question of 'what works' in a straightforward, experimental manner: interventions are not standardised, discrete or independent of their contexts (Sharland 2012).

RESEARCH EXPLORING OUTCOMES

In the absence of research exploring practice interventions, it should be possible to gain some insight by considering those studies which explore the outcomes for young people receiving support services. The outcomes explored in these studies could reasonably be expected to be representative of those aspects of adult life which are thought to be important, and should therefore give some indication of the underlying construction of the concept of 'independent adult life', although they can give little information about services' understandings of how best to support young people as they make this transition.

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the legislation setting out the mandate for leaving care work was prompted by acknowledgement that young people leaving state care had significantly poorer life chances than their peers. These 'life chances' include a wide range of measures, encompassing many aspects of young people's experience including accommodation, health, engagement with employment or education, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Given that this was the backdrop to the policy making, it is unsurprising that these quantifiable outcomes have been adopted as the measures by which the success or failure of leaving care work is assessed. Local authorities are expected to gather data relating to the numbers of care leavers meeting targets on these key performance indicators. These practice drivers

are also reflected in the types of empirical research undertaken in this field, and in the fact that the majority of studies are aimed at exploring the correlations between these outcomes. This is borne out by the research of Harder et al (2011) in their review of data regarding 33 different empirical studies focussing on young people's transitions out of state care. Their study showed that the dominant topics of research were education, social support networks and housing. They also found that most studies aimed to determine which factors have an influence on young people's 'life situations' and how these factors are inter-related (Harder et al 2011).

Dixon et al (2006) is one of the most widely cited studies of this type. The research was undertaken in 2003 in the context of the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000), and aimed to explore how this legislation was impacting on local authorities' provision of leaving care services. This longitudinal study used data from interviews with young people, workers and managers, as well as statistical data, across seven local authorities. The scope of the study is ambitious, with information gathered about a wide range of aspects of the young people's lives: experience in care, housing, education and employment, support networks, health and general wellbeing. Given the scope of the study, it is inevitable that the findings are wide ranging, taking the form of broad correlations between different aspects of young people's lives. Housing is identified as having the biggest impact both positive and negative on other outcomes (mental health, education etc.) (Dixon et al 2006).

The findings of this study are undoubtedly a significant addition to the understanding of the complexity of young people's lives as they leave the care system. The study fulfils its aim to explore the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000): its findings are clearly supportive of the Act's key directive that local authorities should provide more comprehensive and better co-ordinated support for care leavers. In the concluding comments, the researchers assert that:

> Equipping young people with the practical, interpersonal and emotional resources needed for adult life should be a central feature of corporate parenting (p232).

This statement at the end of the report is the starting point for my own research question: what do these 'resources' consist of, and how might workers 'equip' young people with them?

Similar problems arise in the analysis of other studies which focus on one specific outcome in more detail. For example, Akister, Owens and Goodyer (2010) review the international literature relating to the incidence of mental health problems of young people in care in comparison to their peers, adjusting for socio-economic factors. The quantitative data indicate a rise in self-reporting of problems immediately following the transition out of care. In their discussion of these findings, the reviewers raise the question behind this higher incidence, to ask what distinguishes those young people who do achieve mental wellbeing from those who do not. They suggest more detailed, stratified research is needed to unravel the links between early experiences, age and wellbeing at entry into care, placement history and so on.

> More specific criteria, indicative of successful outcomes, need to be identified in order to develop policy systems which can maximise mental capital and wellbeing. (Akister, Owens and Goodyer 2010, p7)

Again the focus is on making links between different aspects of young people's lives and understanding the relationships between them. See also Jackson and Cameron (2012) in relation to education, and Stein (2010) in relation to housing. These studies illustrate which aspects of adult life are considered to be important, and again emphasise the value of support services which are able to take a holistic approach to young people's lives. However, there is little insight gained into the detail of how services are interpreting their mandate to support young people through the transition to independent adult life.

Overall it has been difficult to identify research which provides evidence to answer the question of what the work done with young people during their transition to adulthood looks like in practice. The research base enables us to draw some inferences about the various ways in which services understand 'independent adult life', although the evidence does not provide a clear picture of how this is operationalised. Studies consistently focus on education, housing, mental health and

varying concepts of 'life skills' as aspects of young people's lives which are important in the overall achievement of positive outcomes.

WORKERS' ACCOUNTS OF THEIR PRACTICE

There are few studies explicitly exploring the perspectives of those who work with vulnerable young people living away from their families as they enter adulthood. Several of the qualitative studies do, however, include interviews with workers and their findings are able to provide some information about the ways in which they make sense of their role in supporting young people through the transition. This encompasses a diverse group of workers within a range of organisations, including leaving care services and supported housing projects. These workers are not united around any specific professional qualification or background, although some may be qualified social workers.

Generally studies suggest that leaving care workers express a view of their role as one of co-ordinating access to other services, rather than directly providing support. In the most comprehensive of the studies to include workers' voices, Dixon et al (2006) interviewed 56 leaving care workers, with responsibility for a total of 106 young people. The overall study aimed to explore their experience of delivering services under the (then) new Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000). One section reports how well young people were managing in their accommodation at the time of the follow up interviews, and explores whether these outcomes were linked to support in preparation for the move. Concepts such as 'preparation support' and 'life skills' were defined in terms of fixed lists of aspects of young people's lives (including health, practical skills and interpersonal skills. There was no correlation between the workers' and young people's assessments of the level of life skills, which raises interesting questions: if workers' and young people have varying ideas about what constitutes 'weak' or strong' skills, they are likely to differ in their views about priorities for development. This illustrates a potential difficulty for workers in defining a role for themselves in preparing young people for independence, even relating to relatively

simple aspects of young people's lives, and highlights the need for a negotiated construct of the skills and capabilities necessary for a positive transition.

In this context, more than half the workers reported that young people had undergone a planned programme of preparation before leaving care, but there was no exploration of who had delivered this and no attempt to capture informal preparation work. Throughout the study, the picture of leaving care work that emerges from respondents is one of a functional assessment of needs and co-ordination of the services required to meet those needs.   This model of the work as being essentially concerned with access to and deployment of resources, meant that young people whose needs were complex or who fell outside the remit of appropriate available services posed a particular problem for leaving care teams, which were ill-equipped to take on a more directly supportive role:

> Young people with difficulties appeared to place extra demand on staff skills and time. Team managers felt that taking on the role of full support for more 'needy' young people tended to stretch leaving care team resources. (Dixon et al 2006, p154)

This co-ordinating (rather than relationship-based) model of the work was also reflected in the view expressed by leaving care workers interviewed within the study carried out by Tilbury et al (2011).   This study was undertaken in Australia, and therefore the findings may not be directly transferable to a UK context, but the way in which these workers described their practice and priorities is similar to the views expressed by UK workers in other studies (for example, Dixon et al 2006 and Rogers 2011). The researchers interviewed 14 workers specifically about their role in relation to the development of education and career pathways for young people in and leaving state care. The findings demonstrated that workers believed:

> Their role was indirect: locating a stable placement with a good carer to optimize chances for a good future... they did not conceptualize their role as providing personal support and guidance.   (Tilbury et al 2011, p348)

Pressures of time and workload were most commonly cited by workers in all studies as the underlying reason why they were unable to offer more personal support to young people. Reporting the findings of her interviews with three leaving care social workers and two managers, Rogers (2011) observes:

there were significant time constraints on the level (and type) of support they could offer care leavers. Ultimately, this resulted in them prioritizing practical information and financial subsistence over emotional or personalized support. (p420)

Rogers's study was very small scale, exploring the experiences of five care leavers who continued with their education beyond 18, i.e. young people whose achievements significantly exceeded those of their peers. In addition to interviewing the young people, Rogers also interviewed their professional support network from both social care and education services. The severely constrained personal, relationship-based support she describes may well be linked to the relatively high achieving sample group. Workers interviewed by Dixon et al (2006) also picked up on the fact that care leavers who do well often end up receiving less attention and support than their more chaotic and needy peers. There may be some sense in which, for the young people in Rogers' study, their achievement in progressing to further and higher education courses is in itself a good enough outcome. Unconsciously workers may feel a sense of 'job done' with these young people and focus their time and attention on other young people. It could be argued that this reflects the current culture of evaluating services through their quantifiable outcomes (in this case, the number of young people continuing in education post-16). This would suggest that workers are constructing their role in preparing young people for adult life in terms of outcomes, rather than as support for individual transitions (echoing the issues raised in the experiences of care leavers discussed earlier).

YOUNG PEOPLE'S INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

The focus on the co-ordinating functions of the worker's role, at the expense of personal support and relationships with young people, may be partially attributable to time and workload constraints. Further exploration of the findings from research studies suggests that there may also be underlying assumptions about what is important in preparing young people for independent adult life, which have an impact on the ways in which workers perceive their role. As suggested by several of the studies discussed in section two, the work being done with young people reflects a lack

of acknowledgement of the importance of informal networks of mutual support, especially in respect of extended families. Although small scale, and relating to work with young people before they reach the point of leaving care (looked after children aged 12 to 16 years old), McMurray et al's (2011) exploration of workers' understanding of the construction of identity is useful in understanding the background context. The researchers' analysis of their interview data suggests that workers underestimated the importance of young people's friendship networks and believed birth family to be a source of negative role models (McMurray et al 2011). This failure to recognise the significance of informal support networks may also have an impact on workers' perceptions of the importance of their role in helping young people develop and sustain these networks. Whilst 71% of the workers interviewed by Dixon et al (2006) reported that they provided support with maintaining or re-establishing relationships with extended family, only 42% of young people reported receiving any help or support in this area. Interview questions were not detailed enough to provide a definitive understanding of this disparity, but the findings suggest that:

> Much of the support appeared low key....rather than providing proactive help with counselling and mediation to improve relationships (p130).

Some of the detailed case examples discussed with workers reflect an understanding of the important role played by family members in providing support, reassurance and in some cases a safety net not available within the care system. Overall, however, it appears that workers are not fully recognising the importance of providing active support to enable young people to develop and sustain interconnected care relationships with friends and family members (Dixon et al 2006).

The research carried out by Mayock et al (2011) highlights similar themes, concluding that services often assess and support young people in isolation, viewing their families as problematic. This study suggests using a strengths-based approach to explore what resources they do have in their informal support networks, rather than focussing on what is missing (Mayock et al 2011). Similar themes emerge from the work of Pinkerton and Dolan (2007) which highlights the importance of identifying and building on young people's existing sources of support, to maximise their access to social

capital. Singer et al (2013) explored care leavers' perception of their support networks, and mapped this against how the support is used. Their findings suggest that workers pay attention to the quality of the relationships young people have with those in their support network, as the young people themselves are sometimes not able to assess these accurately. The researchers suggest that a relationship is made up of three aspects of support: emotional, instrumental (practical resources) and appraisal (relating to feedback and self esteem). The care leavers in this study lacked relationships which could provide instrumental or appraisal support, which reduced the resilience and effectiveness of their support networks (Singer et al 2013).

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS

The findings of some studies indicate that leaving care workers recognise the role of the personal characteristics of young people in determining their pathway to independent adult life. Concepts of resilience, motivation and self-reliance are expressed as positive qualities of the young person: intrinsic personality traits, which mark out those who will achieve better outcomes. For example, Tilbury et al note that 'several' of the workers interviewed 'emphasised the need for young people to be self-motivated and responsible' (Tilbury et al 2011). Similar findings emerge from Cameron's research (2007) which uses interview data from 80 care leavers to explore the commonalities between those young people who achieve in education. Self-reliance is cited as the predominant theme. Cameron suggests that this is a two dimensional concept, including a sense of confidence in managing oneself and a preference not to seek help. The study's findings suggest that young people who achieve in education are doing this independently, in the context of limited availability of support, either financial or in the form of encouragement (Cameron 2007).

This is consistent with much of the writing about leaving care work which offers suggestions for practice, based on a range of research evidence (for example, Stein 2006a and 2008, Gilligan 2008). These writers suggest that building resilience is a key task in preparing young people for independent adult life, and should be a focus of the work done in the run up to leaving care. Stein in particular has written at length about

resilience, defining it as a characteristic of those young people who are able 'to find fulfilment in their lives', their capacity to cope and overcome adversity (Stein 2008, p35). He identifies the circumstances and life experiences which seem to foster resilience in young people, including positive experiences of education, robust social support networks and a strong relationship with an adult (Stein 2008). However, there is little empirical research exploring whether, or how, workers may be translating this into practice. For example, workers interviewed by McMurray et al (2011) cited resilience as a positive trait of almost all the teenagers they work with, although there was little explication of how this was either demonstrated or promoted. Workers in this study acknowledged the importance of resilience as an abstract quality, but did not appear to understand it as something they actively focussed on in their work (McMurray et al 2011). Overall the literature presents resilience as an uncontested and positive concept, without clearly articulating what it is. It is difficult therefore to know what 'building resilience' looks like in practice, or how the effectiveness of such activity might be measured.

McMurray et al suggest that workers' descriptions of young people in this positive light (as 'resilient') may indicate a belief in their underlying capability to deal with adversity, or may be an attempt to avoid pathologising their situations. It is also worth noting that emphasising the importance of resilience, an essentially personal characteristic, is very much in line with an individualised model of society. As Canavan points out: 'resilience sits nicely within a neo-liberal, individualistic framework' (Canavan 2008, p4).

Briggs (2008) offers another possible explanation for this tendency to focus on young people's independent and self-reliant traits, rather than the needy child aspects which many young people will also display. Workers are aware of the difficulties these young people are likely to face in the future.

> The anxiety about the risks faced by young people leaving care can nudge staff towards colluding with pseudo-independence, hurrying development (p181).

Emphasising and encouraging self-reliance and accepting the dominant discourse of individual choice and responsibility, may be more comfortable for workers than

recognising the more problematic issue of young people's lack of emotional capacity to manage this independence due to their damaging childhood experiences.

This begins to raise questions about the aspects of the work which invoke (and indeed require) an emotional response from workers. Much of the discussion around this issue is based on Hochschild's concept of 'emotional labour'. Hochschild (1983) described the everyday, private processes by which individuals manage their emotions in line with social and cultural norms as 'emotion work'. When this emotion work moves into the public sphere, as a requirement of a job, it becomes 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983). This term acknowledges the often 'unseen' aspects of jobs in which 'interpersonal skills...comprise an essential component and are combined with technical and professional competencies' (Glucksmann 2006, p.32). Workers have to manage their emotions in line with organisational norms, either on a superficial level by pretending, or on a deeper level by drawing on their own personal reserves. In relation to social work, Leeson (2010) argues that:

> The development of effective relationships with individuals....requires deep emotional engagement...and therefore can be regarded as having substantial personal emotional cost (p484).

She acknowledges that emotional labour can be a positive and rewarding aspect of the work, but where there is insufficient support or the difference between the values of the individual and the organisation is too great, Leeson suggests that workers will burn out or distance themselves.

> Under significant emotional threat, workers may find that they have to withdraw their services to an emotional place of safety where they might function with minimum personal distress (p484).

Leeson's research with social workers for looked after children suggests that inadequate supervision and prioritisation of managerial demands over face to face contact are both factors in creating workplaces where workers struggle to manage the demands of emotional labour. She suggests that better training, particularly in engagement and communication skills, would increase workers' capacity to cope. There also needs to be more clarity about the worker's role, including an explicit recognition of the value of building positive relationships with children (Leeson 2010).

This ambivalence regarding emotional connection with young people is reflected in the findings of McGrath and Pistrang's research with keyworkers in hostel accommodation. Interviewing both young people and staff, the researchers explored the nature of the helping relationship and how the 'therapeutic alliance' functions in this context. Although this was only a small scale project (10 staff, 12 young people) it highlights a significant variation in workers' inclination to engage emotionally with young people. Some expressed the view that this was an integral part of their role (and indeed a very positive aspect of their chosen job). Others, however, were clear that they did not 'get involved', focussing instead on practical tasks and factual advice. The reasons cited for this related in part to young people's unwillingness to engage. The workers' perception was that young people did not want an emotional connection. There were also concerns about upholding professional boundaries and being clear about roles and responsibilities. Some were also hesitant to address emotional issues, or deepen their relationship with young people, for fear of straying into areas in which they felt unqualified. 'Counselling' was seen as something which requires expert input (McGrath and Pistrang 2007).

What do these studies tell us about how workers perceive their role in supporting vulnerable young people through the transition to adulthood? Workers describe their responsibilities as primarily co-ordinating services to support the various aspects of young people's lives: they report having limited time or inclination to involve themselves in the direct provision of personal or emotional support. There seems to be an underestimation of the importance of young people's need for support in developing and sustaining informal support networks.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Overall the picture that emerges from the literature is one of support services struggling to define a complex and highly personal process within an inadequate framework of rigid boundaries and measurable outcomes. Young people unable to live with their families are particularly vulnerable due to their childhood experiences. They lack access to the resources available to their mainstream peers, both practical and emotional, and this is often compounded by their experiences within a system where support is inconsistent or absent. Workers talk about their practice in a way which suggests that they are largely concerned with the practical aspects of young people's preparation for independent adult life, apparently at the expense of providing emotional support during the transition. This review of the literature suggests that services and policy construct 'independent adult life' within a framework of current neoliberal thinking, which appears to be at odds with the needs and priorities of young people. What I have found to be missing from the literature is an in-depth exploration of the perspective of workers: how do they make sense of their professional role in the context of this apparent tension? This is the starting point for my research.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

OVERVIEW

The focus of this chapter is to explore the decisions made about what this research project would look like and the thinking underpinning these decisions. In Chapter One, I traced the development of the research question, from its vaguest early incarnations to the final version. The first section of this chapter considers how the process of working out what I wanted to know from this research has highlighted my underlying framework of thinking about what type of knowledge I am interested in generating.

Having established what I want to know, the second section considers how to generate this knowledge. The overall study design is explained and the participants are introduced. Decisions about practical arrangements are discussed, including an account of the process of recruitment and gaining consent. I have chosen to use two methods to collect the data: focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews. The relative strengths of these methods are discussed, along with the rationale for using them in the way that I have done in this study.

The next section considers the process of using the data to answer the research question. The analysis of the data is based on of elements of three models: thematic, narrative and voice-centred relational. These different approaches are combined to create a framework within which to make sense of the data. The broad principles of these models are outlined, along with a more detailed explanation of how I have used them in this study. The congruence of these models with the underlying methodology of this project is explored.

Finally, the dynamic between the researcher and researched is considered, with some reflection on the challenges and strengths of the particular interactions possible with my insider/outsider perspectives. The complex interplay of power and control throughout the process is explored, to consider the question of what it means for these participants to have conversations with this researcher about the work that they do.

3.1 Different types of knowledge

WHAT KIND OF AN ANSWER AM I AIMING FOR ?

The questions addressed in this research are not about what the work is. The study is not an attempt to observe and describe what is done by these workers, nor is it a review of the legislative construction of the role. Instead the research question aims to tap into the respondents' experience of their work, and to explore how they talk about the job that they do. This in itself dictates some aspects of the methodology which underpins my thinking about carrying out the research. Embedded in the question are assumptions about what I want to find out. There is an implied acceptance of a 'verstehen' approach, seeking to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of those involved (Pope 1982, cited in Lincoln and Guba 1985). Giddens describes this approach as seeking to understand rather than to explain (Giddens 1993, p61). The aim of the study was to explore the reality of the participants rather than to describe an independently existing, fixed reality. Underpinning the research is the concept of 'constructed reality'.

> Events, persons, objects are indeed tangible entities. The meanings and wholeness derived from or ascribed to these tangible phenomena in order to make sense of them...however, are *constructed realities* (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p84).

Seeking to understand something from the actor's perspective does not preclude consideration of the context in which they are acting. The understanding being studied is rooted within a wider social system, and it exists within a framework of tacit knowledge and meanings (Shaw and Gould 2001).

Initially my thinking about the research followed a broadly naturalistic form of inquiry, in line with the model suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p188). This model of research asserts that the researcher is an active part of the process and should be exploited as a means of gathering better and more meaningful data. As it is impossible for the interviewer not to affect the interaction in some way, this should be acknowledged and explicitly used in the context of the interview (Lincoln and Guba 1985). It would have been very difficult, perhaps impossible, for me to research this area of professional practice without drawing on, or being influenced by, my previous

knowledge, and I had to take this into account when making decisions about the methodology underpinning my study design. Considering a naturalistic model of research would allow my prior knowledge and experience of the subject matter to be an advantage. This is explored by Eisner (1997) who suggests that qualitative researchers need to have some knowledge and understanding of their subject matter, in order to produce meaningful findings: 'expertise does matter' (Eisner 1997, p269).

MAKING USE OF THE RESEARCHER'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE PROCESS

Having started from this broad naturalistic base, I began to think more about myself as an active participant in the research. The process of developing and refining the research question highlighted that I was interested not simply in what the respondents said, but also in how they said it: my role as researcher was going further than reporting the content of the data. Interviewers are not 'simple conduits for answers but rather are deeply implicated in the production of answers' (Schneider 2000, p162, cited in Alvesson 2003, p19). Reflecting on what he terms 'practice-near research', Cooper (2009) argues that the researcher's closer emotional engagement with the research is key to the particular perspective this approach can bring. Research which sets out to study its object from up close tends to be 'passionate research about passions' (p432). This echoes a point made by Drake (2010) about the more intense personal interest and investment an insider is likely to have in their research. Rather than struggling to design a study based on methodology which can mitigate this 'distorting influence' (p438) Cooper's view is that a reflexive researcher can use this personal connection to enhance and deepen their understanding and interpretation of the data.

> Good practice-near research seems to me to *depend* on subjectivity and emotional engagement with the object of research. (Cooper 2009, p438)

Cooper's argument is that creating some kind of understanding or meaning from data requires more than simply reporting what people have said, grouped under thematic headings. This feeling that some depth of interpretation is needed and that the voice of the participants is not the only valuable outcome, answered some of my own questions about the usefulness of the analysis I had been attempting on the first round

of data. Alvesson (2003) also suggests that interview data needs to be actively used rather than simply reported, to explore research questions fully.

> It is important not to simplify and idealize the interview situation, assuming that the interviewee – given the correct interview technique – primarily is a competent and moral truth teller, acting in the service of science and producing the data needed to reveal his or her "interior" (i.e. experiences, feelings, values) or the "facts" of the organization.   (Alvesson 2003, p14)

Alvesson suggests an approach of 'reflexive pragmatism' based on eight theoretical conceptualisations of the research interview, each of which can be understood as the interviewee solving a particular type of challenge:

1. Interview situation as complex social interaction (social challenge).   The interview is understood as a conversation between two individuals, taking into account the influence of individual factors (for example age, gender and interviewer's demeanour).

2. Ambiguity, making sense of situation (cognitive challenge). The interviewee develops assumptions about what the research is about and what the interviewer wants to hear.

3. Adopting and presenting identities (identity challenge). Respondents construct an identity in the context of the interview, and will speak from the identity they have invoked. Alvesson suggests that the interview situation constructs rather than reveals the interviewee's identity.

4. Normative talk from cultural scripts (institutional challenge). Interviewees are members of different overlapping groups, each of which has its own accepted norm for talking about an issue. So workers may have a shared understanding of how 'we' talk about things, which will vary according to whether the 'we' is this work team, or the wider organisation or another grouping.

5. Moral storytelling and legitimacy (self esteem challenge). Respondents will want to give a good impression, both of themselves and (usually) their organisation.

6. Political action (motivation challenge).   Interviewees may be using the interview as an opportunity to pursue their own ends.

7. Language as constructive (representational challenge). The way in which language is used is more than just descriptive.

8. Constituted by and responding within social discourses (challenge of autonomy or determinism). There are particular ways of thinking and expressing which are created socially, and these multiple discourses 'speak through' the interviewee.

These models provide a range of different ways of looking at interview data, providing the reflexivity which Alvesson believes 'stands for conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles' (p25). This is coupled with pragmatism, defined as a 'willingness to postpone some doubt and still use the material for the best possible purpose(s)' (p25). The key is to maintain different perspectives, to move around the data and see it through different theoretical frameworks. The model is based on an acceptance that participants' responses are not in themselves an answer. The researcher has to set the responses in context, to consider the multiple processes which may be going on within an interview. For me, this has helped to make sense of the parallel process going on; that of developing a research question. Thinking about the data in this way created some space and legitimised my experience that 'the knowledge produced may thus be quite different from what was intended at the start of the research process' (Alvesson 2003, p25).

3.2 Gathering the data

STUDY DESIGN

Having established what kind of knowledge I was pursuing, the study had to be designed in such a way as to maximise the opportunities to provide an answer. Certain choices were obvious: the research instrument(s) would need to be based on talking to participants, the number of subjects would be small because the aim is depth rather than breadth.

Overview of study design (repeated at two fieldwork sites):

Recruitment of 4 participants

↓

Focus group discussion

↓

Analysis of focus group data to produce interview guide

↓

4 x individual interviews

↓

Data Analysis
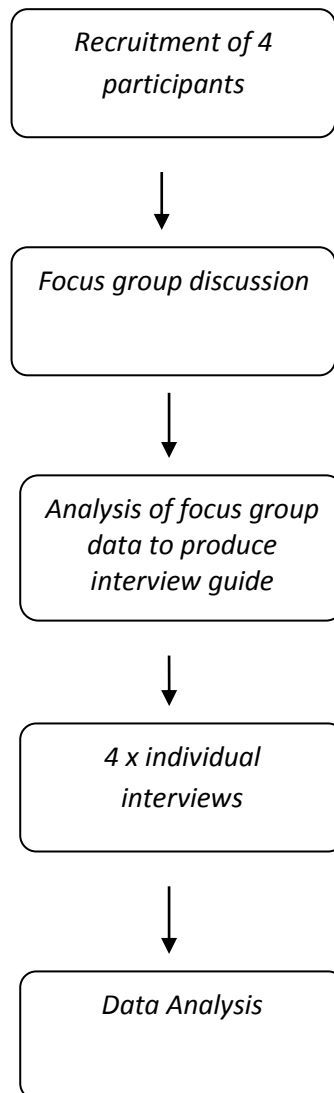
The data were gathered via two cycles of fieldwork, each including four participants. The first stage involved using a focus group discussion to collect initial data, to explore the collectively held concepts and identify key themes to be followed up in the second stage of individual interviews. Using this two-staged model of data collection has enabled me to make the best use of the strengths of each method in relation to my specific research question. The design is also consistent with the overall constructivist methodological approach, reflecting elements of emergent design.

THE PARTICIPANTS

In line with the development of the research question discussed in the introduction, my intended participants changed during the course of the project. In order to address the research question which has emerged, my findings are based on data gathered from two groups of workers within a local authority. The first are leaving care personal advisers, working in a local authority leaving care service. They hold case management responsibility for young people leaving the care system from the age of 18 (with some joint working alongside looked after children's teams from 16-17). The average caseload is around 25 young people per worker. The second group are workers from the same local authority, working within a specialist adolescent service. This organisation has a wide range of remits, including youth justice, child in need work, support for young people not in education, training or employment (NEET) and, critically for this project, currently homeless 16-17 year olds and previously homeless 18-19 year olds. The service works on an intensive support model, and the average caseload is around 12 young people per worker.

The local authority within which all the participants work is in the south of England. In this area the numbers of children living in poverty, young people not in education, training or employment, and young people involved with the criminal justice system are all lower than the national average. The number of looked after children is also lower than the average. It is difficult to compare numbers of homeless young people, because in other local authorities these 16-17 year olds would be classed as being in care.

LEAVING CARE WORKERS SITE 1	SPECIALIST ADOLESCENT SERVICE WORKERS SITE 2
ANDY Experienced practitioner, who has worked in leaving care teams for many years.	ISABEL Professionally qualified as a social worker, with experience working in housing support roles.
BEN Previously a care leaver, with experience working in advocacy services for young people in and leaving care.	JULIA Practitioner who has worked in the service for many years. Professional qualifications in several disciplines (including youth work and youth justice). At the time of this study, preparing to start social work training.
CLAIRE Experience working in residential care. Professional qualifications in law.	KATE Worker with varied experience including careers guidance, youth work and parenting support.
DIANE Previously a care leaver, and has been a foster carer. Came into the role relatively recently, having been a volunteer for the service. Previous work has been in unrelated private sector.	LOUISE Experienced worker who has been in the service for several years and has some supervisory responsibilities. Professionally qualified as a social worker.

All the names used for participants are pseudonyms, but genders are consistent. The four leaving care workers have a range of professional backgrounds, but none are qualified social workers. This is increasingly common in leaving care services, and in this authority the team managers are also not social work qualified. The group was made up of two female workers and two males, spread across a wide age range (from Ben in his early 20s, to Diane in her 50s).

The four workers from the specialist adolescent service were less diverse: all four are female, with an age range from late 20s to early 40s. Again the workers have a range of professional backgrounds, and in this group two are qualified social workers (Isabel and Louise).

In this local authority, any requests to approach staff to take part in research are overseen by a research governance department. Having completed this process and obtained approval, recruitment of both groups for the project was relatively straightforward. The leaving care service is split into four teams (geographically) and

one of these teams was nominated by the service manager as an appropriate site for the research. I was invited to attend a team meeting to talk about the project and recruit participants. By speaking directly to the team myself, I hoped to mitigate the gatekeeping function of the managers as much as possible and reduce any pressure workers may feel to take part (or not). I was able to stress that participation was entirely voluntary and that only a small number of people were needed. Four workers were interested in taking part, they attended the focus group discussion and were subsequently interviewed. A fifth worker expressed an interest and was present for part of the focus group, but it proved impossible to make arrangements with her for an individual interview, and she eventually said that she could not follow this up due to the pressures of work.

Recruitment from the specialist adolescent service was far more selective, partly because my research is focussed on only a small area of their work and also because it is the organisation within which I also work. Again the service is split into four geographical areas. Within my own area I was able to use my knowledge of colleagues, including their likely interest in academic research and the young people they are working with. Having sought permission from their line managers, I directly approached two workers from my own area, who agreed to participate. I asked colleagues from other areas for recommendations and approached two workers. One line manager refused permission for his staff to take part, but I was able to recruit a fourth participant, again on a colleague's recommendation, and this was a worker who had very recently moved internally to my area. All initial approaches were made via e-mail rather than face to face, to allow people time to think about whether they wanted to take part and to make it easier for them to say no.

I had to consider how much information to give potential participants when approaching them about taking part in the project. Clearly they would need at least an overview of the subject of the research in order to make an informed decision about whether or not to take part. Providing only very limited information would enable me to access people's initial reactions and thoughts, whilst more detailed and specific explanation of the research question would needed to generate more considered and thought out responses. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches.

Too much information, added to what the potential participants may already know about my personal perspective on the work due to my previous professional experience and my current role, may encourage accounts rehearsed to tell me what respondents think I want to hear. On the other hand, providing too little information in advance risks putting people on the spot, creating discomfort and anxiety which is likely to limit their response. My research question is in some senses very general, and therefore this did not feel like too much of an issue. I wanted to explore how workers talk about their role. This meant that I could opt for a fairly general overview of the research, stressing the small scale and exploratory nature of the project. For the leaving care group, I provided this in written form and discussed it with them at their team meeting. For the workers from my own organisation, I e-mailed this information to potential participants when I approached them about taking part. This way participants were aware of what I was interested in, but did not have specific questions to prepare for. Had my question been about a particular aspect of the workers' experiences, this issue would have required more thought and reflection to ensure the possible impact of prior knowledge of the research themes on the data gathered was properly taken into account. I started each focus group discussion and individual interview by recapping the brief overview of the study, partly to 'reinforc[e] the interviewee's sense of competence' (Rubin and Rubin 2005, p126) reminding the participants of what I was interested in and reassuring them that they have the information needed to answer my research question.

The physical context of the focus groups and individual interviews (times and locations) were largely determined by practical concerns, and were specified by the participants. All chose to meet at their place of work, in a private meeting room, during their working day. Pole and Lampard (2002) highlight the importance of taking the physical context into account, and considering any possible impact on the participants' responses. For example, they suggest that interviewing someone within their place of work may tap into their professional persona, and draw on feelings of confidence and knowledge (Pole and Lampard 2002).

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This project was subject to the University of Sussex's process of ethical review (approved December 2013 – see Appendix A). There were only limited ethical considerations, given the nature of the research, but some issues did need to be considered, in particular participant confidentiality. Participants were asked to read and sign a consent form before the focus group, and also at the start of the individual interviews, with consent being confirmed at the end of the interview to ensure that it was informed i.e. they knew what data I had gathered. The consent form sets out the intended purpose of gathering the data and the measures in place to protect participants' confidentiality (see Appendix D). The fact that participants are known to each other means that there is potential for them to identify individuals' contributions in the final report. This potential is exacerbated by the use of focus groups, where views are necessarily being shared in a public context. The study design means that this cannot be avoided and therefore this needed to be acknowledged both in the consent form and verbally at the start of the focus groups.

Externally, it is unlikely that the participants' confidentiality will be compromised, because I have included only limited details of the workplaces in which the research is carried out. The teams are described in broad terms, giving only as much information as is needed in order to understand the findings in context. This has become slightly more problematic in my study because of my insider status. The fact that I work within this local authority, specifically within the specialist adolescent service (fieldwork site 2), does make the participants and their workplaces more easily identifiable. To some extent, this is unavoidable because my insider status is highly relevant to the study and needs to be acknowledged, but the size of the local authority mitigates against the identity of individual participants becoming obviously visible.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The first stage of the fieldwork in each location was to bring the respondents together in a focus group. Basic ground rules were agreed with the group and consent to record

the discussion was confirmed. I had mapped out four sections for the discussion, using as prompts a mixture of questions, an activity and a quote. I had a fairly structured plan prepared, but in fact both groups were able to sustain the discussion with only minimal prompting. The discussions were recorded digitally and I later transcribed them. (The guides used for the focus groups are included as Appendices E and F).

Focus groups were used as a starting point because of their two major strengths. Firstly this method facilitates an orientation to the landscape, enabling breadth of coverage of the significant themes. As suggested by Crabtree et al (1993) using focus groups as an initial stage of generating data makes use of their potential to generate a wider range of ideas:

> Focus group interviews use group interaction to generate data and gather insights into a research topic that would be less available without the interaction found in the group (p144).

This was particularly useful as a starting point for a research question like mine, which is exploratory and reliant on being able to access respondents' perspectives. The focus group discussions enabled participants to raise issues and themes which are key for them.

The second strength of focus groups which I was able to exploit in this study, is their capacity to access ideas and opinions which are publicly shared within the groups. Michell (1999) suggests that focus groups are a 'productive way of gaining access to well rehearsed public knowledge' and that they allow some understanding of how social interactions function to construct and maintain this. This is particularly relevant in the context of my research question which aims to explore how the respondents talk about their shared professional practice. Using two methods also allows some comparison to be made between the negotiated and shared public understandings of the group, and the private insights of individuals, aspects of which may be silenced or expressed differently in order to maintain the consensus of the group. The focus groups enabled me to understand the organisational norm for these two workplaces. In Alvesson's terms they establish the 'cultural script' for talking about the role (Alvesson 2003). The extent to which these scripts are followed or deviated from in the individual interviews gives some insight into the ways in which workers align

themselves with, or differentiate themselves from, the organisations within which they work.

The decision to draw focus group participants from the same work teams was largely pragmatic, determined not least by the practicalities of getting four workers in the same room at the same time. There are, however, specific advantages to making use of a pre-existing group. Several researchers note that this type of focus group is useful where the intention is to create a space in which professionals are being asked to talk about what they do, and to discuss concepts which have specific meaning in the context of their work. Although drawing the group from one organisation gives homogeneity on one level, there will be differences between the participants in age, professional qualifications, length of experience etc. The focus group process should enable exploration of which aspects of the concept are shared and where there are points of difference (Clavering and McLaughlin 2007, Frankland and Bloor 1999).

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Analysis of the data from each focus group was used to identify the themes which seemed to be key for this group of workers. Following the themes up in individual interviews makes use of this second method's potential to explore ideas in greater depth. Individual interviews lasted between 50 and 75 minutes, and were digitally recorded (with the participants' consent). The recordings were later transcribed: initially I had intended to do this myself, but after producing the first two transcripts it became clear that this was too time consuming, and so I employed a professional to transcribe the remaining six interviews (checking the written transcripts against the recording and amending them myself as necessary).

In line with my underlying methodology, the interviews needed to be flexible enough to respond to new ideas introduced by interviewees, and therefore I used an interview guide rather than a fixed script of questions. The interviews were designed in line with Rubin and Rubin's model of responsive interviewing, to aim for 'depth, detail, nuance and richness of data' (Rubin and Rubin 2005, p.129). This model aims to exploit the full potential of using a qualitative interview as a research tool, with different types of

questions used to access different types of responses. Thus the interview guide is structured around a small number of main questions, thought out in advance to provide the information which will answer the research question. Within the interview, probes are used in various ways to guide the interviewee. In response to themes introduced by the interviewees, follow up questions allow clarification and exploration of ideas which may be new or different to those expected or allowed for in the interview guide (Rubin and Rubin 2005). The process relies on being open to themes raised or taken up by the interviewee, with the structure being flexible enough to pursue these whilst also maintaining focus on the research question. This fits with my overall pragmatic approach to designing the interview guide as suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). I needed to maintain a balance between allowing the interviewees to speak on issues they felt were important, whilst also ensuring the interview produced data which would enable me to answer the research question. There is a risk of the interview becoming a general conversation, which may be very interesting but may also generate vast amounts of raw data which does not help to answer the research question. This is particularly important in a small scale project such as this, which due to its limited scope and timescale is basing its findings on just one round of interviewing (rather than being able to complete an initial analysis, refine the questions and then return to interviewees to clarify or expand on themes raised).

Having developed an idea of the type of interview I wanted to conduct, I constructed an interview guide to identify the specific themes I needed to cover with respondents, and some possible questions to access these (see Appendices G and H). Kvale and Brinkmann's model suggests a separation between the research question itself and the questions asked of interviewees. Designing an interview guide involves a translation into 'questions that could provide thematic knowledge and also contribute dynamically to a natural conversational flow' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p132).

This highlights the importance of a stage in the study design which links the research question (what I ultimately want to know) to the actual interview questions (how can I get that information from the subject). Rubin and Rubin also point out that the interviewer cannot just ask the interviewee the research question. Their model

involves a process of translation from abstract concept into concrete questions, which the respondent will understand and will be able to answer. Deciding which questions to ask in order to produce information which can answer the overall research question is reliant to some extent on the interviewer's background knowledge of the topic. Some appreciation of the context is needed if the interviewer is to understand what the participants are likely to know (Rubin and Rubin 2005). This is line with the overall methodological approach of the project, allowing my position as an insider to inform the design of the interviews.

3.3 Analysis and interpretation

'THERE IS MORE THAN ONE GOOD WAY OF UNDERSTANDING SOMETHING' (ALVESSON 2003, P.25)

I have used aspects of three different analytical approaches to make sense of the data. My aim is not to produce three separate interpretations of the data, or to explore the question via a hierarchy of analytical layers. Rather I have tried to use the different perspectives as a three-dimensional framework within which to locate the data. Using a combination of analytical models in this way has enabled me to interpret the material in a way which is consistent with my underlying methodology, exploring and exploiting the multifaceted nature of interview data.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, my thinking has been underpinned by Alvesson's model of 'reflexive pragmatism' which suggests exploring interview data from different perspectives (Alvesson 2003). This physical sense of moving around the data was prevalent throughout the process of analysis. The different models were not applied as discrete steps in a linear process, thematic followed by narrative, followed by voice-centred relational (VCR) analysis. I started with a rough mapping of the data thematically, before exploring the data in more detail using VCR. Stories emerged from the VCR analysis, which seemed to be best understood using narrative analysis techniques. However the stories also grouped around similar themes, and the ways in which participants positioned themselves within the stories could be further explored using VCR. Overall the process of making sense of the data involved moving between the three analytical approaches, as I explored the data from different perspectives.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to map out the broad landscape of significant themes emerging from the data. Data from the interviews was analysed inductively, i.e. by looking at what was said in the interviews and drawing conclusions from this. This was appropriate because the research starts from an exploratory question, and there was no intent to use the interview data to prove or disprove a preconceived hypothesis. Analysing data inductively relies on the researcher not speculating on what the

findings might be, or starting the process with categories in mind. It has an impact on the way in which interview questions are set: for analysis to be truly inductive, questions cannot be asked with specific answers in mind, or worded in such a way as to produce specific types or orders of response. The researcher must maintain an openness to being surprised, both by the respondents and by new interpretations which arise during the analysis phase (Corbin and Holt 2005).

Research based entirely on naturalistic principles would necessarily use a grounded theory model of coding data, starting from a completely open framework such that each line or phrase of interview data is coded and re-coded through successive phases of analysis (Corbin and Holt 2005). This contrasts with models such as Rubin and Rubin's responsive interviewing, in which the interview data as a whole is examined together with other literature in the field, to establish a typology. The interview data is then coded according to these categories. In this project I have used a hybrid model, which is appropriate for small scale and focussed interview data. The interview data was coded without reference to pre-conceived categories, but once significant themes and concepts had been identified, the data were re-coded in line with these, effectively collapsing many separate coding categories into fewer, broader concepts (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

The data from the focus group discussions was analysed thematically using this model, to generate a set of themes to be incorporated in the interview guide. Decisions about how and at what stage the interview data was to be analysed and interpreted reflect the underlying methodology of the project. Some elements of 'emergent design' were incorporated, albeit on a very small scale due to the limited scope of the project. This makes full use of the researcher's ability to interpret data as it is gathered, responding to themes introduced by the respondent and following these into areas which may not initially have been the intended focus of the question (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The process of analysis started within the interview, and there was an attempt to pick out and confirm key themes and issues with each interviewee. The early interpretation of the interviews was used to shape subsequent interviews, such that the questions changed slightly from the first interview to the second, and then again to the third and fourth. Whilst this is undoubtedly helpful in a small exploratory project such as this,

allowing me to test and refine the questions, it does mean that the interview data is not directly comparable. When analysing the responses, I had to be aware that I was not looking at answers to the same or even, in some cases, similar questions. This puts more emphasis on a rigorous and iterative analysis process to ensure that both similarities and differences between the underlying meanings of the interview data are fully explored.

By setting out to interpret the respondents' interpretation of their socially constructed role, my research question raises the concept of the 'double hermeneutic'. This is defined by Giddens as inevitable where research:

> deals with a universe which is already constituted within frames of meaning by social actors themselves, and reinterprets these within its own theoretical schemes. (Giddens 1993, p170)

The respondents in a research study can be understood as social actors, whose actions, beliefs and behaviours are both influenced by, and have influence on, the social structures they occur within. Giddens argued that the researcher is in a position to understand and explain how the respondents are making sense of this better than the respondents themselves. In the context of analysing interview data, this generates a similar perspective to the eighth of Alvesson's conceptualisations. Alvesson suggests that interviewees are both constituted by and adding to social discourses. This perspective is particularly interesting in relation to the way my respondents talk about the construction of their role. Several of the leaving care workers conflate the job description mandated in the legislation with their professional identity: *I'm advice and guidance* is a comment which comes up in three of the four interviews.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

I continued the process of analysis and interpretation by using some aspects of a narrative analytical approach. This enabled me to explore the data from a different perspective, using a narrative approach as a 'counterweight to [the] reductionism' of the thematic coding (Reissman and Quinney 2005, p398). At its simplest, this involves centring the analysis on the stories within the data, exploring structure, plot and

purpose. Narrative analysis covers a wide diversity of approaches: the aim may be to develop a coherent narrative from the smaller episodes within the interview, or to build a 'typical' narrative from the various stories told by different respondents (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). For a study design such as mine, narrative analysis is applied to discrete fragments of the interview data, which appear to be stories. As Riessman (2001) points out, decisions about what constitutes a story are often complex and this separating out of 'narrative' is integral to the process of analysing the data. Some respondents may signal the start and finish of stories by using obvious entrance and exit talk:

> *An example of that is a young person I took from a colleague...*
> *(Andy, site 1, interview)*
>
> *Because I'm thinking of this one particular family that it was very much...*
> *(Julia, site 2, interview)*
>
> *...sorry, that was a bit random, but it's just reminded me.*
> *(Louise, site 2, interview)*

Others move in and out of stories in a more fluid way. Narrative analysis explores these different uses and positioning of stories within responses. Some respondents use discrete, clearly delineated examples to illustrate their answers, whilst others use descriptive accounts to answer the question. These different uses of narrative can be explored further by considering how the speaker relates to the story being told. Koven (2002) discusses a theoretical framework within which to analyse where speakers position themselves in the narrative. Her model reflects her belief that 'speakers enact multiple role perspectives' (p213) such that within a story the speaker can perform or inhabit a role from different positions: that of their current self, their past self (at the time of the events being spoken about) and that of themselves as the narrator telling the plot of the story.

VOICE-CENTRED RELATIONAL ANALYSIS (VCR)

This forms the third axis of the analytical framework and is the approach used in the most detailed way to analyse my data. Voice-centred relational analysis was initially devised as a guide for reading and listening to interview data, and has also been known

as the listening guide method. This approach was first developed by Gilligan and others (Brown and Gilligan 1992). The underpinning ideas arose from feminist researchers, exploring approaches to data which allowed respondents' voices to be heard. It was 'developed as a feminist analytical approach to qualitative psychological research' (Pinto 2004, p83). Gilligan's initial model has been expanded and adapted by Mauthner and Doucet (1998).

My decision to explore this approach arose from a discussion with my supervisor, during which I was trying to work out how I wanted to make sense of the data I had collected. Interestingly, although I knew nothing about the model before I followed up this recommendation, when I reviewed my pilot project I realised that I had commented on aspects of my data using VCR principles, noting the use of pronouns to identify with or separate from the content. This reinforced my view that this framework is a good fit for the way in which I am thinking about the meaning and interpretation of my data. VCR is consistent with the underlying methodology of the project, reflecting my aim to produce findings which go beyond organising and presenting the respondents' words. This strength of the VCR model is noted by Mauthner and Doucet, who state that it:

> Represents an attempt to stay, as far as it is possible, with the respondents' multi-layered voices, views and perspectives rather than simply and quickly slotting their words into...categories [and it] delays the reductionistic stage of data analysis when transcripts are cut up into themes and aggregated (Mauthner and Doucet 1998, pp. 134 and 130).

Mauthner and Doucet's model of VCR is based on four distinct readings of the transcripts of the interview data:

* The first reading is of the story as a whole. The analysis is descriptive, mapping the overall arc of the interview and paying attention to any inconsistencies and contradictions. This stage also requires the researcher to consider her own reaction as a listener, to reflect on points of difference and similarity.

* The second reading is listening to how the speaker represents and locates themselves. Close attention is paid to the use of pronouns: when are I, my, we, our used, and when does this shift to you, yours, they, their?

∗ The ways in which interpersonal relationships are talked about is the focus of the third reading. The researcher is listening for descriptions of interactions and relationships between the interviewee and other people.

∗ The fourth stage is listening for how the speaker positions themselves within the wider cultural and social context.

Within a VCR approach the role of the researcher in the interpretation of data is made visible. Analysis is an explicit process, using the reflexivity of the researcher as a key factor in making sense of the data. 'It compels the researcher to confront [her] own difference from and identification with the narrator as the story is told' (Byrne et al 2009, p68). The ways in which this approach fits with my overall thinking about the reflexive nature of the study are explored in the final section of this chapter.

3.4 Dynamics of the interaction between researcher and researched

Earlier in this chapter I have described the interviewees and their respective organisations , including an account of the process of recruitment and practical arrangements to facilitate the research project. In this final section I have considered the specific interaction between this researcher and these respondents. I have explored the interplay of power dynamics between the researcher and the participants, to reflect on what it means for these workers to talk to this researcher about the work they do.

POSITIONING MYSELF AS THE RESEARCHER

Discussion of my decision to use the VCR model of analysis begins to raise questions about the positioning and voice of the researcher within the project. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, naturalistic approaches draw on the researcher's prior knowledge and understanding of the issues being explored. Although my professional experience in this area of work could therefore be interpreted as an advantage, it does raise questions about the extent to which I was an insider researcher, and the implications of this both on the data and also on my interpretations of it. As Drake puts it, 'insider researchers often choose their project as a result of several years of experience of working with the issues' (Drake 2010, p98).

My position in relation to the participants and their professional roles is different in respect of the two groups. It is some time since I worked in a leaving care team, and I did not personally know any of the participants in this group prior to starting the research project. They were, however, all aware that I have previously worked for a long period in this field. In contrast, I work quite closely with three of the four workers from the specialist adolescent service because this is the organisation I am currently working in, and I have a consultancy role in relation to these workers. The fourth participant from this group works for the same organisation in a different geographical location and I had had only limited contact with her prior to starting the research. There were therefore quite complex threads of separation and belonging positioning

me within the two groups, and in relation to the different participants. Rowan (1981) describes qualitative research as a cycle of withdrawal and engagement. The researcher needs to adopt a dual position in relation to the object of study, maintaining the ability to move between theory and the practical experience of doing the research. Rowan describes this as a struggle to maintain a focus on both the wood and the trees (p116) and this felt very familiar through the process. Reflecting on the experience, I wonder whether the complexity of my insider/outsider status actually made it easier to maintain this dual focus. My position was changeable with the two different groups and with different participants. Repeatedly reassessing and repositioning myself within the process forced me to be aware continually of my perspective.

The implications of the extent to which the researcher is an insider can be thought of along two axes. There is an impact on the way in which the researcher engages with the content of the research, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and there is also an impact on the interpersonal engagement between participants and researcher. My professional experience and identity is likely to have had an impact on the way in which respondents talk about their work. There is a broad shared understanding: the starting point is that I know something about what they do, and have access to similar specialist shared knowledge. Interview questions can be structured in such a way as to level the playing field, bringing this shared background knowledge into clearer view. In the context of talking to people about their work, this might mean, for example, asking respondents to imagine they were explaining something to a complete outsider who knows nothing about their professional field.

Platt (1981) discusses some of the particular challenges involved in interviewing colleagues. For the researcher, if there is an existing relationship with the interviewee which will continue outside the context of the research project, it becomes far more important that the interview runs smoothly and that it is generally a positive social interaction. More fundamentally, Platt also suggests that interviewees are more likely to want to help a colleague than an unknown interviewer, and may be more likely to attempt to give 'better' answers which theorise and co-produce the answer to the research questions. Scourfield (2001) also reflects on the tendency of certain

interviewees to refine their responses, rather than providing 'raw' data. He suggests that interviewing workers from talking professions presents particular challenges due to the similarity between the research interview and professional interactions. Their professional role and skills makes it likely that these workers are comfortable with the concept of talking about and reflecting on what they do, which can make them competent and articulate interviewees. However, in their work interviews and conversations are generally used to gather information for assessment or evaluation purposes, and this underlying concept of what an interview is 'for' may lead them to make assumptions about the purpose of the research interview. Believing that the researcher is judging or appraising the information they provide may well have an impact on what respondents share with the interviewer and how they frame it (Scourfield 2001). Scourfield was making this point specifically about social workers as research participants, but I think that the underlying premise would hold true for all the respondents in my study. This tendency of some respondents to second guess what the researcher wanted to hear is evident at several points in the data, and I have reflected on this further in Chapter Five.

Going beyond the interviewee's desire to respond in the way that they believe the researcher wants them to, this also picks up on key themes of Alvesson's model, relating to the performative aspects of the interview situation. Respondents are presenting themselves in a particular way which may be real or an idealised version, and what they say will be carefully judged to be consistent with this chosen identity. This may be signalled explicitly ("I'm the sort of person who...") or may be implicit in the way that the respondent speaks about themselves. Hall (2001) also observes that formal interviews about professional roles will tend to produce an 'official account' of the work: what people say they do is not always the same as what they actually do.

More generally this starts to raise questions about what it means to ask people about the work that they do. Inevitably the process of reflecting on their practice and explaining it to a researcher brings into consciousness aspects of dissonance, where what they actually do is not in line with what they would like to do or feel should be done. This is particularly audible in the focus group with the leaving care service, which raised feelings of sadness and frustration at several points in the discussion.

DIMENSIONS OF POWER

As in any interview situation, there was a dynamic power balance between myself and the interviewees. At the start, even during the process of arranging times to meet with the participants, I was conscious of my dependency on the goodwill of these workers. I was asking them to give up their time and make an effort for my personal benefit, and for a purely academic exercise. The fieldwork stage of the project was characterised by my sense that respondents were doing me a favour by taking part. My construction of the relationship was very much with the power vested in the interviewees who were helping me out. Reflecting on the process of conducting the interviews, I wonder whether this had more of an impact than I was aware of at the time. As an insider to the organisation, I was already subject to Platt's suggestion that it was important for this to be a comfortable social encounter – how much was this exacerbated by my underlying feeling of being beholden to the participants? I may well have adopted a more conciliatory manner, striving to make interviewees feel comfortable and avoiding any challenge or questioning of the responses, even where they clearly contradict themselves.

However, in a wider sense, and in a way which has far more impact on the analysis of the data, there is a balance of power underlying a formal interview, in which the interviewer is very much more in control. Decisions about which issues are discussed and what questions are asked (and, just as importantly, not asked) rest with the interviewer, as does the responsibility to direct the progress of the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Even using a responsive interviewing model, ostensibly to allow me to pursue issues as they were raised by the interviewee, the interviewer can control which themes are picked up and which are ignored. The interviewer's response will give clues as to what is important or relevant, and equally what is not of interest. In his discussion of the importance of recognising and acknowledging this power differential, Kvale (2006) also suggests that there is a potential for researchers to exploit the rapport they are able to build with the interviewee:

> The interviewer may, with a charming, gentle and client-centred manner, create a close personal encounter where the subjects unveil their private worlds (p482).

 This may lead subjects to disclose more than they intend, or would want to put into the public domain. There is a similarity between the approaches of qualitative interviewing and therapeutic interviewing, which creates the potential for the researcher to manipulate subjects, using the illusion of a close trusting relationship to bypass normal defence mechanisms (Kvale 2006). Given that I personally knew some of the interviewees, this was an issue I had to take into account.

Once the data has been gathered, the power shifts firmly to the researcher, who has a 'monopoly of interpretation' (Kvale 2006, p485). The researcher makes decisions about how the data is analysed, what is deemed to be significant or relevant, and ultimately has the final say about how the data is reported. Reflecting on my experience of making these decisions, this has created a slight discomfort in respect of two participants from the leaving care group, as I am very conscious that the finished product will not satisfy what they had hoped the outcome would be. From my earliest discussions with this group, two participants were very keen to take part because they felt that it was a way of being heard. In the focus group and then in the individual interviews, it became clear that both respondents felt that they were not listened to by decision makers and both have clear ideas about what needs to change in their organisation. As I wrote about the findings from the study, I was conscious of a feeling that these individuals will be disappointed that their data has been used to explore a far less concrete and practical question. My experience leads me to wonder whether practitioner research may be more prone to these uncomfortable questions about the different agendas of researcher and researched, and indeed may be more open to challenges about the point of doing the research at all. It is possible that participants may have higher expectations that there will be concrete, practice-related outcomes from practitioner research than from studies carried out by a researchers solely identifying as academic outsiders.

It is possible to design research in such a way as to reduce the researcher's influence over the interpretation of data. Naturalistic models would aim to generate negotiated outcomes, and would include a phase of 'member checking' in which the researcher verifies their interpretation of the data with the participants. Initially I had intended this to be a part of the study design, but as the research question evolved, it became

increasingly clear that what I am interested in is *how* workers talk about their work. The study does not aim to present what the respondents said, but rather to explore what they said within a range of different frameworks of understanding. The findings are not a representation of the participants' views, they are my interpretation of how the participants position themselves in the landscape (actual and theoretical) within which they work.

Chapter Four: How do workers talk about their role in relation to the organisations within which they work ?

OVERVIEW

In focus groups and individual interviews, workers talked to me about their role in supporting vulnerable young people through the transition from childhood to adulthood. I have used three different analytical frameworks to make sense of the data and to consider the research question from different angles. Thematic analysis gives an overview of what workers talk about: what is important, which themes run through different discussions and interviews. Narrative and voice-centred relational analyses highlight how workers talk about themselves and their work. This multi-layered analysis of the data suggests that the participants talk about their role from two distinct perspectives: firstly in relation to the organisations within which they work, and secondly in relation to the young people they support.

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the first of these perspectives, exploring the question of how workers talk about and position themselves in relation to the organisations and systems within which they work.

The first section considers the structural framework within which the participants are working: the factors which limit and restrict the work, but also contain and scaffold it. In common with most areas of work, there are constraints of time due to high workloads. The ways in which services are organised and delivered, including bureaucracy, processes and paperwork, are also talked about as having a significant impact on the work that is done. Workers acknowledge the wider context of the external systems interacting with their own, which have an impact on the way they work.

Another axis of the context is time. Eligibility for services is determined by age, meaning that much of the work is being done to a fixed deadline. In the second section, I have explored how workers talk about this. The stories about their work with young people are of 'moving on' and the language is physical, dynamic. The ages used as these fixed points are also a point of reflection for the participants, and

analysis of the data starts to draw out how workers are thinking about the young people with whom they work in the context of the mainstream cohort of their peers. Discussion about preparing young people to move on and to manage without services raises the question of what the end point looks like: how are workers making sense of what independence or adulthood is going to look like for their young people ?

The final section of this chapter considers how workers position themselves in relation to their organisations. There is some talk about shared values and perspectives, a sense of team culture. However, there is also a tendency for workers to define their practice in contrast to colleagues', drawing attention to different approaches. Both groups of participants work in multi-disciplinary teams, which raises questions about how they manage and make sense of difference within their organisations.

4.1 Constraints of context

LITERAL, CONCRETE RESTRICTIONS

All the participants talk about practical, physical restrictions on the work they do. In common with much of the research evidence, high caseloads and a corresponding pressure on time is a dominant theme in several of the interviews.

> *The caseload is far too high. I'll tell you honestly, I listen to other people saying it and think "Oh shut up about bloody caseloads – they're not going to lower it". But it is... We just want to spend more time with our young people.*
> *(Diane, site 1, interview)*

> *I'm only one person with two hands and 25 young people.*
> *(Ben, site 1, interview)*

> *We don't have that sort of time that we can give, and so the amount of work that we can actually do means that they don't get a consistent package...we can't do it all for them, we don't have time to do it all...we're already at our capacity of what we're coping with.*   *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

> *With all the best will in the world...you physically haven't got the time in the day.*   *(Claire, site 1, interview)*

These comments echo the findings of several research studies, in which workers cite the pressure on their time as having a direct influence on their practice (for example Rogers 2011, Tilbury et al 2011, Dixon 2006). Workers describe being forced to make decisions about priorities, compromising and curtailing the direct one to one work they are able to do with young people. One result is that those young people doing relatively well get far less time and attention than their more chaotic peers. This point is made in the focus group and all four interviews with workers from the leaving care service and is consistent with the findings of the research studies noted above.

> *I've had to prioritise, and my really well behaved ones haven't even been contacted by me for about four weeks...It's not fair. And they'll say "I don't see my social worker". And the truth is they don't.*   *(Diane, site 1, interview)*

> *Given the case load, there's no way...if they were all chaotic you couldn't handle it.*   *(Claire, site 1, interview)*

There is a marked difference between the two groups in the way the pressure of workload is talked about. It is a far more dominant theme with the leaving care workers (in the focus group and the individual interviews), perhaps unsurprisingly,

given that their average caseload is twice that of the specialist adolescent service. The group from the specialist adolescent service acknowledge multiple competing demands on their time, but their talk is of how they manage this, how they prioritise different aspects of the work and how, in some cases, the time pressures could be used to their (and the young person's) advantage. Both Isabel and Kate relate examples of occasions when they were not able to respond immediately to a young person, due to another demand on their time. In both examples, the time between the young person contacting them and them being able to respond was enough to allow the young person at least to start taking action to resolve the problem.

In contrast, the leaving care workers talk of struggling, of high levels of stress and worker burn out. Two interviewees in particular express a degree of despair about the possibility of ever managing the work expected of them:

> *The frustration and the tears and the time off that people are having with stress is unbelievable. And it's not fair.* (Diane, site 1, interview)

> *It's hard to understand what they actually expect you to do as a worker.* (Ben, site 1, interview)

Some interviewees also make references to a lack of resources other than just time. The leaving care workers (but not the specialist adolescent service) make numerous comments along the lines of *it all comes down to money* or *we don't have the funding for that*. However, it seems that many of these concerns about financial issues are actually still to do with workload and time. Workers want the service to be better resourced so that they would have more staff, and therefore fewer young people on their caseloads.

The only other resource mentioned commonly was housing for young people. Several workers express concerns that they are restricted by the types of supported housing available, some of which they feel is not ideal or appropriate for young people.

BARRIERS INTRINSIC TO THE ORGANISATION

All the participants talk to some extent about constraining aspects of the ways in which their own organisations function and deliver services. The focus group discussion with workers in the specialist adolescent service is particularly interesting in this respect. Their local authority is one of those which does not routinely offer looked after child status to homeless 16/17 year olds, instead delivering support services (including housing) under the remit of the Child in Need legislation. This means that these young people are reliant on mainstream benefits, rather than being financially supported by the local authority as looked after children. In the focus group, workers reflect on the impact this has on young people.

> *I do think that those young people would massively benefit from looked after child status in the sense of they won't get sanctioned every 5 minutes, because actually the responsibility of funding payments to them comes through Children's Services.* *(Julia, site 2, focus group)*

As well as the financial disadvantages, the group acknowledge the extended eligibility for support for care leavers (to 21, or beyond) whilst their own service has far more limited responsibilities post 18 and withdraws when young people are 19. The discussion echoes some of the concerns raised by the research of Crellin and Pona (2015) that homeless young people's rights and entitlements are not fully protected without looked after child status. However the discussion creates a more nuanced picture of the realities behind the two legal mandates. The group concludes that there were obvious structural advantages to looked after child status, but the actual experience of the young people receiving the support may not be any better.

> *Isabel: The actual face to face support that we offer I don't feel is any different to what a social worker would offer.*
> *Julia: I think we probably offer more because we meet with them more regularly.*
> *Louise: I don't know that they get much more being a looked after child, to be quite honest.* *(Site 2, focus group)*

Organisational priorities, bureaucracy and paperwork are all cited as restrictions and barriers to the work people wanted to do. Ben in particular talks at length about the different priorities of workers and managers, describing an almost adversarial culture in which he was having to battle with management on behalf of young people.

Management just want their tick boxes met...we've got to do so much admin work which: 1. Young people aren't even interested in. 2. They don't really want to engage with it. And 3. Most of the support they need is all practical and it's hands on one to one... And I can never do that with my young people because I always get brought back in, saying I'm behind on my work. (Ben, site 1, interview)

Ben's comments echo the findings of Winter et al's research exploring social worker's communication with children, which suggest that:

While there are aspirations towards more face-to-face practice...these sometimes struggle to find traction because of contextual factors where bureaucratic requirements dominate (Winter et al 2016, pp.16-17).

The organisational definition of the 'work' is clearly different from Ben's view of the support young people need. This strong feeling of separation from 'management' is a feature of three of the four interviews with leaving care workers. The VCR analysis highlights a clear split between 'we' and 'they' which is illustrated explicitly in one short sentence from Andy, talking about the difficulties of engaging young people who have had multiple changes of placements whilst in care:

*And you wonder why, or **they** wonder why, why they can't maintain anything. (Andy, site 1, interview)*

This explicit awareness of the organisational hierarchy is reflected in the language used. Interviewees talk of pleading, struggling and fighting with their managers. In contrast, workers from the specialist adolescent service talk much less about management, and what they do say is expressed in far less combative terms.

Organisational processes are also discussed by some interviewees. One interviewee in particular expresses quite ambivalent views about the case management rules in place in her organisation. Louise expresses frustration that the organisational requirements do not allow for flexibility or discretion in determining the level of contact with young people. The organisation has adopted an intensive support model, which she feels actively prevents workers from planning and managing positive gradual endings.

There's just a process that we have to see them once a week, and that contact has to be on there and you have to see them... I think sometimes we're blinded by process... That requirement by management to see them once a week does not encourage practitioners to think outside the box and wean them off.

However, later in the interview, still talking about endings, she expresses her concern that workers are not given enough direction, or sufficient frameworks within which to think about their practice.

> *You get wrapped up in your work, you've got a job to do. You don't sit back and reflect on what you've done or where you're going sometimes, because you might not feel like you've got the time to do that, you're going through a process...I think, like with everything, the only way you can enforce it is through process and practice guidelines. You know, that's the only way people take it on board.* (Louise, site 2, interview)

The need for better use of processes is also picked up by Diane, who expresses her frustration that the pathway planning process, a key statutory requirement for leaving care services, is not more robust and central to the work.

> *I don't know that there's one single one of my young people that even know what a pathway plan is. And that's wrong.* (Diane, site 1, interview)

Workers express some ambivalence about organisational processes, describing them as simultaneously part of both problem and solution. There seems to be a dual role for process and bureaucracy, as constraining but also shaping, containing and standardising practice.

INTERACTION WITH WIDER SYSTEMS

The participants also talk about wider issues which have an impact on their work, reflecting on the external systems which impose pressures and constraints. Several interviewees acknowledge the recent changes in benefits legislation and the general climate of financial austerity.

> *I'm noticing now how punitive the benefits system has become. If you're supporting someone to sign on for JSA it's nigh on impossible. I'd even find it hard actually, if I had to sign on.* (Andy, site 1, interview)

> *I think there's a really fine line now with people who perhaps a few years ago could have claimed income support quite easily...whereas now it's just harder.* (Kate, site 2, interview)

> *There's no crisis loans, just this hardship thing, which takes forever to get anything out of. So now it's food banks...but even that's a pain, because...you've got to fill out the forms and get the slip. And once they've done all that, they give you what – well I had one young person said they got given a few tins of beans and a packet of dry spaghetti.* (Andy, site 1, interview)

Participants acknowledge the wider context in which they are working, the current agenda of austerity, in both its practical and ideological senses. However they seem to be resigned to this as a fact: there is no talk of opposition or taking on an advocacy role to challenge harsh or punitive systems. Instead the underlying tone is accepting and pragmatic. These findings are interesting in the light of research exploring the changing value base of social work, which suggests that the profession is becoming less radical, more focussed on changing the individual than on changing society (for example Woodcock and Dixon 2005, Stevens et al 2012).

The ways in which workers position themselves and their organisation within the overall landscape of services was interesting in some cases. In particular, Andy reflects on his previous experiences of working within leaving care services, when a charitable organisation was contracted to provide the service on behalf of the local authority. He talks at length about the ways in which his work (and the way he thinks about it) have changed since the local authority brought these services back in-house.

> *You could have the conversation with the young people to say "we are not part of the council"... And I quite liked that because you had a separate identity to being part of the system, the machine if you like.*   *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

Kate (from the specialist adolescent service) also reflects on the usefulness of being able to position herself outside of systems largely perceived as negative by young people.

> *That does make my job easier, to go in and say "I'm not a social worker, and this is what I can do". We tend to get a, sort of, slightly better reaction. Then you get told all of the problems they've had with different services. (Kate, site 2, interview)*

4.2 Support is mandated by age rather than need

MOVING YOUNG PEOPLE ON: THE IMPACT OF FIXED END POINTS

All of the interviewees acknowledge that they are working in a time-boundaried landscape.   Age is the overriding criteria used to determine what services young people are entitled to, and there are fixed points in their lives (16, 18, 21) which mark fundamental changes in how services relate to them (and how they are expected to relate to services). When the interviewees talk about their practice, there is a shared sense that they are working against a ticking clock. All are conscious of the passing of their allotted time with each young person.

> [Talking about a young person who is repeating a cycle of making small progress, then slipping back] *And the difficulty is, you know, with that, by the time it does sink in will it be too late for him to still be open to us...*
> *Interviewer: Will we be able to stay with him long enough?*
> *Yeah – until it all clicks.*   (Isabel, site 2, interview)

> *And the thing is, we're the end result. So that's it, they're off...They're off, that's it, we close them.*   (Diane, site 1, interview)

> *The rules totally change when they turn 18, and we're not able to do an awful lot...That fills me with more anxiety because we're, sort of, stuck.*
> *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

> *Because once you're over 21, it's not there anymore...if you're going to keep pulling strokes like this you'll find yourself in some horrible....[tails off]*
> *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

The ways in which interviewees talk about age criteria and the cut off point between children's and adults' services is largely consistent with the findings of wider research. In particular the focus group discussion with the leaving workers echoes Mayock's suggestion that fixed age criteria are an attempt to 'impos[e] structure through bureaucratic certainty' (Mayock 2013, p456). There is some debate about the huge variability in young people's maturity and capacity to cope, and a general acceptance that age is not a good indicator.   However, the discussion gets tangled in the impracticalities of eligibility based solely on individual needs, with Ben commenting that:

> *you can't treat them as individuals – well we do, but you can't.*
> *(Ben, site 1, focus group)*

The use of pronouns illustrates the way in which Ben is struggling to define his own practice (and that of his immediate colleagues) within the wider context. 'You' denotes the abstract, what is acceptable or possible within the system – whilst 'we' demonstrates that Ben situates his own practice outside of these confines. The use of 'we' rather than 'I' is also interesting. This may imply shared values within the team or the organisation, or may be because the comment was made in a group context, with Ben articulating the group's view to me as an outsider.

The fact that their work has a fixed end point does seem to be a significant factor, shaping the way in which interviewees talk about their work. Two broad themes have emerged, with the distinction between them dependent on the particular circumstances of the young person. For some, there is a sense of treading water: workers describe offering support which acts as a sticking plaster, holding things together for young people for the time that they are within the service's remit.

> *Unfortunately there's that magic figure of 21 and if they're not up to much, doing anything constructive, that's it. You know, what can you do ? There's no happy ending basically.* *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

> *There'll be some young people...no matter what you do for them they're not going to be ready, we do have some of those. They don't want to engage, they're just reckless and they're on a reckless downward spiral and we can't bring them back up.* *(Diane, site 1, interview)*

> *When they're getting to 21 is when they're starting to make progress – actual, actual progress. They're getting there and you close them. It's like Nooooo.... It does make me feel like we've failed as a service.* *(Ben, site 1, interview)*

There is a sense that services did what they could during the time young people were eligible for them, but that for some young people this is not enough and is not sustained long enough to effect lasting changes or progress. The service's obligations are measured by time and age, rather than the outcomes for the young person. Unsurprisingly, interviewees express a degree of hopelessness about the potential impact of their work in this context.

Julia is the one interviewee who takes a more philosophical view when talking about closing cases and withdrawing support, despite feeling that the aims had not been achieved.

> *But it's one of those jobs where you don't ever know the impact you've had...what we do, we're just a little dent...we just make a tiny impact, a little imprint, and then they move on, and so do we to the next young person.*
> *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

In contrast, talking about other young people, interviewees reflect on the fixed time constraints very differently. For some young people it seems to create a definite sense of driving forward in the way workers talk about their role. Interviewees use dynamic language in their accounts, explicitly talking about 'moving young people on'. There is a feeling of wanting young people to use the support services as a bridge from dependent childhood to independent adulthood.

> *We should only be thought of as temporary in someone's life really.*
> *(Louise, site 2, interview)*

> *Obviously as a client group they are more damaged than most. So to then be thrust into the big bad world – but the thing that's important about the role is that you have to make them aware that at 18 that it is a big bad world, you know what I mean ? You've got 3 years of this bit of support...but after that you're on your own.*   *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

> *I feel like when they're getting close to 21 everybody is like 'Oh quick quick quick, get this sorted out so we can close them'.*   *(Diane, site 1, interview)*

> *I think that's really important for them to learn to take responsibility, become independent, because once we've finished that's it. And if we've just rescued them every time, how have we helped them? We haven't. We might have helped them for like six months, and then we expect them to go out in to the world and just get on with it.*   *(Louise, site 2, interview)*

It seems that, for some, the time pressure is a push forward, creating a drive to keep young people moving through their transition. Defining eligibility criteria solely in terms of chronological age is a blunt instrument. There is an overwhelming message that services are not flexible enough to take into account the huge variation in emotional and practical capabilities of young people in this age group. The awareness of a fixed endpoint is a thread running through all of the work being done, with all participants driven by an underlying concern of 'what are you going to do when we're not here ?'

REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE CRITERIA

All the participants talk about the ages used as cut-off points by services. Most express some frustration at the unrealistic expectations for young people to take on adult responsibilities at such an early age.

> *To say you have to maintain a tenancy for the rest of your life essentially, at the age of 18, is ridiculous to put on anyone's shoulders. (Ben, site 1, interview)*

> *All these young people are not going to, suddenly, for the rest of their lives, never need support after us.* *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

> *They are still children a lot of them, and that's the difficulty. We're sort of expecting them to live in an adult world and manage themselves, and emotionally a lot of them aren't anywhere near that level.* *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

> *18 is such a young and tender age to have to be an adult.* *(Ben, site 1, focus group)*

For most, this criticism is aimed externally: an abstract 'system' expects too much of young people at too early an age. However, one interviewee feels that other workers in her organisation sometimes shared these attitudes. Louise expresses concern that some of her colleagues struggle to analyse or see beyond presenting behaviours:

> *There's the pressure from the system, but yeah I do think we can be unrealistic because there's this view, isn't there, at 18 you can just get on with your life...if you don't get it from the beginning it makes it really hard to work with, and then you will have an unrealistic plan and unrealistic expectations because you will think "well you're now 18, you've got to stand on your own two feet and just get on with it"...I do think we can also be unrealistic as well in how we expect someone to just behave when they're 18.* *(Louise, site 2, interview)*

The use of 'we' in this passage is interesting. Louise is including herself within the organisation which has unrealistic expectations, and yet the implication is that she is talking about other workers (who do not fully explore or analyse young people's circumstances).

On the surface, Diane is the exception to the dominant theme that age-related expectations are unrealistic. She advocates strongly that the care system should start preparing young people for independent living much earlier:

> *It should be around 13,14 – in the foster placement. Take them out of there, put them into independent living...say "come on then, this is what you're going*

to face when you're older". Let them go there for maybe a month and say "Right that's the money you'll be given, now you've got another 4 years to prepare".   *(Diane, site 1, interview)*

However, looking more closely at her explanation for this, there is not necessarily a fundamental difference between Diane's perspective and her colleagues'. Given that there is a hard edge at 18, she is putting this forward as a solution: if you're going to make them do it at 18, at least prepare them for it properly so that it isn't a shock. Underneath the more strident, directive style, her underlying sentiment seems to be similar to that of another interviewee, Louise, who expresses her feeling that independence is acquired gradually from a very young age in most families. These two interviewees pick up on an important theme from the theoretical writing about adolescent transition, suggesting that services should be structured to provide more protracted, gradual transitions (for example, Ward 2011, Geenen and Powers 2007). The participants reflect Stein's view that there is an 'expectation of instant adulthood' for these young people (Stein 2008, p40).

Whilst there is a general acknowledgement of the particular difficulties faced by their client group, interviewees differ in the degree to which they reflect on them as part of the mainstream. The VCR analysis was helpful in highlighting the extent to which young people receiving services are talked about as an 'other'. Several interviewees felt that the expectations placed on their young people were unrealistic for anyone of that age, drawing comparisons with the norm for peers who are still living at home with family. This is discussed in both focus groups:

> *Julia: Just because they've turned 18 and one day doesn't mean that they're now all of a sudden going to manage their lives and be able to live outside of that chaos. It's ridiculous.*
> *Louise: Children living at home in a secure family, no major difficulties, they would struggle to be doing that anyway at that stage of their development. (site 2, focus group)*

> *They're expected to go into independence...I don't know many people at the age of 18 that can handle that, I really don't, and you actually do have to be quite a special young person to go in there and just do it and succeed. I take my hat off to anyone that can do it, I haven't met one that has just gone into independence and flourished completely. So I think a lot of it does all stem back to all the policies and procedures handed out by government, saying that you're an adult from the age of 18.*   *(Ben, site 1, focus group)*

Julia also illustrates this point by talking about her own son and his housemates at university, who struggled with their first experiences of living away from home and regularly needed support to deal with routine household issues like getting the boiler to work.

Andy takes this point further and talks about young people as being just like anyone else, implying that they should not get special treatment. In his interview, we talk about the support services available to care leavers post-21:

> *NHS Direct, Samaritans, Citizens Advice Bureau, all that kind of stuff. But that's what anyone else would do you see, it's not about [pause] you know, you're not special anymore because you've been in care, but that whole process you've gone through, generally you have to put a line under it and join with the rest of society as best you can I suppose.*   *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

Some interviewees relate their own experiences of making the transition to adulthood, comparing this to the expectations placed on the young people they are supporting. Isabel references this most explicitly:

> *I'm 27 – my friends 50-50 have moved out, and a lot of my friends are still living at home with their parents and they still rely on their parents a lot. I don't live with my parents but when I have a problem with my car, I call my dad. It's things like that...you know, starting this new job and there was the pension. I got my mum to read through the forms. And I suppose it's, we're trying to make these 18,19 year olds independent, not reliant on a service when they're not going to be...you know? You're not going to be at 18 independent...*

> *This big thing, like once you're 18...I think for me turning 17 to 18, all that changed was I was legal to buy alcohol, do you know what I mean? You know, nothing else changed in my life...it was just a birthday, carried on. Whereas for these young people it's such a big deal.*   *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

Ben is another interviewee who draws direct comparisons between his own transition to adulthood, and the transitions of the young people he is supporting. As the youngest interviewee, open about his own experience of being both a looked after child and a care leaver, it is perhaps unsurprising that he draws heavily on his own experiences when trying to make sense of or predict how young people would feel or what they could cope with.

Julia also reflects on her personal experiences as a service user (as a parent rather than as a young person) and how this has impacted on her professional practice.

> *It's been eye-opening...I always said at the time "this is going to make me a better practitioner at some point, but right now I'm a mum".*
> *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

Diane's interview is interesting (albeit contradictory) in this respect. She refers to her personal circumstances more frequently and in more detail than any other interviewee, including the fact that she herself spent time in local authority care as a child:

> *I was in care myself, so I can see these young people, and I know exactly what they're doing and I know exactly what they're thinking. (Diane, site 1, interview)*

However the voice-centred relational analysis also highlighted that of all the interviewees, Diane most frequently refers to young people as a generalised 'they'. There is a feeling that she is framing her account of the work at one step removed, maintaining an arm's length, wider perspective. This is in contrast to other interviewees who (to varying degrees) use stories of their direct work with young people to explain or illustrate their point. It is also in contrast to other interviewees who share personal experiences as an illustration that the young people and families with whom they work are no different to anyone else.

If the fact that there are fixed age criteria is problematic, the actual ages chosen also present huge difficulties. The cut off points of 16, 18 and 21 are seen as unrealistic not just for this particular group of young people but for any young person, including the participants themselves. The extent to which workers distance themselves from their client group can be explored by looking at the ways in which they speak about the young people with whom they work. There is relatively little talk of these young people as an 'other' despite their difficult and damaging backgrounds. Instead workers talk of their service users as part of the wider cohort of peers, including their own children and their own experiences when growing up.

WHAT WILL 'ADULTHOOD' LOOK LIKE FOR THESE YOUNG PEOPLE?

In addition to the framework of service criteria set by age, practitioners are working in a landscape of social norms and expectations about independence and adulthood. It is

possible to see the influence of this wider context in the way that the participants describe how they feel services should interact with young people.

> *I think it's far too giving, you know, I do. I think they throw money at them from a young age...the naughtier you are and the louder you are, the more you're going to get.* (Diane, site 1, interview)

> *We don't want to keep them open if we don't need to. It's not fair on them, it's not fair on anyone, it doesn't support them in moving on.*
> *(Louise, site 2, interview)*

> *We talk about doing with, not to, but actually you don't want to be doing **for** young people either, because the whole point is to create independence.*
> *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

There is some quite striking talk about over-reliance and dependence on services as deeply problematic. For some interviewees, the emphasis is on taking responsibility. Their aim is for young people to reach a point where they are willing and able to do things for themselves.

> *If we're wrapping them up in cotton wool and if we're doing everything for them, and if we're making them dependent on us then we've done them no favours. Actually, we'd have been better off not being in their lives at all.*
> *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

These perspectives seems to reflect the current individualised concept of independence. Value is placed on looking after yourself and not expecting someone else (or services) to sort things out. This view of independence extends to financial self reliance, and the dominant message that individuals should aim to meet their own needs, rather than being a drain on society. These aspects of the dominant discourses around independent adulthood are also expressed by some interviewees.

> *Education or employment is a huge part of their self-worth and self esteem. And if they're doing something with themselves and they're contributing back to society, I think that's a huge huge part.* (Claire, site 1, interview)

> *It's about explaining to them where benefits come from in the first place. And how actually, you're taking this opportunity now to have some of those benefits but really, we want you to then contribute back to society. It's kind of looking at the long plan.* (Claire, site 1, focus group)

But there are indications in some interviews that the situation is more complex. It is possible that concerns about dependence are not based on workers' underlying

alliance with social norms of self reliance, but may instead be based on a pragmatic, realistic understanding that ongoing support services are not available.

> *The whole sort of issue around self-responsibility, just for some young people is a real struggle. And as a service I think it's really damaging if we don't challenge that, because we know our time is short, and when we're finished working with them...there isn't really anybody else out there.*
> *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

This tension is also evident in the different ways that interviewees talk about planning for the point where their service would withdraw. Three of the four workers from the leaving care service seem to be confused by this question, and talk about mainstream open-access services, such as GPs and the Citizen's Advice Bureau. However, others acknowledge that their young people may well have need of adult services, and talk at length about their efforts to research appropriate services which can continue supporting young people into their adulthood. Kate and Isabel in particular reflect Sennett's suggestion that for some people, constructing 'independence' as not being a user of any services is neither realistic or desirable. The aim should be functional engagement with appropriate support (Sennett 2002).

> *Everybody always has support....it's just some people need more than others.*
> *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

> *Sometimes you've got to accept that sometimes that's the way somebody is, and they might for their whole life need a bit of support.*
> *(Isabel, site 2, focus group)*

> *Whether we have that sense....everything will be fine. That all the problems have been solved and we can actually close them off our caseload...they're not going to have any more issues now because they're a fully functioning adult. But the reality is that adults of 60 still struggle with all sorts of mental health issues and financial issues.*   *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

One conceptualisation of the interview situation suggests that socially constructed ways of thinking 'speak through' the interviewee, such that these social discourses can be heard within the data (Alvesson 2003). However, these respondents demonstrate that this is not necessarily obvious or straightforward. The dominant discourse of 'anti-welfare commonsense' (Jensen and Tyler 2015) is not presented wholesale. Rather the respondents acknowledge the gap between this discourse and reality, constructing a way of thinking which is more nuanced than a blunt distinction between

dependent and self-reliant. The aim is not that young people should reach adulthood in a position never to need services again, but more that they should have the capacity to recognise their own needs and have the willingness, confidence and skills to seek appropriate help.

> *It's giving them the tools and the confidence to feel that they can access those things and take some control over their life isn't it? Rather than feel they have to be part of the process when they come out of that door.*
> *(Louise, site 2, interview)*

The talk is not of independence, but of taking responsibility and dealing with consequences. The way in which the participants make sense of adulthood and independence directly echo the findings of research exploring young people's perspectives on this issue (Goodkind et al 2011).

In addition to their own views about positive outcomes and the version of adulthood they are aiming for, workers talk about the views and priorities of the young people with whom they work. There is some talk of tension and feelings of discomfort when the aspirations of young people are not in line with those of workers, or of services.

> *They choose to live maybe a bit of a chaotic life, or a lifestyle we wouldn't want them to lead, but they're quite content with how things are.*
> *(Isabel, site 2, focus group)*

> *I was saying only today to [young person]...trying to find some more positive activities for her to get involved in. And she said "I just like being in bed and watching TV"... And I said "Do you not want to do anything like join a gym, or go to the cinema with your friends?" You know, it's almost like it was my want for her, not her want.*   *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

These ideas around different versions of 'normal' come up in the focus group discussion between workers from the specialist adolescent service. Although they are not explored in any depth, it seems workers are reflecting the ideas of Bynner (2005) around social capital and constraints on the choices available to young people. Young people's restricted experiences of life and their limited social capital may limit the range of options open to them, or the options that they are aware of.

> The nature of the choices they perceive are highly structured in terms of gender, locality, ethnicity and social class.   (Thomson et al 2004, p229)

Respondents acknowledge that young people's sense of what is normal, and also what is possible, has been shaped by their life experiences and they recognise that their own values may conflict with this. Julia articulates the challenge of expanding young people's horizons, without devaluing or dismissing their experiences.

> *It's making sure you're not belittling what their achievement is, but at the same time pushing them to actually do better for themselves.*
> *(Julia, site 2, focus group)*

Exploring how the data gives an indication of the ways in which workers are constructing adulthood, there is some difficulty in unravelling the relative influences of pragmatism and value base: is dependence undesirable in itself, or undesirable because it is not sustainable once there are no services on which to depend? There are definitely some differences emerging in the ways that workers talk about their exit plans. The specialist adolescent service talk much more about ongoing adult services, and describe supporting young people to identify and access these services as part of their role prior to their service withdrawing. This is an interesting contradiction, because this group of workers also talk much more explicitly about the importance of not creating dependence. The reasons for this are unclear but may be to do with the different ways in which the organisations are set up to deliver services: the leaving care service work with young people from the age of 16 through until they turn 21 (or beyond if the young person stays in education). The organisation's involvement is relatively long term and sustained, even if there are changes of individual worker within this period. In contrast, the specialist adolescent service might take on responsibility for a young person at any age between 16 and 18, and work with them until a maximum age of 19. In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that the workers from the specialist adolescent service tend to talk about their work in far more temporary and transient terms.

Overall it seems that it would be too simplistic to say that workers are pushing and driving young people through an accelerated transition to premature self-reliance, based on an individualised concept of adult independence, although their accounts do suggest some elements of this. Instead the interviews create a more nuanced picture. Workers are influenced by pragmatism and reality, by their knowledge of what adult ongoing services look like. The best you can hope for is that young people are willing

and able to seek help.   The social norms and expectations of independence and adulthood are framed by the fixed criteria of age, creating a landscape within which workers must position themselves, both as a group and as individuals.   The final section of this chapter considers the extent to which participants align themselves with and differentiate themselves from their organisations.

4.3 Alignment and difference within organisations

DESCRIBING MY PRACTICE BY CONTRASTING IT WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S

Several interviewees talk about and explain their practice by comparing what they do with what another worker does. This is not often directly critical of the other, in fact most are at pains to stress that they are not criticising their colleagues, it is just a different way of looking at things. However there is definitely some tension about how the organisation could accommodate such contrasting styles, and what this means for the experiences of young people being supported by different individuals.

> *You know, we're all so different. I'd look at Liz* [colleague within the team] *for example, and she's far more mummy-fied. She's had children of her own. And I might look at something she does and think "you've mummy-fied them a little bit – you've given them a lift , you've made the phone call for them". Whereas...I'll give them some, you know, help them out, but there is an expectation that they do it themselves... So I don't think what Liz's doing is wrong, but I think for me it's a very different style. I wouldn't do that.*
> *(Claire, site 1, interview)*

Claire is very careful in the way that she speaks about her colleague's practice, defusing the potentially contentious message by repeatedly stressing that these are personal comments. Alvesson notes that interviewees may use language in this constructive (rather than descriptive) way 'using slippery language with multiple and sometimes negative connotations' (Alvesson 2003, p23). The interjection of *for me* is particularly powerful in managing these potentially awkward messages.

Julia is the only interviewee who explicitly said that she felt her way of working was better for young people, and the comparison with colleagues is a theme running through the whole of her interview. Her professional identity as different to others is clearly something that is important to her, and she refers to this in her very first response.

> *The way I work, I think I'm quite creative, so I will go outside the box. And I will do more than I'm probably employed to do to support a young person. And then I know other workers that wouldn't even dream of having a conversation with a young person around sexual health...You know, and I find that odd.*
>
> *So, you know, it's like I've got a young lady at the moment who's having problems keeping her bedroom clean and tidy at [supported housing project]. So I'll go round there with her and put on my rubber gloves and I'll help her tidy*

her bedroom. I kind of think that's what my job is – but other people wouldn't dream of doing something like that. So I find that really weird.

[talking about a particular piece of work she had done with a family] *So many other workers would have shied away from that conversation with mum. (Julia, site 2, interview)*

Julia's interview can be considered in the context of Alvesson's suggestion that interviewees may use the situation to 'express, elaborate, strengthen, defend and/or repair a favored [sic] self-identity' (Alvesson 2003, p20). From her response to the very first question, Julia presents herself as a particular kind of worker: practical, hands on, guided by 'common sense'. Having constructed this identity, Julia continues to speak from this position throughout the interview. Alvesson's model would suggest a degree of caution in drawing conclusions about the reality of Julia's practice from the way that she speaks about it, as her interview may reflect the process of constructing rather than revealing her professional identity. However, a clear picture does emerge from her interview of how she would like to be thought of as a worker.

Shared values and perspectives

In some of the interviews, there is a clear identification with the shared values of the team within which the interviewee worked. This is most explicit in the leaving care group, and particularly in the individual interview with Diane.

We're all pretty much all the same, us PAs. We're really, we'll fight hammer and tongs for our young people...I'm very passionate about it, but I'm not the only one. We're all like that. (Diane, site 1, interview)

Discussions in the other group were far less obvious. There is less talk of 'we' and certainly none of the adversarial language used by the leaving care workers to align themselves as a group fighting for young people against management. This observation needs to be seen in context. The leaving care workers are all drawn from the same team, whilst the other group all work for the same organisation and know each other, however they are based in different geographical teams. Even taking this into account, the issue of an underlying shared value base did seem more problematic for workers from this service. Isabel, in particular, really struggles to articulate her

thoughts. The following extract was not in response to a direct question; we were talking about the difficulties of encouraging young people to use services whilst they were eligible for them, and this prompts her to think about how workers manage situations where young people do not engage.

> *And I suppose, yeah I think it can be [pause] people can feel uncomfortable with that in the team and, you know, people can feel like [pause] I think it's definitely difficult getting that balance, and different people have different [pause] I think we all have similar values and beliefs because obviously we're all in the same job and we all have, you know, trying to get that balance. And I suppose other people have different approaches, and some people more so than others.*
> *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

This passage really stands out in an interview that was otherwise very free flowing, articulate and conversational. Something about the thought that colleagues may not share a common framework for thinking about their work is quite uncomfortable for Isabel. Considering this within Alvesson's model, it is possible that this passage reflects the difficulty Isabel feels in going 'off script' and trying to articulate something which is not generally expressed in her organisation. Another explanation is that it is difficult for respondents to express criticism of their organisation: by acknowledging a possible lack of shared values within the service, Isabel is challenging herself to confront questions of loyalty to her organisation (Alvesson 2003).

POSITIONING WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

As well as describing differences in direct practice, interviewees from the specialist adolescent service reflect on the broader underlying differences between workers in their organisation:

> *You've got different practitioners from different backgrounds all doing their own thing.*   *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

> [Asked whether she felt there was a shared basis for decision making in her organisation]   *I would say it's probably quite individual. I think there are too many different people in the pot – if we had a cultural, sort of, view and system I think it would be more cohesive. So I don't think we must, I don't think we can do.*   *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

This diversity of professional backgrounds and approaches is also picked up by Louise. She expresses concerns that some colleagues were dealing with surface issues and

presenting behaviour, but lacked the capacity or professional training to reflect on and fully understand young people's needs:

> *Seeing a behaviour but not thinking - where's that coming from, why is that happening, what are they trying to communicate? I think some people aren't in that place to understand that, or have come from a background where that's not the way they need to think... there's just a lot of things that I don't know that you would always know from experience.* (Louise, site 2, interview)

This is a theme that Louise returns to several times in her interview, but her perspective is in direct contrast to that of Julia.

> *We don't have to have rocket scientists in the service, we need people that have got good common sense and that can be a good reasonable parent, and make those kinds of choices and decisions to support the young people we're working with. It's not difficult, it really isn't.* (Julia, site 2, interview)

These two interviewees seem to have opposing perspectives on their role. Louise values professional knowledge and training, worrying that experience is not enough to equip workers with the skills and understanding they need to support young people effectively. On the other hand, Julia has a very practical, pragmatic take on the work.

Leaving Care Personal Adviser is a formal job title which is mandated in the legislation. In contrast, the specialist adolescent service uses its own generic job title, which has no basis in legislation or professional qualifications. It is therefore unsurprising perhaps, that the participants from the leaving care group talk about their work in terms of a job specification. It is striking how many references they make to 'advice and guidance', in many cases inhabiting this job role 'I'm advice and guidance'. Andy, in particular, talks about how the role should work, as set out in the legislation. This fixed professional identity seems to be a point of stability and something to hold on to in a challenging work environment: the workers have a clear sense of their mandated role and their place in the system.

In this context, the way in which one interviewee positions himself within the organisation and the wider profession is particularly interesting. Ben was the youngest interviewee and also a care leaver himself. In his interview, we talked at length about the use of self in the work and how his personal experiences influence his professional role, with the result that some of the narrative accounts do not relate to young people, but to Ben himself. There is a theme of change over time, and Ben reflects on how he

has 'grown into' his professional identity. Concluding a story about his initial difficulties getting colleagues to accept him in the role of personal adviser, he says:

> *That age thing is not an issue for me anymore, I get treated like an adult and a professional.* *(Ben, site 1, interview)*

Although Ben states it is 'not an issue anymore' several of the stories he tells in the interview suggest that he is still struggling with the shift of role from young person (and care leaver) to a PA (and representative of the system). The way in which he situates himself in the stories is not straightforward, and several of his examples demonstrate that he allies himself more with the perspective of young people than with that of his management.

> *I'm really lucky in a sense, that I can look at it from a young person's point of view and a professional's point of view. Not many people have that to be able to reflect on it. And I think that my management see that, which is quite lucky for me because I get very passionate about stuff that I believe these young people need.* *(Ben, site 1, interview)*

Although both Diane and Julia also make reference to their own experiences as service users, they use this to inform their professional perspective. Neither adopts dual identities, or shifts position in the way that Ben does. This may well be a function of age, as Ben's alignment with young people is not only due to their shared experience of being in care but also because he is closer to them in age. Claire also talks about how her age set her apart her from colleagues at the start of her career, and explicitly reflects that she understands how difficult this is for Ben.

> *I was the youngest I think at the time when I was working there...And the staff felt like adults to me, and with the young people I didn't feel I had as much authority as the other staff, if that makes sense, although I had benefits, I thought "Oh I'm more on their level"...I was more "I understand, I'm a young person"...but I did get disrespected. So I do feel for Ben...because he's young and I remember what that was like.* *(Claire, site 1, interview)*

This feeling that personal circumstances have an impact on the way in which workers construct their professional identity and position themselves within their organisations is also picked up by Diane. She talks about the contrast between herself and others in her team from a different perspective, explaining that her personal circumstances give her more capacity to be flexible and accommodate the demands of the job.

> *Interviewer: Do you think you do more of that practical "Right let's go and do this" than other people do ?*

Diane: Yeah I do, simply because I have no commitments at home, so I can stay in the office until 8 o'clock at night.   *(site 1, interview)*

Talking about the administrative aspects of the job, Diane tells me that she has recently been recognised by senior managers for being so up to date with her case recording and paperwork. The way in which she talks about this is interesting; on the surface she dismisses it.

That's not fair, because I've got the time to do that...I haven't got the commitments, I can stay. So really and truly that's not fair because if the other PAs had the time like me they would be the same.

However, she then goes on to say:

But the thing is, not only that, I'm extremely organised. I'm just a very organised person. And there are some people in our teams that are not quite as organised, and that's cool too, they should still be able to do their job comfortably. It's not fair.

All the PAs go over and above. I mean, we have got a fantastic team of people.

We are pretty much all the same, us PAs... We're very passionate.
(Diane, site 1, interview)

Of all the interviewees, Diane talks the most about the values she shares with colleagues. She is the most vociferous about the level of commitment and devotion workers demonstrate, and how much they care about the young people they work with. However, Diane is also the interviewee who talks most about how different she is from colleagues, explaining her professional and personal background as a contrast to those of the people she works with. It may be that this is an attempt to resolve the tension and dissonance created by her open acknowledgement of the difference between her practice and her colleagues'. It feels important for Diane to emphasise that 'we're all the same', painting a picture of her service as united in their shared (positive) values. However, this sets up a problem when she talks about aspects of practice which are not the same. She resolves this by explaining it in terms of personal capacity: she is able to work differently only because she has the time and personality to do so. If colleagues were in her circumstances then they would do the same. Interestingly, this is completely refuted by two of her colleagues (Andy and Claire) both of whom specifically reference Diane in their interviews and say that they do not place the same emphasis on practical independent living skills that she does.

Interviewer: There was a lot of talk in the focus group about practical independent living skills. Is that a bit of a theme for your team?
Andy: Well yeah, it is for Diane – that's her thing. I mean, I'd have a slightly different opinion.   *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

Overall there was an awareness and an openness about the individuality of practice. Each participant explicitly acknowledges that their own values and approaches influence the direct work they do (and do not do) with young people, and that there are significant differences from one worker to another. Again there is some difference between the two groups on this issue. For the leaving care workers, doing things a bit differently seems to be ok. Workers describe their practice in contrast and comparison to that of their colleagues, and they appear to be comfortable with this. Within the other group of workers, there is more of a struggle to reconcile different approaches and more talk of some practice being better than others. This applies to differences in direct work, and also to more fundamental underlying differences of professional background and value base. Difference within the organisation is less problematic in the accounts of the leaving care workers, who seem to be more united under a mandated job role.

Looking at the data from the two groups using Alvesson's model, it appears that the cultural scripts are more explicit and coherent within the leaving care service. The shared, clearly defined job role may be part of the explanation for this. In contrast the specialist adolescent service covers a wide range of remits, each with its own expectations and ways of doing things. Another consideration is the fact that the leaving care workers were from the same team. This underlying shared identity may also strengthen and unify the script for 'how we talk about what we do'. Conversely the group of workers from the specialist adolescent service were drawn from 3 different teams, again reducing their sense of a shared way of talking about the work.

In talking about their organisations, the participants also start to explore their professional identity. Workers from both groups are able to identify aspects of the organisations' positioning within the wider system which could be used positively in the way that they present themselves to young people and families. Personal characteristics (age, gender, life experiences) are also talked about as factors which have an impact on the way in which the work is (and can be) done.

The picture emerging from the data is of two quite different workplaces. The leaving care group talk about high caseloads and almost unmanageable pressure. One result of this is that asking them to talk about what they do has prompted answers which talk about what they do not (or cannot) do. This language is far less common in the interviews with workers from the specialist adolescent service. The other significant area of difference is the way in which the leaving care workers talk about themselves as a group. There is a sense of shared values, but this is expressed in combative language, with workers describing themselves as passionately fighting for their young people. The group's unity is expressed as an 'us' against the 'them' of management. Again this language is not seen in the data from the other group of workers.

Chapter Five: How do workers talk about their role in relation to individual young people?

OVERVIEW

In the previous chapter I have explored how the participants talk about themselves and their professional role in relation to the various organisations and systems forming the landscape within which they work. This chapter shifts the focus to the interactions between workers and young people. Again I have combined elements of the three analytical models (thematic, narrative and VCR) to make sense of the data from different perspectives. I have used this framework to explore the ways in which participants talk about their direct work with the young people they are supporting. As a broad starting point, I have considered the stories told about the work, using a narrative analytical approach to differentiate between the various ways in which participants use stories to explain or illustrate their responses. Exploring these stories further reveals the specific ways in which the speakers position themselves within the narrative.

The second section of this chapter identifies the significant themes which emerge across the data in relation to the different roles participants cast themselves in within their stories of their work. Analysis of the data suggests that a key theme is the need to act in some capacity as an educator and role model. The different ways in which this plays out in practice are explored.

The third section highlights the central importance of the relationship between worker and young person. The ways in which participants make sense of the nature and function of this relationship are considered within the theoretical framework of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983). The participants' perspectives on the limits of this relationship are the focus of the final section.

5.1 Stories, anecdotes and examples: narrative accounts of direct work

One approach to exploring how these workers talk about their work with young people is to consider the ways in which they tell stories about them. All the participants use illustrations or examples to explain particular points, but these stories vary greatly between participants in their frequency, length and the ways in which they are told. There is also huge variation in the extent to which accounts are co-created by the interviewee and the interviewer.

The clearest examples of stories being told about the work are found in the interviews of Isabel and Claire. Both switch easily from making a point to relating an example of this point based on their practice experience. Stories are largely made up of reported dialogue between themselves and a young person, which has the effect of situating the speaker as an active participant in the narrative. For both of these interviewees, what they did equates to what they said. Using Koven's suggested model to categorise the speaker's perspective, both Isabel and Claire appear to balance their role as narrator of events, relating the plot of the story, whilst also maintaining the voice of their current self. (Koven 2002)

This contrasts with other participants who use more descriptive accounts to illustrate their point. For Ben, this develops into an extended narrative, telling the story of his experience with a particular young person. In the telling of this story, Ben illustrates the third voice of Koven's model: he is emotionally drawn in, reliving the events, re-inhabiting the role of his past self. Ben tells the story from the perspective of being there in the present moment. For other participants (particularly Andy) the role of the worker within the story is less obvious and less active: he is very much telling the young person's story. Andy confines his storytelling to the role of narrator.

Julia uses stories in various ways throughout her interview, introducing them with explicit entrance talk and linking back to her point with clear exit talk.

And actually sometimes – because I'm thinking of this one particular family

[extended narrative account of the family background and her own work with them]

And it's those young people, when you talk about ...letting them make mistakes and stuff, that's when it's difficult – with them. (Julia, site 2, interview)

There are some elements of the narrator role in the way in which Julia tells these stories, but largely she maintains the perspective of her current self. This is particularly clear in the longest story in the interview, which is told mostly in the present tense. This account is co-created with the interviewer, and has elements of descriptive story telling (talking about the young person) as well as the speaker taking on an active role in the events (recounting dialogue).

She's in and out of all the hostels, she doesn't survive anywhere because she's so chaotic with her upbringing...So you know, I have conversations with her "Actually what you experienced as a child must have been really difficult for you". (Julia, site 2, interview)

Although they are very different in style, content and tone, Kate and Diane's interviews are interestingly similar in the way they use narrative accounts. Both interviews contain very few stories, with those that are told being brief, descriptive and anecdotal. The speakers position themselves clearly as the narrator, recounting a sequence of events.

I remember seeing, I was godmother to a little girl a long long time ago, and she was about 18 months old and she'd got a little wooden spoon. And there were some visitors in the room as well as me and her mum and she'd got this little wooden spoon and she started whacking this bloke on his leg. And the mum came over and said "Stop hitting him" and whacked her. And I just thought "Oh my god, the irony of this whole situation" if your response is to hit your daughter because she was hitting someone else. (Kate, site 2, interview)

Louise also uses only a few narrative accounts to illustrate her points. However, unlike Kate and Diane, this is openly acknowledged by Louise, who is consciously concerned about using examples and anecdotes. After the two most developed stories in her interview, she apologises and expresses anxiety that she has gone off the point by telling a story. Louise illustrates Alvesson's suggestion that the interview can be experienced by some respondents as a cognitive challenge: she demonstrates 'intensive interpretation of what the researcher is after' (Alvesson 2003, p19) and is clearly concerned that this is not stories.

Sorry, that was a bit random.

But anyway, sorry, I've digressed a bit.

I don't feel like I'm answering your question really.　　　*(Louise, site 2, interview)*

Mishler (1991) notes that many researchers edit stories out of interview data as merely anecdotal examples, not pertinent to the answering of the research question. These three interviewees appear to have made a similar judgement. They may have felt that stories were not useful or appropriate responses. It is possible that these participants were attempting to speak about their work in a more reflective and theoretical way, rather than anecdotally, to create a professionalised version of the role for my benefit. This picks up on the point made by Scourfield (2001) in relation to social workers as interviewees, second guessing what the researcher wants from the interview.

5.2 Educator and role model

PRACTICAL INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS

Varied views are expressed about the role of workers in the direct teaching of practical independent living skills. Several interviewees say that they do this as and when it comes up in their interactions with young people, but generally they relied on staff in supported accommodation to do most of this work. For many, time pressures means that teaching practical skills is impossible: others aspects of their work have to take priority.

> *It's become very difficult to go and spend a lot of time with a young person on a 1:1 level and take like an independent living skills pack out to them, and go through using a washing machine or cooking, ironing. We just don't have the time.*   *(Ben, site 1, interview)*

> *It feels like you have to prioritise the piece of work that you do. And sometimes things like standing and working out whether they can peel a potato, I would probably think I'm not able to do that ...we need to get to the more complex, more sort of immediate jobs that need sorting.*   *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

> *If people are in supported accommodation, it's more the role of the keyworker who's actually living with them within the home to do those sorts of task...you know, they're in their home, they're making dinner...it's an opportune time to sit down and start cooking with them.*   *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

The way in which most participants talk about practical independent living skills is consistent with the research evidence in this area (for example, Stein 2010 and Dixon et al 2006). There is a feeling that supported housing providers are better placed to do this kind of work, partly because it can occur in the more natural setting of young people's homes, but also because of limitations of time. Considering the way these workers talk about the work being done with young people within Alvesson's framework, it is possible that this is an example of the wider discourse 'speaking through' the respondents (Alvesson 2003). There is an accepted hierarchical way of thinking about direct work, which constructs some tasks as more highly skilled and more important than others. This is specific to the UK model of individual caseholding and is in direct contrast to the accepted discourse in other systems. For example social pedagogic approaches, more commonly used in Europe, ascribe significant value to the

direct work which can be done through workers living alongside young people, sharing and role modelling everyday tasks (Petrie et al 2006).

Diane is the exception to this. She gives a very detailed account of the practical work she does with young people to teach them independent living skills.

> *I did a 7 day menu plan for 20 quid...I did the dial on an iron and showed them what all that meant. And how to use a washing machine, the dials on the washing machine, how they would actually place the colours and the whites, and that you don't mix them. I also did, oh, a budgeting plan so when they move in they know "This is my gas, electric, water, TV licence, shopping, how much I've got to pay out each week".*   *(Diane, site 1, interview)*

She talks of herself almost at war with the system, and sometimes with the young people, in her battle to ensure they understand the realities of independent life and have the practical skills to cope. Reflecting on Diane's interview as a whole, it seems that she constructs an identity and then speaks from this voice, sustaining this version of herself, in the way suggested by Alvesson's model. She presents herself as a crusader, fighting to get the importance of practical independent living skills properly recognised, and it is clear from the comments of her colleagues that this is her preferred identity within the team, the way she wants to be thought of. However her account of what those skills actually are is difficult to pin down and is contradictory at times. Despite some very detailed accounts of 'doing' independent living skills with young people, at other points in the interview the way in which she talks about this work is almost at arm's length. She gives an idealised description of practice, rather than examples of actual interactions with young people: so her language is "I would" or "you would", more often than "I did". At times Diane acknowledges this, talking at length about how she would like to see the service change and the work she would like to have time to do. It appears that Diane is constructing rather than revealing her identity through the course of the interview, and therefore what we can learn from the data is the kind of a worker she would like to be, or to be seen as, rather than the kind of a worker she actually is in her day to day practice.

PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

Looking beyond concrete practical skills, all the interviewees do include elements of educating and role modelling in their accounts of their work. Most participants see themselves as having a role in supporting young people to develop skills around problem solving, social skills and identifying sources of help.

> *You're constantly an educator aren't you? They're little learners.*
> *(Louise, site 2, interview)*

> [Talking about appointments at the Job Centre] *I try and do the first time and second time maybe. First time definitely, maybe the second time I'll go along with them. And then I'll try and let them go on their own after that.*
> *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

The ways in which the interviewees talk about how they teach young people is interesting: it varies from Diane's very directive "I tell them" or "I make them do this", to more reflective accounts of helping young people to think through problem solving processes. Claire is the most explicit in talking about how she does this in her work.

> *For me, I would much rather someone not have a clue how to do one of those things, but to be able to ask the right questions to the right people, and have that initiative to know where they can go and find that information.*
> *(Claire, site 1, interview)*

> *Not to feel embarrassed or silly or stupid if you are asking questions. And, you know, more often than not I might say "I don't know, but we can find out this way". [laughs] You know it's ok to say that, to have the confidence to say "I don't know the answer right now, but let's be resourceful, this is how we can find out"... I might say to them "Why don't you do this bit, I'll do that bit" so it's a bit of a joint effort.* *(Claire, site 1, interview)*

Claire then goes on to recount two stories from her work with young people, illustrating how she tries to role model being assertive, asking questions, challenging people (including other professionals) and how she encourages young people to adopt this approach to their lives. However both Claire and Kate talk about how pressures on their time have an impact on the way in which they practice: both observe that it is far quicker to do things for a young person than it is to take them through the process of working out how to do it for themselves.

> *If you're in control of it, it gets done, it gets sorted... Teaching them how to do it takes a lot longer, and time is something we don't always have on our side.*
> *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

We, as workers, have a certain amount of time that we can spend with the young people and therefore I am aware that we do sometimes push on to them "Yes, but today we've only got an hour so we need to go to the JobCentre and we need to get this sorted out. And yes, I know you've got probably another 3 questions, then I can quickly tell you the answers"... But in an ideal world it would be a different conversation, it would be "Where do you think you need to go for that ? What do you think you need to do?"   (Claire, site 1, interview)

SPACE AND SUPPORT FOR REFLECTIVE THINKING

Many of the interviewees stress the importance of young people learning from their experiences and mistakes. Their comments resonate with the themes identified in research and theoretical writing around the importance of structured, gradual transitions (for example, Ward 2011). Young people need to assume responsibility for decisions in their lives in an incremental way and services should provide opportunities for this gradual increase in autonomy, rather than creating a cliff edge between childhood and adulthood. Allowing young people space to practice and test things out is essential, as is a safety net and the option of second (and third, fourth, fifth) chances for young people when they get it wrong. Participants describe how these ideas are operationalised in their practice, with several explaining their approach of supporting young people to make sense of events, providing space and facilitating reflective thinking.

I always make a point of having the conversation...once the dust has settled again, we'll sit down and, well you know "let's go through this whole – what's brought us to this position, your decisions and da da da". Again you try and make sure they understand.   (Andy, site 1, interview)

I think sometimes if you give them time they're able to really think about what's happening, or it gives them time to be able to start processing some of the stuff...giving them time and space to actually think "God, what has led up to this point ?"   (Kate, site 2, interview)

Sitting down with them and saying – you know, after mistakes they might not reflect on it or think about it – it's sitting down and saying "ok, let's have a chat, what went wrong here?" and getting them to think about it.
(Isabel, site 2, focus group)

Stories about interactions with young people are used to illustrate the point, and several workers tell these in the form of a dialogue, as this example from Claire demonstrates:

> *They're an adult, they have to be able to make those decisions and all you can do is ask the slightly leading questions to help them....*

She then goes on to give an account of a conversation about a young woman's partner:

> *And she said "I'm not talking to him at the moment, he's gone off with my sister who's pregnant"*
> *I said "Oh dear....how do you feel about that ?"*
> *And she said "Well you know, it's up to him, he can do what he likes"*
> *And I said "Oh right, ok. Do you mean if he splits up with her and comes back to you that's you know, it's up to him ?"*
> *She went "Yeah exactly. It's up to him"*
> *And I said "Oh ok, so it's his decision then as to who he wants to be with"*
> *And she was like "Oh I don't like the way that sounds". (Claire, site 1, interview)*

Conversations such as this reflect the principles of cognitive models of social work practice, although the interviewees did not specifically reference them as such. Solution focussed approaches, motivational interviewing and other similar practice interventions use questions and prompts to guide someone through the thinking process. Conversations such as the one recounted by Louise above, use these ideas to take the young person step by step through the process of reflecting on an issue. These accounts suggest that there may be an important narrative aspect to the role, with workers using conversation as a practice intervention. Talking with young people, co-constructing a coherent narrative of their experience and helping them to make sense of it, is a key aspect of the support. Narrative analysis of the data (discussed at the start of this chapter) explores this from a different perspective. Some respondents' stories about their direct work are accounts of conversations: what they did equates to what they said.

In the focus group discussion, Claire also talks about using these principles more creatively: working with a young person who repeatedly refused to engage in the process of registering a housing application, she describes almost in desperation asking him to pretend that he was the worker. She then asked him to persuade her to do the application. By switching roles, the young person was put in the position of having to think about all the reasons for completing the task and in doing so, work out why he

needed to do it. Workers talk about these interactions in ways which suggest they are accepting of the need for young people to be active participants in the work. The importance of this space, of an adult providing a framework to scaffold the young person's thinking process, supporting them to learn how to think about something (not what to think) is crucial in adolescent development. During this period of re-negotiating identity and development of a sense an adult self, young people need repeated opportunities to practise the process of making decisions, testing them out and reflecting on the consequences.

Some interviewees are aware of the importance of young people's ongoing development during their adolescence and talk about being careful not to expect too much. They are conscious that young people's chronological age is not necessarily an indicator of their maturity or their level of development.

> *Actually a lot of them don't have the ability to reflect, thinking about how did that impact, they're like "I don't know". And they literally, they're not trying to be awkward, they literally don't know. So yeah, as you get older you can, it's one of those things.*   *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

This links back to the discussion in the previous chapter regarding the problematic nature of determining eligibility for services according to age criteria. Sometimes the expectations of young people at fixed age points are unrealistic. Overall the purpose and practice of direct work is not concerned with practical independent living skills, except for one interviewee, Diane, who is acknowledged as an outlier in the data. Instead there is a focus on supporting the development of thinking and attitude. Participants talk about their role as instrumental in young people's development of less concrete, transferable skills around problem solving and social behaviour. Underlying many of the interviews is a slight inference that there is a hierarchy, with 'basic' independent living skills falling within the remit of supported housing workers.

The importance of creating systems which allow young people to learn from mistakes, within a wider overall aim of supporting more gradual transitions to adulthood, is discussed in the theoretical and research literature: the different analytical models have enabled me to begin exploring how this plays out in the direct work of individual interactions with young people. The respondents give accounts of their direct work which describe the ways in which their conversations provide opportunities and

scaffolding for reflective thinking. There is some awareness, whether from theory or from experience, of the context of adolescent cognitive development, although it may or may not be significant that the two interviewees who mentioned this as a factor are the two who are qualified social workers.

5.3 The relationship itself as the job

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELING CARED FOR AND HELD IN MIND

These accounts of conversations which provide young people with a containing space in which they can work through their feelings and thoughts, pick up some of the themes in the theoretical literature around the adolescent process and the parallels with infant development. They begin to highlight the extent to which the 'work' participants describe takes the form of a relationship with a young person. For some interviewees, this is explicitly a professional and planned relationship. Claire and Andy in particular are very clear that they have given some thought as to how to represent their professional role in the way they engage and interact with young people.

> *I've got a broad idea of how I am as a person who's trying to develop a relationship with the young person...For me it's all about getting off on the right note rapport-wise.*   *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

> *I do start off quite professional is the word – or quite stern. I'll be friendly, but it's very factual and it's very, you know, "I work for the local authority" kind of stance. And as time goes on, yes, then I'll soften a bit.   (Claire, site 1, interview)*

Other participants talk about the thinking behind how they go about building and sustaining a relationship with individual young people. Several interviewees make the point that their relationships with young people are very different dependent on that young person's needs and circumstances. Isabel compares two young women on her caseload and explains her different approaches to them based on their very different levels of informal support. This feeling that sometimes you do have to step in where there isn't someone else, also comes through the interviews with the leaving care group, all of whom make a clear distinction between those young people who have come through stable foster placements and those who have not.

The importance for young people of having a consistent adult in their life to take an interest in them and hold them in mind is a key theme from the literature and research. This 'evidence of genuine caring and belonging' (Snow 2008, p1296) has a huge impact on the capacity of young people to make a positive transition from childhood to adulthood. This is highlighted in several of the research studies discussed in the first chapter, particularly those which explore the experiences of young people

(for example Snow 2008, Geenen and Powers 2007, Gaskell 2010). The participants talked in a way that suggests they know this from their own experience. There is an explicit recognition of the significance for young people if workers are able to find ways of demonstrating that they are thinking about them:

> *Acknowledging little things – knowing that they're going in for an exam, "Good luck", "How did you do?". Those little things...are sometimes the most important things, just showing that you're there and that you have remembered something that's important for them.* (Claire, site 1, interview)

Some interviewees take this further, discussing how they use their understanding of the importance of these small gestures to support their overall work and plans with the young person:

> *There's little things – you've got a child who maybe doesn't have a lot of support and it's their first day at a new job on a Saturday, or something like that. On a Friday I'll text and say "Good luck for tomorrow" to let them know that I'm thinking of them, where they might not have other people who they think...you know our plan says they've got very low self confidence, we need to work together about ways to build up their self esteem. Well actually something is to let them know that others care about them and are thinking about then. So a little text, I would argue, would go towards building somebody's self esteem.* (Isabel, site 2, interview)

Again there is a sense that workers like Isabel are explicitly using their relationship with young people as a powerful tool in their practice. The ways in which they interact with young people are considered, decisions to do, or not to do, are thought through.

Other interviewees reflect on how difficult it is sometimes for young people to accept that this care is genuine. Several make reference to young people's need for adults in their lives who are not there simply because it is their job.

> *When she said that "no one believes in me" and I was like, "well I'll believe in you"... And she turned around and she was like, "well you have to because you're a professional".* (Ben, site 1, interview)

Isabel also reflects on this, talking about her efforts to build relationships with young people in which they feel confident.

> *I want them to be able to rely on me, but I also don't want them to rely on me [laughs]... I'd hate to think that one of my young people is thinking, you know, they don't have any adult or anyone that they can rely on – they've got a professional involved and they're feeling "well I can't rely on her". You know, you want to think that they can.* (Isabel, site 2, interview)

This quote from Isabel illustrates the tension workers feel in trying to reconcile their concerns about creating or encouraging dependence, with their personal and professional desire to be what young people need – a reliable adult in their lives. Again the participants express feelings and experiences in line with the research evidence: studies with both care leavers and homeless young people demonstrate the value to young people of a relationship with a professional in which they feel personally known and individually valued   (for example Gaskell 2010, Collins et al 2009, McGrath et al 2007, Rogers 2011).

The leaving care workers highlight how difficult it is for them to develop these relationships with young people in the context of the multiple changes of workers many have experienced during their time in care.

> *Young people have had seven workers before you've even started the job... You've got pretty much no chance of gaining that young person's trust, respect or anything like that... How are they meant to feel like they can come to you if that's the message they're getting - no one wants to stick around in my life. So, you know, they think "oh I just won't bother".*   *(Ben, site 1, focus group)*

> *You do find if you're just another worker that's rocked up, number however many, usually double figures, you don't really get much of a rapport going. It can take quite a long time.*   *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

TAKING ON THE ROLE OF PARENT

The participants talk about doing their best to demonstrate to young people that they genuinely care about and value them. However the way in which this relationship is constructed is not always purely as worker-service user. Every participant talks about aspects of the parent role embedded in their work. For the workers in the leaving care service, this appears as references to their responsibilities as 'corporate parent' to the young people. For the workers in the specialist adolescent service, it's a role they talk of having to step into by default for those young people lacking input from their own parents, or an equivalent adult relationship. Interestingly, taking on a parenting role is more often talked about explicitly by the workers in the specialist adolescent service, rather than the leaving care workers for whom it is a mandated responsibility.

> *It's that parent side of it as well...most 17 year olds will have their mum saying "come on, you need to get to that appointment, you need to do this, you need*

to do that" or "you need to be in by this time". And if they don't have that, you know, being able to be that person stepping in and reminding them...just that gentle nudge or reminder that maybe they're not getting, that other average people would be getting from their parents.   *(Isabel, site 2, interview)*

[Talking about moving a young person to a new placement] *They had no parent to say "right I'll call you later, I'll just check that everything's ok". And I was that mum... There was another worker there doing the same with two young people, and it really felt that that was the role we were having to play.*
(Kate, site 2, interview)

Sometimes I do the 'what would a good parent do' test. We're not their parents, but actually that's what they need. They need somebody who's going to look out for them as a good parent. And without the emotional attachment, I think that is part of our job to be that good parent – what would I do with my own child ?   *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

This quote from Julia highlights a theme which came through several of the interviews: there is a separation between the perceived different aspects of being a parent. Interviewees make reference to their attempts to provide the advocacy, guidance and encouragement a good parent offers their child. The parent role is also used as a measure and a check on practice: would this be good enough for my own child? However this is in contrast to the emotional, nurturing aspects of being a parent, which all interviewees state is not their role.

I always come back to thinking "If I was their parent what would my wish - what would I be doing to support them better?". And I'm not, you know, I've got my professional boundaries, I'm not mothering these young people I'm working with, I'm simply trying to make sure I'm doing my best work and support for them that they deserve.   *(Julia, site 2, focus group)*

The leaving care group do not talk about taking on a parenting role in their direct work with young people, but they do talk about their responsibilities as a corporate parent, mainly in the focus group discussion.

Those two words, corporate parenting - I never understand how they go together. I mean as a parent you're nurturing and loving to your children, what's corporate about that?   *(Andy, site 1, focus group)*

It is possible that the semantic dissonance Andy highlights between 'corporate' and 'parent' reflects a slightly different perspective on the same split that the specialist service workers identify between the thinking and feeling aspects of parenting. There is a difference between the two groups of workers in the extent to which they take on the role of parent: the leaving care workers talk about this as an abstract concept, a

responsibility which is part of their mandated job role. It is parenting at an organisational level. The workers from the specialist adolescent service appear to enact the role in their individual direct work, thinking and acting as a 'good parent' where this is missing for young people.

EMOTIONAL CONNECTION AND DISTANCE

The participants all demonstrate an awareness of young people's need for a consistent, caring adult in their life. However there is an overwhelming message not only that they cannot offer this, but further that professionals should not offer this. Those who speak about taking on a parenting role are very clear that they mean this in a theoretical way: thinking rather than feeling like a parent. The VCR analysis highlights a shift in the pronouns used, and the way that the participants position themselves when speaking about this. Even those interviewees who otherwise talk freely in the first person, owning their actions and opinions with lots of use of "I" and "my", start to use "we", "you" and "our" when talking about the role of services in emotional care and support. There is a sense that the speakers are creating a distance, separating and protecting themselves from the painful reality that services cannot provide what these children need. The plural pronouns are particularly interesting for the leaving care workers, where their relationship with young people is explicitly constructed as an organisational one of corporate parent.

This need for a protective distance between workers and the painful emotional aspects of their work is reflected more explicitly in some of the stories told. Claire describes her experience of supporting a young person whose child was subject to Child Protection proceedings:

> I went to court with her and it's hard going you know, and for me to be able to...I felt upset, you know and obviously can't show that. So I was saying "Well done, you're doing a really good job. And I'm just going to go off and make a phone call" so I could go round the corner and take a gasp. You know, because it was just – it's just really intense. (Claire, site 1, interview)

In this example, the separation needed is a physical distancing: Claire felt she had to remove herself from the situation in order to protect herself from becoming

overwhelmed by the emotional intensity. In their discussion of professional boundaries in social work relationships, O'Leary et al (2013) highlight the use of separation to defend and to protect. Similar themes are explored by Winter (2009) in her research with social workers for younger looked after children. Her findings suggest that some workers were avoiding deep relationships with children, keeping their distance as a protective strategy to avoid 'being exposed to highly charged emotional situations (where there were no easy 'fix-it' options) and where their own emotions might surface' (Winter 2009, p454). Social workers in Winter's study also expressed concern that showing emotion may be construed as somehow 'unprofessional' (Winter 2009). Claire's statement in the example above that 'obviously' she couldn't show that she was upset, appears to be consistent with the messages from wider research. Workers supporting vulnerable children and young people are engaged in complex processes of managing their own emotional responses. Their accounts of their practice suggest that they are using distance, both metaphorical and, as in Claire's story, actual, as one strategy to protect themselves, both from emotional pain and also from criticism of their professional boundaries.

MANAGING EMOTIONAL LABOUR

The ways in which these workers talk about and make sense of this aspect of the work can be considered in the context of the theoretical concept of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983) discussed in the first chapter. All the participants acknowledge, to a greater or lesser degree, that it is a requirement of the job to engage in human interaction with young people and to develop some kind of relationship with them.

There is a contrast between the two organisations, which is highlighted by a short section of the discussion in the focus group with the leaving care workers. In this focus group, I used a quote from the concluding remarks of Dixon's research study as a discussion point:

> Equipping young people with the practical, interpersonal and emotional resources needed for adult life should be a central feature of corporate parenting (Dixon et al 2006, p232).

This provokes quite strong reactions from the workers, as they try to explain why it is out of touch with the reality of practice.

> *Andy: It assumes you're going to have personal and emotional relationships with young people, but you don't. That statement is totally dream land.*
> [some discussion about those young people in stable long term foster placements who have the opportunities to develop interpersonal and emotional skills]
> *Andy: As PAs we don't do that. I mean, there are some young people where you are the one person they rely on, everyone's got one or two where it's like that. Then you do have an emotional relationship, but that comes with its own stresses. If you put a lot of yourself in emotionally and it doesn't work out then that's difficult* [this tailed off and was not resolved or returned to]
> *Claire: It's about building up a rapport with the young person isn't it? Not necessarily intense or emotional, you're meant to be there as a guide...*
> *Diane: From this statement, we really focus on the practical. Partly because of time, partly because of resources –*
> *Andy: Workload*
> *Diane: - but also because in terms of interpersonal and emotional resources, some young people have had such trauma. I mean they've got major attachment issues and haven't built up the emotional resilience. They jump from one crisis to another, they just haven't got the emotional skills there and actually it would take a lot more intensive work than a PA has time to do.*
> [strong agreement from the group]
> *Ben: I think as well, interpersonal and emotional resources [pause] it's not something workers would not want to support young people with. By all means. Unfortunately it all comes back to the PA's job role. We don't as workers have the resources to provide the young people with resources. It's technically not really our job role, I mean advice and guidance. So unfortunately some young people do get shafted with a pretty crappy start.*
> *(Site 1, focus group)*

The way in which this discussion ends is also interesting: Ben continues talking about those young people whose life chances were irretrievably damaged by their childhood experiences. The group are engaged in this reflection, and then Diane abruptly changes the subject and begins talking about starting independent living skills training at a younger age. There is something very uncomfortable for this group about thinking and talking about the possibility of emotional connection with their young people. Reflecting on the ways in which this group talk about their organisation (discussed in the previous chapter) these workers talk about huge pressures of workload and a lack of congruence between their priorities and those of management. They are describing a workplace similar to those in which Leeson (2010) suggests it is particularly difficult

to manage the demands of emotional labour. Again the way in which this group invoke their specified job role may be significant. Leeson argues that emotional labour is more manageable in workplaces where relationships are explicitly valued as an aspect of the role: by continually referencing that their job is 'advice and guidance' the leaving care workers suggest that this is not the case within their organisation.

In contrast the workers from the specialist adolescent service talk far less about pressure, stress or conflict in the workplace. It is possible that this explains why they seem more comfortable thinking and talking about their emotional engagement with the work, in particular the relative ease with which they talk about thinking about their young people as they would their own children. Of course, this is not the only difference between the two organisations, and therefore not the only possible explanation. Leaving care workers may not talk about taking on a parenting role because it is implicit: they do acknowledge the corporate parent aspect of their job role. However they make reference to this, rather than discussing it in any depth, and none of the leaving care interviewees talk about this aspect of their role in a way that would imply it has a direct bearing on their practice. Interestingly they make reference to corporate parenting less frequently than they do to another mandated aspect of the job role, that of 'being' advice and guidance. In contrast, all the workers from the specialist adolescent service make at least one reference to thinking or acting as a good parent would.

The leaving care workers do talk about the emotional impact of their work, even Andy, who is the most distanced and absent from his account of his work. His manner and style of speech creates a very pragmatic, blunt impression, but there are points when his underlying engagement with and commitment to the young people becomes evident. Talking about his experiences of positive outcomes, Andy observes that it is generally those young people who have had long-term foster placements who do well, but continues:

> *I wouldn't really pat myself on the back for that sort of thing. Really, you know, it's just nuts and bolts admin stuff...The ones you really want are the ones you positively see a massive difference from when you pick them up to when you leave them off.*   *(Andy, site 1, interview)*

Both Ben and Claire talk about the intense emotional stress involved in supporting young people whose own children are going through child protection processes. Ben in particular reflects at length on his feelings of frustration and sadness at the situation of one young woman he is working with. For him, this brings up further feelings of conflict about his identity as an ally of the young person whilst being an agent of the system. Again there is a contrast between the two organisations. Ben describes his experience of trying to seek support from his managers and there being none forthcoming:

> *For me that was really difficult because I thought what can I do? As this professional in her life, the only one that's fighting for her, what can I do? And I went to colleagues, I went to management, and I was offered no solutions as to what I could do. No support. And I thought, do you know what, that's really unfair because my young person's really upset and I want to help her. I'm coming to you to help me to help my young person, but no-one wants to. (Ben, site 1, interview)*

In contrast, Isabel talks about the frustration and self-doubt which is generated when working with young people who seem to be making no progress, or whose situations are actually getting worse, despite her best efforts. She talks positively about the role of supervision in providing a safe space to talk and reflect, and of this reassurance sustaining her when things get difficult. Again the underlying sense is that the specialist adolescent service is somehow managing to support emotional labour better than the leaving care service is able to.

This difference may be attributable to the organisational differences between the two services. Leaving care support is a legally mandated final process in a system which has formally taken on parenting responsibilities for these young people. In contrast the specialist adolescent service is a discrete, targeted service, outside of and untainted by the care system. Its support is based on voluntary engagement, and interventions are much shorter than leaving care support. As discussed in the previous chapter, the service's criteria are a combination of age and needs led, whereas leaving care support is entirely determined by age. In some ways the specialist adolescent service exists as an added extra: people are surprised and grateful that it exists at all. Expectations and feelings of entitlement are lower, which reduces conflict and tension in relationships between workers and service users. This is explicitly cited as a positive

aspect of the organisation by Kate (quoted in the previous chapter). It is possible that this creates a more fluid, freer practice context for the workers in the specialist adolescent service, in which emotional labour is easier to manage.

Considering the concept of emotional labour through the interview data as a whole, Diane's interview is interesting and somewhat contradictory. Her interview and her contribution to the focus group are quite significantly different from the other participants'. Diane's accounts of her work (her actual day to day practice) are delivered as very detailed descriptions of telling young people factual information about practical independent living skills. It is very difficult to find any examples of her talking about the relationship between herself and young people as anything other than a didactic struggle to make them understand. There is no talk of reflective conversations, or using the relationship to demonstrate that she is keeping a young person in mind. And yet the emotional labour is clearly there: it is evident in the passionate way she speaks throughout the interview, in her obvious frustration and sadness at the high number of young people she considers to be failed by the system, in her statement that she cries when something goes well for one of her young people. Diane's understanding and management of the emotional labour inherent in her role is the most complex and difficult to make sense of. She is the participant I would like to interview again. Alvesson's model offers several possible ways of considering Diane's interview, and why it has been difficult to untangle in analysis. As discussed earlier in this chapter, throughout the interview Diane constructs and speaks from a particular identity position, which is bound up in her sense of herself in the role of persuading people of the overriding importance of practical independent living skills. Within this identity, it is difficult to speak about other aspects of the work. From our earliest conversations about the research, Diane's interpretation was that the question related to independent living skills, either because she genuinely understood the question in this way or reflecting a more political agenda – this is what she would like to talk about, this is an issue on her personal agenda.

Overwhelmingly the data suggests that participants are aware of importance of their relationship with young people and are giving explicit thought to this. It seems that workers are making conscious, thought through decisions about how to develop this

relationship and how to use it to effect change. There is a general recognition that demonstrating to young people that they are valued and cared for, beyond delivering what it is your job to do, is in itself a powerful and positive intervention. This centrality of emotional engagement to the role raises the question of the level of emotional labour involved in the work. There is some indication of difference between the two organisations in the extent to which they support or hinder the emotional labour being required of the workers. This may explain the significant difference between the two groups of participants in the extent to which they are comfortable talking about themselves as taking on the role of parent in their relationship with young people. Despite the statutory mandate of leaving care services to function as a corporate parent, it is workers from the specialist adolescent service who talk about feeling obliged to step into the role of parent for those young people who do not have the involvement of their own parent. However this role is that of an idealised 'good parent', in which thinking is separated from feeling: workers are clear that they do not take on the emotional aspects of the relationship. The final section of this chapter explores how the respondents talk about other possible sources of this emotional support.

5.4 If not us, then who?

THE INADEQUACY OF SERVICES TO PROVIDE THE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT NEEDED

The recognition that young people need consistent adult support, which feels genuine and individual to them, prompts many of the participants to reflect on the limitations of their work. There is an underlying sadness, a resignation to the fact that for many young people there would be no "happy ending" as Andy puts it.

> *It's a harsh lesson that they're having to learn at that age, where they can't rely on any one person, they can't have a consistent one person because it's just not possible. There isn't that service out there that could be that consistent person that does everything for them, because ultimately that is your family isn't it? And that's why they're in that situation – because they haven't got a family that's able or capable.*   *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

> *It can't be professionals that do that unconditional stuff, it can't be a service that does it, it's got to be somebody outside that does it for good reasons...I know it's very idealistic.*   *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

Kate's interview is the most explicit and articulate about the inadequacy of services to act as parent or family. Reflecting on my reaction to her interview data as a whole, the first reading in the process of VCR analysis, my notes start with 'sad'.

> *You can do the practical stuff, you can make sure that they've got all those benefits, you can do the referrals to the different services to look at their mental health and the rest of it, but ultimately you can't replace the love of key members of the family. You know, there's no solution to that... The ones that don't have that mum there emotionally, just seem to be so traumatised, they just don't seem to be able to, sort of, get back on their feet.*
> *(Kate, site 2, interview)*

This honesty about the likelihood of young people ever recovering from the lack of consistent, unconditional emotional commitment, suggests that these participants have not fallen in to the self-protective ways of thinking that Briggs (2008) suggests may be a risk in this area of work. These interviewees are not over-estimating the capacity of their young people to manage adult life, and are very open about the limitations of the degree of 'independence' reached at the point where services withdraw.

IDENTIFYING AND NURTURING INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

All eight participants are clear that their service cannot fully meet young people's need for a consistent adult in their lives. However there is a marked difference in the ways in which they speak about looking at other sources of this informal support. Young people's parents come up in every interview to a greater or lesser extent, and workers' contact with these parents is a point of discussion in four interviews (two from each service). The leaving care group openly acknowledge that they rarely work with parents, regarding this as not their job. Some go further, and see working with parents as deeply problematic and to be avoided whenever possible.

> *Interviewer: Do you do much work with families?*
> *Andy: I try not to if I'm honest with you... It's like, well you're over 18 now, you're an adult. I don't need to talk to your mum do I?   (Andy, site 1, interview)*

> *Interviewer: Do you have much to do with family members?*
> *Claire: Not a huge amount, but my stance really is my obligation is to work with the young person and not with family members.   (Claire, site 1, interview)*

The workers from the specialist adolescent service talk more about working with parents, and they are clear that they have a role in supporting young people to maintain, develop and build on their relationships with their family. Louise is the most explicit about the central importance of parents:

> *People need to understand that these young people are a part of a family, and life might be crappy at the moment and not right, but at the end of the day, a few years down the line, the chances are they will gravitate back to their family. And we shouldn't be, kind of, reinforcing any messages of "Well that's it, you haven't got a family any more".... I think that is really important in terms of going on to adulthood and being an independent person, knowing where you've come from and having that sense of identity.   (Louise, site 2, interview)*

This is interesting in the light of research evidence which suggests that although workers often consider young people in isolation and view families as problematic, those young people who are able to maintain family links do have more positive outcomes (Mayock et al 2011). There appears to be a contrast between the two organisations in the way that they construct the remit of their work. The leaving care workers define the individual young person as the focus of their responsibilities, whilst the workers from the specialist adolescent service take a more holistic approach. There is an explicit recognition of the importance of young people's capacity to

maintain healthy relationships with family and friends, and workers see it as very much within their role to support this.

> *Most of it's relationships stuff...relationships with family, relationships with partners...having healthy relationships, because quite often they're unhealthy relationships - whether it's with family, so there's family mediation going on...It's probably the most complex work that we do. (Julia, site 2, focus group)*

These workers acknowledge the permanence of family relationships in comparison with the transient nature of relationships with professionals. There are several organisational differences which could explain this disparity in the extent to which workers involve themselves with young people's families. Firstly the average ages of the young people are slightly different, with the specialist adolescent service working with a slightly younger cohort overall. Workers may be expecting lower levels of involvement in their children's lives from parents as young people get older, and in fact Andy does make reference to having done more direct work with parents when he was working with 16 year olds. There may also be some significance in the different histories of the young people: for those who have been formally 'looked after', rather than simply housed, by the local authority, a decision has been taken that their parents are not willing or able to provide adequate care. Whilst this obviously does not preclude any further involvement in their child's life, it will necessarily have an impact on the judgements made by leaving care workers about the desirability of involving them in their work.

The wider ambivalence within the care system about involving families is highlighted by Boddy et al's research, which explores contact between looked after children and their relatives, particularly parents. The study's findings suggest that 'the adversarial system posed barriers to work with families' (Boddy et al 2014, p159). Research comparing the experiences of young people in care with that of their peers in the general population also suggests that the involvement of families is problematic. The ELTA (Everyday Lives: (Re) conceptualising transitions to adulthood for young people in care) project is a wide ranging qualitative study, using narrative analysis of data from young people in England and France. Findings emerging from the ELTA project suggest that 'the relative absence of family in the narratives of everyday life of young people in care in England was striking' in comparison to their mainstream peers, who 'refer

constantly' to family relationships (CORDIS 2015). It would seem that the views expressed by the leaving care workers in my study are consistent with the wider research picture, which suggests that the families of young people in care have limited involvement in supporting them.

Interviewees from both organisations talk about other strategies which could be helpful in addressing young people's lack of informal, i.e. non-professional, relationships and support. The idea of mentoring schemes is raised in several interviews. Workers see these as an opportunity to introduce young people to positive adult role models, who could develop a different type of relationship, over a more sustained period of time.

> *We need something where people are going to be in it for the long road. So we need people like us, workers like us that will do it on a kind of, not a work professional level, not as a job level but as a personal level...I really love the idea of having an organisation that offers mentors to young people that don't have positive adult role models.* *(Julia, site 2, interview)*

> *We were thinking it might be nice if we could set them up, so to speak, with other previous care leavers that were in the area or have a certain interest which is similar, where they can have a buddy almost. And that person will, kind of, look out for them beyond 21...you know, someone else that they – for a bit of a relationship with and mentoring.* *(Claire, site 1, interview)*

Ben also talks about trying to create networks of peers to provide mutual support between three young people living in the same block of flats. Exploring this theme helps to cast further light on the discussion in the previous chapter about the ways in which these workers are constructing an ideal 'independent adulthood'. Participants seem to be drawing a distinction between emotional self-reliance and dependence on services. So whilst there is an underlying desire to promote young people taking responsibility for themselves, and to reduce an unhealthy and negative reliance on services, there is a parallel desire to help young people develop wider emotional connections and relationships. Talk of mentoring schemes and strategies for creating sustainable informal support networks suggests a model of interdependence similar to that discussed in the research literature (for example, Samuels and Pryce 2008). However it is worth noting that this is an idealised model of practice, rather than what is actually happening in practice currently (again this is as the literature would suggest).

All the participants recognise and talk about young people's need for a relationship with a consistent adult, to provide sustainable and unconditional emotional support. There is also a unanimous feeling that this cannot be provided by services. This tension creates space for work to be done with young people to build on their informal support networks. These may be either naturally occurring (family/friends) or created (mentoring schemes). There is a difference between the ways in which the two groups spoke about this type of work. The leaving care workers focus far more on the young person in isolation, and the solutions identified come from the outside (formally organised mentoring schemes). There is little enthusiasm for working with families, particularly parents. In contrast, the workers in the second group express more caution about isolating young people from their families, even where there are currently difficulties in these relationships. There is an acknowledgment of the transient nature of services in comparison to family and of the potential for changes in the dynamics of family relationships as a young person moves from child to adult, and then possibly becomes a parent themselves.

Chapter Six: Discussion, Reflection and Conclusion

OVERVIEW

In this final chapter I have reviewed the study as a whole and highlighted the significant themes which have emerged from the data. Key findings are brought together to summarise how these workers talked to me about their role in supporting vulnerable young people to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. My analysis of the data suggests that participants construct their role from two distinct perspectives: in relation to the organisations and systems within which they work, and in relation to the individual young people to whom they provide direct support.

Taking a step back from the detail of the findings, the second section of this chapter considers whether there are broader patterns made visible by the data. What can the voices of these participants tell us about the wider picture of services supporting homeless and care-experienced young people, as outlined in my review of the literature? I have explored some of the questions raised by my findings and considered the possible implications for practice.

My learning from this study extends to more than simply the findings. In the third section of this chapter, I have reflected on the experience of doing the research. The strengths and weaknesses of the study design are discussed, alongside the implications of my decisions about methods and methodology for the overall usefulness of the study. Acknowledging the questions raised or left unresolved in my findings, I consider ways in which the study could be built upon and make some suggestions for future research.

In the final section, to conclude, I reflect on the extent to which this study has achieved its aims. The thesis closes with an exposition of the contribution it makes to the wider field of knowledge and understanding of this area of practice.

6.1 Review of the study

This study has emerged from my desire for a better understanding of my field of practice. I have spent all of my professional career working with teenagers and young adults who are unable to live with their families. Research is all too often limited to reiteration of the restricted life chances and poor outcomes for this group of young people, with few studies exploring the actual work being done, or offering practical suggestions to improve practice. As discussed in my review of the literature, there is relatively little research which considers this area of practice from the perspective of workers. Research and theoretical literature highlight the central importance of genuine and consistent emotional support during the transition to adulthood. However, the research also suggests that the workers tasked with supporting young people struggle to offer this, partly due to pressures on their time but also due to concerns about developing emotional connections with young people. Leaving care work is subject to increasingly stringent government legislation, enshrining rights and entitlements but also setting out expectations of young people to accept the wider discourses around education and employment. In contrast, 16 and 17 year olds who are housed by local authorities without being formally taken into their care have no protected rights or entitlements post-18. Current social discourses of what it means to be an adult are dominated by an idealised self-reliance, such that outcomes are attributed to individual choices and efforts. Perversely, services are organised in such a way that this vulnerable group are expected to 'become' adults at the age of 18, despite the fact that data suggests their peers are living at home and are dependent on their parents until well into their 20s.

Work completed earlier in the doctorate enabled me to explore my area of interest and brought into focus my underlying framework of thinking about the kind of knowledge I was seeking. This process of developing my methodological approach continued throughout the study. Changes in my professional role, practical difficulties in accessing a second fieldwork site and a shift in my thinking about the analysis of the data have each influenced the direction of the research. What has emerged is a small-scale, exploratory, qualitative study, based on data gathered from focus group and individual interviews with a total of eight participants across two workplaces. The data

from the interviews and focus groups has been analysed using elements of three approaches (thematic, narrative and VCR) to produce an in-depth and reflexive interpretation of the workers' accounts. Overall, this suggests that workers talk about their role from two perspectives: firstly, in relation to the organisations within which they work and secondly, in relation to the individual young people with whom they work directly.

SIGNIFICANT THEMES: WORKING WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

Through my analysis of the data, I have explored how participants position themselves in relation to the organisations and system within which they work. They describe working within multiple constraints and restrictions, some of which are created by the ways in which their services are organised. The leaving care workers talk about high workloads and overwhelming demands, including management prioritisation of bureaucratic tasks. The workers from the specialist adolescent service express concerns that providing housing and support without the legal status of being in local authority care, reduces young people's entitlements to support, particularly in terms of finances and the duration of the support. This group reflect the concerns raised by a recent study of the accommodation and support being provided to vulnerable young people, suggesting that those who are formally taken into care acquire a protected status (Crellin and Pona 2015). Workers from both groups also acknowledge the ways in which wider systems impact on and constrain their work, particularly in relation to the austerity agenda and consequent changes to the benefits system.

Time is a significant factor in the landscape within which this work is undertaken. Participants talk about time from two perspectives: their own time as a scarce resource and the passing of time as a deciding factor in the way that services relate to young people. Workers express frustration about the rigidity of age criteria which determine eligibility for support. These fixed cut off points do not allow any flexibility to take into account the fact that this group of young people demonstrate huge variations in their levels of maturity and capability. These views resonate with Uprichard's criticism of life course theories which create a false dichotomy between

the states of adult and child (Uprichard 2008). The age criteria themselves are also the subject of discussion, with participants from both groups expressing the view that unrealistic expectations are placed on these vulnerable young people to manage independently and take responsibility for themselves far earlier than their peers. Workers use their own experiences, and those of their children, as a comparison. They do not distance themselves from the young people and do not argue for them to have 'special treatment': rather, they want their service users to have the same protracted and gradual taking on of adult responsibilities that characterises the transitions of their wider peers. The participants appear to have an awareness of the ways in which the transition to adulthood has become fragmented for this generation of young people, with extended dependency on parents becoming the norm, and increasing variations in expectations relating to rites of passage (Thomson et al 2004, Brannen and Nilsen 2002).

Reflecting on their work within the context of their own organisations, the participants talk openly about difference and the individuality of practice. In each of the interviews, the respondent acknowledges how their approach to the work is shaped by their own values and experiences, making their practice different from that of their colleagues. These differences are owned, with talk such as "I do this", "for me it's important to...". The data suggest that the leaving care workers are more comfortable than the workers from the specialist adolescent service in talking about this variation in practice. Differences in approach, professional background and value base are presented as more problematic by the second group, with two participants talking explicitly about some ways of working being better than others.

SIGNIFICANT THEMES: SUPPORTING INDIVIDUAL YOUNG PEOPLE

In relation to the direct work done with young people, several significant themes have emerged. With one exception, the respondents describe educating young people to think rather than to do. Problem solving and the capacity to recognise when they need help are seen as more important for young people than the skills to complete specific independent living tasks. Reflecting on how this plays out in their practice, several

respondents describe using conversations with young people as a means to facilitate the development of thinking skills. Workers are supporting young people to create a narrative, and in the process are encouraging self awareness and reflective thinking. This finding is interesting in the wider context of research studies which highlight the importance of young people having the opportunity to learn from mistakes (for example Geenen and Powers 2007, de Winter and Noom 2003). It may be that the workers in the current study are reflecting how this translates into practice, with their detailed accounts describing the face to face work which facilitates young people's learning.

Another perspective on the direct work with young people is the way in which the relationship between worker and young person is an intervention in itself. The participants' accounts suggest that they are aware of the importance to young people of feeling genuinely valued and held in mind. This relationship is conceptualised in various ways, with the clearest construct being parent-child. However the respondents explicitly split the different aspects of the parenting role, and are very clear that they do not fulfil the emotional aspects. 'Being' a parent is more clearly enacted in the thinking and practice of the workers in the specialist adolescent service. In contrast, 'being' a parent appears to be more of an abstract organisational responsibility for workers in the leaving care group.

Given the acknowledged limitations of their capacity to deliver the emotional, caring and nurturing aspects of a relationship, it is perhaps surprising that workers do not talk more about building on young people's informal support networks, which may be expected to be a more natural source of this type of support. This is an area where there is much idealised talk: both groups express clear ideas about what they would like to be in place for young people, but which does not currently exist. In terms of what is actually done to address this need, the workers from the specialist adolescent service talk about the importance of not isolating young people from their families. They express a willingness to support these relationships with mediation and encouragement, and appear to be able to take a more holistic view of the young person within their reciprocal care networks. In contrast, the leaving care workers articulate a far more individualised model of support, underpinned by their

understanding of their responsibilities to work with the young person, who is now (or is very nearly) an adult. This would seem to relate back to questions of how these workers are constructing the concept of being an independent adult. The leaving care workers' responses support the findings of research studies which suggest that workers find it problematic to provide meaningful support for young people to maintain family relationships (for example, McMurray et al 2011, Boddy et al 2014). However, the workers from the specialist adolescent service talk about taking a pro-active role in supporting young people to repair or to sustain relationships with their families, which suggests that there are support services where this work is happening. This is encouraging, given that the research evidence suggests maintaining family relationships is a protective factor for young people, correlated to more positive outcomes (Mayock et al 2011).

Respondents describe the challenge of maintaining a balance between being reliable whilst not becoming relied upon. The concept of 'dependence' on services is complex and no coherent picture has emerged. From one perspective, there is very clear and explicit talk of guarding against the 'danger' of dependence. On the surface, this implies an acceptance of individualised concepts of adulthood, in line with the wider social discourse discussed in Chapter Two. However, within the wider context of the analysis, another interpretation emerges: it is possible that workers are driven by pragmatism rather than ideology. Constructing 'ideal' outcomes in terms of self-reliance and young people's capacity to take care of themselves may be based more on workers' experience than on their underlying values. The respondents describe working against the ticking clock of fixed age criteria, their interactions with young people overshadowed by the question "what are you going to do when our support is withdrawn?" The participants know that their role is transient and there will be a point, determined by need or, more likely, by age, when the young person is no longer eligible for their support. Knowing that there will come a time when services are no longer available, workers feel a responsibility to prepare young people for this. This picture of practice being driven by the existence of fixed boundaries in time may be a reflection of the situation described in the literature. These workers are describing

what it is like to provide support within services structured by the 'bureaucratic certainty' of fixed age criteria suggested by Mayock et al (2013, p456).

This is another area in which there is a difference between the two groups of workers. The group from the specialist adolescent service talk about their support as transient and temporary. There is far more talk of planning for endings, of the efforts made to identify appropriate sources of ongoing support for young people. This may be attributable to differences in the structure of services for the two groups of young people, with the leaving care service mandated to offer support, albeit unlikely to be from one consistent worker, from 18 through to 21. In contrast, the specialist adolescent service offers much shorter, targeted interventions, with entry and exit to the service determined by need as well as age.

6.2 Patterns emerging from the findings

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOOKED AFTER STATUS

In the introduction (Chapter One) I have traced the development of my research question. I was working on the premise that the group of vulnerable young people who cannot live with their families are likely to have similar characteristics and needs. After the first round of data collection (the point at which the research question changed) it appeared even more likely that this would be the case: in their accounts the leaving care workers had consistently discounted the group who are in, or who have moved on from, stable foster placements. Thus the young people they talk about in the focus group and interviews are those who have had a less settled and smooth passage through the care system, and who have not lived in settings which replicate the care and consistency of family. My feeling that care-experienced and homeless young people were similar cohorts was reinforced by my professional experience, which suggests that many homeless 16-17 year olds have been known to Children's Services during their childhoods and have been on the edge of care.

As individual young people, it is true that care-experienced 16-18 year olds present with challenges similar to those of their homeless peers (noted by Crellin and Pona 2015, and Osgood et al 2010) However, listening to the data, there does seem to be something significant about the difference between being in care and being housed. It is perhaps inevitable that, as a practitioner, I relate to the young people one at a time, so my initial response is that they are a group of similar individuals. But there appears to be a group identity of looked after children and care leavers, an identity constructed by and within the system, which has an importance in itself. The respondents allude to an interesting tension between the negative connotations of the group identity (associated with poor outcomes) and the positive advantages of membership of the group (protected status and entitlements).

This tension plays out in the contrast between the data from the two groups of workers, and it is debated explicitly in the focus group discussion with the workers from the specialist adolescent service. These workers are clear that their young people would have financial advantages and more sustained support within the care system.

However they are equally clear that within their own service, workers are able to spend far more time with young people and be more responsive to their immediate needs. This is consistent with what is said by the leaving care workers, who talk of almost unmanageable workloads significantly restricting the time available for direct work with individual young people. This raises the question of whether the strengths of the two services could be combined to create a model which harnesses the flexibility and capacity for direct work within the safety net of rights and entitlements. It suggests that the leaving care workers are right to be concerned about the impact of the high caseloads – their young people are benefitting from the security of a protected status within the system, but they are missing out on the face to face support being provided to their homeless counterparts.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO SERVICES

My decision to widen the research question to include homeless young people not within the care system was based on an assumption of equivalence. It therefore follows that I had not explicitly intended this to be a comparative study between the two services. However, during the process of analysing the data it has become clear that there are striking differences in the ways that the two groups talk about their organisations. Reflecting on these differences has added an unexpected perspective to the findings from the study, and has proved to be an interesting dimension of the overall picture. For the participants from the leaving care service, the relationship between workers and management is constructed as an adversarial and hierarchical 'us versus them'. Two respondents are particularly clear about their alignment with their colleagues in the battle to do the best for young people. In contrast, the workers from the specialist adolescent service talk explicitly about a lack of shared values within the organisation and draw attention to the problematic nature of differences in practice. It appears that their organisational script for 'how we talk about what we do' is less coherent than that of the leaving care group. Listening to the data from the specialist adolescent service, there is no talk of a 'them' and respondents do not position or define themselves in opposition to management. This raises the possibility

that these workers do not need a strong and explicitly articulated 'us' because the context is less oppositional; there is no 'them' to define the 'us' against. My analysis of the data suggests that the existence, or lack of, an overall cohesion and coherence of the job role may also be significant. The way in which respondents speak about and make sense of their work was different between the two groups. For the leaving care workers, having a clearly mandated role seems to give some clarity of script and this underlying unity enables workers to talk more comfortable about differences between colleagues.

MANAGING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION AND DISTANCE

In Chapter Three, I have talked about my approach to the research question being essentially exploratory, but having worked in this field for so long, it would be impossible not to have had some ideas about the likely direction of the findings. One aspect which has surprised me is that the impact of the emotional labour inherent in the role is so close to the surface in the participants' accounts of their work. Overall, the data suggest a concern to boundary and contain emotional aspects of the work, constructing a professionalised version of 'care'. Workers' talk is dominated by references to what their role is not: not mothering, not being a friend. Differences between the two organisations play out in the fact that emotional labour appears to be managed quite differently within the two groups. This was a very small scale study, so it is not possible to say whether this is down to these individuals, the organisational culture, or differences in the work itself. Talking about the emotional content of their work, the leaving care workers express sadness or frustration, or else they retreat from the idea of emotional support as somehow beyond what they can offer and not their job. Frequently they struggle to articulate the emotional content of the work at all: sentences tail off, accounts are unresolved. For this group of workers, it is difficult to talk about emotional labour. These participants describe a workplace dominated by management priorities, which focus on paperwork and finances, rather than relationships with individual young people. The workers from the specialist adolescent service, whilst they too talk of professional boundaries limiting the extent of their

emotional connections with young people, do appear to be more comfortable articulating emotional aspects of their role.

Analysis of the data does not provide clear answers as to why the two groups differ in their capacity to talk about the emotional dimensions of their work, but there are hints that this may be linked to differences in the levels at which workers are connected to, and separated from, their colleagues. The leaving care workers are united on one level, within the bounds of an explicit job title. This makes the talk about the concrete aspects of the role more coherent: there is a shared sense of what the work is and is not. But considering coherence and shared frameworks at one step removed, the picture is slightly different. The workers from the specialist adolescent service appear to have a shared way of thinking about and making sense of the work which is somehow protective. I wonder whether this may be linked to the different profiles of the two groups in relation to professional background. The leaving care group contained no social workers and the team manager is not a social worker. In contrast, the group from the specialist adolescent service contained two qualified social workers and one preparing to start her social work training. In addition, within this organisation, the work with homeless young people is overseen by a consultant social worker. Social work as a professional discipline includes explicit recognition of the importance of reflection and the use of supervision, both of which are key in managing emotional labour effectively. It is possible that something about the contribution of social work values and thinking is creating a culture, a 'way of thinking about what we do' in this organisation which is unifying the workers at a more abstract level.

Whatever the underlying reasons, the differences between the two groups in the management of the emotional demands of the work appear to have a direct impact on the ways in which the individual relationships between workers and young people are constructed. Particularly interesting is the extent to which participants cast themselves in the role of 'parent' to these children. The workers from the specialist adolescent service talk comfortably about thinking in the role of a good parent: what would I want for my own child? They also describe stepping in and enacting a parenting role when this is otherwise absent for young people. In contrast, the leaving care workers talk about themselves as parents only in an abstract sense. Reflecting on

the ways in which the leaving care workers talk about their role as a 'corporate parent' I wonder whether the fact that this is mandated in legislation is significant. The way in which workers talk about this aspect of their role echoes the way in which they talk about another mandated function, that of 'advice and guidance'. These respondents appear to inhabit their job role with talk of 'being', rather than providing or supporting young people with, advice and guidance. If 'corporate parent' is conceptualised in this abstract manner, as another aspect of the job, then this might explain why workers talk in a way which suggests they are inhabiting this as a label or a responsibility rather than enacting it as an active role. It is possible that the insertion of the word 'corporate' acts to separate the worker from the parent role. This in itself may be a barrier, inhibiting workers from enacting a parenting role with young people. This is only hinted at in my data, but is a question worthy of more careful exploration (discussed in Section 6.3, below).

6.3 The experience of carrying out the research

REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY DESIGN

In Chapter Three I outlined the reasons for using focus groups and individual interviews to gather the data. In practice, these two methods did not function in the complementary way that I had intended, although both did generate useful and pertinent data. For these two groups of participants, there was very little difference between what was said in public and in private. The individual perspectives are recognisable in both contexts. This means that I was not able to explore the processes within the group which construct and maintain their negotiated and shared public understandings, a strength of focus groups suggested by Michell (1999). One obvious explanation for this is that I was asking the participants to talk about their work, which is, by definition, public rather than private. There are, however, other factors which may be significant. Firstly, the groups were very small, reducing the normative pressure of the group. In the leaving care group in particular, the participants knew each other well because they work together in the same team, and this closeness and background knowledge was obvious in the focus group discussion, as comments and jokes were made about individuals' particular points of view. As discussed earlier in this chapter, one of the key themes emerging from the findings is that these workers demonstrate an awareness of individual differences in approach to the work. Under these circumstances, the pressure may actually have been working in the opposite direction, such that it created an expectation on participants to speak from their own habitual individual perspective, rather than fall into line with the group. I think that the professional role of the participants may also have lessened the expected difference between the two contexts. These respondents are from a talking profession, used to conversation and discussion as a means of challenge and negotiation.

Through the process of grappling with and trying to make sense of the data, I reached an understanding of my own perspective on the 'right' way to analyse my data. Combining elements of three different analytical approaches has produced a reflexive account, which reflects the complexity and ambiguity of the participants' talk.

Positioning the data within a three-dimensional framework allows it to be considered from multiple perspectives, and this has given the depth of analysis which has enabled me to explore my research question. I have explicitly given preference to depth over breadth of knowledge, although, inevitably this restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalised. The use of Alvesson's model as a conceptual framework, together with ideas from practice-near research (discussed in Chapter Three) has freed up my thinking, such that I have been able to play an active part in the process of analysis and interpretation, rather than feeling restricted to attempting to establish what the respondents may have meant. Ethically this has generated some discomfort, as the resulting findings are perhaps not what the workers would have wanted or expected.

The decision to include workers from two different services has had both positive and negative impacts on the study. As discussed in Chapter One, my initial intention was that all the participants would be leaving care workers. Changes in my professional role led to a process of re-focussing of the research question to include homeless young people beyond those in the statutory care system. This has enabled me to keep my research aligned with my work, and on a pragmatic level this has been key in maintaining my motivation to complete the study. Listening to the voices of workers from these two services has created an interesting comparative dimension to the study and has opened up new perspectives for looking at the data. However, in such a small scale study, it must be acknowledged that this decision has reduced the capacity to make any kind of generalisations because it introduces another variable which splits the dataset. More fundamentally, the differences between the two groups are more significant than I had expected: raising the question that I may have been asking workers to talk to me about two completely different roles? Reflecting on this question, I think that my response is based somewhere in the nature of the research question and the methodology underpinning it. The knowledge I have sought is simultaneously detailed and abstract: so whilst the study is based on in-depth analysis of the data, the data itself was generated by broader discussion of how the participants position themselves in the multiple frameworks within which they work. My conversations with the participants were detailed and reflective, but the findings

are based on a snapshot of one interview. As discussed in Chapter Three, the aim of this study was not to describe or to understand what workers do, but rather to listen to the ways in which they talk about their role.

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Workers in this study talked explicitly about dependence as a dangerous condition to be avoided. Their accounts of their work describe their efforts to guard against creating or encouraging this state. The thinking underpinning this still intrigues me: as discussed earlier, I have not been able to unravel from this data to what extent this is a reflection of value base and to what extent it represents pragmatism based on experience. In the literature review, I have explored the wider social discourses which frame our understanding of independence and adulthood, and set out how these have an impact on services at policy level. Are these dominant discourses of individual responsibility pervading the ways in which individual workers are delivering support services to vulnerable young people? I would be interested to interview the participants again with this specific issue in mind, although it should be acknowledged that this would be a complex question to operationalise in research. Firstly, there is the issue previously discussed in this thesis: what people say they do is not necessarily what they actually do. Secondly, as Alvesson puts it, speakers both construct and are constructed by social discourses (Alvesson 2003). Dominant discourses can become accepted and presented as uncontested ways of thinking, as 'common sense'. Talking to workers is unlikely to be sufficient to disentangle their underlying thinking from their practice, or from a generalised acceptance of 'the way things are'. Careful thought would be needed to design a study which could explore this question, and some ethnographic methods would need to be included.

The question of the extent to which workers enact the role of 'parent' in their direct work with young people is hinted at within the findings of this study, but further exploration is needed to understand more fully the ways in which the different aspects of this role are constructed as within or outside of professional remits. As discussed above, the difference between the two groups of workers is particularly interesting on

this point. It is possible that specifying the role as 'corporate' parent may be distancing workers from the 'parent' aspects, such that the organisational dimension obscures the interpersonal relationship. Further discussion with leaving care workers, with interviews based around questions specifically about the corporate parenting aspect of their role, would help to clarify whether there is a separation between enacting the role (thinking, acting, feeling like a parent) and accepting the responsibilities inherent in the role (fulfilling the organisation's parental duty).

This study has also raised questions about the management of difference within organisations which are based on an individual caseholding model. Both groups of workers hold discrete caseloads which, to a large extent, they manage autonomously. Differences between colleagues, in terms of approach, attitude, priorities and practice, are openly acknowledged and described by these participants: what is the impact of this variation on the young people receiving the support? The way in which the participants talk suggests that young people's experiences of services may be dependent on the individual worker to whom they are allocated. It would be interesting to explore this further by considering the perspectives of young people receiving support services. Qualitative research, designed to tap into the experiences of young people who are supported by different individual workers, would enable further exploration of this question. Following on from this, I would also be interested to consider the role of supervisors in these organisations. Participants in this study clearly suggest that the work being done is not uniform: how do those who supervise practitioners manage this difference to maintain the thread of organisational consistency and equivalence?

6.4 Conclusion

Reflecting on the findings from this study, I have identified a contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the work being done to support the transitions to adulthood of young people housed by the state. The study explores the field by listening to the views and experiences of frontline workers, delivering services within two distinct organisational remits. This has enabled me to identify that the role is understood differently depending on the kind of service. There is also some indication that the professional background and training of the workers may be influencing the ways in which the work is thought about and made sense of. This has implications for the kind of service which is being provided to young people. In particular, it would seem that care-experienced and homeless young people are being offered quite different services, with each model having both strengths and weaknesses.

The study also gives a sense of the emotional demands this role places on workers. In particular, the enactment of a parenting role with young people is problematic and is further complicated by the slippery concept of 'corporate' parenting. Workers are employing active strategies to manage and boundary their emotional connection with young people. These complex decisions about which kinds of relationships are within the remit of the role are being made in the context of a wider society in which notions of acceptable and unacceptable dependency are changing. The organisational landscape of fixed time boundaries increases the pressure on workers and encourages fragmentation of the work: workers rely on accommodation staff to provide support with practical skills, referrals are made to other services. The focus is on one to one work with individual young people to 'move them on'.

Overall this study has generated a more nuanced understanding of how workers are making sense of the emotional connections between themselves and the young people they support. This is potentially of use to managers and supervisors, who have an essential role in supporting workers to create and sustain a framework within which they can manage the emotional demands of the work. Judgements made by individual workers are shaped by complex interactions between personal values, professional background and organisational context. Supervisors who are aware of the complexity of the process by which workers define what is (and is not) their role are likely to be

better placed to support workers to articulate this, and to challenge where this is not working in young people's best interests. In the current context, dominated by an individualised one-to-one case management model of service delivery, it is relevant and useful for managers to be aware of the wide variation in workers' understandings of their role: I believe that this study highlights this, and also gives some depth of understanding of how this is operationalised, which may be helpful in considering ways of maintaining young person centred support, worker autonomy and a baseline level of service consistency.

Returning to the 'tiny impact' of the title, the message from these workers is that they acknowledge the potential for their support to make a positive contribution in young people's lives, whilst being realistic about its limitations. This echoes my aspirations for this study: I set out to explore the support being provided to vulnerable young people during their transitions to adulthood, from the perspective of the workers providing this support. The findings from this study, whilst small-scale and exploratory, have generated insights into one aspect of our understanding and knowledge in this field of practice.

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Appendix A: Application for ethical review and confirmation of approval

Ethical Review Application (ER/HKE20/1) Helen Evans

Project Title:	In what ways is the concept of 'preparation for independent adult life' constructed by leaving care workers in the context of their practice with young people as they leave the care system ?
Status:	Approved
Department:	Social Work and Social Care
Email:	H.K.Evans@sussex.ac.uk
Applicant Status:	PG (Research)
Phone:	
Supervisor:	Marrable, Letitia F
Project Start Date:	08-Jul-2013
Project End Date:	27-Jun-2014
External Funding in place:	No
External Collaborators:	No
Funder/ Project Title:	
Name of Funder:	

US
University of Sussex

Social Sciences & Arts Cross-School Research Ethics Committee **CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**	
Reference Number:	ER/HKE20/1
School:	ESW
Title of Project	In what ways is the concept of 'preparation for independent adult life' constructed by leaving care workers in the context of their practice with young people as they leave the care system ?
Principal Investigator:	Helen Evans (Marrable)
Expected Start Date:*	01/02/2014

*NB. If the <u>actual</u> project start date is delayed beyond 12 months of the <u>expected</u> start date, this Certificate of Approval will lapse and the project will need to be reviewed again to take account of changed circumstances such as legislation, sponsor requirements and University procedures

This project has been given ethical approval by the Social Sciences/Arts Research Ethics Committee (C-REC). *Please note the following requirements for approved submissions:*

Amendments to research proposal - Any changes or amendments to the approved proposal, which have ethical implications, must be submitted to the committee for authorisation prior to implementation.

Feedback regarding any adverse and unexpected events - Any adverse (undesirable and unintended) and unexpected events that occur during the implementation of the project must be reported to the Chair of the Social Sciences C-REC. In the event of a serious adverse event, research must be stopped immediately and the Chair alerted within 24 hours of the occurrence.

Authorised Signature	*Stephen Shute*
Name of Authorised Signatory **(C-REC Chair or nominated deputy)**	Professor Stephen Shute 02/12/2013

Appendix B: Information sheet for participants in Site 1

US

University of Sussex

[Date]

Dear [Name]

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project. Before we meet for the focus group discussion, I wanted to let you know a bit more about why I'm doing the project, what I'm hoping to find out and what I'm going to do with your information.

I am currently studying for a doctorate in social work at Sussex University. This project is the final part of my course, and will provide the data for my thesis.

My overall research question is:
In what ways is the concept of 'preparation for independent adult life' understood by leaving care workers in the context of their practice with young people as they leave the care system?

The project will have two stages: a focus group discussion followed by individual interviews. The focus group is an opportunity for me to explore some ideas with you and four of your colleagues. I am interested in your thoughts about what independent adult life might look like for care leavers, and how this influences the way you think about the work that you do.

The individual interview (which we can arrange for a time convenient to you) will follow up on some of the themes raised in the group discussion, with the aim of exploring your views in more depth. The interview will take no more than an hour of your time. I can come to meet with you at your office (or we can arrange another venue if you would prefer).

Before both the focus group discussion and the interview, I will ask you to sign a consent form to confirm that you agree to take part. A copy is attached for your information - I will bring a copy for you to sign when we meet.

The focus group discussion and interviews will be recorded and then transcribed. Your name will not be recorded on the audio or the transcripts.

I won't ask any questions specifically about your direct work with young people, but this might come up in our conversations. Any information about a young person or a family will be fully anonymised when the interview is transcribed (if necessary, I'll summarise the information to record the overall themes, rather than specific details which could identify a person).

A summary of the project will be sent to all participants and to the local authority's research governance department.   This will outline the significant themes from the focus group discussion and the interviews, together with an overview of my findings. However no specific information from the interviews (or direct quotes) will be included, so it will not be possible to identify individuals' contributions within this summary.

The final report will be submitted to the university for examination, and a copy will be held in the library. I'm hoping that the research will produce some findings which may be useful to practitioners, so it's possible that in the future I will use aspects of the report for training or discussion. I may also use this research as the basis for articles for publication.

I hope that this gives you an overview of the project, and that you are still happy to participate. Please do let me know if you have any questions – h.k.evans@sussex.ac.uk

Appendix C: Information sheet for participants in Site 2

US

University of Sussex

<div align="right">[Date]</div>

Dear [Name]

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project. Before we meet for the focus group discussion, I wanted to let you know a bit more about why I'm doing the project, what I'm hoping to find out and what I'm going to do with your information.

I am currently studying for a doctorate in social work at Sussex University. This project is the final part of my course, and will provide the data for my thesis.

The area of work I am particularly interested in is the support we give to our more complex and chaotic young people who end up living away from their family home. My research project will explore the role of workers in preparing these young people for independent adult life. I have already completed one round of fieldwork interviews with workers from the leaving care service, and I am curious about what similarities and differences there may be in the ways the two services understand young people's transition to adulthood.

The fieldwork will have two stages: a focus group discussion followed by individual interviews. The focus group is an opportunity for me to explore some ideas with you and three of your colleagues. I am interested in your thoughts about what independent adult life might look like for the young people you work with, and how this influences your day to day practice.

The individual interview (which we can arrange for a time convenient to you) will follow up on some of the themes raised in the group discussion, with the aim of exploring your views in more depth. The interview will take no more than an hour of your time. I can come to meet with you at your office (or we can arrange another venue if you would prefer).

Before both the focus group discussion and the interview, I will ask you to sign a consent form to confirm that you agree to take part. A copy is attached for your information - I will bring a copy for you to sign when we meet.

The focus group discussion and interviews will be recorded and then transcribed. Your name will not be recorded on the audio or the transcripts.

I won't ask any questions specifically about your direct work with young people, but this might come up in our conversations. Any information about a young person or a family will be fully anonymised when the interview is transcribed (if necessary, I'll summarise the information to record the overall themes, rather than specific details which could identify a person).

A summary of the project will be sent to all participants and to the local authority's research governance department.   This will outline the significant themes from the focus group discussion and the interviews, together with an overview of my findings. However no specific information from the interviews (or direct quotes) will be included, so it will not be possible to identify individuals' contributions within this summary.

The final report will be submitted to the university for examination, and a copy will be held in the library. I'm hoping that the research will produce some findings which may be useful to practitioners, so it's possible that in the future I will use aspects of the report for training or discussion. I may also use this research as the basis for articles for publication.

I hope that this gives you an overview of the project, and that you are still happy to participate. Please do let me know if you have any questions – h.k.evans@sussex.ac.uk

Appendix D: Consent forms for focus groups and interviews

US

University of Sussex

CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

☐ I agree to take part in a focus group discussion facilitated by Helen Evans. The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have received a copy of the information sheet.

☐ I agree that my responses may be used by Helen for her research project to be submitted to the University of Sussex.

☐ I understand that the focus group discussion will be recorded and transcribed.

☐ I agree to maintain the confidentiality of other focus group participants. I will not disclose any details of the discussion which could be recognisable or attributed to any other member of the group.

☐ I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

☐ I understand that neither my name nor the name of my workplace will appear in the write up of the research.

☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. I can ask for my data to be removed from the project at any point, until it is no longer practical to do so.

Signed: ....

Name of participant: ....

Date: ....

University of Sussex

CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

☐ I agree to be interviewed by Helen Evans. The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have received a copy of the information sheet.

☐ I agree that my responses may be used by Helen for her research project to be submitted to the University of Sussex.

☐ I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed.

☐ I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

☐ I understand that neither my name nor the name of my workplace will appear in the write up of the research.

☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. I can ask for the recording of my interview to be destroyed and for my data to be removed from the project, until it is no longer practical to do so.

Signed: ....

Name of participant: ....

Date: ....

Appendix E: Guide for focus group discussion in Site 1

PRACTICAL ISSUES AND INTRODUCTIONS:

Reminder of what the focus group is for and how the data will be used.

Participants asked to sign consent forms.

Recording device.

Ground rules: basic agreement about turn taking (one person to speak at a time), constructive challenges, valuing of everyone's views. Plus any other suggestions from the group.

Reiteration of confidentiality and request that identifiable personal information is not shared (about self, another professional or service users). Reminder that safeguarding responsibilities outweigh confidentiality.

Reassurance that the participants are the experts, and the whole point of the study is to understand their perception. There is no right or wrong answer – open research question with no right or wrong answers, and no hypothesis I am looking to them to prove.

1.

Ask participants to list the tasks/activities of a typical work day. (Specific bullet points – give example).

Ask the group to share examples from their lists, look for points of similarity and difference.

Ask participants to review their lists and consider which tasks/ activities are related (either explicitly or implicitly) to promoting young people's independence.

2.

Share quote and explain where it comes from:

"Equipping young people with the practical, interpersonal and emotional resources needed for adult life should be a central feature of corporate parenting" (Dixon 2003, p.232)

(Written copy of the quote to remain visible for reference).

Ask for any initial thoughts (prompts, if needed: is that fair ? is that how you see your responsibilities as a corporate parent ?)

What are those 'resources' ?

3.

What does it look like when it's finished? What is a good outcome?

(prompts if needed: how do you know when you've done a good job? What are the skills or characteristics of a young person who has done well?)

Would you get different answers to that question if you asked young people?   Or service managers?

ENDINGS:

Round up what we have talked about to end on the positive.

Reminder of confidentiality of what has been discussed/disclosed by other participants.

My initial reflections of key themes which may be followed up in more depth in individual interviews.

Appendix F: Guide for focus group discussion in Site 2

PRACTICAL ISSUES AND INTRODUCTIONS:

Reminder of what the focus group is for and how the data will be used.

Participants asked to sign consent forms.

Recording device.

Ground rules: basic agreement about turn taking (one person to speak at a time), constructive challenges, valuing of everyone's views. Plus any other suggestions from the group.

Reiteration of confidentiality and request that identifiable personal information is not shared (about self, another professional or service users). Reminder that safeguarding responsibilities outweigh confidentiality.

Reassurance that the participants are the experts, and the whole point of the study is to understand their perception. There is no right or wrong answer – open research question with no right or wrong answers, and no hypothesis I am looking to them to prove.

1.

Reminder that my research question relates to young people who are not living in their family home. Ask participants to list the tasks/activities they would typically undertake with this client group. (Specific bullet points – give example).

Ask the group to share examples from their lists, look for points of similarity and difference.

Ask participants to review their lists and consider which tasks/ activities are related (either explicitly or implicitly) to promoting young people's independence.

2.

Share quote and explain where it comes from:

"16 and 17 year olds who cannot live at home with their families are very vulnerable and need a great deal of support and care if they are going to be able to enter adult life positively."   (Crellin and Pona 2015, p4)

(Written copy of the quote to remain visible for reference).

Ask for any initial thoughts (prompts, if needed: is that fair? Do you see that as part of our responsibility?   Comparison with corporate parent role for looked after children?)

3.

What does it look like when it's finished? What is a good outcome?

(prompts if needed: how do you know when you've done a good job? What are the skills or characteristics of a young person who has done well? What do you need to see before you're happy to close a case?)

Would you get different answers to that question if you asked young people? Or service managers?

ENDINGS:

Round up what we have talked about to end on the positive.

Reminder of confidentiality of what has been discussed/disclosed by other participants.

My initial reflections of key themes which may be followed up in more depth in individual interviews.

Appendix G: Guide for individual interviews in Site 1

THEME 1:

In the focus group discussion, there was lots of debate about practical independent living skills. How much is that a focus of your day to day practice?

- Is there a core set of skills that young people need
- Does it feel like something which can be done within your role
- Is it something that should be done within your role

THEME 2:

Recurring phrase in the focus group discussion was this idea of young people being "ready" to leave care. What does it look like when a young person is "ready" (might be easier to define what it looks like when a young person isn't ready ?)

- Do you think "ready" is recognisable
- Examples from direct work

THEME 3:

Making those judgements, thinking about whether someone is or is not ready to leave care, what values or frameworks are you drawing on? (might need to problem solve what are values – personal experience, professional background).

- Is there a shared set of basic principles between workers
- Do different workers make the same decisions or judgements
- Within quite wide individual variations, are there baselines, red lines which everyone works to.

THEME 4:

Something mentioned several times in the focus group was this idea that the leaving care worker is often the only person – the only source of support for a young person. In your experience, is that common – is it sometimes just you?

- Who else provides support (might need to break down the different sorts of support)
- What's missing – who's missing
- What are the challenges of that 1:1 relationship and the pressure on it

Any other observations or comments?

- Anything you thought would come up which hasn't
- Anything you think we should have talked about which we haven't

Appendix H: Guide for individual interviews in Site 2

THEME 1:

Refer back to focus group discussion – we talked about some of the practical independent living skills young people need to develop during this transition period – but it seemed that this isn't a major focus of your work ?

- What sorts of things would you do
- Under what circumstances
- How do young people develop these skills

THEME 2:

Something that did seem to be important was providing space for young people to take risks, to make mistakes and to learn from them.

- What does that sort of support look like in practice
- How does it work
- How do you scaffold those opportunities for young people

THEME 3:

That feeling of stepping back and letting young people do things fits with another theme which came through strongly in the focus group discussion. People were very clear that they wanted to guard against creating dependency.

- Not needing services is good
- Young people need a strong 1:1 emotional relationship – advocate or mentor
- Are these contradictory – does it create a tension

THEME 4:

These judgements about what is too dependent, who can or can't do it for themselves, are those judgements based on common shared values? Do workers in your service have a similar way of thinking?

- Is it more difficult for a multidisciplinary service to have shared professional values
- What do we mean by values – are there fixed baselines/red lines underpinning practice. We definitely do that, or don't do that, or everyone prioritises this.

Any other observations or comments?

- Anything you thought would come up which hasn't
- Anything you think we should have talked about which we haven't