

**Growing Up In and Out of Care:
an ethnographic approach to young people's transitions to
adulthood**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has two aims. The first is to explore the effects of biographical experiences on the transitions young people make as they leave care. The second is to explore and compare the different ways in which young people growing up in care and those growing up in biological families experience the transitions of youth. Existing research shows that 'care leavers' tend to be disadvantaged, vulnerable and socially excluded. They tend to attain fewer educational qualifications than the rest of their age-cohort. They are more likely to experience unemployment at an earlier age and for longer periods of time. They are disproportionately represented among the prison and homeless populations. This research unpacks 'care' as an explanatory variable for negative outcomes in youth and develops a more holistic understanding of the experience of growing up in care.

This research breaks new ground in comparing the different experiences of youth between two groupings of young people. A sample of young people were recruited from one local authority area. Sixteen of them had effectively grown up in care and the comparison grouping contained six young people who had grown up in their biological families. It was intended to carry out three depth interviews with each young person over a period of twelve months. Sample attrition resulted in fifty seven depth interviews being undertaken altogether. The use of this longitudinal, ethnographic approach facilitated a vivid insight into the complexity and dynamism of youth. Moreover, the adoption of a life course perspective enabled a more critical awareness of the importance and influence of the different social contexts in which young people grow up.

The findings show that experiences of growing up in care are characteristically diverse. Yet, for many of the young people in this research, the abuse, uncertainty and instability they experienced prior to their admission into care, continued as they were growing up in, and leaving care. Their transitions out of care and towards adulthood were a much more complex process than the, somewhat linear, youth transition model suggests. Comparisons with the grouping of young people who were growing up in their biological families highlight the differential experiences of youth. However, the young people who had grown up in care were apparently more able to cope with the social, economic and emotional changes experienced in youth.

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PREFACE

The introduction of the Children Act 1989 and its implementation in 1991 was predicted to bring about “the most fundamental change of child care law this century” (White *et al*, 1990:v). The magnitude of the Act and some of the changes it heralded are discussed in this thesis. However, there was one significant change contained in the Act which needs examining briefly at the outset as it has semantically important implications and thus affects the terminology used in this thesis. The Children Act 1989 introduced the term ‘looked after’ to denote all children who would have previously been described as ‘being in care’. This relatively minor change in terminology appeared to signal an attempt to break down the stigma perceived to be attached to ‘being in care’. This semantic attempt at cultural change has been embraced in some sections. For example, a report by the Social Services Inspectorate and OFSTED (1995) was entitled *The Education of Children who are looked after by Local Authorities*. Similarly, government departments and committees refer to *looked-after young people* (Education and Employment Committee, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998a,b). However, in other sections, reference is made to ‘care-leavers’ (McManus, 1998) or ‘young people leaving care’ (Broad, 1998). These two terms are clearly more concise than the presumably more correct ‘young people who were looked after’ or ‘young people who are ceasing to be looked after’.

Despite the changed terminology introduced by the Children Act 1989, this thesis uses the term ‘in care’ rather than ‘looked after’, that is reference is variously made to ‘children and young people in care’ rather than ‘children and young people who are looked after’. The reason for this is grounded wholly in the research findings. The young people in this research identified themselves as having been “in care” (as in the care system) rather than having been “looked after”. To look after something is to take care of it. The young people each struggled to remember a placement in which they felt cared for and many of them had a lot of placements from which to choose! It is evident, from this research at least, that being ‘looked after’ is a nominal change in that it has yet to pervade or let alone change the way in which children and young people perceive themselves to be treated in the public care system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research began its life in 1994 as an exciting idea. I presume the E.S.R.C. thought so as well and I acknowledge their financial support. Since then, the “exciting idea” has battled for domination over frustration, anxiety, ethical dilemmas and, on too many occasions, that infernal filing system known as the bin. There are many people who have, over time, prevented me from filing my idea. I think I am grateful to them. Bob Coles, despite knowing me as an undergraduate, agreed to supervise this research. His support, encouragement and constructive comments have been invaluable. After meeting and talking to other research students, I have become increasingly appreciative of the high quality of supervision I have received. I am genuinely grateful for his time and efforts.

There are numerous other people whose support has prevented me from becoming a ‘failed’ E.S.R.C. statistic. In 1994 my mum asked me what a D.Phil would qualify me to do. I’m afraid I still do not know the answer to that question but her unassuming support has been a motivating force. Majella Kilkey and Leigh Keeble have, over the last three years, shared so much more than an office with me. To the staff at Southview and the residents who passed through on their life’s journey, I say thank you for the shifts and the insights, respectively. Both have been extremely beneficial in their different ways. I would also like to thank my friends and collaborators in caffeine, nicotine and alcohol consumption for their continued support for my addictions and my research.

This research could not have been completed without the help of John Tempest and Sue Hailwood from social services, and Jerry Glover and the team at the youth club. They facilitated access to a population of young people as well as giving encouragement and enthusiasm to the research itself. Finally, and in the spirit of a childhood trait I have never managed to shake off, I have saved ‘the best ‘til last’. I am indebted to all the young people who gave so much of themselves to this research. A “thank you” is not enough. I listened, I learned and I attempted to do justice to their voices. Their lives continue. A glimpse of their rich, detailed and frequently poignant life stories are contained within this thesis.

DECLARATION

Some ideas from this research were included in a joint paper presented at the *Youth 2000 International Conference* held at the University of Teesside in the summer of 1995. The paper was later published as a chapter in *Youth, the 'Underclass' and Social Exclusion* (MacDonald, 1997). The bibliographic details of the chapter are as follows:

Baldwin, D; Coles, B & Mitchell, W (1997) The formation of an underclass or disparate processes of social exclusion? Evidence from two groupings of 'vulnerable youth' Routledge, London.

I declare that this thesis is the product of my own work and, to the best of my knowledge, all sources used have been acknowledged.

Signed:



Debra Anne Baldwin

Dated:

28th August 1998

CHAPTER ONE

Growing Up In and Out of Care

Introduction

This thesis has two concerns. Firstly it is concerned with the experiences of young people who grow up in care and their experiences of leaving care. The utilisation of a life course approach to young people leaving care breaks new ground in terms of facilitating an understanding of the processes of growing up in a specific social context and the impact of earlier life histories on later transitions. Importantly, life course analysis also enables an exploration of the interactions between individuals and institutions over time (Pilcher, 1995). Many of the young people in this research spent a large part of their childhood in care and many made their transitions from childhood to youth within the care system. The primary aim of this research is to explore the effects of biographical experiences on the transitions young people make as they leave care. One objective of the research is to understand why some young people appear to leave care more successfully than others.

The second concern of this thesis is the different ways in which young people who have grown up in care experience youth as they undertake their transitions to adulthood compared to young people who have grown up in their biological families. Comparisons between young people who have grown up in care and young people in the wider population have previously been made (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Coles, 1995). The comparisons have employed secondary data analysis by extrapolation from large scale surveys or national data sets on young people generally and from small scale, usually localised studies, of young people leaving care. There is just one example of research which has compared, with methodological consistency, the experiences of young people in care with young people in biological families (Heath *et al*, 1989). The research by Heath *et al* (1989) compared the experiences of young people in foster care with young people in biological families in the context of teacher-pupil interactions in secondary school education. Whilst being methodologically unique, the specific focus of the research gives a highly partial view of the different experiences of young people in care vis-à-vis young people in biological families. A second aim of this research is to explore holistically the different ways in which these two groupings of young people experience youth. The objective of this is to gain a more informed understanding of the effects of biography and its

impact on the ways in which different groupings of young people make their transitions to adulthood.

Youth is regarded as an important and dynamic stage in the life course (Bates & Riseborough, 1992; Coles, 1995; Jones & Wallace, 1992; Griffin, 1993). The methodological design of this research aimed to encapsulate the dynamism of youth which, for some young people, includes leaving care. The emphasis of the research is to understand cumulative experiences rather than static statuses. Therefore, a longitudinal and qualitative approach was chosen. Longitudinal, qualitative research into young people leaving care has previously been undertaken (Stein & Carey, 1986; Biehal *et al*, 1995) although the focus has been on the process of leaving care rather than the dynamics of growing up in care. With the exception of research by Phoenix (1991) into young mothers, longitudinal research on young people generally has tended to be of a quantitative nature (for example, the National Child Development Study (Social Statistics Research Unit, 1995), the Youth Cohort Study (Courtenay, 1988; Courtenay & McAleese, 1993), and the Economic and Social Research Council's 16-19 Initiative (Banks *et al*, 1992)). The findings in this research are based on a series of three depth interviews carried out over a twelve month period with a sample of two groupings of young people from one local authority in the north west of England. One of the groupings of young people had grown up in care and the young people in the other grouping shared similar socio-economic background characteristics but had grown up in their biological families. In short, this research provides original insights into the different experiences of young people growing up in and out of care.

This chapter reviews the existing literature on being in care, leaving care and youth. The literature will be used in different ways throughout this thesis. For example, in Chapter Three, the methodological strengths and weaknesses of previous research will be explored and, in subsequent chapters, the literature will be used to contextualise the findings from this research. This initial review, however, has four strategic objectives. Firstly, the review will evaluate what can be learned from different perspectives in developing a more critical awareness of youth and young people in care. Secondly, the review will be used to develop a more adequate framework with which to explore the different experiences of young people in care and one which encapsulates changes over time and the cumulative experiences of having grown up in care. Thirdly, the review raises issues concerned with the conceptualisation of leaving care and the identification and measurement of appropriate outcomes. This theme recurs in Chapter Three, however, it is important to review the issues here as they are

imperative to the aims of this thesis. Finally, the review relates these three objectives to an overall critique of the conceptualisation of youth in recent research.

The literature from which this, and subsequent chapters, draws highlights an important disciplinary divide. Much of the literature on being in care is grounded in social work research. The research on leaving care retains a social work emphasis although there is a much clearer incorporation of social policy issues, particularly those that affect young people. The section on youth draws on sociological and social policy research. It has been argued that sociology has no tradition for studying childhood (Qvortrup *et al*, 1994). The same could be said for social policy. With one or two notable exceptions (for example Holman, 1995; Franklin, 1986; Lavalette, 1994; Pilcher & Wagg, 1996) children tend to be visible only as dependants rather than as conceptually autonomous individuals (Bradshaw & Miller, 1991; Kiernan & Wicks, 1990; Morgan, 1995). Nevertheless, the literature itself does give a vivid insight into the separate stages. Furthermore, it provides support for the need to adopt a more holistic and dynamic approach to understanding transitions into and out of the life course stage of youth. The argument that childhood is as much a part of youth as youth is to adulthood is an explicit theme of this thesis.

Youth and Youth Transitions to Adulthood

One of the aims of this research is to compare the experiences of youth between young people who have grown up in care with the experiences of young people who have grown up in their biological families. Youth is represented in different ways (Griffin, 1993). Three such representations are: youth as an interstitial phase in the life course; youth as a period of socio-psychological change and development; and youth as a stage comprised of three main transitions. It is the latter of these which is of concern here. The construction of a model by which to analyse youth transitions has gained a common currency within the sociology of youth (Banks *et al*, 1992; Jones & Wallace, 1992) and, more generally, in research concerned with youth and social policy (Coles, 1995). The youth transition model has been developed to explain the processes through which young people move from the dependency of childhood to the independence of adulthood. Traditionally, the transition between childhood and adulthood was understood to occur on two levels (Galland, 1995; Pilcher, 1995; Wallace, 1987). The first level was the transition from full-time education to participation in the labour market and full-time employment. The second level concerned the transition from family of origin, living with and dependency on parents, to the family of destination, living with sexual partners and

off-spring. Social changes and the tendency for young people to leave the parental home without necessarily establishing a family of destination has resulted in the adaptation of the youth transition model. The transition from childhood to adulthood is now understood to occur at three levels. The incorporation of the housing transition reflects the prevalence with which young people now move from the parental home to some kind of intermediary accommodation, usually with friends or because of education or employment opportunities (Jones & Wallace, 1992; Jones, 1995). Indeed, leaving the parental home is now seen by some writers to be as important as the school to work transition in defining youth (Ainley, 1991; Jones, 1995). Despite these changes, the attainment of adulthood is still seen to be symbolised by entry into the labour market which brings financial independence, the move from parental home to independent accommodation, and will, for many, eventually include the establishment of a family of destination (Jones & Wallace, 1992).

The sequential nature of the three transitional stages is evident in research by Jones (1988). Her secondary analysis of the General Household Survey and the National Child Development Survey data shows that despite differences between young people in terms of social class background and gender, the order in which the transitional stages are undertaken is remarkably similar. The table below shows the median ages at which transitional milestones are reached by youth class and sex.

1.1. Median ages at transition milestones by youth class and sex

Median age at which:	Stable Middle Class	Stable Working Class
Men		
Left full-time education	18.3	16.3
Started first job	18.8	16.3
First left home	20.6	22.3
Married/cohabited	25.8	23.3
Had first child	27-8	23-4
Women		
Left full-time education	19.3	16.3
Started first job	20.2	16.3
First left home	18.9	20.3
Married/cohabited	23.5	20.8
Had first child	25-6	21-2

Source: Jones (1988:727)

The above table shows that those young people who remain in education for longer are more likely to leave home at a younger age than the early school leavers yet tend to marry/co-habit and have children at a later age. It is possible to make a number of inferences about the data particularly in terms of the time span over which the milestones are attained. Acknowledging variations by gender, for young people in the stable middle class grouping, the process of reaching adulthood in terms of leaving full-time education, entering the labour market, leaving home and establishing a family of destination takes significantly longer than for those young people in the stable working class grouping. It can be inferred therefore, that for working class young people the period of youth begins at an earlier age and is compressed into a shorter time period. Jones (1988) argues that the data highlights the structural inequalities of youth within a conceptual framework of transitions to adulthood. The data unarguably gives an insight into the different transitional patterns of young people from different social class backgrounds. The extent to which social class background determines inequality in youth is supported by Roberts (1993 & 1995). However, the data is limited in that it compresses complex biographical data into one socio-economic variable which offers a only partial insight into the experience of youth.

Although the youth transition model is comprised of three distinct strands, the degree of separation between them is arguably more apparent than real. The process as a whole is acknowledged to be a complexity of choice and opportunity whereby choices made at any one point can open up or close down future opportunities both within and between the transitional strands (Coles, 1995). For many young people, the first transitional strand to be encountered is from school to work. At the age of sixteen, when compulsory education ends, young people have to make critical choices which can have both short and long term effects on their futures. An increasing number of opportunities exist at minimum school-leaving age. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. However, the range of opportunities available and the ability of young people to make choices will, however, be constrained by a variety of factors. Banks *et al* (1992) have identified four: social class background; gender; ethnicity, and locality. A further important factor which impacts on the opportunities available to young people is their level of educational attainment at the age of sixteen when compulsory education ends. It has been argued that levels of educational attainment at the age of sixteen are also influenced by the four factors identified by Banks *et al* (1992) which suggests that the structuration of youth transitions begins long before young people reach the end of compulsory education (Roberts, 1993).

The choices which young people have the opportunity to make at the age of sixteen, with regard to their school to work transitions, can have a long-lasting effect on their entry into and their continued participation in the labour market (Courtenay & McAleese, 1993; Sime *et al*, 1990). The routes by which young people begin to make their transitions into the labour market also impacts on their ability to make choices about leaving the parental home and establishing independent accommodation. Research shows that young people leave home for a wide variety of reasons, including participation in education courses, taking up employment, and the desire for single, independent living (Jones, 1987; 1995). The first two of these indicate a direct association between the school to work transition and the housing transition. However, the latter reason for leaving home is only indirectly associated with the school to work transition. The young people in Jones's research (1995) argued that the 'proper' or 'right' way to leave home was with a job, an income, and having arranged accommodation. For young people without employment, therefore, the decision to leave home is somewhat constrained by their lack of financial independence. In such situations, some research shows that many families absorb the responsibility of maintaining unemployed young people (Hutson & Jenkins, 1989).

The links between these two transitions are evident. Yet, there have been significant changes in the patterns of youth transitions generally and these arguably stem from the effects of social and economic policies which have impacted upon the education system, the labour market and the housing market. The contraction of the youth labour market and the rise in youth unemployment since the late 1970s resulted initially in the growth of a youth training sector and, in the 1990s, in an expansion of post-sixteen education. This expansion has generated a diversity of pathways from compulsory education into the labour market encompassing both academic and vocational routes. As a result, and in the absence of a buoyant youth labour market, the school to work transition has increasingly become protracted, in that young people's entry into the labour market proper can be delayed by a number of years (Coffield, 1995; Furlong, 1993). This is particularly the case for young people from working class backgrounds who traditionally entered the labour market at the end of compulsory education. It has been argued that these young people now find themselves marginalised and disadvantaged (Cartmel & Furlong, 1997; Roberts, 1995; Williamson, 1993).

Although the youth transition model offers a useful exposition of the processes in the attainment of adulthood, it does so from a life cycle perspective in that the focus is on youth as a distinct and interstitial stage in the life cycle (Banks *et al*, 1992; Chisholm & Du Bois-

Reymond, 1993; Jones & Wallace, 1992). The main weaknesses of the life cycle model are argued to lie in its universalistic and deterministic tendencies and its failure to take into full account the social contexts of young people's lives (Irwin, 1995; Pilcher, 1995). The same criticisms can also be made against the youth transition model. In focusing on the stages and ages in the life cycle, the model presupposes a number of important factors: firstly, that young people are in education until the age of sixteen; secondly, that young people live in the parental home; thirdly, that the completion of the three transitional strands are sequential; and fourthly, that the successful completion of these results in the attainment 'adulthood'. There is, of course, a sense in which these four presumptions have legitimate applicability to the experiences of the majority of young people. Despite significant differences in the processes between groupings of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, most young people do indeed make the transition from school to work prior to making the transition to independent accommodation. Furthermore, most young people also establish intimate relationships leading to co-habitation, marriage and/or parenthood. However, whilst it is the case that some would infer the attainment of adulthood as a result of the completion of these transitions (Jones & Wallace, 1992) other research suggests that young people do not necessarily identify with such a status (Coffield *et al*, 1986). The latter point is, perhaps, more interesting in that it is important except that if young people do not recognise themselves as reaching adulthood at a time concurrent with the assignation of adulthood then the youth transition model may be deemed to be little more than exponentially prescriptive.

This thesis is concerned with the importance of social context and the influence of biography on young people's experience of youth. Within the youth literature, biographies appear to be negated to the extent that they are condensed into variables such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. These variables are then used to explain difference and inequality within youth. Transitions to the life course stage of youth remain largely unexplored. Growing up in care provides a remarkably different social context to youth. Yet, within the youth literature 'care' is treated as a somewhat simplistic variable with which to explain inequalities (Coles, 1995; Roberts, 1995). Furthermore, there appears to be an assumption that young people's experiences of being in care are universal and that 'care-leavers' form a homogeneous grouping of young people. This is not the case. The literature on being in, and leaving, care gives an indication of diversity. It is only by unpacking 'care' that the different experiences of young people in care can be explored and a more critical awareness of youth developed.

Children and Young People In Care

The care system exists to provide substitute care and surrogate families for children and young people who, for a variety of reasons are unable to live with their own, biological families. Until recently the reasons for this ranged from abuse and neglect to criminality, truancy and moral danger. It was also possible for children and young people to be taken into care on a voluntary basis, i.e. at the request of their parents. The status of young people based on the reasons for their admission into care has been summarised by Packman (1986) as 'the victims, the villains, and the volunteered'. Similarly, Farmer & Parker (1991) use the categories of 'the protected' and 'the disaffected'. These categorisations give a general indication of the causal factors pre-empting admission into care. However, the implementation of the Children Act 1989 changed the criteria for admission into care and it is now no longer possible to admit children and young people into care for reasons of criminal behaviour, truancy, or moral danger. Indeed, the Children Act 1989 also removed the concept of voluntary care and as such all those in care are deemed to be 'looked after' with parental responsibility, in most cases, shared between parents and the local authority. The implementation of the Children Act 1989 and the changes it brought about will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. It is sufficient for the moment to highlight the diversity of reasons why children and young people are admitted into care.

Perhaps not surprisingly, age is a factor closely associated with admission into care. Those who are admitted into care at a younger age, e.g. less than ten years old, are much more likely to be removed from their families for reasons of sexual and/or physical abuse or neglect (Farmer & Parker, 1991). For those admitted in their teenage years, the reasons are much more likely to be due to their own behaviour, e.g. committing criminal offences, truancy, sexual promiscuity, running away from home, combined with a real or apparent parental inability to cope with, or control, such exhibited behaviour (Farmer & Parker, 1991). Although age provides a useful factor for analysis in these circumstances, consideration should be given to the possibility that those teen-aged young people admitted into care because of, for all intents and purposes, their own behaviour may well have suffered some form of abuse or neglect earlier in their lives. Evidence from this research suggests that many of the young people admitted into care in their teenage years for reasons other than abuse or neglect may well have experienced abuse or neglect themselves although it remained largely undetected or undisclosed at the time. The reason for making this point is to raise questions about whether young people who are admitted into care in their teenage years can legitimately

be seen to be culpable. It is perhaps simplistic to label these young people 'the villains' or 'the volunteered' purely on the basis of reasons deemed to be fitting by professionals. The converse also has some applicability. This research will show that many of 'the victims' and 'the protected' become 'the villains' and 'the disaffected' as they grow up in care.

Although the reasons for being admitted into care may vary, there is one clear message from the research; unless children and young people are returned to their families quickly, i.e. within the first six months following admission into care, then they are likely to remain in care for a very long time. This was found to be the case by Rowe *et al* (1989) who carried out extensive research into admissions into care in five local authorities over a two year period. Other research has supported this and indeed the finding itself has informed the Department of Health Regulations and Guidelines which accompany the 1989 Children Act. Some studies show that a short stay in care can be beneficial to children and their families (Fisher *et al*, 1986; Packman *et al*, 1986). Yet, an important finding by Rowe *et al* (1989) was that for many children and young people admission into care was not an isolated event. They found that a significant proportion of children and young people experienced more than one admission into care over the two year period. Such repetitive admission and discharge patterns are a possible consequence of the acknowledged need to return children and young people to their families quickly in order to prevent a lengthy stay in care. Research shows that in some cases children and young people are returned to their families too quickly without there being any discernible change in the circumstances which led to their admission into care in the first instance (Bullock *et al*, 1993; Farmer & Parker, 1991). In their research on children in care being returned to their families, Farmer and Parker (1991) raise the concern that many of the parents to whom the children were returned would not pass the selection criteria to be employed by social service departments as foster parents. Unfortunately, in a small minority of cases, returning children in care to their parents has had tragic and ultimately fatal consequences (Reder *et al*, 1993). Yet, for those children and young people who oscillate in and out of care, little is known about the psychological effects disruption of this kind can have on their lives. However, the behavioural changes exhibited by children and young people over time cannot be ignored.

For a small proportion of children and young people, admission into care signifies the commencement of a lengthy career in care (Rowe *et al*, 1989). Having said that, it is important to recognise the complexity of the 'care system'. Although it is quite common to talk about the care system or about someone being 'in care' there are important differences

within this generalised terminology which need recognition. The structure of the care system is fragmented into different types of services aimed at meeting the welfare needs of children and young people. At its most basic, the care system incorporates both residential care and foster care. The complexity of the care system is most apparent in the residential care sector where there are a whole range of institutions designed to meet the different needs of children and young people. For example, provision varies from local community or children's homes, community homes with education (usually located out of borough), therapeutic communities, through to semi-secure units and secure units. Therefore, the care system is not an homogenous service. This is acknowledged to be important when exploring the experiences of children and young people in and leaving care (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992). Given the diversity in types of placement in care, there needs to be a more critical understanding of the usage of the "care" terminology.

The importance of the diversity in types of care placements is apparent when looking at what happens to children and young people once they are removed from their families. For most, admission into care takes place in emergency situations i.e. children being removed after the disclosure or detection of abuse, particularly if the perpetrator lives in the family home (Rowe *et al*, 1989). Similarly, a complete breakdown in family relationships can occur suddenly thereby necessitating an immediate response. Such crisis situations are prohibitive of a planned admission into care and most children and young people are initially placed in emergency care placements. If it proves to be the case that a stay in care will be needed, then movement to more appropriate placements are then arranged. This means that not only do children and young people face the initial upheaval of being admitted into care but they may also face further upheaval in terms of moving to different placements in a short period of time (Rowe *et al*, 1989).

Research into placements in care suggests that there are clear patterns in the types of placements that are likely to be experienced. Summarily, these are that young children are much more likely to be placed in foster care whilst teen-aged young people are much more likely to be placed in residential care (Department of Health, 1993; Berridge & Cleaver 1987). The reasons for this appear, primarily, to be due to resources in that it has proved very difficult for local authorities to recruit foster parents who are willing to care for teen-aged young people (Berridge, 1985; Department of Health., 1991). The entrenchment of these placement patterns is such that residential care has been referred to as a service for teenagers (Utting, 1991). This is increasingly the case given the ideologically driven move towards

foster care as the preferred type of placement with the concurrent retrenchment of local authority residential provision (Cliffe, 1990).

Such placement patterns raise questions about the quality of care being received by those in care. This is particularly the case if foster care is seen as the preferred option yet is being denied to teen-aged young people. The recent detection of widespread abuse in residential children's homes raises further questions about the quality of care being provided. Recent research by Berridge and Brodie (1997) highlights inconsistencies in the quality of care being provided in children's homes. Although the report highlights examples of good practice, it also raises concerns about working practices in some children's homes. Research into the quality of care in foster placements indicates some foster placements suffer from similar inconsistencies (Sinclair *et al*, 1995; Triseliotis *et al*, 1995). Although there has been no widespread allegations of child abuse in foster care, in his 1997 report, Utting cautions against the assumption that such abuse does not take place. It would appear, therefore, that despite increasing research interest into the care system much of what is known may be exceeded by that which remains unknown.

The studies that have been carried out can be grouped into a few small scale qualitative studies which provide valuable material on the experiences of being in care, and a larger number of quantitative studies which provide a more generalised picture. Extrapolating from the latter, it is possible to portray a career in care as characteristically involving numerous moves between different placements and different types of placements (Millham *et al*, 1986; Rowe *et al*, 1989). The extent of movement experienced has implications for the education of children and young people in care in that a move between placements can, and often does, necessitate a change of school. This can and does have an impact on educational attainment levels (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Jackson 1987). A joint report by the Social Services Inspectorate and the Office for Standards in Education (SSI/OFSTED; 1995) highlighted the very low levels of attainment for children and young people in care. Perhaps more worryingly, the report also gave evidence of widespread exclusion from education particularly among teen-aged young people in care. There has been no detailed exploration of the causal factors although inferences have been made about the implementation of the 1988 Education Reform Act generally and the implementation of league tables specifically (Utting, 1991; Pearce & Hillman, 1998). Findings from this research suggest the reasons for exclusion and particularly truancy may have their roots elsewhere.

The qualitative studies give important insights into children's and young people's experiences of being in care. Berridge (1985), in particular, provides data which gives some understanding of the effect on children and young people of movement in care. His research suggests that some young people are moved around so much that they have ceased unpacking their belongings as they know that they will be moved on again in a short period of time. Such occurrences resulted from young people experiencing numerous breakdowns in their placements. These were often due to inappropriate placements in the first instance followed by a trial and error approach to subsequent placements. Berridge (1985) estimates that almost two-thirds of placement changes occur for administrative reasons or are part of a planning process. In the research by Rowe *et al* (1989) nearly one quarter of all placements failed to last as long as was needed and one third did not last as long as was planned. The effects of disruption of this kind must be seen in terms of feelings of rootlessness and having no sense of belonging. With regard to placement disruption, Millham *et al* (1986) have commented that for some children and young people in care, the birth family may be the most stable influence in their lives, even when contact is very limited. At the other extreme, there are examples of children and young people who experience apparently very stable placements in care; placements lasting a number of years. Berridge (1985) does however issue a cautionary note by raising concern about the what he calls "drift in care" whereby placements continue because they do not breakdown but this does not necessarily mean that they are appropriate placements. He goes on to question the extent to which these kind of placements are meeting the needs of children and young people. In short, it cannot be presumed that placements which do not breakdown are necessarily any less detrimental to the welfare of children and young people than those that do breakdown.

It is difficult to know how to measure the welfare of children and young people in care. Excessive movement in care and lack of participation in education have both been seen to be detrimental to the welfare of those being looked after (Social Services Committee, 1984; Utting, 1991 & 1997). It has also been pointed out that lack of contact with members of the biological family can also be detrimental to welfare (Berridge, 1985; Kahan, 1994; Millham *et al*, 1986). A lack of knowledge about one's past is similarly seen to impact on self-development and is certainly a fundamental factor in the development of self-esteem (Thoburn, 1994). All of these are raised as important issues for children and young people in care and inform social work discourse and practice. The extent to which these issues are addressed in care and their long-term effects on the experiences and welfare of young people leaving care provides further support for adopting a life course approach. A better understanding of how

young people experience leaving care can only be gleaned by a deeper appreciation of their experiences in care. Much of the existing literature on leaving care has tended to concentrate its analysis on the process of leaving care itself (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Garnett, 1992; Broad, 1997).

Leaving Care

The existing research on leaving care generally adopts a dual focus in terms of examining the process of leaving care and of assessing the outcomes of that process. There are a number of reports and studies on the provision and outcomes of leaving care services (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Broad, 1992 & 1997). Other research has focused on the process and outcomes of leaving care specifically (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Bonnerjea, 1990; Fry, 1992; Garnett, 1992). Many of the findings from research into leaving care has been usefully summarised by Stein (1997). His report for Barnardo's highlights what works with regard to social work practices and service provision for young people leaving care. It is vital to emphasise the *apparent* nature of what works within this particular field. As Stein points out, in the absence of randomised control samples, it is very difficult to gauge the extent to which young people's experiences of leaving care would have been different had they not, for example, had contact with any leaving care services. Despite this caveat, it is widely acknowledged that the process of leaving care can be extremely difficult for young people, particularly during the first twelve to eighteen months (Garnett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986).

One factor which is seen to compound the difficult process of leaving care is the age at which young people are expected to live independently of the care system. The average age at which young people in the general population leave home is between twenty and twenty two years of age (Jones, 1995) and a significant proportion remain in the parental home until at least the age of twenty six years (Ferri & Smith, 1997). However, it is increasingly the case that young people in care are being moved into some type of independent accommodation at a much younger age. It is not uncommon for young people to leave care at the ages of sixteen or seventeen rather than remaining in care until the legal discharge of their care orders which occurs at eighteen years of age (Biehal *et al*, 1992 & 1995; Fowler *et al*, 1996; Garnett, 1992). This does mean that some young people will spend up to two years living independently despite still being in the legal care of a local authority. The fact that young people are encouraged to move out of care at such a young age has implications for changes in the process of leaving care and, more importantly, the outcomes of leaving care.

The process of leaving care is subject to local variability (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992). What happens to young people once they reach the age of sixteen will depend on a number of factors not least of which will be the provision of services within the local authority. Since the implementation of the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a statutory duty to prepare young people for leaving care. In many local authorities the process of preparing young people to live independently has resulted in the development of residential leaving care services such as those documented and evaluated by Biehal *et al* (1995). In other areas, however, no such provision exists and young people are encouraged to develop independence skills whilst in care, either in children's homes or in foster care placements. Such diversity in provision means that some young people have the opportunity to leave care gradually in that they can move from a care placement to a specialist independence unit before eventually moving into independent accommodation. For other young people the process is much more abrupt with movement into independent accommodation occurring directly after the cessation of a care placement. The discrepancies between local authorities in the services they provide for young people leaving care was an aspect of a recent Social Services Inspectorate report (Laming, 1998). In the report, Sir Herbert Laming commented that services for young people leaving care were not an optional extra and that the quality of service provision was crucial in determining the direction of the lives of young people.

The provision of services, therefore, is seen and has been shown to be an important factor in determining how successfully young people leave care (Broad, 1992 & 1997; Stein, 1997).— However, research suggests that even where local authorities do provide residential leaving care services, young people do not necessarily want to make use of them or are not directed towards them (Biehal *et al*, 1995). It appears that some young people prefer to move directly into independent accommodation. This choice seems to reflect a common perception among some young people that leaving care schemes are merely a continuation of the care system. Given such perceptions, therefore, the opportunity to live in an independence unit will be interpreted as staying in care for longer: an option many young people would apparently forego. This does raise an important issue about the experience of being in care. If, for some young people, the experience of being in care is such that they choose to live independently at the age of sixteen or seventeen rather than move into residential leaving care schemes then the provision of services of this kind may be less influential in determining outcomes for young people than the experience of care itself. Similarly, as Biehal *et al* (1995) point out, if some young people are not being directed towards leaving care schemes concern needs to be raised about the equality of opportunity to access such services.

So what does happen to young people when they leave care? Given the age at which young people leave care, many face a situation in which they have to make decisions about education, training, or employment at the same time as having to settle into and maintain independent accommodation. These practical issues are compounded by psychological changes which ensue from leaving care, including the adjustment to living alone after living with others either in foster care placements or in children's homes. Indeed, loneliness is frequently cited by young people leaving care as one of the major issues with which they have to deal (Stein & Carey, 1986; Biehal *et al*, 1995). Yet, it is somewhat simplistic to make general comments on what happens to young people when they leave care as there are almost too many factors which affect the leaving care process. These include the type of placement and the type of care career a young person has experienced prior to leaving care (Garnett, 1992), the provision of services made available to them particularly with regard to independence training units and other leaving care services (Biehal *et al*, 1995), the relationship young people have with significant others including their biological families, foster carers and other professionals (Farmer & Parker, 1991; Fry, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986) and, to a greater or lesser extent, the gender of the young person. The latter factor becomes important when consideration is given to the disproportionate number of young mothers among young women who have been in care *vis-à-vis* young women generally (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986). To this end, it is possible to highlight the gendered nature of the leaving care process.

Having acknowledged these numerous factors there is sufficient research to enable some general comments to be made about the what happens to young people once they leave care. The first, and arguably most important, issue is the extent to which young people experience disruption in their accommodation once they leave care. It is not uncommon for young people to experience numerous changes of independent accommodation in a short period of time (Stein & Carey, 1986; Garnett, 1992; Biehal *et al* 1995). For some young people, these moves may also include movement into independence training units after having lived independently (Biehal *et al*, 1995). The reasons for this disruption are varied and some can be seen to be structural in that many young people are placed initially in temporary independent accommodation such as bed and breakfast accommodation, lodgings and hostels (Garnett, 1992). The short-term nature of these types of independent accommodation are suggestive of movement to longer-term accommodation at a later date. For other young people who are allocated tenancies in long-term accommodation, for example flats and houses, movement appears to be due to their inability to maintain those tenancies, with eviction following the

accumulation of rent and/or fuel arrears. Another reason some young people experience eviction seems to be for reasons to do with noise and overcrowding which appears to be associated with loneliness (Stein & Carey, 1986). Eviction, for whatever reason, can appear to pathologise disrupted accommodation patterns and emphasise the young person's inability to maintain their tenancies. This can have important implications for the willingness of professionals to allocate subsequent accommodation. An alternative view would be that young people are ill-prepared for living independently and that their evictions are a direct result of inappropriate placement and a lack of support. Even for those young people for whom a place in an independence training unit is made available their decision to utilise the service does not necessarily diminish the disruption: movement from the training units to independent accommodation will ensue eventually which may merely forestall the difficulties commonly experienced when living independently.

It is clear that for some young people, the disruption in placements they experienced in care continues as they leave care and, as Stein and Carey (1986) showed in their two year, longitudinal study of leaving care, long after young people have left care. It was suggested in the previous section that a major effect of placement disruption in care is educational instability and research shows that a similar trend is evident in post-sixteen career paths (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Broad, 1992 & 1997; Stein & Carey, 1986). One of the effects of disruption in after-care accommodation can be seen to be upon young people's post-sixteen education, training and employment opportunities which are limited by unstable accommodation and, in many cases, homelessness (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Kirby, 1994). Educational attainment levels amongst young people in care are much lower than those in the general population which, in itself, may make young people leaving care vulnerable to unemployment (Roberts, 1995; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998b). The fact that many of these young people also have no stable and secure accommodation appears to compound that vulnerability. Stein and Carey's study (1986) and the more recent research by Biehal *et al* (1995) found that many young people leaving care experienced cycles of education, training, and employment interspersed with periods of unemployment. Towards the end of both these two year studies, the periods of unemployment among the young people were longer and more frequent. Levels of unemployment among young people who have been in care are disproportionately higher than for young people generally. Biehal *et al* (1995) found that fifty two percent of their sample of young people leaving care were unemployed whilst statistics from Social Trends (1994) showed that in 1993 nineteen per cent of sixteen to nineteen years olds in the general population were unemployed. Whilst the low levels of educational

attainment must be seen to be a factor it would be naive to ignore the effects of disrupted accommodation patterns. Consideration also needs to be given to the psychological implications. Young people may feel unable to participate in education, training or employment whilst they experience difficulties in securing one of the most basic of human needs in terms of having somewhere to live.

It is difficult to see disrupted accommodation and unemployment as mutually exclusive issues particularly as research does suggest that those young people who have stable accommodation after they have left care are more likely to be in education, training or employment (Garnett, 1992). Garnett's research supports others (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Jackson, 1987) in highlighting that young people who have stable careers in care, i.e. experience few or no placement changes, are more likely to attain more educational qualifications at the age of sixteen than young people who experience extensive disruption in their placements. This highlights the need for a more rigorous exploration of the longer-term effects of being in care rather than examining the experiences, processes and outcomes of leaving care in isolation.

Accommodation and employment are clearly important issues for young people leaving care. Yet, there is a sense in which a preoccupation with these two issues serves to minimise other aspects of young people's lives. Young people's interactions with such major social structures as the housing market and the labour market do not occur in isolation and must be considered alongside young people's social interactions with others. Of particular importance are their relationships with their families and peers, including sexual relationships. These social relationships occur concurrently with their interactions with social structures. It has already been shown that for children and young people in care, contact with their families is important (Bullock *et al*, 1993; Farmer & Parker, 1991; Millham *et al*, 1986; Thoburn, 1994). The importance of family contact appears to increase as young people leave care. Research shows that many young people leaving care either return to, or seek support from, their families (Stein & Carey, 1986; Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992). However, as Biehal *et al* (1995) point out, the quality and sustainability of family support is highly variable. Rapprochement with parents occurred for some young people whilst for others, relationships with parents remained conflictual and resulted in rejection. For those young people who did negotiate positive relationships with their parents, there appeared to be a tendency for the young people to seek accommodation in the same neighbourhood as their parents. This gives a strong indication of the interconnectedness of social interactions impacting on young people's interactions with social structures, in this instance, the housing market.

A further example of the impact of young people's social interactions with accommodation patterns is evident in the research by Biehal *et al* (1995). The researchers found that within eighteen months of leaving care, one third of the young people were living with their partners. Unfortunately, it is not clear from the research whether co-habitation had necessitated changes in accommodation for the young people concerned. However, other research on young people in the wider population (Jones, 1995) shows that co-habitation significantly affects young people's early housing careers in terms of accommodation changes in order to co-habit with a partner and following the break up of the partnership. It seems logical to assume therefore, that for young people leaving care, co-habitation will in some, if not all, cases result in accommodation changes. Comparisons of these two studies show that co-habitation at an early age appears to be more prevalent among young people leaving care. The figure of one-third of young people in the study by Biehal *et al* (1995) is much higher than the five per cent of young women in Jones' research (1995). Since Jones found that young men are considerably less likely to co-habit at an early age than young women, then the figure of five per cent would be reduced if the gender differences were to be taken into account.

The stark differences between young people leaving care and young people generally in terms of the tendency to co-habit with partners raises issues beyond housing careers and accommodation patterns. Feelings of loneliness have previously been found among young people leaving care (Stein & Carey, 1986) and many of the young people in the research by Biehal *et al* (1995) made similar disclosures. A link between feelings of loneliness and co-habitation is made apparent by Biehal *et al*, who comment that many of the young people co-habiting with partners had poor or non-existent relationships with their families and were isolated from other social contacts. The researchers themselves, question whether these issues precipitate some young people into co-habitation at an early age. Answers to such a question would largely be a matter of conjecture but the issues raised do highlight the need for a more holistic exploration of the experiences of being in care and their effects on young people's experiences of leaving care.

Understanding Difference: The case for a new conceptual analysis

In order to explore why some young people appear to leave care more successfully than others and in order to understand the different ways in which young people experience youth, there is a need to see young people's lives as an integrated whole rather than as a short, discrete and

distinct stage in the life cycle. The integration of childhood, youth and adulthood is a complex task, not least because of the need to contextualise the social processes of growing up. The adoption of a life course approach facilitates such a task. The main characteristics of the life course approach are summarised by Hareven and Adams (1982:xiii) in the following way.

“The life course approach...shifts the focus of study of human development away from stages and ages to transitions and the timing of events. Rather than focusing on stages in the life cycle, the life course approach is concerned with how individuals and families made their transitions into those different stages. Rather than viewing any one stage such as childhood, youth, and old age, or any age group in isolation, it is concerned with an understanding of the place of that stage in an entire life continuum.”

(quoted in Pilcher, 1995:18-19)

The life course approach therefore allows for flexibility and variation in the timing and sequencing of events. Jones and Wallace (1992) have pointed out, however, that there is a danger in examining all aspects of people’s lives since the focus on the individual can result in the negation of both social groups and structural inequalities. The focus on individuals also carries the risk of pathologising what Roberts (1995) has called failed transitions, leading some writers (especially Murray, 1990 & 1994) to interpret these as wilful membership of the underclass. In response, it could be argued that allegations of failed transitions and the emergence of an underclass are elitist in nature and misguided in application. If young people do not define their transitions as failed or do not identify as members of an underclass then questions need to be raised about the validity of those labels (Baldwin *et al*, 1997).

The concept of transition is central to the life course approach and there is a need to understand the structuration of the transitions which individuals make over the life course. Coles (1995) makes this point with regard to youth transitions. He argues that young people are not merely ciphers of structural and economic determinism as some would assert (Roberts, 1993). Rather, young people are active, thinking agents who are capable of making choices and creating their own destinations within given constraints. Coles’ concept of career, as developed by Becker (1963), acknowledges that young people’s transitions to adulthood are a sequence of statuses through which young people move. In recognising that young people will be afforded different opportunities depending on their social and economic circumstances, Coles argues that the choices young people make at any one time have the potential to open up or foreclose future opportunities. Drawing on Giddens’ ideas of structuration (Bryant & Jary,

1991, Giddens 1979 & 1991), Coles asserts the importance of understanding both sides of the careers equation by exploring the extent to which social and economic institutions determine structures of opportunity and the agency of young people in choosing a particular option.

The aim then, is to integrate structure and agency within a framework which recognises childhood transitions as influential in shaping the transitions of youth. This can be achieved by conflating life-course analysis with Coles' concept of career (1995), particularly with regard to understanding and explaining how and when action can be transformative or structures are excessively constraining. In this research, there is a dual and comparative emphasis on understanding different transitional processes. The emphasis on understanding difference is important in terms of de-constructing the inferred homogeneity of groupings of young people generally and unpacking the categorisation of 'care leavers' specifically. It was shown earlier that admission into care can be precipitated by a range of factors which manifest themselves throughout childhood. It was also shown that the types of care placements experienced will be largely determined by age and circumstance. Therefore, to impose a commonality of experience on this grouping of young people is misleading. Children and young people move through the care system in remarkably different ways and, as this research will show, for perceptively different reasons. Similarly, growing up in a biological family is not necessarily a universal experience from which inferences can be made about young people's life course transitions based on the socio-economic status of their parents. This research will show that young people, growing up in and out of care, are actively creating their own biographies within structurally imposed parameters.

Structure of the Thesis

This chapter has reviewed the literature on care, leaving care, and youth and youth transitions. It has also made a case for these to be incorporated into a life course perspective. Chapter Two examines the social policy environment in which young people, growing up in and out of care, make their life course transitions. The social policy environment constitutes a key aspect to the structural side of what Coles (1995) has called the careers equation. The chapter will begin by exploring the impact of the Children Act 1989. The implementation of this Act has brought about some significant changes in child care. Section 24 of the Act outlines the duties and responsibilities of local authorities towards young people who have been in care. At the time of enactment, there was a sense of optimism about the impending reform of child care law and its implications for improving local authority services for children and young people

in and leaving care (Allen, 1992; Garnett, 1992; White *et al.*, 1991). The Children Act 1989 was implemented in October 1991. Early research suggested that many local authorities were failing to meet the requirements of the Act (Strathdee, 1993). In 1997, six years after the Act was implemented, *Community Care* ran a three month campaign aimed at improving the situation for 'care leavers' and the 1998 report from the Chief Inspector of Social Services Inspectorate (Laming, 1998) adds further weight to the evidence that the Children Act 1989 has had little impact on the life chances of children and young people in and leaving care. The Act, however, was not implemented in a policy vacuum. In the last decade or so, there have been many other social policy changes, specifically in the areas of education, training, housing, and social security, which have had significant impact on the lives and life chances of children (Pilcher & Wagg, 1996) and young people (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). These policy changes and the construction of the legislative environment are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The remainder of this dissertation is concerned with the experiences of a sample of young people as active agents, creating their own biographies within similar structural constraints but in different social contexts. Chapter Three outlines the methodology of the research. Emphasis is placed on the need for empathetic understanding of actor's accounts rather than external explanation, hence the adoption of an ethnographic approach. The young people in this research lived in the same local authority, situated in the north west of England. The chapter contains a description of the sampling techniques used, the issues encountered in gaining access to the sample of young people, and the difficulties in preventing sample attrition. All research can be seen to be sensitive, particularly to those involved (Lee, 1993). This research is no different. The findings contained in this research are based on the young people's recollections of some key events in their childhood as well as their current situations. Issues disclosed by the young people included, among other things, child abuse, prostitution, domestic violence and problematic family relationships. Although mechanisms were in place to protect the young people's identities, confidentiality and anonymity do not make the research topic and the issues discussed any less sensitive. These matters are discussed in the final section of Chapter Three which explores some of the ethical and moral dilemmas encountered during the course of this research.

The analysis of the data from the interviews is presented in Chapters Four to Seven. Cumulatively, these four chapters explore the young people's experiences of growing up in and out of care. In Chapter Four, the focus is on the experiences of the young people who had

spent many of their formative years in care. It begins by exploring where and in what kind of circumstances these young people were living prior to their admission into care. The young people's recollections give a vivid insight into the 'start points' of their transitions through childhood, into youth and towards adulthood. Their experiences of growing up in care are discussed around three key themes: care placements, education, and family contact. Although these themes are not inclusive of all aspects of the young people's lives in care, they do illustrate rich and detailed biographies and provide a stark contrast to the experiences of the young people who were growing up in their biological families.

Chapters Five and Six explore the young people's transitions into independent accommodation and employment, respectively. Comparisons are made between the experiences of the young people who had been in care and the experiences of those who grew up in their biological families. The data highlights the different ways in which these transitions are both negotiated and experienced. Importantly, the extent of difference is as apparent *within* the grouping of young people who had been in care as it is *between* the two groupings of young people. The findings emphasise the importance of biography and social context in understanding transitions through the life course. This becomes more apparent in Chapter Seven which examines 'adulthood'. None of the young people in this research identified with the concept of adulthood, nor did they aspire to be adults. Rather, they saw themselves as becoming "more grown up". Chapter Seven explores how and why the young people saw themselves feeling and becoming "more grown up". The young people's self-assessments and the indicators by which their assessments were made, give a varied and interesting account of emerging identities from cumulative life histories. The narratives contained in Chapter Seven call into question the implicit victimology which underpins the discourse on vulnerable and disadvantaged youth.

This thesis has attempted to give a voice to some of the young people whose lives are frequently presented in statistical form. They have experienced the effects of social policies at the sharp end and have lived to tell their stories. Chapter Eight draws together some of the lessons to be learned from these young people. The lessons are numerous. Lessons can be learned about the effects of social policies on young people's lives. However, in the search for increasingly effective youth policies it has to be recognised that youth is a product of childhood. The experiences of the young people, specifically those who had been in care, arguably suggest the need to prioritise social policies affecting children. To do otherwise is akin to closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. Lessons can also be learned about

measuring and assessing outcomes. Young people, some by their own admission, are not always the best judges of what is good for them. They are, however, capable of passing an informed judgement about who and what they are, and, perhaps more importantly, how and why they got there. Chapter Eight concludes this thesis by arguing the need for a different perspective in youth research and one which includes an understanding of *how* and *why* young people become what they are.

CHAPTER TWO

The Legislative Environment

Introduction

This chapter will examine the legislative environment of care, leaving care and youth transitions. The importance of this examination is twofold. Firstly, analysis of the policy process generally, and the interactions of different social policies specifically, gives an insight into the intended and unintended consequences of policy implementation (Minogue, 1993). Secondly, the legislative environment is an important element in the structuration of the life course. Social policies are seen to create ladders of opportunities but they can also create disadvantage and compound vulnerability (Coles, 1995). An understanding of the legislative environment, therefore, facilitates analysis of the effects of this particular set of social structures upon individual agency. By examining the social policies as they affect both children and young people it is possible to make inferences not only on the short term affects of the policy process and implementation but, more importantly, the long term effects of policy and practice. ”

The Children Act 1989 enables such an analysis since it now forms the mainstay of child care law. Statutory interventions into the lives of children, young people and their families are structured by the requirements of the Children Act 1989. For those children and young people who are unable to live with their families, the Act provides, among other things, a structural framework for their admission into care, their time in care, and the process of leaving care. The Act also outlines the duties and responsibilities of local authorities towards young people who have previously been in care and until they reach twenty one years of age. The Children Act 1989 was said by Sir Geoffrey Howe, to meet “a long felt need for a comprehensive and integrated statutory framework to ensure the welfare of children” (Hansard, 26.10.89). Others commented that the Act provided a sound basis for good practice in child care for the 1990s and beyond (White *et al*, 1990). An important theme in the Children Act 1989 is that in looking after children, local authorities should act in the manner of a ‘good parent’. The next section of this chapter outlines the some of the key aspects of the Children Act 1989 in order to assess how a ‘good parent’ is expected to carry out its duties.

Whilst not all young people are directly affected by the Children Act 1989, they are all affected by a range of other social policies, such as those relating to education, training and employment, housing, and social security benefits. There have been significant policy changes in all these areas during the 1980s and 1990s. The effects of these on a significant proportion of young people have critically been seen to have contributed to the marginalisation of young people (Williamson, 1993). It has been argued that young people in and leaving care have been disproportionately affected (Fowler *et al*, 1996). Each of the policy areas is examined with reference to its impact on young people generally and those in and leaving care specifically. The nature of the interactions between social policies within the legislative environment have resulted in calls for a more co-ordinated approach to youth policies (Coleman & Warren-Adamson, 1992; Coles, 1995). The apparent lack of co-ordination can be seen to undermine the capability of local authorities to act in the manner of a 'good parent'. This is the subject of the final section of the chapter.

The Children Act 1989

The Children Act 1989 began its life following the 1984 report from the inquiry by the House of Commons Social Services Committee into children in care. The committee made a number of recommendations in its report and, in the name of justice, recommended that the legal framework of the child care system be rationalised. A working group was established resulting in the 1985 green paper entitled "The Review of Child Care Law" and subsequently the 1987 white paper, "The Law on Child Care and Family Services". These documents were concerned with the public aspects of child law. Whilst these were being drafted, there was a concurrent review of private child law undertaken by the Law Commission and many of their recommendations were framed within the proposed changes to the public child law. The Children Act 1989 is the result of these reviews and, unlike previous child legislation, both the private and public aspects of child law are contained in a single Act.

During the 1980s, whilst these reviews were being undertaken, there were a number of incidents relating to the welfare of children and associated intervention. Notable amongst these were the investigations of extensive child sexual abuse in the Cleveland area (Butler-Sloss, 1988) and of the abusive practice known as "pindown" in children's home in Staffordshire (Levy & Kahan, 1991). Inquiries also took place after the deaths of Jasmine Beckford, Tyra Henry and Kimberley Carlile, all of whom died as a result of injuries inflicted on them by their parents/step parents and during the course of social work intervention. Whilst it has been

argued that these incidents overshadowed the reform of child law that was already underway (Allen, 1992), the incidents and subsequent enquiries did, however, emphasise the urgent need for the reform of child law. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Children Act 1989 was broadly welcomed. The magnitude of the Children Act 1989 cannot be understated. With regard to the public law relating to children, the Act fundamentally altered the way in which statutory interventions were to be undertaken. Emphasis was placed on working in partnership with parents to prevent family breakdown. Importantly, in any considerations about the upbringing of a child, the Act stated that the child's welfare should be given paramount consideration. The centrality of the welfare of children is evident throughout the Act and indeed, parents are no longer considered to have rights over children but instead were deemed to have responsibility for children. Far from being an exercise in semantics, the change from rights to responsibilities can be seen as empowering children. Given the concern that has been voiced over the imbalance of power between parents and children (Archard, 1993; James & Prout, 1990) the Act appeared to redress the issue. The empowerment of children reached into the realm of statutory and judicial interventions concerning children with the Act stating that all considerations with regard to the upbringing of children should have due regard for the child's wishes and feelings, depending on their age and understanding. In other words, children's voices should be heard and their wishes given serious consideration. However, in alluding to the concept of children as individuals in their own right, it has been argued (Parton, 1996), that children's rights remain little more than rhetoric. Parton argues that, as a result of the Children Act 1989, children now have the right to remain in their family, wherever possible, and to express an opinion on their future, the latter of which can be easily dismissed as socially naive by adult parents, judges and social work professionals.

In redrawing the boundaries in and between the State, the family and the child, the Act also introduced a much changed ideology about the care of children and the child care system. The Act stated that where possible children should be brought up in their own families. However, in circumstances in which this would be prejudicial to a child's welfare, local authorities have a duty to provide accommodation for the child. "Accommodating" children and "looking after" children are synonymous with admission into care and being in care. The change of terminology introduced in the Act was arguably an attempt to recast the care system in a positive light following the critical report of the Social Services Committee (1984). The extent to which the care system had become maligned and that children in care were stigmatised is indicated by the Report's comment (*ibid*, para 14) that "...the care system is designed primarily to provide protection for children against adult society rather than protection for

society against children.” The Guidance and Regulations which accompany the Children Act (DoH., 1991a,b) point out that the provision of accommodation should not be seen as a negative service or as being an indication of parental failure. Rather, the provision of accommodation is *a positive service aimed at assisting the child* (emphasis added).

The provision of accommodation forms part of local authority services to children in need, as defined by Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. A child is considered to be “in need” and therefore eligible for local authority services if they are unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development. Health is defined as both physical and mental well-being. A child’s development encompasses physical, intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural progress. These definitions are important since they recognise the multi-faceted nature of a child’s welfare. This recognition and the definitions stipulated in the Act provide a useful mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of the services provided by local authorities, including the provision of accommodation. If children are provided with accommodation by a local authority because their welfare was being prejudiced by remaining in their families then there is a sense in which their welfare should be enhanced by being in care, rather than being admitted into care *per se*. Indeed, Volume 3 of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations (DoH, 1991, para 2.5) specifically states that the immediate and long term needs of the child should be considered and provided for in the local authority’s planning for the child. For those children provided with accommodation in children’s homes rather than with foster parents, Volume 4 of the Guidance and Regulations (DoH, 1991b, para 1.1) stipulates that with regard to the promotion of a child’s welfare, homes must exercise the concern of that of a *good parent*. The concept of a ‘good parent’ runs throughout the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations. Unfortunately the concept remains somewhat rhetorical as no explicit definition is given. Nevertheless, the holistic definition of needs combined with other information contained in the Act and its Guidance and Regulations allows inferences to be drawn regarding how Local authorities should fulfil their *in loco parentis* role for children and young people in their care.

There are four key areas which are seen to be important for the long-term welfare of children and young people in care. These relate to health, education, self-esteem and preparation for leaving care. Perhaps as a reflection of the criticisms made in the 1984 Social Services Committee Report, there is now much emphasis on the health of children and young people in care. The Report (para 331) heard evidence from various medical practitioners to say that children in care tended to be medically disadvantaged by discontinuities in medical care. This

was largely seen to be as a result of the lack of a single person who was familiar with the children's medical history. The lack of continuity in carers and the lack of intimate familiarisation with children was evidenced by the comment "that it was very easy for a child to go through care with no one knowing whether they are left-handed or right-handed" (*ibid*). The Children Act 1989 now requires local authorities to arrange medical examinations and health assessments to be carried out for all children and young people in their care on a regular basis. It is suggested that this will encourage young people to understand the importance of health care and to take responsibility for their own health, including matters relating to alcohol and substance abuse, and sexual health. It is stated that the health of a child in care should be promoted with the same assiduity as would be the case for a child living with caring parents (DoH, 1991b, para 1.97).

With regard to the education of children and young people in care, evidence to the Social Services Committee (1984: para 340) noted that being in care is an educational hazard over and above the disadvantages which children in care are likely to suffer from their home circumstances. These sentiments are echoed in the Children Act 1989. In particular, recognition is given to the need for extra help and encouragement to meet the educational needs of those in care in order to compensate for early deprivation and for the educational disadvantage arising from extensive movement in care (DoH, 1991a: para 2.33). In recognition of the importance of education in improving life chances, explicit mention is also made of the rights of children and young people in care to education, including the opportunities to reach their full potential in further and higher education (*ibid*). All those with responsibility for the care of children and young people are encouraged to adopt the role of a good parent in terms of encouraging children and young people's participation in education and ensuring that all their educational needs are met.

The emotional, social and behavioural development of children and young people are perhaps more difficult needs to be met or, more accurately, to be seen to be met. The Children Act 1989 places much emphasis on the need to place siblings together in care and, where appropriate, for contact to be maintained with biological families. There is also a requirement that, where possible, children and young people be placed in either children's homes or in foster placements close to the area in which they were previously living. The intention is to minimise the disruption caused by admission into care. Placing children and young people as close as possible to their home locality enables them to maintain contacts with peers as well as family members and also alleviates the need for them to change school. Continuity in these key

areas has been shown to encourage stability and thus promote a child's development and self-esteem (Lindsey, 1995; Newman, 1995; Thoburn, 1994; Triseliotis, 1990).

The steps taken in the Children Act 1989 to promote the welfare of children and young people who are in care appear to approximate that which would be offered by a good parent. However, the role of a good parent and the promotion of young people's welfare is seen to continue beyond the time in which young people are in care. It is acknowledged that the manner in which young people are prepared for leaving care and the support provided for them after they have left care "may profoundly affect the rest of a young person's life" (DoH, 1991a: para 9.3). Preparation for leaving care should help to develop a young person's capacity to make satisfactory relationships, develop their self-esteem and enable them to acquire the necessary practical skills to live independently (DoH, 1991b, para 7.18). Section 24 of the Children Act 1989 provides the legal framework of the support and services which should be available to all young people who have been looked after. Local authorities now have a *duty* to "advise, assist and befriend" all young people who have been looked after until they reach the age of twenty one years. The extended period for which young people are entitled to access local authority after care services arguably takes account of messages from research which highlight the difficulties faced over a period of time by many young people once they have left care. Indeed, Section 24 states that young people can be returned to care and provided with accommodation in a community home if there has been a breakdown in their living arrangements. The assistance offered to young people can be in kind or in exceptional circumstances in cash. However, there are some young people who are entitled to financial support after they have left care. These are young people who are participating in continued education or training leading to employment. Financial assistance can be given for course related expenses, maintenance, and accommodation which will enable young people to complete their courses. Exceptionally, these young people are also entitled to services under Section 24 of the Children Act 1989 until the end of their courses which may be after the young person reaches twenty one years of age. This is further evidence that the Children Act 1989 contains some key elements which constitute being a 'good parent'.

In principle, therefore, the Children Act 1989 has laid down mechanisms to promote the welfare of children and young people in care and to provide services to young people once they have left care. The Act was implemented in 1991. Yet, research is still showing that young people leaving care experience disadvantage and are more vulnerable than the rest of their age cohort (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Broad, 1997; Kirby, 1994; Fowler *et al*, 1996). Given the

anticipated improvement in the situations of young people in and leaving care which the Children Act 1989 was expected to bring, it is tempting to ask what has gone wrong. The Act sought to legislate for major changes in attitudes and social work practice as they relate to child care, particularly in relation to working in partnership with parents in order to prevent family breakdown and children's admission into care. There has been a decline in the number of children and young people admitted into care in recent years but this trend was evident before the Children Act 1989 was implemented (Utting, 1991). It has been argued that changes in law alone do not result in changes in attitudes or, indeed, practice (Rogers & Roche, 1994). Whilst the Children Act 1989 emphasises the importance of planning in order to minimise disruption for children and young people in care, in practice it would be difficult to legislate for stability in care placements: a factor which has been shown to be associated with more positive outcomes for young people after they have left care (Garnett, 1992).

Despite the inability of the Children Act 1989 to impact upon such aspects as stability in care placements it is arguably the case that the major impediment to the success of the Children Act 1989 is the legislative environment into which it became law. The Children Act 1989 was not implemented in a social policy vacuum. Many of the good intentions contained in the Act are dependent not only on social work practices but on the compatibility of key aspects of other social policies. It is a co-ordinated approach to the latter which is important if local authorities are to act in the manner of a 'good parent'. An exploration of some key policy areas shows that co-ordination barely exists within local authorities let alone between state departments.

Education, Training and Employment

Education, it has been argued, is one of the defining characteristics of childhood (Wagg, 1996). Education policies have inevitable implications for the lives that children and young people lead. It is widely recognised that the education children and young people receive in their compulsory schooling years has a determinant effect on their labour market careers in adult life (Banks *et al*, 1992; Furlong & Raffe, 1989; Roberts, 1993). In the last two decades there have been significant changes in education and training policies which have impacted significantly on the way in which young people experience education and the transition into employment (Coles, 1995; Jones & Wallace, 1992). It has been argued that some of these changes, particularly those in education, have been driven purely by political ideology (Simon, 1988). The changes in post-sixteen education and training policies can be seen to be a

response to wide spread unemployment and, in particular, the collapse of the youth labour market. The net effect has been to create a range of opportunities for young people at the end of compulsory education. Increased levels of educational attainment and participation in post-sixteen education suggest that some young people have benefited from the policy changes. However, Roberts (1993) has argued that the policy changes have created only a mirage of opportunity and the changes themselves have had only a limited impact on the social reproduction of inequality. Those most adversely affected by the policy changes tend to be young people who leave school at sixteen with few or no educational qualifications which includes young people leaving care (Roberts, 1995).

The education of young people in care has long been a cause for concern to the extent that the Social Services Committee (1984) stated that being in care was an educational hazard. Despite the emphasis given to the education of children and young people in the Children Act 1989, a recent report by the Social Services Inspectorate and the Office for Standards in Education (SSI/OFSTED, 1995) commented that social service and education departments are failing to promote the educational achievement of those in care. The report further commented that the educational needs of children and young people in care fall between the bureaucracies of the two departments which themselves are attempting to adjust to their changing roles and responsibilities brought about by recent legislative reform. Commenting on the education of children and young people in care prior to the implementation of the Children Act 1989, Utting (1991) specifically highlighted the detrimental effects of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

The 1988 Education Reform Act brought about the most significant changes in education in the post war years. It had far-reaching implications for the provision and delivery of education. The introduction of local management of schools, the national curriculum, standard attainment testing and league tables effectively marketised education in the name of parental choice and in an attempt to raise standards in education. The extent to which the Act enabled parental choice is contested (Gilmour, 1993) but the Act did allow schools to enrol pupils selectively. Indeed, the publication of league tables indicating levels of educational attainment at different key stages and the levels of truancy positively encouraged schools to be selective in their enrolment practices. With regard to raising standards, there have been annual improvements in the proportion of young people achieving five GCSE A-C grades since the late 1980s which suggests resources are being targeted to increase attainment levels as schools strive to improve their performances indicators (Moon, 1995). This trend is to be welcomed.

However, there is another, arguably more worrying, trend appearing. Over broadly the same time scale, the rate of permanent exclusions from school has increased dramatically from 2,910 in 1990/91 to 13,581 in 1995/96 (Parsons, 1996). Whilst it may be the case that children and young people are exhibiting increasingly disruptive behaviour in the classrooms, such a rapid rise in exclusions can be explained, at least in part, by institutional factors (Pearce & Hillman, 1998).

The introduction of performance indicators such as league tables can be seen to deter schools from investing resources into under-achievers and those exhibiting disruptive behaviour, particularly when such behaviour is likely to effect other pupils in the school. Permanent exclusions are the ultimate sanction that a school can apply to these children and young people. It is a mechanism which effectively removes them from the school register thus giving the appearance of increased educational attainment for that institution overall (Pearce & Hillman, 1998). A second factor which is of importance is the division in status between schools. The 1988 Education Reform Act allowed schools to opt out of local authority control and become grant-maintained, i.e. funded directly from central government. The divisions between local authority controlled schools and grant-maintained schools is such that once a pupil is excluded from one school it can be very difficult to enrol them in another mainstream school, especially with the selective enrolment policies being practised by grant-maintained schools (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998b). Pupils excluded from mainstream schools are therefore dependent on special schools or pupil referral units for their education, neither of which is obliged follow the national curriculum. Thus, children and young people who attend such institutions are highly unlikely to achieve the basic educational qualifications with which to gain a foothold in the labour market.

Exclusions from school constitute only one side of the equation. The other is formed by unauthorised absences or truancy which can be understood to be a voluntary type of exclusion. Research by Kinder *et al* (1996) highlighted pupil disaffection with the National Curriculum as an important cause of truancy and disruptive behaviour. The rigidity of the National Curriculum and the emphasis on testing at various key stages contributes to disenfranchisement of less-academically able pupils. Although the actual rate of truancy appears to have remained constant over the last few years, the increase in exclusions may account for this. Pearce and Hillman (1998) raise the point that official exclusion from school may merely convert unauthorised absenteeism into authorised absenteeism.

The changes in education policy brought about by the 1988 Education Reform Act affect all children and young people in both primary and secondary schools. However, some groupings appear to be more vulnerable than others. Children and young people in care appear to be particularly at risk from exclusion from school. The SSI/OFSTED report (1995) into the education of children in the care of four local authorities, found that twenty six per cent of fourteen-sixteen years olds were either excluded from school or had poor attendance records. The report highlighted a lack of understanding given by teachers to the needs of children and young people in care. It also cited a critical lack of communication between social workers and teachers which worked to the disadvantage of children and young people. These findings come after the implementation of the Children Act 1989 which emphasised the importance of education in terms of promoting the welfare and development of children and young people in care. If over a quarter of young people in care are not attending school or, more crucially, not being allowed to attend school then it is, perhaps, less surprising that their levels of educational attainment compare unfavourably with other young people. Research by Garnett (1992) and Biehal *et al* (1992) showed that two thirds and three quarters, respectively, of the young people leaving care had no qualifications. In the wider population, only six per cent of young people leave school with no qualifications (CSO, 1994).

The legislative changes in education go beyond primary and secondary schools. Further education and higher education have both been affected. The expansion of vocational education and the raised quotas for admissions into university has resulted in a dramatic increase among young people aged sixteen to eighteen years in post-compulsory education (Spours, 1995). Changes in the organisation of education appears to have provided a new incentive for young people to continue their education (Raffe, 1992). However, Furlong and Cartmel (1997:17) also point out that it is changing labour market structures and, in particular, the collapse of the youth labour market which has “produced an army of reluctant conscripts to post-compulsory education.” Research by the Audit Commission (1993) detailing high non-completion rates among sixteen to nineteen year olds due, in part, to inappropriate enrolment practices, would certainly support such a claim.

Nevertheless, the trend of increased participation in education continues and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future (Smithers & Robinson, 1995). Yet most young people depend on the support of their families if they are to pursue further and/or higher education courses (Jones & Wallace, 1992). Similarly, the Children Act 1989 states that local authorities have a duty to support young people who have been in care for the duration of their

educational careers. In effect, this ensures that young people in care who want to continue in post-sixteen education are not discriminated against by a lack of family support. However, an important criterion for entry into further and higher education is a young person's level of educational attainment at sixteen years of age. It has already been shown that many young people leaving care do not have any qualifications at this age. So, although legislation is in place to ensure that young people in care have the opportunities to pursue further and higher education, it does not appear to be resulting in such outcomes. Biehal *et al* (1995) found that between eight and twelve per cent of the young people leaving care in their study, continued in post-sixteen education. This is a similar figure to the eleven per cent continuing in further or higher education cited by Broad (1997) in his national survey of leaving care schemes. In stark contrast, by the mid 1990s, more than seventy per cent of sixteen year olds continued in full-time education (DES, 1995). It could be argued that excluding young people from school whilst they are in care effectively excludes them from further or higher education once they leave care.

The changes in education must also be seen in the context of changes in the labour market which began in the early 1970s. The oil crisis in 1972 and subsequent economic recessions since that time have radically transformed the labour market. The most noticeable effects have been widespread unemployment and the collapse of the youth labour market. The decline of the industrial labour market reduced the supply of traditional apprenticeships for young people leaving school with few or no qualifications resulting in a dramatic increase in youth unemployment. The legislative response to this phenomenon has been the creation and subsequent expansion of youth training programmes which themselves have served to fundamentally restructure the youth labour market (Ashton *et al*, 1990). These were initially designed to provide temporary work experience for young people without jobs. Since 1975, the evolution of the initial Job Creation Programme into a six months programme of work experience, then a twelve month Youth Training Scheme into the current two year Youth Training is indicative of various governments' attempts to tackle youth unemployment and increase skills levels. Participation in the various youth training programmes has increased over time. In 1989, participation rates peaked and youth training accounted for the spring destinations of twenty seven per cent of males and twenty per cent of females who left school at the age of sixteen (Courtenay & McAleese, 1993). The subsequent decline can be accounted for by the increased rates of participation in further and higher education rather than by a significant upturn in rates of youth employment.

The extent to which the policies geared towards youth training have impacted on young people's employment prospects is minimal, despite the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Official statistics for 1994 show that only forty two per cent of trainees were awarded NVQs (*Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 1994) and just fifty six per cent of trainees were in employment six months after completing their training (DfEE, 1995a). Young people's scepticism about the value of youth training appears to be validated particularly given the low rate of recompense given to young people undertaking training (Raffe, 1989). The introduction of Training Credits, which allow young people to buy their own training, may go some way in overcoming the hostility towards youth training and an early evaluation of Modern Apprenticeships (ECOTEC, 1997) suggests they are being welcomed by young people. However, whilst the evolution of youth training continues unabated the net result is a stratification of training programmes with the employment prospects of some young people remaining nil (Roberts & Parsell, 1992).

The expansion of further and higher education and the proliferation of youth training has drastically altered the way in which young people experience the transition from school to work. At the end of compulsory schooling, young people now face a multitude of opportunities and different routes into the labour market. Yet access to many of these are dependent upon the attainment of basic educational qualifications. For those young people leaving school with few or no qualifications, the opportunities are much reduced. The increase in the numbers of children and young people not regularly in education is matched by a similar increase in the numbers of young people who are wholly unoccupied, i.e. not in education, training or employment. Research by Istance *et al* (1994) suggests that between sixteen and twenty three per cent of young people who leave school at sixteen years of age are wholly unoccupied at any one time and that two fifths of these young people remain so for six months or more. Among young people leaving care, figures vary. Biehal *et al* (1992) found that thirty six per cent of young people leaving care were wholly unoccupied in that they were unemployed. This figure did increase to fifty per cent in their later research (Biehal *et al*, 1995) which reflects the figure of fifty one per cent cited by Broad (1997).

Istance *et al* (1994) noted that many of the young people who were wholly unoccupied had experienced, amongst other things, partial and fragmented schooling and, whilst some were experiencing partial and fragmented education, training and employment, the research shows that the legislative changes have circumscribed some young people altogether. Their status of being unemployed sixteen and seventeen years olds has been metaphorically categorised as

'Status Zero' (Istance *et al*, 1994; Williamson, 1997a). This label is perhaps unfortunate in that it infers an absolute lack of status. However, changes in social security policy, particularly the removal of entitlement to benefits for sixteen and seventeen year olds, lend some weight to that inference.

Social Security Benefits

The Social Security Acts of 1986 and 1988 provide the most significant indication of the way in which recent legislative changes have negated the needs of young people. The 1986 Social Security Act radically transformed the social security system. Its implementation in April 1988 initiated a new scheme of welfare support, the main aim of which was to target assistance on those in greatest need. All aspects of the social security system were affected from child benefit, which was frozen at its 1987 level, through to the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme whose future value was effectively reduced. The changes signified a departure from Beveridge's intention for the welfare state to provide social assistance for those in need 'from the cradle to the grave'. Importantly, the 1986 Social Security Act replaced Supplementary Benefit with the new Income Support as the basic welfare payment for people who were unemployed but who were not entitled to the contributory Unemployment Benefit. In replacing Supplementary Benefit, the legislation removed the previous distinction between householders and non-householders which had provided an additional payment for those with financial responsibility for running their own home. In place of the householder/non-householder distinction, Income Support was to be paid at different rates according to age with those aged twenty five years and over entitled to a higher rate of benefit than those under twenty five years of age. This new method of social assistance explicitly assumed that the financial responsibilities and the financial needs of people who were unemployed differed on the basis of age rather than circumstance. This clear case of age discrimination was exacerbated in September 1988 by a further change to the legislation.

The 1988 Social Security Act removed entitlement to Income Support for sixteen and seventeen year olds who were unemployed and not participating in youth training. The withdrawal of benefits for young people in this age group was justified by the then Conservative Government on the grounds that a Youth Training placement would be guaranteed to all unemployed sixteen and seventeen year olds. Yet the guarantee of a Youth Training placement remained unfulfilled as there were insufficient placements for the numbers of young people who were unemployed. This resulted in a significant number of sixteen and

seventeen year olds having no access to either benefits or training (Craig, 1991). Whilst the withdrawal of benefits to sixteen and seventeen year olds could be seen as a work incentive, it has also been argued that an important intention of the changes was to discourage young people from leaving the parental home (Roll, 1990; Jones, 1991). As with the different rates of Income Support payments to those under twenty five years of age, the removal of benefits from sixteen and seventeen year olds assumed that young people would be supported by their parents in the family home (Finch, 1989).

This was clearly not the case and previous legislation had recognised that some young people were estranged from their parents and allowances were made for Income Support to be paid accordingly (Killeen, 1992). In removing automatic entitlement to Income Support for sixteen and seventeen year olds, discretionary powers were given to the Secretary of State to allow payments to be made to the anticipated small number of young people who were estranged from their parents and as a result were suffering severe hardship. These payments were to be paid on a temporary basis, initially only for three weeks although this was subsequently lengthened to eight weeks. The implicit assumption that a small number of young people experience severe hardship in short, one-off situations is undermined by research which shows that between 1989 and 1992 applications for Severe Hardship Payments increased by three hundred per cent and that in 1992, sixty two per cent of all applications were repeat or continuous claims (Maclagan, 1993). A system designed to provide temporary financial support for sixteen and seventeen year olds in extenuating circumstances is now providing the main source of income for a significant number of young people, except, in some cases, young people who have been in care.

Eligibility for Severe Hardship Payments is determined by 'estrangement from parents'. Young people of sixteen and seventeen years of age now have to prove that they are unable to live in the parental home if they are to be awarded benefits. The burden of proof can mean the disclosure of abusive relationships and circumstances to unqualified and often insensitive social security staff; a process which has to be undertaken every eight weeks. This has resulted in many of those eligible for Severe Hardship Payments not submitting applications in the first instance or not renewing their claims once payments have lapsed (Maclagan, 1993). For young people who have been in care, it might be expected that the burden of proof of estrangement from parents is self-evident. However, this is increasingly not the case. Many young people who have been in care are having their applications for Severe Hardship payments refused on the grounds that social services act *in loco parentis* and that the onus to

provide financial assistance falls with them and not the social security system. The situation, however, is not so straightforward. McManus (1998) describes the complex way in which decisions are made regarding who has financial responsibility for sixteen and seventeen year old young people leaving care. To simplify the matter, young people who are subject to a care order are not entitled to claim Severe Hardship payments. The reasoning is that social services are deemed to have parental (and financial) responsibility for them until their care orders are discharged, usually when young people reach eighteen years of age. For young people who have been in care but are not subject to a care order, the situation is that they *might* be entitled to claim Severe Hardship payments between the ages of sixteen and seventeen. Social services are not deemed to have parental responsibility for these young people as a matter of course. Much depends on where young people are living, who is providing the accommodation, whether they are in non-advanced and relevant education, and the number of hours per week young people are in education. McManus (1998) describes the situation as 'complex' which is arguably a gross understatement. The introduction of the Job Seekers Allowance, with its emphasis on actively seeking work and its imposition of sanctions for those refusing work or training, appears to be discriminating further against some sixteen and seventeen year olds, including those who have been in care (Maclagan, 1998).

It can be assumed, therefore, and with some justification, that sixteen and seventeen year old young people who are in or who are leaving care are caught between two statutory institutions. The Benefits Agency have effectively absolved themselves of responsibility for young people leaving care (McManus, 1998) and social service departments for whom young people leaving care are seen to be a low priority (Lambert, 1998). Section 24 of the Children Act 1989 states that local authorities have a duty to provide assistance for young people leaving care and only in exceptional circumstances does this have to be financial assistance. The Guidance and Regulations accompanying the Act (DoH, 1991b, para 7.7) state, however, that social services should not take on duties more properly performed by other agencies. Depending on interpretation, this could result in social services absolving themselves of responsibility on the grounds that income maintenance is more properly the duty of the Benefits Agency. Research does indicate that some social services are providing monies to some young people leaving care, up to a rate equivalent to that of social security benefits but that there are marked variations between local authorities (Biehal *et al*, 1995). Furthermore, other research shows that social workers do loose contact with a significant number of young people within a short time period once young people have left care (Garnett, 1992). This raises questions about how these young people are managing to secure a source of income

until such time that they reach eighteen years of age and are automatically entitled to claim social security benefits.

It has been suggested that the implementation of both the 1986 and 1988 Social Security Acts is causally related to the rapid increase in youth homelessness witnessed in recent years (Maclagan, 1993; Thornton, 1990). The cumulative effects of the two Acts was to reduce the level of Income Support paid to young people which has a direct impact on young people's ability to afford to live independently. There were, however, other changes to the social security system which also affected young people's ability to afford independent accommodation. Prior to the 1986 Social Security Act, young people who were unemployed could apply for a Single Emergency Need payment to cover costs such as deposits for accommodation and basic household goods. These were one-off payments in addition to the basic rate of benefit. The 1986 Act replaced this with the Social Fund and the Community Care Grant, both of which had locally devolved, cash-limited budgets. The previous *ex gratia* payments were replaced by Social Fund loans which had to be repaid by deductions from benefits. Given that the rate of benefits to young people were reduced anyway by the 1986 Act, the net value of benefits were further reduced for those young people who were repaying loans thus compounding the poverty into which young people had been thrust. Payments from the Community Care Grant remain *ex gratia* although the criteria for eligibility has become more stringent. As the name suggests, grants can be made available to those who are returning to live in the community after residing in institutions such as prison, hospital, and care homes. Unlike the majority of young people, those who have been in care are entitled to apply for a grant to enable them to live independently. However, due to the nature of cash-limited budgets, both the Social Fund and the Community Care Grant operate on a priority need basis for which entitlement to apply does not necessarily translate into entitlement to payment. Those young people leaving care who are refused Community Care Grants are either having to rely on social services to pay leaving care grants which research shows are subject to wide variation in both actual provision and payable amount (Biehal *et al*, 1995) or they have to apply for a Social Fund loan. Leaving care, therefore, does not necessarily provide access to the financial resources needed to establish an independent home.

One other important change was brought about by the 1986 Social Security Act and that was with regard to Housing Benefit. The payment of Housing Benefit to those who were unemployed and in receipt of social security benefits remained at a level which covered the full amount of rent. However, the means-testing of Housing Benefit has disproportionately

affected young people. For those on low-income, Housing Benefit rebates are reduced by sixty five pence for every pound of income over the basic rate of Income Support. Since the basic rate of Income Support is reduced for young people, they are now required to pay a larger proportion of their income on rent than others whose income and rent are the same as their own. It is difficult to see these new regulations as anything other than discriminatory. Like the other aspects of the changes in social security legislation, the underlying assumption is that young people should be living in the parental home and mechanisms are now in place to enforce that situation. Whilst research shows that young people are now remaining in the parental home for longer than previously was the case, the decision for some young people to leave home is taken in spite of the prohibitive legislative structures (Ferri & Smith, 1997; Jones, 1995).

The issue about whether young people *choose* to leave home or are *forced* to leave home is both contentious and complex (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). The same applies for young people leaving care except that, for young people in care, the point at which they *have* to move into independent accommodation arrives sooner than for most young people living in the parental home. The regulations guiding the payment of Housing Benefit have, until recently, applied to young people leaving care. However, young people who have been in care are no longer automatically entitled to Housing Benefit. In a similar vein to the changes affecting awards of Severe Hardship Payments, for sixteen and seventeen year old young people who have been in care, the financial responsibility for housing costs have been deemed to be the responsibility of social services. The extent to which social services are meeting their responsibilities under Section 24 of the Children Act 1989 is inconsistent due to the discretionary nature of 'duties' vested in them (Fowler *et al*, 1996). In recent years, therefore, young people leaving care have lost their rights to claim both income and housing related benefits between the ages of sixteen and seventeen. One possible consequence could be a rise in homelessness among these young people. It is difficult to determine whether these policy changes have exacerbated the levels of homelessness among young people who have been in care since research shows that they have long been disproportionately represented among the homeless population (Drake *et al*, 1981; Anderson *et al*, 1993). Whilst the changes in social security legislation have been noted to be part of the structural explanation of youth homelessness, homelessness itself has traditionally and, in some cases, mistakenly been understood to be a housing problem (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994).

Housing

Like many other social policy areas, there have been significant changes with regard to housing policy. There have been numerous legislative changes throughout the last two decades which have radically altered the supply of social housing and the manner in which local authorities manage homelessness. An indication of the impact these changes have had on young people is given by statistics on youth homelessness. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) cite an increase from 53,000 in 1978 to 156,000 in the early 1990s, in the numbers of young people living without a home. These figures are based on official estimates and are, therefore, likely to be an under-estimation of the true extent of youth homelessness. The difficulties in measuring youth homelessness are discussed in detail by Hutson and Liddiard (1994) and Evans (1996). The main difficulty is one of definition. Definitions of homelessness range from 'rooflessness' and sleeping on the streets through to living in temporary accommodation such as hostels or living involuntarily in existing households. It is clear, as Hutson and Liddiard point out, that the measurement of homelessness is dependent upon how it is defined. This is a crucial issue and recent changes in housing policies have not only redefined homelessness but have arguably served to ignore the housing needs of many young people.

Local authorities have long been the main suppliers of social housing. They still are but the 1980 and 1984 Housing Acts, which gave local authority tenants the right to buy their rented properties, have effectively reduced the amount of local authority housing stock. The reduced role of local authorities as providers of social housing as been paralleled by an expansion in the role of Housing Associations. However, despite financial incentives from central government to Housing Associations, the expansion has failed to compensate for the reduction in local authority housing. The proportion of housing in the private rented sector has also decreased whilst there has been a big shift towards owner occupation which now accounts for two thirds of all housing stock in the United Kingdom (DoE, 1992). The changed composition of the housing market has important implications in terms of accessibility since there is no indication that the demand for social housing has decreased. The net result is inflated competition for the social housing that is available.

Even though its role as a provider of social housing has been much reduced, local authorities still have primary responsibility for homelessness. The 1985 Housing Act introduced new regulations for the management of housing need. This translated into a system of prioritisation with a distinction being made between genuine homelessness and 'intentional' homelessness.

This distinction is important because under the 1985 Act local authorities were absolved of responsibility for those who were deemed to be 'intentionally' homeless. Definitions of intentionality vary from those who have somewhere to live but, for whatever reason, choose to leave it to those in mortgage or rent arrears and facing repossession or eviction (Ungerson, 1994). For those who are deemed to be genuinely homeless, housing is allocated on a priority-need basis. Essentially, those in priority-need are seen to be families with young children, pregnant women and some other vulnerable groups such as the elderly and people with disabilities. Importantly, age, in itself, is not deemed to be a criterion of vulnerability. Young people are, therefore, competing with other groupings of individuals for a limited supply of social housing and housing legislation has severely disadvantaged their access to it.

The extent to which the remainder of the housing market is accessible to young people is doubted (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994; Jones, 1995). The ability of most young people to move into owner occupation is limited due to high costs necessarily involved. The private-rented sector is no more immediately accessible for the same reasons. The cost of deposits and advance rents means high financial costs in the first instance. It has already been shown that young people on social security benefits have had the rate of their benefits reduced and no longer have access to additional payments for deposits. For those young people in employment, their salary levels are less than their adult counterparts and it has been suggested that the introduction of the various youth training programmes has further deflated young people's rate of recompense (Roberts, 1995). The structural inaccessibility of the housing market is further compounded by the limited financial resources to which young people have access.

One effect of these issues has been to extend the time in which young people remain in the parental home. Research shows that young people generally are now delaying their transitions into independent accommodation (Ferri & Smith, 1997; Jones, 1995). Although the reasons for this are varied and include, for example, the protraction of young people's participation in education. Another important factor, though, is the legislative changes that have foreclosed young people's opportunities to establish independent accommodation at an earlier age. Whilst the evident trend in extended transitions to independent accommodation is becoming the norm, it cannot be assumed that all young people have parents who are willing to house them or indeed that all young people have parental homes in which it is safe for them to reside (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). The converse of extended housing transitions is accelerated transitions into a hostile housing market structured by age-discriminatory legislation. The manifestation of

extensive youth homelessness gives an indication of the possible consequences of these types of transitions.

A key policy response to youth homelessness has been an attempt to address the manifestation of homelessness rather than the root causes of homelessness *per se*. This is evident from the piloting and subsequent expansion of 'foyers'. Foyers are specialist hostels for young people which have been designed to tackle homelessness and unemployment (Malynn, 1992). They provide supported accommodation for young people and incorporate opportunities to participate in education, training and job-search programmes. Indeed, residence in foyers are dependent upon young people's willingness to seek and participate in education or employment based programmes (Anderson & Quilgars, 1995; Chatrik, 1994). It has been suggested that an important and positive aspect of foyers is the bringing together of education and training programmes within an accommodation scheme (Coles, 1995; Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). However, foyers cannot provide permanent and appropriate housing into which young people can eventually move. Moreover, even if they do prove capable of increasing the employment prospects of young people through education and training, foyers cannot provide jobs that do not exist at a rate of recompense which would enable young people to afford to live independently. In providing accommodation for young people, Coles (1995:208) warns that unless foyers are developed in ways which safeguard the rights of young people to a modicum of care, support and welfare, they could become "repositories into which social problems can be deposited."

Clearly, some young people are more at risk of becoming homeless than others. Leaving home at an early age combined with unemployment, poverty and a lack of affordable accommodation, are influential to the process of becoming homeless (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). This is not meant to infer that all young people *choose* to leave home at an early age. Conflict with parents or abuse within the family may result in some young people having no choice but to leave home. Similarly, for many young people in care, choosing not to move into independent accommodation is not an option. Leaving home and leaving care results in some young people facing the vagaries of housing policy. Evidence in the 1984 Report of the Social Services Committee on children in care stated that, "the provision of suitable accommodation is the single greatest obstacle to a young person leaving care.." (1984: para 306). At that time the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 was still in force and the Committee made an explicit recommendation that the Act be amended to include young people leaving care as a priority-need category. The guidance notes on homelessness accompanying the 1985 Housing

Act do identify young people leaving care as a “vulnerable” group. However, this recognition of vulnerability falls short of imposing a statutory duty on housing departments to provide for the housing needs of young people leaving care. The Regulations and Guidance of the Children Act 1989 state that when a young person leaves care “the primary responsibility for housing lies with the housing department of a local authority” (DoH, 1991b: para 7.81). The regulations also state that housing departments *may wish to consider* reserving some of their housing stock to meet the needs of young people leaving care (*ibid*, para 7.83, emphasis added). Yet in 1996, twelve years after the Social Services Committee made its recommendations, the Action on Aftercare Consortium recommended that young people leaving care should be considered by housing departments as a priority group (Fowler *et al*, 1996).

The apparent unwillingness of housing departments to make statutory provision for the needs of young people leaving care has resulted in social services having to rely on other sources of move-on accommodation. Research shows that it is not unusual for young people leaving care to be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, board and lodgings, hostels and bedsits in the private sector (Garnett, 1992; Biehal *et al*, 1995). These types of accommodation have been identified by Hutson and Liddiard (1994) as constituting the ‘middle phase’ in the process of becoming homeless. They are types of accommodation which tend to be short-term in nature and arguably wholly inappropriate thus fuelling the propensity for increased movement among young people after they have left care. Even for those young people who are allocated social housing when they leave care, stability does not necessarily ensue. It has already been mentioned that issues such as loneliness, rent and fuel arrears and a lack of support are factors associated with extensive movement after care. These issues forcibly impact on young people’s ability to maintain their tenancies. For those who cannot, they are faced with the caveat in the 1985 Housing Act of “intentional” homelessness for which housing departments are absolved of responsibility. This, along with many other social policies, may serve to pathologise the problems faced by young people generally and those leaving care specifically.

Good Enough Parenting?

For children and young people in care, the State acts *in loco parentis*, a responsibility which the State has until those who have been looked after reach the age of twenty one years. However, the state devolves responsibility for looking after children and young people to local

authority social services departments. The Children Act 1989 provides a blueprint for how the State believes social services should discharge their duties and promote the welfare of those in care. As 'corporate parents', social services have been criticised for parenting children and young people in a system designed, in principle, to promote their welfare but, in reality, disadvantages them (Utting, 1991). It has been shown that children and young people who are admitted into care come from socially deprived family backgrounds (Bebbington & Miles, 1989) and others have stated that children in care are the children of the poor (Social Services Committee, 1984). For young people who have been in care, their circumstances are such that they are described as vulnerable and socially excluded (Baldwin *et al*, 1997; Coles, 1995). The Children Act 1989 states that children and young people in care and after they have left care should be looked after and supported in the manner of that of a 'good parent'. On the evidence in this chapter, it is relatively easy to criticise the 'corporate parents' as being not good enough.

Blaming corporate parents is a contentious issue not least because the responsibility for looking after children and young people in care is laid down by the State but carried out by local authorities. Relations between central and local governments have themselves been radically transformed by a succession of legislation throughout the 1980s aimed at minimising the role of local government (John, 1990). The deterioration in central/local relations as it affects children and young people in care is analogous to an acrimonious divorce in which the parent with care of the children is battling for maintenance payments from the absent parent. Had the Children Act 1989 been implemented in a policy vacuum and with sufficient resources, there is a sense in which the anticipated improvement in child care policy and practice may have come into fruition. This clearly did not happen and, as this chapter has shown, one of the major factors inhibiting the success of the Children Act 1989 is the legislative environment in which it was enacted.

The development of children and young people demands a holistic approach in which all needs are met. For those in care, this necessarily entails co-operation between different legislative departments. In recognition of this, the Children Act 1989 advocates multi-agency working in order to promote the development and welfare of those who are looked after. However, an impediment to multi-agency working concerns organisational cultures which tend to be difficult to coalesce. Increasingly, these difficulties are compounded by antithetical legislative aims. For example, social services now have a statutory duty to promote the education of children and young people in care. Yet, at the same time, schools are attempting to improve

their performance indicators by excluding under-achieving and/or difficult pupils. Social services have a duty to prepare young people in care for independent living and to ensure that they have appropriate accommodation in which to move. Meanwhile, housing departments have neither the housing stock nor the political will to provide social housing to those leaving care. Social security legislation increasingly assumes that young people will be supported by their families. For young people who have been in care responsibility for providing financial support falls to social services who frequently become estranged from the young people they once looked after. There are, therefore, inherent difficulties for local authority social services in discharging their duties in the manner of a 'good parent'. The main difficulty is the incoherence in legislation emanating from central government. This is not to absolve social services of responsibility but to make the point that for them to act in the manner of a 'good parent necessitates the support of central government and the legislature. Calls for a more co-ordinated approach to social policies affecting young people generally are not new (Coleman & Warren-Adamson, 1992; Coles, 1995). Neither are calls for a more co-ordinated approach to children and young people in and leaving care (Social Services Committee, 1984; Utting, 1991; Fowler *et al*, 1996). In concurring with these calls, it is the aim of this research to understand how growing up in and out of care but within the same legislative environment differentially affects young people.

CHAPTER THREE

Designing the Research

Introduction

The methodological design of this research has been influenced by a wide range of literature from the disciplines of social work, social policy and sociology. Much of the existing research on being in care and leaving care has been undertaken within the discipline of social work. The emphasis has largely been on social work practice rather than on social policy issues. This is certainly the case for research focused on admissions into care and the experience of being in care (for example Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Rowe *et al*, 1989; Heath *et al*, 1994). Similarly, research looking at the return of children in care to their families has also adopted a broadly social work perspective (Bullock *et al*, 1993; Farmer & Parker, 1991). It is only when the process of leaving care is analysed does attention bifurcate into social work practices and social policy issues (Garnett, 1992; Biehal *et al*, 1992 & 1995; Broad, 1997). Yet even in this body of research the wider social policy environment remains largely peripheral.

Methodologically, the perspective from which social issues are viewed will influence research design, data collection, analysis and, importantly, interpretation of findings. Having made the distinction between research in social work and that in social policy, the methods by which research in each discipline is undertaken draws on both quantitative and qualitative techniques. In line with Bryman's reasoning (1988), the methods generally being chosen on the grounds of their appropriateness to the specific aims of the research as opposed to any philosophical persuasion regarding the primacy of certain methods. This facilitates an exploration of their methodological strengths and weaknesses which is the subject matter of the first section of this chapter.

The research questions guiding this study have been mainly informed by epistemological gaps within the literature concerned with being in care, leaving care, and youth. One such gap is an *understanding* of young people's *experiences* of growing up in care and the affects of those experiences on the transitions they make out of care and throughout the process of youth. With the notable exception of the longitudinal, qualitative study by Stein and Carey (1986), much of the existing research on leaving care has been concerned with quantifiable processes

and outcomes based on data provided by social work practitioners (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Broad, 1992 & 1997; Garnett, 1992). (These provide valuable information and explanations of what happens to young people leaving care but offer little insight or understanding into the experience of being in care and leaving care. In order to grasp an understanding of young people's experiences and the processes by which they reflexively construct their social realities, an ethnographic approach is necessary. The methodological framework and details of the research process are described in the second section.

The final section of this chapter explores some ethical issues which manifested themselves at various stages in this study. Traditionally, ethical issues in social research have focused on matters such as privacy, confidentiality, and deception (Homan, 1991). Within general methodology texts, the lack of commentary on ethics might suggest that social research is no longer replete with important ethical issues. Although there is discussion on the use of pseudonyms and informed consent, wider ethical issues seem to be ignored. The experience of undertaking this research suggests otherwise. Some of the issues encountered in this study were anticipated but others were not. The reflections on the research process contained in this chapter are included as a salutary reminder of the moral maze which can be encountered in undertaking social research and making decisions as to its most appropriate conduct.

Methodological Lessons from Previous Research

The existing research which informed this study generally and the research design specifically can be categorised into three distinct areas, namely; research on admissions into care and being in care, research into leaving care, and research into youth transitions to adulthood. In each of these areas, the diverse aims of the inquiries reflects the mixture of research methods used and their subsequent findings. The collective contribution made by previous research can be seen to provide a basis for understanding the process of growing up in and out of care in the absence of specific research into this multi-staged phenomenon. Importantly, the messages from previous research throws into sharp relief the manner in which this is made problematic by methodological practices.

Data on admissions into care and the placement of children and young people in care are collected annually by the Department of Health from all social service departments in England and Wales (DoH, 1993, 1994). It is evident from the statistics that there has been a changing trend in both admissions into care and the types of placements used. For example, there has, in

recent years, been a significant decrease in the number of children and young people in care and there is evidence of a shift towards foster placements rather than residential placements for all those in care (DoH, 1995). Nevertheless, the statistics continue to show that teen-aged young people in care are much more likely to be in residential care placements rather than foster care placements. These trends are evident only by comparing year on year statistics. Although the statistics do provide a picture of the changing patterns in numbers of and types of placement for children and young people in care, the picture presented suffers from partiality. The data are only collected on those in care on the 31st of March each year. This produces a completely artificial and static picture which negates the amount of movement experienced by those in care.

Research carried out by Rowe *et al* (1989) casts light on the extent to which the Department of Health annual statistics are both static and partial. Their research was undertaken in six Local Authorities over a period of two years, between April 1985 and March 1987. The inquiry had three main aims which were; to provide information on the numbers and the characteristics of children going into various types of placements and the outcome of those placements, to investigate the possible links between placement outcomes and the organisation of services, and to test the viability of a placement monitoring system. The intention was to collect data on all placement starts and all placement endings during this period by means of a questionnaire to be completed by social workers. The findings from the research give a crucial insight into the "turnover" of children in care, with one third of children admitted into care during the first year of the study having been in care previously and one quarter of all first year admissions experiencing at least one subsequent re-admission into care. Overall, there were 9,723 placement starts and 9,335 placement endings in the two year period. Such extensive movement in and out of care and between care placements highlights both the simplistic nature of Department of Health statistics and shows that admission into care is part of a process rather than an end in itself.

Without undermining the importance of the research by Rowe *et al*, the research methods employed resulted in some serious limitations which the researchers themselves acknowledge. The main limitation to the project was acknowledged to be its sole reliance on information provided by social workers. This raises issues of methodological importance, particularly with regard to the reliability of the data. Although ninety five per cent of questionnaires were collected, some were incomplete with a common absence being information on moves and discharges from care. The problem of missing data was compounded by ambiguous and

inconsistent information, particularly that concerning placements endings and whether they were 'planned' or 'unplanned'. It is clear that social workers placed more emphasis on admissions into care than on movement in and discharges from care. A final issue concerns the quantifiable nature of the data. This type of data is unable to explain the reasons behind the movement in and out of care and fails to give an understanding of the effects such movements have on the children and young people concerned and/or their parents.

The latter of these is addressed in two studies (Farmer & Parker, 1991; Bullock *et al*, 1993) which explored the experience of returning children and young people in care to their families. The data collection methods used were similar, in that both studies undertook analysis of case files as the primary method of data collection supplemented by a series of qualitative interviews with social workers and parents. The study by Bullock *et al* (1993) also included interviews with children and young people. Analysis of case files was noted to be time-consuming due to the often unwieldy nature of recording information. This is an issue which has been critically noted by Utting (1991) who commented that case files are characteristically incomplete and tend to be incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with them. Whilst the qualitative aspects to these studies were of a supplementary nature, the data collected by the interviews highlighted the trauma and difficulties experienced by families reunited after a period of separation. Indeed, both studies concur that reunion can be as traumatic as separation for those concerned. Such emotional experiences are negated by research which concentrates on statistical depiction of children's movement in and out of care.

Research by Fisher *et al* (1986) which explored children's careers in care and the views of parents, social workers and professional carers adopted a qualitative approach. The aim was to gain an understanding of the feelings of everyone involved in the care process rather than collect information. Other research (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987) carried out using qualitative methods also shows that the experience of being in care transcends numerical categorisations of how many placements, for how long and with what outcome. Being in care variously involves coping with strange environments and having strangers as carers, not knowing how long for, being moved on unexpectedly and having to experience the whole process of coping and adjustment again. For some young people, this cycle is so repetitive that they cease to unpack their belongings in their new placements (Berridge, 1985). Conversely, there are some children and young people who fail to appear in statistical analyses because their placements do not breakdown and therefore experience no movement between placements (Rowe *et al*, 1989). Yet, qualitative research suggests that inferences of stability in some such

cases can be misleading since longevity of placement does not necessarily equate with either stability or appropriateness for the children and young people concerned (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987).

The fundamental differences between research which generates information on children and young people in care and that which engenders an understanding of the experiences of being in care are important, not just in terms of a philosophical debate about quantitative and qualitative methodologies, but because of their implications for research focused on leaving care. This point is pertinent to the research by Garnett (1992) who undertook a follow-up study of a sample of young people from the study by Rowe *et al* (1989). Garnett's research focused on the process of leaving care and what happens to young people once they have left care. As in the previous study, Garnett collected data using social worker completed questionnaires. The limitations mentioned earlier of this method remain pertinent but Garnett experienced two further difficulties. Firstly, in a number of cases the original social worker was no longer in post and questionnaires were completed by their managers. Secondly, in some cases where the social workers were available, contact with the young people had ceased and social workers were unable to provide the requested information. For example, in twenty per cent of cases, the social workers did not know whether the young people concerned had achieved any educational qualifications and in twenty nine per cent of cases social workers were unable to say whether the young people had stayed in their last placements or had moved on. Despite these limitations, Garnett's research has made a significant contribution in terms of providing information about what happens to young people as they leave care and afterwards.

Until recently, very little was known about the 'destinations' of young people who had been in care. It has been possible to glean information from research into the prison (Walmsley, 1991) and homeless (Anderson *et al*, 1993) populations yet the statistical nature of these studies results in a somewhat static picture and an overt concentration on negative outcomes. Moreover, information about the disproportionate number of people in these populations who have previously been in care infers causality rather than offers explanation. Garnett's study (1992) does little to dispel the negative outcomes associated with leaving care. Her research does, however, enable inferences to be made about possible associations between types of careers in care and outcomes of leaving care. For example, young people designated as having long-term stable careers in care, as measured by the length of their last placement, tend to attain more educational qualifications, participate in the labour market and experience

stability in their after care accommodation than young people who had either unstable careers in care or were admitted into care during their teenage years. Other research using a broadly similar methodology (Biehal *et al*, 1992) concurs with these findings. Yet, such findings serve to raise further questions. Why do some young people in care experience stable placements whilst others do not? Why do some young people who have unstable careers in care, with numerous placement changes, gain some educational qualifications whilst other do not? Is it the instability of placements *per se* - does placement instability impact upon school attendance, or does truancy and/or educational disaffection lead to placement breakdown and instability? These questions remain unanswered. The process and, therefore, the policy implications are unclear.

The same kind of questions could be levelled against research which seeks to explain the processes of youth transitions to adulthood. By compounding complex childhood biographies into variables such as gender, ethnicity, levels of educational attainment at the age of sixteen, and the number and type of parents in the family home, the processes remain unclear. Quantitative research can, of course, provide information about the changing patterns of youth transitions and, indeed, highlight the different ways in which young people undertake their transitions (Banks *et al*, 1992; Roberts, 1995). However, the inferences made suffer from partiality and, to a greater or lesser extent, their contribution to an understanding of how young people manage their transitions is somewhat superficial. Statistical analysis shows that young people with few or no educational qualifications are much more likely to be undertake 'failed' transitions leading to negative outcomes. They are more likely to be unemployed, on poor quality training schemes or in low paid manual work than those who achieve some basic educational qualifications at the age of sixteen (Roberts, 1995). Whilst the number of educational qualifications gained at the age of sixteen may well explain this phenomenon, it is arguably more useful to take a step backwards and question why some young people do not achieve educational qualifications in the first instance. Despite allegations of over simplistic, cultural determinism, the qualitative research by Willis (1977) shows that behind the social class variable usually invoked in this example, lies the active involvement of young people in shaping their own destinies. It was not the working class lads who 'were failed' by the education system, rather, they 'failed' themselves because they wanted working class jobs.

It was shown in the previous chapter and it has been argued elsewhere (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997) that social and policy changes have fundamentally altered the way in which young people experience youth. The legitimacy of grand narratives such as structural determinism

invoked to explain young people's trajectories into the labour market (Roberts, 1993) are questioned by some (Beck, 1992; Beck *et al*, 1994; Giddens, 1991). The fragmentation of traditional structures of social reproduction necessitates, therefore, a need to explore the way in which the social world is negotiated at an individual or micro-social level. Others have cautioned against such an approach and have asserted the continued importance of social structures in influencing, if not determining, young people's life chances (Jones & Wallace, 1992). This is not the place to enter into the arguably paradigmatic debate about modernity - late, high or post - but it is important to assert the need to uncover the way in which choices are made and explore how those choices affect individual life chances.

Recognition of this need is evidenced by two recent pieces of research which adopted a dual approach of discovering generalised and objective patterns of transitions by the use of surveys and of exploring, by the use of qualitative interviews, the individual and subjective choices negotiated by young people (Banks *et al*, 1992; Biehal *et al*, 1995). The scope and context of the two inquiries were very different in that one was concerned with representative samples of whole age cohorts (Banks *et al*, 1992) and the research by Biehal *et al* (1995) was concerned with young people leaving care. The qualitative aspect of both studies showed the complexity of young people's lives in terms of their social interactions and their interactions with key elements of social structures such as schools, labour markets, and families. These interactions were variously seen to be influential in the formulation of attitudes and identities which thus affected the transitional processes out of care and towards adulthood respectively. Youth must, therefore, be regarded as a complex stage in the life course and the complexity is evidently differentiated by the context in which young people grow up.

Information about the extent to which the transitions of young people who have been in care are different from the transitions of young people generally is largely a matter of inference and conjecture. Comparisons of the transitions of these two groupings of young people are made in terms of objective criteria such as levels of educational attainment, employment status and ages at which key milestones are reached (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Coles, 1995). Such analyses do show that young people in care have different transitional patterns than the rest of their cohort. They have fewer than average qualifications. They are forced to live independently at an earlier age than the majority of young people. And, on average, they are more likely to be unemployed. The list of comparisons could continue. However, the tendency for such comparisons to be set against statistical averages merely serves to problematise young people leaving care rather than furnish an understanding of difference.

Qualitative research can, and does, give an insight into young people's experiences of leaving care (Stein & Carey, 1986; Biehal *et al*, 1995). However, comparisons between these and methodologically similar research on young people generally (for example Coffield *et al*, 1986) are limited. The design and *in situ* nature of qualitative and ethnographic studies prohibit extrapolation and comparison. There is, therefore, a gap between inferred difference and experienced difference. It is a gap which fuels conjecture on the effects of being in care and its assumed negative impact on young people's life chances vis-à-vis other young people. This research provides empirical evidence with which to bridge that gap.

Designing the Research

As outlined at the beginning of the thesis, this research has two aims: firstly to explore why some young people appear to leave care more successfully than others; and secondly, to explore the ways in which young people who have grown up in care experience youth compared to young people who have grown up in their biological families. By definition, these aims necessarily involve an examination and comparison of outcomes. Yet outcomes themselves are notoriously difficult to measure which makes comparison a potentially flawed exercise (Parker *et al*, 1991). At its most simple, an outcome is something that follows from an action or a situation. In this case, the outcome is what happens to young people after they leave care. However, there are different dimensions along which outcomes can be measured and earlier research has suggested that a multi-dimensional view of outcomes is needed (Parker *et al*, 1991). Drawing on the work by Parker *et al* (1991) and Cheetham *et al* (1992), Biehal *et al* (1995:253) constructed nine dimensions along which outcomes of leaving care can be measured which they summarised into two types: material circumstances and quality of life. Material circumstances included accommodation, employment, further education and training, and income. Quality of life included more subjective outcomes such as self-esteem, mental state, social networks/social isolation, interpersonal skills, self care, practical skills, ability to maintain a tenancy and ability to sustain a job or place at college. The achievement of any of the specific or types of outcomes is a complex process since success in one dimension may be dependent upon success in another. A range of structural factors also influence them. For young people leaving care, these are seen to be preparation for leaving care, professional and non-professional support after care, local housing and labour markets, and educational qualifications (Biehal *et al*, 1995). This then necessitates consideration of temporal and spatial factors. The complexity of the process is such that outcome measures and assessments tend towards generalisations, from which it is difficult to determine for whom

outcomes are being assessed, for example services, professionals, or young people themselves. This is an important point when arguably one of the most important factors of outcome measures, irrespective of the locus of evaluation, is personal start points. The Audit Commission and OFSTED (1993) in the context of educational attainment, suggest a “value added” approach in terms of assessing outcomes. Indeed, Biehal *et al* (1995) also recognise the importance of starting points when assessing outcomes for young people leaving care. Children and young people are admitted into care in different circumstances and with very different emotional baggage. Yet this is often forgotten in efforts to explain outcomes of leaving care (Broad, 1992 & 1997; Stone, 1989; Garnett, 1992). These critical analyses of outcomes of leaving care are based largely or wholly on objective, external accounts. They assume children and young people who enter care and those who do not, do so on a level playing field and that those who do enter care are looked after in broadly the same conditions. It would be naive to assume this to be true. This research will unravel the inherent simplification of the complex processes of growing up in and leaving care by focusing on internal, subjective accounts.

Existing research which makes comparisons between young people who have been in care and those who have not, does so based on objective outcomes of the transitional process (Coles, 1997). This condenses the complex process of growing up in care into a single variable invoked to explain difference. For both groupings of young people, such analyses also simplify the multi-dimensional phase of youth into a tripartite process of transition involving employment, housing, and to a lesser extent, partnering, marriage and procreation. Insights into the complexity of youth and factors which influence the transitional process are offered by some research (Coffield *et al*, 1986; Banks *et al*, 1992; Jones & Wallace, 1992). In planning the research design, it was intended that by involving both young people who have grown up in care and those who have grown up in their biological families in the same research, a greater understanding of the ways in which young people experience youth would emerge.

A theme linking the two aims of this research is to understand the experience of growing up in care and to understand how growing up in different socio-cultural environments affects young people’s experience of youth. The previous chapter outlined the ways in which social policies structure both being in care and the period of youth. Yet, the influence of these social structures are not uniform. There is, therefore, a need for a more informed understanding of the differential ways in which young people negotiate the social structuring of youth. This

demands an ethnographic approach which enables the open exploration of behaviour in specific social contexts and between multiple lines of action (Baszanger & Dodier, 1997). It is, moreover, an approach which facilitates an understanding of the means through which individuals engage in meaningful action and create a social reality of their own, or one that is shared with others. The comparison of two groupings of young people thus enables an understanding of how individuals and groups make sense of their lived experiences. Youth is seen to be a tumultuous phase in the life course, in which young people experience extensive socio-psychological changes (Coleman, 1992; Shantz & Hartup, 1992). The research needed to be designed in such a way as to be able to tap into these processes of change. A longitudinal approach was adopted. This facilitated an insight into the dynamics, and sometimes unpredictability, of the changes being experienced by the young people. More importantly, this methodological approach allowed a reflection of 'youth as a social and psychological process' rather than merely a series of status transitions.

For many young people, an important event in the life course is the end of compulsory education. It is an age and stage which is seen by some to signify the commencement of the transitions to adulthood (Jones & Wallace, 1992). Decisions about future careers potentially hinge on the decisions young people take and the opportunities available at the age of sixteen years. For many young people in care, it is also the age at which the process of leaving care begins. Indeed, for some of them the process may already be underway. Research shows that leaving care and the first twelve months to eighteen months after care is a characteristically turbulent time due to the extensive changes experienced (Gamett, 1992, Biehal *et al*, 1995). It was prudent, therefore, to access a sample of young people who were of an age at which these changes and transitions were being experienced.

Accessing the Sample

Given that the main aim of the research concerned young people leaving care, the support of a local authority had to be negotiated. It is local authority social services departments that act *in loco parentis* and, as such, have a duty to protect the children and young people in their care from harm (including that which could be inflicted by social researchers!). Having been advised of the potential difficulties in gaining access to both a local authority and the young people in their care, an approach was made to a local authority in the north west of England six months before the research began and, indeed, before funding for the research had been granted. The local authority approached was one with whom I had been previously employed

as a youth worker. It is difficult to know the extent to which this had any influence. In my initial letter to one of the Assistant Directors of social services, I made no reference to my previous employment with the local authority. I had, however, broached my research idea and the possibility of access with a former colleague. In the event, the local authority quickly agreed to support the research in principle. The final decision to grant access, however, had to be taken at various committee meetings. A senior manager in the social services department, who had originally supported the research proposal, was present at these committee meetings and the support of the local authority was eventually secured. There were two conditions attached to their support. The first was that the identities of the young people would be protected. The second was that the local authority withheld the right to be named. Given the media presentation of social services in recent years, the latter seemed to reflect an understandable concern about the findings of the research. The local authority did, however, request feedback from the research process.

Having agreed to support the research the local authority allowed access to the case records of all young people in their care so that an appropriate sample could be drawn. Given the aims of the research and the points raised above regarding the ages at which young people experienced a great number of changes, it was decided to construct a sample of young people in care with the only criterion being that they reached the age of sixteen in the first six months of 1995 - the year in which the research started. A trawl of social services records suggested that only a very small number of young people would be eligible to participate in the research based on this criterion. This created difficulties for two reasons. Firstly, it was anticipated that only a proportion of the young people approached would agree to participate in the research. Secondly, longitudinal research usually suffers from sample attrition over time (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Stein & Carey, 1986). It was important, therefore, to ensure that the initial sample of young people was large enough to withstand both these processes. The original age range was, therefore, extended to include all young people in care whose dates of birth fell between June 1977 and June 1979. This meant that the young people in the sample would be aged between sixteen and eighteen and the start of the research. Although the age range was wider than initially intended, it was not seen to be problematic with regard to the aims of the research since it has been argued that leaving care is a process and not an event (Biehal *et al* 1995). Based on this wider age criterion, forty young people in care were selected on the basis of their ages.

It had been agreed with the local authority that the initial contact with these young people would take place via their social workers. Letters outlining the purpose of the research and requesting the help and participation of the young people were handed to social workers who then addressed and posted them. The envelopes contained a pro forma reply slip requesting the name, address and consent of the young person. A follow-up letter was sent by the same procedure after a period of four weeks had lapsed. From the forty young people selected, sixteen agreed to participate in the research, giving a response rate of forty per cent. This was lower than had been expected. Social workers for one young woman requested that no contact be made due to a number of events which were occurring in her life at the time. They were of the opinion that contact by a researcher would prejudice the young woman's emotional well-being. It was agreed not to contact the young woman concerned. Apart from this one case, there is no evidence to suggest that the letters to the other thirty nine young people were not sent although some social workers did voice opinions on their perceived appropriateness and willingness of some young people to participate.

In assuming that the social workers did send the letters as requested, there are a number of reasons why the response rate was low. It is known that young people experience a lot of changes in accommodation after they leave care and that they may not live in the accommodation in which social workers have placed them (Garnett, 1992). Therefore, some young people may never have received the letters which were sent to them. For those who did receive the letters, there are two possible explanations for the low response rate. Firstly, it is known that levels of school attendance and levels of educational attainment are low amongst young people in care (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992). This is likely to have an impact on some young people's ability to read and write. This issue was taken on board in drafting the letter to the young people and an attempt was made to keep the language and message as simple as possible without being patronising. Nevertheless, for those who did receive the letters, it cannot be assumed that they could all understand the letter or were able to reply to it. Indeed, one young person who did agree to participate in the research apologised for the state of his writing on the reply slip. The second explanation is that some of the young people simply did not want to participate in the research. There was no apparent benefit for them in participating as it had been decided not to offer payment to the young people. It is possible that the response rate would have been higher had some kind of payment been made. The decision not to offer payment was based on two lines of reasoning. In considering whether or not to pay the young people, the question of how much money was important. Too little would be exploitative and too much would be bribery. Furthermore, given the longitudinal nature of

the research, should money be paid as a one-off gesture or after every interview? In considering these issues, there was a fundamental belief that the overall quality of the data would be increased if it was given on a purely voluntary basis rather than being given for money. The low response rate is a possible consequence of this decision.

The second aim of the research was to compare the ways in which young people leaving care experience youth with the experiences of young people who had not been in care. It proved to be more difficult to access the comparison sample of young people than had been anticipated. The original intention was for the comparison sample to be comprised of young people who had experienced social services support but had not been admitted into care. Although the local authority supported the research, it was felt to be impossible to gain access to young people with whom the social services department had previously been in contact. This would have necessitated trawling through all the closed files held by social services. The understandable unwillingness of the local authority to facilitate this, resulted in the need to access a comparison sample of young people who had not been in care. It was thought to be important that the broad, biographical characteristics of the comparison sample were similar to those of the young people who had grown up in care. It was also important that the two groupings of young people were undertaking their youth transitions in similar social and labour market conditions.

Two possible points of access were recommended by the local authority. One was a town centre drop-in centre for young people and the other was a town centre youth club which serviced a large area of the town dominated by two large social housing estates. The manager of the drop-in centre was reticent about allowing access to the young people who used the centre. A process of negotiation resulted in permission being given for leaflets to be left in the coffee bar. The leaflets outlined the purpose of the research and requested the participation of young people. A contact telephone number was given. Unfortunately, this generated no response despite repeated visits made to the centre in order to ensure that the leaflets were available. However, the manager of the youth club was more willing to allow access to the young people who used the club and encouraged the staff to approach young people whose ages matched those of the young people who had been in care. Six young people volunteered to participate in the research. All these young people lived with their parents in rented accommodation situated on one of the social housing estates in the vicinity of the youth club. Although the number was small, it was thought to be of a sufficient size for a comparison sample. Indeed, given that the young people were to be interviewed in depth interviews lasting

approximately one hour each on three separate occasions, it provided more than sufficient data to be thoroughly analysed in a project of this scope.

In total, twenty two young people agreed to participate in the research - sixteen had been in care and six had grown up in their biological families. Of the sixteen young people who had been in care, nine were male and seven were female. Two of the young men were mixed race and the rest of the young people were of white, British origin. Among the six young people who had not been in care, three were male and three were female. One of the young men was of Asian origin and the other five young people were of white, British origin. The intention was to undertake three in-depth interviews with each young person over a period of twelve months, at six monthly intervals. This longitudinal approach was primarily concerned with gaining an understanding of the process of leaving care and the processes of youth as experienced by the young people. It is widely acknowledged that there is a temptation for people who participate in research to present a partial self either through selective recall or by dressing up experiences in order to please the researcher or to make themselves more presentable (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Denzin, 1989; Goffman, 1959). It has, however, been argued that such deception, if it occurs, is difficult to maintain over an extended period of time (Bullock *et al*, 1993). A consequential benefit of this longitudinal approach, therefore, was that it would facilitate a greater approximation to 'the truth'. All twenty two young people were initially interviewed during November and December 1995.

One problem with longitudinal research is sample attrition and this becomes more acute with potentially mobile populations. Research shows that young people leaving care tend to experience numerous changes in their accommodation over a short period of time (Garrett, 1992). Other longitudinal research amongst this population has suffered from sample attrition despite efforts to maintain the sample size (Stein & Carey, 1986; Biehal *et al*, 1995) The majority of young people in this sample were leaving care so sample attrition was a concern. There were a number of ways in which efforts could be made to prevent this. Firstly, it was decided to seek the consent of the young people to approach social services for those in care and the parents of those not in care for the disclosure of the young person's whereabouts should they change accommodation. Given that many social workers lose contact with young people once they leave care, this was not wholly foolproof. Nevertheless, consent was given by all the young people. Secondly, it was intended to hold group interviews in between the six monthly individual interviews. This would serve to maintain contact with the sample on a more regular basis and allow for feedback to the young people on the progress of the research.

However, after the first series of interviews it became apparent that to bring the sample together in a group would have been prejudicial to their welfare, specifically for the young people who had been in care. Many of the young people had lived in the same children's homes and had been victims or perpetrators of, and/or collaborators in, crime, prostitution, violence and abuse. Contact between most of these young people was non-existent so it was not considered to be wise to bring the group together again for the sake of the research. The final mechanism to prevent sample attrition, and the one which was employed in the research, was simply to write to the young people on a regular basis. Each letter had a return address and contained a stamped, addressed envelope so that the young people could more easily communicate any change in address. This worked in some cases but certainly not all. However, this form of communication and being able to contact social services did serve to minimise sample attrition. Sixteen young people were interviewed a second time during May and June 1996 and nineteen young people were interviewed in the third trawl during December 1996 and January 1997. Only three young people were interviewed only on one occasion. Two were in the leaving care sample and one was in the comparison sample.

A total of fifty seven interviews were undertaken. The length of the interviews ranged from half an hour to over two hours. The majority were tape recorded with the consent of the young people. It proved impractical to use a tape recorder in ten of the fifty seven interviews. In these, contemporaneous notes were taken. All the interviews were transcribed in full. The interviews were undertaken in a variety of places. Amongst the young people who had been in care this was predominantly in their own homes, although a few took place in a room made available in the semi-independence unit and three took place in Young Offender Institutions. The interviews with the young people who had not been in care proved to be more problematic to arrange. None of these young people wanted to be interviewed in their own homes. The presence of parents and siblings seemed to be the prevailing reasons. A room was made available at the youth club and some of the initial interviews took place there. However, during the course of the study many had ceased frequenting the club and were reticent about returning there. As a consequence the interviews took place in either pubs or burger bars - a salutary reminder of the inter-cohort appeal of burgers and fries!

The topic guides for the series of interviews were developed from the findings from previous research and within the context of this research. A summary of these can be found in the appendix to this thesis. The initial interviews were concerned primarily with the young people's childhood experiences and their transitions into youth. The topic guides for the

subsequent interviews were developed from data collected at the initial interviews but also included topics pertinent to the research questions. For example, previous research has highlighted the relatively high proportion of young women who leave care as mothers (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986). Pregnancy and motherhood were, therefore, topics which needed to be discussed with the young women in this research. During the initial interviews, it was noted that five of the seven young women who had been in care were mothers. Given the sensitive nature of sexual relationships, contraception, pregnancy and motherhood, it had been decided to postpone this topic until the later interviews by which time, it was hoped, that a sense of trust and rapport would have developed between the researcher and the interviewees. This particular topic was discussed during the second series of interviews which also included an exploration of changes in the young people lives over the previous six months. The final interviews also included an exploration of any changes experienced in the previous six months as well as an exploration of the processes of attaining adulthood and the impact of social context. Prior to each interview, time was spent informally conversing with each young person in order to relax the interview situation. The topics discussed are not included in the topic guides as the conversations were geared towards the individual. However, a knowledge of football proved to be an invaluable asset.

Analysis of the data was undertaken after each series of interviews. The data was analysed again at the end of the research period. The process of analysis was one of emerging themes and analytical induction, both of which were made easier by familiarisation with the data. Having carried out and transcribed the interviews, read the transcripts and re-listened to the tapes on numerous occasions, clear themes emerged. Some of these were based on the topic guides and some according to meta-themes which became chapters and chapter headings. By a process of analytical induction, the themes were applied to the data to check their validity in terms of examples of similarities and differences. During the various stages of analysis, my supervisor proved to be a willing audience to whom the transcripts could be brought to life again by discussing the young people, their life histories and their unfurling experiences. These were beneficial exercises which engendered a clarity of vision and prevented potential engulfment by paper and print.

Confidentiality and Protecting Identities

Confidentiality is an important precept in social research. Those who consent to participate in research have the right to privacy and to be protected from harm (Galliher, 1982; Reece &

Siegal, 1986). The use of pseudonyms goes some way in disguising the location and identity of those involved in the research. For this research the local authority withheld the right to be named. However, the sensitive nature of the research and the subsequent disclosure of potentially harmful information by some of the young people resulted in a decision being taken that the town should remain anonymous. For all intents and purposes, this does not affect the findings.

The importance of confidentiality was explained and assured to the young people and in order to protect their identities, the use of pseudonyms was employed. The young people were asked to choose their own aliases on the grounds that names form a fundamental part of identities and it was believed that their new identities should be self-determined. This decision raised an interesting gender issue. The young women gave pseudonyms almost without thinking. It became evident that many had spent years wishing they had been given another name at birth. In most cases the young men found it more difficult to think of a pseudonym. At the time of the first interviews, when the young people were asked for their pseudonyms, the local football club had a prolific striker and many of the young men opted for his name. Envisioning the difficulties this would create for analysis and the readers of the research, they were reluctantly asked to choose another name - a valiant but failed attempt at empowerment.

Despite the anonymity endowed upon the young people and the town in which they live, it would be naive to presume that the young people's real identities have been completely protected. The young people will be able to identify not only themselves but others in the research due to the specific experiences which have been disclosed. It is highly likely that social workers and after care support workers will also be able to identify some of the young people. In view of this, great care has been taken in analysis and in presenting the research findings not to cause harm to the young people. Many of the young people grew up together and have, therefore, experienced a number of incidents together. However, they did not necessarily have shared recollections or perceptions of the same incidents. Where potentially harmful incidents have been disclosed which involved more than one of the young people in the sample, the identities of those involved has been hidden. It is hoped that this does not detract from the wealth of experiences about which the young people talked.

Reflections on the research process

This research raised a number of ethical issues and moral dilemmas which are worthy of discussion. All research, to a greater or lesser extent, is fraught with ethical issues and these arguably become more acute in qualitative research, particularly when the focus is on sensitive issues. This research covered a number of sensitive issues, some of which were expected and some, which arose during the course of the research, were not. These are discussed below. However, contrary to academic convention, these will be discussed in the first person singular mainly because these were real events which had a very real effect on the researcher and on those being researched.

The most fundamental ethical issue to be resolved was the decision to undertake the research in the first place. Young people leaving care are variously seen and described by some writers as 'vulnerable', 'disadvantaged', 'disaffected' and 'socially excluded', due to their past experiences and the difficulties encountered as they leave care (Broad, 1992; Coles, 1995; Roberts, 1995; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998b). The decision to undertake research among this grouping of young people had the potential to compound and contribute to this array of adjectives and socially constructed labels. Specifically, it could do so by the prurient and invasive nature of the research methods and by further highlighting these young people as being worthy of investigation. There was also a concern that by asking the young people to discuss their experiences of being admitted into care and of being in care itself, would re-open possibly healed, emotional wounds. These concerns were countered by the belief that the findings generated by the research would contribute to a more informed understanding of the experiences of these young people for practitioners in the field, the local authority concerned, policy makers generally and for the wider readership. The local authority certainly expressed a desire to be informed of the findings as they felt that they could learn from them and if necessary improve their social work practices. Nevertheless, as the researcher, I was acutely aware that potentially I would be the only beneficiary of the research since its *raison d'être* was the attainment of a doctorate. Pruriently selfish or research for the greater good? Despite undertaking the research, I do not believe this fundamental ethical question was resolved. However, during the research process itself a number of incidents arose which served to limit my preoccupation with the ethics of undertaking the research.

Approximately eighteen months after the fieldwork had begun, a report was submitted to the local authority detailing the progress of the research and some of the early findings. Copies of

the report were also distributed to each area social work team, the after care team and the youth justice team - all of whom had been instrumental in the early stages of the research with regard to accessing an appropriate sample of young people. At the time, the local authority was undertaking a spending review for the coming financial year and the senior officer in the youth justice team was concerned that the team was going to lose some of its existent resources. He requested permission to use some of the early findings from the fieldwork to show the impact of some of the work carried out by the youth justice team. Permission was granted and the incident gave an early indication that this research was, in some way, important. This allayed some of my concerns about some the research being, first and foremost, voyeuristic.

Alongside this specific incident there were numerous others which involved the young people themselves. There is a consensus that research and researchers should not interfere or do anything to alter the field which they are studying. This is clearly easier to achieve in research in which contact between the researcher and the researched is minimal, for example in quantitative surveys. In qualitative research, the nature of the interactions between the researcher and the researched occur at a more personal level. It is, therefore, more difficult to assess the extent to which the researcher's presence alters the behaviour of the researched. This is particularly the case in longitudinal, qualitative research. The nature of the relationships between the researcher and the researched changes over time as familiarity grows and the relationship becomes less staged and superficial. An important benefit of this type of research is its capacity to generate a greater wealth of information. It was evident during the second and third interviews that the young people felt more at ease talking to me, especially about sensitive topics, than perhaps would have been the case had the research employed only a one-off series of depth interviews. The continued contact with the young people enabled a greater sense of trust and rapport to be built. Whilst this facilitated a more probing line of questioning and the disclosure of information which may otherwise have been hidden, it also worked to disguise the primary basis of the relationships - that of researcher and researched. These issues are commonly experienced in research using participant observation whereby the researcher's role changes over time as they become increasingly accepted by the people being observed (Burgess, 1982; Whyte, 1984). Parallels can be drawn between participant observation and longitudinal qualitative research and one of these is the manner in which the role of the researcher can be unwittingly compromised.

In this research my role as a researcher among the young people changed perceptively over time and in different situations. I was variously put in the position of counsellor, confidante, and taxi-driver - none of which fitted easily with being a researcher. However, some of these were more easy to negotiate than others without fundamentally altering the field into which I was engaged in study. I was frequently asked by the young people to drive them somewhere after the interview had taken place, usually to a friend's or parent's house. On one particular occasion I was asked by a young woman if I would take her to the local hospital for an appointment she had later in the day. She had recently been diagnosed as having cancerous cells on her womb and was due to undergo laser treatment to remove them. She had been unable to arrange child care for her two children and her social security benefit was not due for another day or two which meant that she was unable to afford the fares on the four buses she would have to take to reach the hospital. She was aware of the necessity of the treatment but felt unable to keep the appointment. My decision to take her to the hospital clearly altered the course of her actions. Justifiably, I believe, my decision was based upon giving a higher priority to her health than to any research procedures.

The more difficult situations to negotiate were ones in which the young people sought my advice or opinion on something. In some of these situations I felt strongly that my role as a researcher had been superseded by that of a counsellor. After years of working with young people in both criminal justice and social services settings, I felt capable of avoiding giving answers to such questions and had learned to switch them round so that a young person answers the question themselves. This became a useful interviewing skill for research purposes. There were situations in which advice was sought directly on specific issues, usually concerning social security benefits, employment training, and housing. In such cases I directed the young people concerned towards more appropriate contacts through which they were likely to obtain the correct information. Again, there is a sense in which these actions interfered with the social setting under investigation. Whilst I would concur with the allegation, I would argue that my actions were about giving something back to the young people. They had given me a lot of their time and shared some very painful experiences with me. The exchange of information was therefore, rightly or wrongly, a *quid pro quo*.

The role of confidante was assigned to me on a number of occasions whereby a young person would disclose something during the interview and insist that the information remain confidential. The issue of confidentiality had been discussed with the young people at the outset and mechanisms were in place to protect the identities of those involved. It became

apparent, however, that the young people were content to disclose information for the purposes of the research but they were concerned that the information would subsequently be disclosed to others without their identities remaining hidden. An obvious example concerned the disclosure of criminal activities. Assurances were sought by the young people concerned that the information would not be passed on to the police. Again, assurances were given that the information disclosed would only be used for the research and that their identities would be protected. Another frequently occurring example was the disclosure of information by one young person about another young person in the sample. These disclosures were interesting in the sense that they allowed an insight into the social networks operating within these groupings of young people. However, such information generated sometimes conflicting pictures of individual experiences and specific events. At different times in the research process, I had information about something from the young person themselves, other young people who had either been involved or knew about it, and, quite often, from an after care worker who had acted as a point of contact for young people who had moved on. With the exception of their whereabouts, it needs to be stated that no other information about the young people was actively sought from members of the after care team. However, they frequently volunteered information about the young people they knew to be involved in the research. This raised ethical issues in terms of analysis. Is it morally right to use information given by others about someone else without seeking their consent or validation? It is, undoubtedly, easier to answer in the affirmative when the information is used in a corroborative or substantive manner. It is less so when the information conflicts with what a young person has said themselves. Given that this research is concerned with young people's experiences as they recall them then greater emphasis has been given to their own stories. Information given by third parties, however, has been used to contextualise themes rather than specific issues or events.

The final point to be made with regard to the ethics of the research concerns a specific incident which relates to child protection. One young woman in the sample of young people who had been in care had, over the period of the research, begun to experience a somewhat chaotic lifestyle. At the third interview, which took place in her own home, she admitted to finding it difficult to cope with a number of issues which were currently manifest in her life. Her two children were obviously suffering as a consequence and I had concerns about their welfare. The young woman had asked me not to inform her after care worker that she was not coping because she did not "want her interfering". I was, therefore, faced with the dilemma of respecting her request and the trust she had placed in me or breaking that by contacting her after care worker with a view to raising my concerns about the children. Due to the time of

day at which the interview had taken place, I was unable to contact the after care worker immediately but had planned to raise my concerns the following day. In the event, I received a phone call from the after care worker asking me to delay my interview with the young woman because her children had been taken into care. I was relieved that the situation had been acted upon without any action on my part. However, my intention to act upon my concerns was based upon the priority I gave to protecting the children's welfare rather than adopting a non-interventionist stance with regard to the research. As the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children have rightly argued, child protection is everyone's responsibility.

CHAPTER FOUR

Growing Up In Care

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is the experience of admission into care and the processes of growing up in care. Research shows that separating children and young people from their families can be a traumatic experience for those involved (Bullock *et al*, 1993; Farmer & Parker, 1991; Fisher *et al*, 1986). This is particularly the case when it is noted that the majority of admissions into care take place in emergency situations (Rowe *et al*, 1989). It is amidst this trauma that children and young people begin their careers in care. For some, their stay in care will be temporary whilst others will spend a large part of their childhood in care. The young people in this sample were still in care at the age of sixteen and although they had been admitted into care at different ages, the majority can be described as having grown up in care. Their life course transitions from childhood to youth were experienced within the context of the care system, in much the same way as their transitions from youth to adulthood are seen to be structured by having been in care (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Coles, 1995). By exploring these transitions as a process rather than two distinct phases, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the effects of growing up in care.

This chapter will begin by exploring the pre-care experiences of a sample of young people. The primary focus is on their family background and their familial circumstances. For many of these young people, recollections of their experiences of living with their families were not only distant memories but were memories marred by abuse and neglect. Such situations cast a somewhat different light on the role of the family particularly with regard to its caring and socialising functions (Parsons & Bales, 1956). To a large extent, these functions are assumed by local authority social service departments when children and young people are admitted into care. The experience of being taken into care is examined as a significant event in the young people's lives, and one that signifies the commencement of their lives in care.

The process of growing up throughout childhood and into youth is multi-faceted in that there are number of environments which influence the process. For most children and young people, the two main environments in which development and socialisation occur are the family home and the school. Peer groups can also be seen to be a further influential factor. For most

children and young people in care, their family homes exist elsewhere and, in reality, are substituted by foster and/or residential placements. Alongside school, it is these which provide the environment for growing up. Yet, despite being removed from their families, for children and young people in care, it is seen to be important for family contact to be maintained (DoH, 1991a,b) or at least to have an understanding of their family history in order to aid the development of identity and self-esteem (Lindsey, 1995; Thoburn, 1994). Research also shows that it is not unusual for young people who have been in care to seek support from their families once they have left care (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Stein & Carey, 1986). Contact with families is, therefore, important in a number of ways. The extent to which contact with families is maintained whilst children and young people are in care is explored in the final section. The adoption of a multi-faceted exploration of being in care facilitates a more holistic understanding of the experiences of growing up in care, how those influence the process of leaving care and the stark contrast with the experiences of young people growing up in their biological families.

Going Into Care

Characteristically, the socio-economic backgrounds of children and young people in care are well known. Research by Bebbington and Miles (1989) suggests that children and young people are more likely to be admitted into care if they come from a large, lone parent family which is dependent on state benefits and lives in overcrowded, rented accommodation. They also found that children and young people of mixed race ethnic backgrounds were much more likely to be admitted into care than their white counterparts. The Social Services Committee (1984) noted that children in care are the children of the poor. Recent research (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Garnett, 1992; Rowe *et al*, 1989) on young people in and leaving care has broadly supported these findings, as indeed, does this research.

The families of all the sixteen young people in the sample who had been in care lived in rented accommodation and most lived in houses rented from the local authority. Eleven of these young people were admitted into care from lone parent families, although it should be noted that a number of these families were typically reconstituted in that the parent with care had a cohabiting partner at the time of admission. Two young people were admitted from adoptive, two-parent families and the other three young people were admitted into care from biological, nuclear families. Behind this numerical depiction of family characteristics lie abusive and neglectful family environments which suggests that the number of parents may be

considerably less important than the quality of parenting children and young people experience in their formative years. This is not to say that all the parents of these young people were, in themselves, abusers. Indeed many of them were not the perpetrators of the sexual or physical abuse suffered by some of the young people. Many of the young people who experienced this type of abuse did so at the hands of a cohabitee or partner rather than their biological parent. However, with the exception of sexual and physical abuse, the other most commonly occurring reason for admission into care was neglect which was, in the main, alleged against the biological parent. It is common social work practice to differentiate between abuse and neglect in child protection cases. The distinction, however, appears to be more apparent than real, particularly under the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Under the Convention, neglect would certainly seem to be an abuse of children's rights even if it is not recorded as such in social work practices. Indeed, these issues find resonance in the Children Act 1989. It is little more than a simplification of definition to see neglect as anything different, or less serious, than abuse. The emotional scars inflicted by any kind of abuse, largely regardless of the time scale over which it was suffered, can have long term effects on personal and emotional development (Gibbons *et al*, 1995; Reder *et al*, 1993).

Perhaps not surprisingly, when the young people talked about their experiences prior to admission into care, recollections of physical abuse and neglect were more common than those of sexual abuse even though social work records stated that a significant number of the young people had indeed suffered sexual abuse. Jim was the only young person to make reference to the sexual abuse he experienced as a child. Jim lived with his mother, step-father, brother and sister before being taken into care initially at the age of eight. He became very upset and angry when he recalled his experiences of living with his family,

“My mum and dad used to drink a lot and it did my head in. They used to leave us on our own when they went out. He used to touch me and my brother and sister...he did horrible things to me. I'd kill him if I ever saw him again.”

The emotions which were manifest when this issue was being discussed gives a vivid insight not only into the abuse itself but also into the longer-term effects of such abuse. Jim was talking about events that had occurred approximately ten years earlier yet the emotional scars remained evident. For other young people, their recollections of physical abuse and neglect were tinged with a sense of both anger and disbelief. The disbelief stemmed from a growing lack of comprehension about why the abuse happened. Alexandra, who was admitted into care at the age of twelve months, has learned from life-history work that she was hospitalised approximately thirteen times in the first year of her life and, on some occasions, her parents

failed to pick her up from hospital upon discharge. Alexandra also learned that she had two brothers,

“they (social services) told me that one of them died of cot-death and the other had got brain-damaged when he was four months old. The truth was that me mum had suffocated them but she moved the pillow from our Jason which is why he had brain-damage... Why does someone does this? Why do they have kids if they don't want them?”

At the same time as asking why her parents had children they obviously did not want, Alexandra also added that, *“I'm probably lucky to be alive”* since one of her brothers died as a baby and the other died at the age of fourteen after spending approximately thirteen years in a home for people with disabilities.

The notion of being “lucky to be alive” was mentioned explicitly by three other young people during their recollections of living with their families. Nicky was admitted into care at the age of nine following his hospitalisation after a particularly severe beating by his mother's boyfriend.

“He got a bit heavy-handed when he'd had a drink. He used to batter me, my two sisters and me mum. We were in hospital coz of all the bruises and things. I'm surprised he didn't kill us.”

Levi was taken into care at the age of nine. She was physically abused by a male cousin and, to a lesser extent, by her mother. Levi also expressed surprise that she survived the abuse as she recalled one particular incident in which she was hit repeatedly with an iron bar for refusing to go to the shop for her cousin. The third person to express amazement at her survival does so from slightly different circumstances. Courtney was living with her mother after an earlier admission into care due to concerns about her welfare given that her parents were alcoholics and had an extremely violent relationship. Within eighteen months of returning home Courtney's father died: an event for which Courtney was blamed by her mother. Following this event her mother had again started drinking heavily. Courtney described the following incident,

“It was the anniversary of my dad's death and my mum had been drinking. She were off her head. I woke up and there was this massive haze everywhere. I thought my mum had burned something on the cooker. I were walking downstairs and I could hear all this crackling and everything. I opened this door and all these

flames and all this smoke came flying out at me. She'd set the house on fire. I just freaked. I was screaming and screaming. I was really scared. I could have died."

Given that only five young people were admitted into care for reasons other than abuse or neglect, it would be possible to describe numerous other individually-specific incidents such as Sebastian's mother who regularly took overdoses and subsequently asked Sebastian to phone for an ambulance and accompany her to hospital. Sebastian was eventually taken into care when he was eleven years old. There is also Geoffrey's story. He remembers frequently being left on his own in the house and recalls one particular incident when he woke during the night to find his parents, who were drug and alcohol users, throwing paint around the house. Clearly, these incidents should be seen in a wider context of instability and insecurity which impacted upon these young people's lives both inside and outside of the home. Many talked about missing school either because their parents just did not take them or send them. Additionally, some said that they were purposefully kept away from school due to the visible effects of physical abuse. In terms of assessing outcomes of care it is important to understand the 'starting points' for those concerned (Parker *et al*, 1991). These experiences facilitate an understanding of the 'starting points' for the young people in the sample. It should be remembered that the incidents discussed above were those that the young people chose to recollect in detail, presumably from any number of similar incidents which occurred over a period of time. It is, perhaps, not surprising that many expressed relief at being taken into care although there was little understanding of what care was or what it would be like.

Admission into care occurred in characteristically similar situations for many of the young people. However, there are notable differences in the ages at which admission took place. In line with other research (Farmer & Parker, 1991; Garnett, 1992; Packman, 1986) the young people aged thirteen years or over at admission, entered care for different reasons than those in the younger age groups. Five young people in this research who were admitted into care during their teenage years did so for seemingly behavioural reasons, such as offending, truancy, or being seen to be beyond the control of their parents. All the young people who entered care at an earlier age were admitted because of concerns about abuse and neglect. Farmer and Parker (1991) make a distinction between 'the protected' and 'the disaffected'. Age was seen to be a defining characteristic, with 'the protected' being of a younger age than 'the disaffected'. A similar distinction is offered by Packman (1986) who categorised young people admitted into care in a self-explanatory manner as 'the victims', 'the villains' and 'the

volunteered' (the latter category pre-dates the 1989 Children Act which removed the concept of voluntary care). Both these categorisations have some applicability to this research.

Although many of the young people had vivid recollections of the circumstances precipitating their admission into care, very few had clear memories of actually being admitted into care. This was particularly the case amongst those young people who had been admitted into care at a young age. Vivian was ten years old when she was admitted into care with her older brother. She did remember being taken into care,

"my mum and dad had split up and we were living with my dad. My dad couldn't cope with us and my mum couldn't have us because she was living in this really small place. They (social services) came and said that we were going on holiday. They took us to this house...foster parents...they just said that we were going on holiday for a while."

Vivian's care order was discharged on her eighteenth birthday. She commented, "that was a long holiday, wasn't it?". Levi and Nicky, who were both nine when they went into care, remembered going to foster parents after being in hospital but have no recollections of being told what was happening to them. This lack of knowledge about being taken into care is mirrored by a common lack of understanding of what being in care meant. Jane was ten years old when she ran away from home with her sister. She said,

"My dad used to beat us up a lot...It seemed like we got beaten up more than the others. One day I dropped a doll on the floor and my dad punched me in the eye. After that I thought we'd run away from home. Me and Angela ran away. We went to the police station and they took us to a children's home. We didn't really know what it was going to be like but we knew it couldn't be as bad as living at home."

Stevie also remembered feeling a sense of relief when he was taken into care at the age of nine even though he did not really know what was happening to him:

"...they just took me away...I think they knew I was getting beaten up...they put me in this children's home...I didn't know what was going on but I was happy I was away from my mum's boyfriend."

The young people who had been taken into care during their teenage years had much clearer memories of being taken into care. This is probably because it had happened much more recently. Furthermore, it appeared that these young people knew what being in care meant due

to previous social work intervention in their lives. Ashley remembered going to children's homes at weekends to give his mum a break:

"I kept getting into trouble with the police and she got fed up of it...I went to this children's home to visit and stay over sometimes...it were alright...then I set this wagon on fire and she said she'd had enough. I moved into the home full-time...I were thirteen."

Chelsea's story is very similar. Chelsea was expelled from school when she was thirteen years old. She began shoplifting and "getting into trouble". She remembers going to a children's home for respite care because of the problems at home,

"...me and me mum didn't get on. There were loads of arguments, all the time. Things kept getting worse so they said I had to stay at the children's home all the time."

Both Ashley and Chelsea would fall into Farmer and Parker's (1991) category of 'the disaffected' and would be seen as two of Packman's (1986) 'villains' due to the behavioural reasons precipitating their admission into care. Yet both Ashley and Chelsea intimated experiences of violence throughout their childhood at the hands of their fathers. Although neither explained their behaviour in terms of the violence they experienced, there is a sense in which these experiences may have resulted in them becoming 'the disaffected' or 'the villains' (see Gibbons *et al*, 1995). This raises questions about the superficial nature of these types of categorisations, based as they are, on partial information. Similarly, the categorisations of 'the protected' and 'the victims' are indicative of the reasons precipitating some admissions into care. Yet, once children and young people are in care, as will be seen, these distinctions become blurred in a care system which can be seen as a melting pot for 'the protected' and 'the disaffected', the 'victims' and the 'villains'. The volunteered no longer exist which perhaps indicates further the artificiality of these categorisations.

Growing Up In Care

Even though many could remember little about their admission into care, most could recall their initial placements in care. Almost all of the young people had been admitted into care in emergency situations and their initial placements were recalled as lasting only a short period of time. This is supported by other research (Rowe *et al*, 1989) which shows that in such circumstances, initial placements tend to be of an emergency and short-term nature pending a longer-term, and usually more appropriate, placement (Rowe *et al*, 1989). Indeed, none of the young people stayed in their initial placement for the duration of their time in care although

Nicky did spend six years in the children's home in which he and his two sisters were initially placed. Nicky believes he should have been fostered since his two sisters were moved to different foster placements soon after arriving at the children's home. For reasons unknown to Nicky, this did not happen and he spent six years in what was, in effect, an emergency placement. In terms of the young people remaining in their initial placements, Nicky's case is unusual. However, it does highlight the incidence for what Berridge (1985) has termed 'placement drift' whereby placements last much longer than was originally intended.

Like Nicky, most of the young people were initially placed in children's homes rather than with foster families. However, there is a clear difference between the types of placements experienced in care and the age at which young people were admitted into care. Those who were admitted into care at a younger age were much more likely to move onto foster care rather than to another residential home following their initial placement. The lack of foster placements for older young people in care is well documented (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Utting, 1991) and this may account for the noticeable differences in the types of placements experienced by the young people. Nevertheless, even those young people who were admitted into care at a younger age and placed in foster care, were predominantly experiencing residential placements as they got older. Again, this trend is supported by others who have commented that residential care is increasingly becoming a service for teenaged young people (Utting, 1991). In fact, only four young people in the sample were in foster care by the age of sixteen.

In her research on young people leaving care, Garnett (1992) categorised careers in care based on the length of time spent in care and placement histories. Three types of careers in care are evidenced. These were 'long-term stable', 'long-term unsettled', and 'teenage entrants'. The latter category is self-explanatory. The first two categories refer to those admitted into care before the age of thirteen with a distinction made between stable placement histories (i.e. little placement disruption) and unsettled placement histories (i.e. extensive placement disruption). There is a degree of applicability to this research of Garnett's categorisations. The table below gives a brief over view of the ages at which each young person was admitted into care, the number of placements experienced up to being sixteen years of age, and the different placement types. All these young people were deemed to be in care at the age of sixteen years.

4.1 Placement histories in care by age at admission and number and type of placements

Young Person	Age at admission in years	Total Number of Placements to 16 years of age	Number of residential placements	Number of foster placements
Wesley	less than 1	3	0	3
Alexandra	less than 1	3	1	2
Boothy	7	10	3	7
Stevie	9	13	7 + 1 custodial	4 + 1 home on trial
Levi	9	9	6	1 + 2 home on trial
Nicky	9	2	1	1
Vivian	10	8	4	3 + 1 home on trial
Jane	10	13	10	2 + 1 home on trial
Geoffrey	11	4	1	3
Sebastian	11	16	8	4 + 4 home on trial
Dave	12	4	1	2 + 1 home on trial
Ashley	13	16	11 + 2 custodial	0 + 3 home on trial
Chelsea	13	5	4	0 + 1 bedsit
Jim	14	3	2	1
Courtney	14	1	1	0
Tenpenny	15	1	1	0

Key: custodial - refers to a period of time spent in a Young Offenders Institute
home on trial - refers to a period of time spent with the young person's own family
bedsit - refers to a placement in independent bedsit accommodation

As can be seen from the table, living in care, particularly the number of placements experienced, is highly varied. It is possible to state that in this research, of those admitted into care before the age of thirteen years, three young people could be seen to have had 'long-term stable' placement histories, having experienced fewer than three moves. Eight young people could be described as having had 'long-term unsettled' placement histories, experiencing four or more moves in care. Finally, five of the young people would be described as 'teenage

entrants'. These categorisations are useful in terms of giving an indication of the different types of young people's placement histories. However, like all typologies, they mask some important issues, most notably the amount of movement experienced by young people within each category.

The extent of movement experienced by the young people in this research, is broadly similar to that found in other research. Stein and Carey (1986) found that very few of their sample of young people leaving care experienced less than three moves in care. Indeed, seventy five per cent of their sample of young people leaving care had experienced three or more placement changes in care. Of those, forty per cent had experienced five or more changes, and five per cent had experienced ten or more placements. A similar pattern is noted by Biehal *et al* (1995). In their sample of young people leaving care, fifty two per cent of the young people had experienced between one and three placement changes and thirty two per cent had experienced four or more changes. Only sixteen per cent of their sample had remained in the same placement throughout their careers in care. The evidence from these two studies, and that from other research (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Millham *et al*, 1986; Stein, 1990) suggests that for many young people, being in care involves placement disruption, irrespective of the length of time spent in care. For example, in this research Chelsea and Ashley would be described as 'teenage entrants' having been admitted into care at the ages of thirteen years. Yet, up to the age of sixteen years, they experienced five and sixteen placements, respectively. These two young people clearly experienced qualitatively different careers in care which demand some exploration. It is arguably the case that biography plays an important role in facilitating a more informed understanding of the experiences of growing up in care. However, for ease of analysis, the young people's experiences of growing up in care will be explored using Garnett's typology (1992). This serves to demonstrate a greater insight into the differences within each category as well as between them.

Three young people in this sample would be described as having 'long-term stable' placement histories. Two of them, Wesley and Alexandra, were admitted into care before their first birthdays. Wesley experienced two foster placements before being placed with his current foster family at the age of eighteen months. Wesley has remained with this family for nearly seventeen years. Alexandra's situation is slightly different in that she was initially placed, with her brother, in a specialist residential placement for people with disabilities. Alexandra spent four months there before being placed with a foster family with whom she resided for fourteen years. Both foster families considered adopting these two young people. However, the

potential cessation of boarding-out payments halted the adoption process. The stability of these foster placements is indicated by the manner in which Alexandra and Wesley referred to their foster parents as “mum” and “dad”. Despite feeling part of their nuclear and extended foster families, they both had constant reminders that they were in care. Alexandra recalled there being other children around all the time:

“...there were always new kids coming and my mum didn't always have time for me...whenever a new one came, they always got to be the centre of attention and because I was the oldest I got pushed out.”

Wesley is mixed race and his foster family is white. He remembered,

“...people were always asking why I was black and my family were white so I had to tell them I was in care...my social worker was always going on about it as well...about my being black in a white family, saying we should do some work on it. I mean, I'm happy and if there is a problem then it's other people's not mine.”

A further issue which served to remind them of their status of being in care was the six monthly review meetings held with social workers. Social services have a statutory duty to review regularly the placements of all those in their care. Concern has been raised that these are not always carried out with in accordance with the guidelines (Utting, 1991). Yet for Alexandra and Wesley, the meetings appeared to act as a critical reminder that they were in care. Alexandra became quite angry when she recalled some of her review meetings:

“They just fired stuff at you. Like, how are you now compared to a couple of years back. How you think you've managed. My relationships with boys. They were just prying all the time about things that had nothing to do with them. They'd always bring stuff up about the past, things I'd done in the past. It used to get me really uptight and I'd end up walking out.”

Despite the longevity and stability of their placements, Alexandra's and Wesley's childhood were, therefore, somewhat bureaucratised by being in care. The emotions that were evident when reviews were being discussed suggests that even stable placements in care can have disadvantageous effects on the young people concerned.

Nicky's situation is somewhat different than Alexandra's and Wesley's, most notably because Nicky's long-term stable placement was in residential care rather than foster care. Nicky was admitted into care at the age of nine years. He was initially placed in a children's home with his two sisters. Nicky believes that this was not intended to be a long-term placement since both his sisters were moved on to different foster families. Yet, Nicky stayed at the home for

six years and his placement only ceased because the home was closing down. Nicky was then moved to a foster placement which lasted just over two years until he was seventeen years of age. Although Alexandra and Wesley witnessed the passing of numerous children through their foster families, their foster parents proved to be a constant and stable feature in their lives. For Nicky, life in the children's home was characteristically different in that he witnessed regular changes in both children and staff, sometimes with adverse effects.

"...Sometimes kids came in there (the children's home) who would egg me on to do things like wag school coz they didn't go. There was one lad who got me into trouble with the police for doing a burglary...it changed all the time...Most of the staff were okay coz they'd known me a long time but others just came and went."

Despite the longevity of Nicky's placement, he lost contact with his sisters and had at least six different social workers during the time he lived in the home. His life was also clearly affected by the constant changes in the other children living in the home. This latter issue and the way in which the culture in children's home is susceptible to rapid change has been highlighted by others (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Brodie, 1997). It is arguably the case, therefore, that the 'stability' of Nicky's placement is more apparent than real. For all three of these young people, their 'long-term stable' placement histories are defined solely on duration which disguises some instability in the more qualitative aspects of their placements.

Eight of the young people in the sample would fall into Garnett's 'long-term unsettled' category (1992). All were admitted into care before the age of thirteen. In fact the range of ages at admission for this grouping is from seven years old to eleven years old. The number of placements experienced ranges from eight to sixteen. All of these young people experienced at least one placement for every year they were in care up to the age of sixteen years and two of them experienced at least three placements per year. Whilst these figures do suggest extensive instability with regard to placements in care, the figures themselves do not do justice to the disruption experienced by some of the young people. Boothy's placement history highlights the point. Boothy was admitted into care at seven years of age. His first three placements were with foster carers and lasted thirteen months, eighteen months, and twenty months respectively. He was twelve years old when he moved into his fourth placement which was in a children's home. This placement ceased because of Boothy's offending behaviour and his violent outbursts in the home. Subsequently, Boothy experienced six moves in the two and a half years up to his sixteenth birthday. Similarly Jane, who was admitted into care at the age of ten years, experienced four different placements in the three years to being thirteen years

old but in the three years to being sixteen years of age she experienced nine further placements. Jane recalled her experiences of moving to different placements.

“You’d be there for a couple of months and then you’d move on again. That’s what it felt like anyway. Some places were okay and I’d have a room on my own but there was always another bed in my room just in case someone else came in. You couldn’t settle really. Some places were horrible...really strict...like one place they used to lock you in a room and you couldn’t get out. You were sat in a room with just a bed and your nightie on.”

Jane knew such practices, known as ‘pindown’, are now illegal following an investigation in Staffordshire (Levy & Kahan, 1991). Yet the now illegal status of these practices cannot remove the memories from those who experienced them.

Like Jane and Boothy, many of the young people in the ‘long-term unsettled’ grouping experienced residential placements rather than foster placements as they got older, usually when they reached twelve or thirteen years of age. This supports the claim that children’s homes are predominantly a service for teenagers (Utting, 1991) but, as this research shows, many of the teenagers in children’s home were once children in foster families. The transitions between foster care and residential care are only one aspect of the changes experienced throughout a childhood in care. All but one of the young people in the ‘long-term unsettled’ grouping experienced at least one out-of-borough placement, usually community homes with education (CHE). Stevie, who experienced thirteen placements between the ages of nine and sixteen, lived in four different out-of-borough placements. Such placements not only necessitate adaptation to a new environment, carers, and other young people but also adaptation to a new geographical locality. Some of these out-of-borough placements were up to one hundred miles away from the town in which these young people had lived. Levi remembered going to her out-of-borough placement. She said,

“it was a bit scary coz I didn’t know were anything were...the shops or nothing...I didn’t know my way round.”

Stevie was somewhat obdurate in recalling his feelings about going to placements in new towns. Referring to his criminal activities, he commented, “...they were just new places to make your mark.” For many of the young people in this grouping, it was “making [their] mark” which appeared to result in their placement histories becoming ‘unsettled’. With the exception of Sebastian, all the young people admitted to having been involved in both criminal activities and extensive truancy. They variously referred to “staff doing my head in” and “kicking off”, which referred to exhibited aggressive behaviour towards staff in the children’s

homes. It needs to be remembered that this grouping of young people would have been described as 'the protected' by Farmer and Parker (1991) and as 'the victims' by Packman (1986) in their respective typologies of reasons for admitting children in to care. By their teenage years, the young people in this sample would undoubtedly be seen as 'the disaffected' (Farmer & Parker, 1991) and 'the villains' (Packman, 1986), as their behaviour in care was similar to that exhibited by the young people admitted into care as teenagers.

The five young people in what Garnett (1992) has described as the 'teenage entrant' grouping were admitted into care for characteristically different reasons than the other two. Their admissions were either at the request of, or with the consent of, their parents who were reported by the young people as having experienced difficulties coping with them and their behaviour. Some of the reasons for their admission into care were discussed earlier. Yet, despite being 'teenage entrants' and sharing broadly similar reasons for admission into care, their placement histories are remarkably different. Ashley was a 'teenage entrant'. Within this grouping, and within the whole sample, he experienced the most placements in the shortest period of time. The duration of most of his placements can be measured in weeks rather than months even though his longest placement did last approximately nine months. Like many of the young people who had a high number of placements, Ashley had difficulty remembering each placement and the length of time he stayed in any of them. The placements that he could remember were triggered by his recollections of the presents he had received at various birthdays and Christmas". He described his experience in one CHE in the following way,

"It was really good there. I got a small telly and video for Christmas and they used to take you out a lot, to the pictures and stuff...I got kicked out though...for nicking the petty cash."

All of Ashley's changes in placements were brought about because of his criminal activities. Similarly, four of the five placement changes Chelsea experienced were due to her involvement in prostitution. This was also the reason given by Chelsea for her being moved from a children's home into a bedsit at the age of fifteen. She said,

"The staff knew what I was up to and they tried to stop me going out...in the end they just kept moving me around to different homes but they were other people to go out with...I wanted to go with foster parents. I wanted to be with a family but they said there was none available. So I just carried on. In the end they moved me to a bedsit coz they said I wasn't sticking to the rules."

The experiences of the other three young people in this grouping differ from those of Ashley and Chelsea. Courtney and Tenpenny, who were admitted into care at the ages of fourteen and fifteen respectively, stayed in the same placements until the age of sixteen. And even though Jim experienced three placements from being admitted into care at the age of fourteen until the age of sixteen, one of his placements lasted for over twelve months. The different experiences of these young people within the 'teenage entrant' grouping and the differences between the young people in the other two groupings suggests that the patterns of placement histories has little to do with the age or the reasons young people were admitted in to care.

It might be assumed that the longer a young person spent in care the more placements they would experience. The evidence presented above shows that this is not the case. From the young people's stories, the only factors which would appear to be related to the number of placements they experienced in care was participation in criminal activities, truancy and/or the manifestation of aggressive behaviour. More than half of the young people in the sample had, at some time, exhibited at least one of these types of behaviour. For some young people, these were short-lived. Dave, for example, said he started missing school when another young man joined his foster family and took some of the attention away from Dave. He said, "I wasn't happy and that's when I started acting up, like wagging school and stuff." The situation was resolved when Dave's foster parents realised that he was missing school and discussed the issues with him. For many of the other young people, crime, truancy and aggression were longer term features of their lives in care. Importantly, it was behaviour such as this which served to disrupt their placements. Research does suggest that childhood experiences of abuse are likely to have long term effects on those concerned, especially with regard to their behaviour in adolescence (Gibbons *et al*, 1993). It is impossible in this research to infer a causal relationship between abuse and exhibited behaviour. None of the young people themselves talked about there being an explicit link between their experiences of abuse or neglect as children and their later behaviour. However, given the prevalence of such kinds of behaviour, especially among those who were admitted into care because of concerns about abuse, a possible association should, perhaps, be borne in mind. Moreover, the social context of care may be seen to exacerbate the association. As in other research (Stein & Carey, 1986), many of the young people in this research discussed being in care as a factor influencing their behaviour, particularly as a context in which to explain their offending and truancy.

Ten of the young people in the sample admitted to some kind of involvement in criminal activities and nine of them had experienced contact with the police as a result. Alexandra was

the only young person who admitted to committing a number of shoplifting offences but had never been apprehended. Alexandra explained that this behaviour occurred soon after she was moved from her long-term foster placement which had broken down after thirteen years. She was placed with another foster family whom she did not like. Alexandra said she had wanted to get at her new foster parents and bring about her removal from their home. In fact, Alexandra was the only young person to talk about offending as a means of bringing about the end of a placement. For other young people, their behaviour could be described as conforming to a pervading culture in the children's homes or CHEs in which they lived. Chelsea associated her involvement in prostitution with being placed in children's homes where some other young women were also working as prostitutes. She said, "I just got drawn into it." Nicky explained his behaviour in similar terms.

"There were people at the home who were leading me on saying 'don't go to school today' and stuff like that...I got done for some burglaries as well...they said I wouldn't get caught but I did."

For most of the young people, their offending did eventually cause the end of their placements although this was not stated as their explicit intention. Research has shown that some young people later regret leaving their placements (Triseliotis *et al*, 1995). In some cases in this research, the cessation of a placement was a regrettable consequence of their behaviour. Both Ashley and Boothy had fond recollections of at least one each of their one out-of-borough placements which had begun and ended because of their participation in criminal activities and truancy. Both said that that they wished they could have returned to the placements.

On the whole, most of the young people whose behaviour caused the cessation of their placements accepted such outcomes with a degree of ambivalence. Comments such as "you just get used to it after a while" were not unusual. Certainly for those who committed a large number of offences there is a sense in which this implied resignation to being moved around is understandable since they were the ones who experienced the most placement disruption. Sebastian's case, however, provides an interesting exception to this apparent association between offending behaviour and placement instability. Sebastian, who said he never committed any offences and never purposely missed school, experienced sixteen placements in care up to being sixteen years old. Sebastian explains his placement history in terms of the number of times he was returned home to his mother and the nature of the care system.

"Every time my mum came out of hospital, they would send me back to her. She was in no state to look after herself never mind me, with all the drugs inside of her."

She was really depressed and would try to commit suicide again so I would go back into care...I used to get beaten up in the children's homes because I was the only black kid. I'd get called 'paki' and 'nigger'. Yet they would move me to a different home. You were just like a pawn they could move around."

In some ways Sebastian's latter point has some legitimacy in that, for all those young people who did experience extensive placement disruption, there is a sense in which the exhibited behaviour of the young people was perceived as a problem which could seemingly be addressed by movement to 'specialist' placements like CHEs. Yet none of the young people could remember any attempted intervention to address their behaviour. Jane experienced an increasing number of placements during her teenage years in care due, apparently, to her aggressive and sometimes violent behaviour towards staff. She said that staff "just went on" about her aggression although Jane herself did suggest an alternative intervention. She said,

"They'd go on about something, telling me to calm down. It did my head in and I used to hit them. There was this one woman - I liked her so I don't really know why I hit her - but she were always on about my temper. I kicked off a lot which is why I got moved. They just weren't nice to you, y'know. I didn't want to hit them. I just wanted a hug."

Jane never did get a hug and she said her behaviour only changed once she had left care. It is difficult to assess whether placement disruption caused or fuelled the young people's behaviour. However, it is clear that in some cases, placement disruption did little in terms of behaviour modification. Ashley, Boothy and Stevie continued to commit offences up to, and after, leaving care and Chelsea stopped working as a prostitute only when she became pregnant. Behaviour modification, therefore, cannot reasonably be seen as an outcome of placement changes.

It would be wrong to assume that all the placement changes experienced by the young people in this research were associated with their behaviour. It was mentioned earlier that some changes, particularly those experienced soon after admission into care, were intended to bring about stability. For some young people, the changes they experienced were caused by external factors. Dave had to leave one of his foster placements because of the ill-health of his foster father. Nicky had to leave his children's home because of its closure. One of Levi's foster placements ended because of the abuse she suffered at the hands of her foster parents. Indeed, Jane and Boothy also mentioned foster placements ending because of abuse. Given that most

of the young people talked about visiting new placements only for an overnight stay prior to moving in properly, the speed with which young people were moved into, and presumably, expected to adapt to, unfamiliar surroundings is self-evident. Despite the ambivalent comments made earlier by some of the young people in this research, other research shows that placement endings can be traumatic and can have serious and adverse effects on young people (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Millham *et al*, 1986). As will be shown, movement in care also has important implications for young people's education and their contact with their natural families. These issues raise the importance of a more holistic appreciation of the experience of living in care rather than just focusing on the placement histories.

Education in Care

In 1984, the Social Services Committee noted that being in care is an 'educational hazard'. Research shows that young people in care are much more likely to leave care with fewer formal educational qualifications than the rest of their age cohort (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992). Explanations for this situation vary. Jackson (1987) and other writers (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987) have argued that young people in care experience disruption to their education because of disruption in their placements. Lack of co-ordination between education and social service departments is also seen to be a factor (Fletcher-Cambell, 1990). A third explanation is that teachers have low expectations of young people in care which results in a self-fulfilling prophecy (Heath *et al*, 1994). More recently, concern has shifted towards the number of young people in care who are either excluded from school or are seen as having special educational needs (Education & Employment Committee, 1998; Pearce & Hillman, 1998; SSI/OFSTED, 1995). Exclusion from school or having special educational needs can be seen as contributory factors to the low levels of educational attainment recorded for young people in care. However, these factors arguably oversimplify what is a complex situation in terms of the interface between the education system, the care system and, importantly, young people themselves.

Education is seen as an important need of young people in care and the Guidance and Regulations accompanying the Children Act 1989 (DoH, 1991a,b) state that 'regard' should be given to the importance of continuity in education when care plans are being constructed. Having a 'regard' for education is clearly not the same as prioritising education. As social service department attempt to find appropriate placements for the children and young people

in their care it is, perhaps, not surprising that educational needs are given a lower priority than accommodation. Nevertheless, the frequency with which some young people in care are moved between placements, as Jackson (1987) suggests, must be seen as having a deleterious effect on their education.

Garnett's research (1992) certainly supports this view. Three quarters of the young people she studied had no educational qualifications. Yet significant differences emerged between the three groupings of young people. Nearly half of the 'long-term stable' group had some qualifications when they left care compared to just one tenth of the young people in the 'teenage entrant' grouping. The young people in the 'long-term unsettled' grouping were similarly unqualified. However, a cautionary note needs to be issued. The data for these statistics were collected from social workers and in twenty per cent of cases, such information was either not known or missing from case files. Despite this limitation, there does appear to be an association between types of careers in care and levels of educational attainment. This research supports Garnett's findings and those of others (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Broad, 1997). Of the sample of young people who had been in care, nearly two thirds had no educational qualifications and all of these young people had either 'long-term unsettled' placement histories or were 'teenage entrants'. All three of the young people in the 'long-term stable' grouping did achieve some qualifications. Furthermore, as in Garnett's research, some of the young people in the other two groupings also achieved some educational qualifications. The latter point suggests that whilst disruption in care placements can be seen to be an important factor, types of placement histories, in themselves, cannot account fully for all young people's educational performance.

The SSI/OFSTED report (1995) highlighted that young people aged between fourteen and sixteen were more likely to be excluded from, or not regularly attending, school. For some young people in this research, disruption in their education began at an early age. Out of the seven young people who were admitted into care at primary school age, four attended more than one primary school. Stevie and Boothy transferred from mainstream primary schools to special schools after being admitted into care. Such transfers may have occurred irrespective of their admissions into care. However, for both Levi and Vivian admission into care was directly related to the disruption they experienced in their primary school attendance. Levi attended two different primary schools and Vivian attended three. These changes were all instigated by changes in their care placements. Despite the disruption experienced at primary school stage, all four of these young people made the transition to various secondary schools

at the age of eleven. They remained registered at the same secondary schools until they were excluded.

For the majority of the young people in the sample, disruption in their education occurred whilst they were at secondary school. Five of the young people attended more than one secondary school. Of those, Jim was transferred from a mainstream school to a special school and Chelsea was permanently excluded from two different secondary schools. Chelsea was excluded from one secondary school at approximately the same time as being admitted into care. Soon after her admission, she was registered at a different secondary school but was excluded from there within a short period of time. Both of these exclusions were due to Chelsea's behaviour when she was in school; behaviour which she describes as disruptive.

"I used to go to school but I never did any work really. I just used to mess about with all the others, giving cheek to the teachers and stuff. I could do the work but I just couldn't be bothered. It was the same when they put me in the other school. I got expelled from there as well."

For two young people, however, their changes of secondary schools were a direct result of changes in their placements. Sebastian and Jane experienced extensive placement movement in care, each living in sixteen different placements. Both attended three different secondary schools. Sebastian did attend school on a full-time basis throughout his time in care despite the changes in his schools. However, at the age of fifteen Sebastian was moved to an out-of-borough placement following allegations of assault against a member of staff in the children's home in which he had been living. At the time, Sebastian was approaching his GCSE examinations and the secondary school near to his new placement refused to enrol him. He said,

"It was a cock up by social services. They said I had to change schools because of the distance...my old school was over thirty miles away from where they put me. They suggested a school near to where I was living which I thought would be alright so I agreed to change. I thought it was all sorted but the new school changed its mind at the last minute. They said they couldn't take me because of the class sizes. I think it was because they realised I was in care. It was a mess and that's why I've no GCSEs."

The situation for Jane was very different. Up to the age of thirteen Jane attended school on a full-time basis despite the changes she experienced in the schools at which she was registered.

Around this time she began to miss school on a regular basis and her behaviour in her care placements had become quite aggressive. As a consequence, she was moved to an out-of-borough, CHE. She never returned to mainstream school. Jane described herself as being quite bright and as always getting good marks at the last mainstream school she attended.

“I did alright at school. The teachers said I was doing well and I used to get these certificates for doing my work...when I moved to [the CHEs] the work they gave you to do was really babyish, like really easy sums and stuff. It was too easy. It was boring.”

Jane’s education, therefore, effectively ceased at the age of thirteen. She was one of eight young people who ceased attending school around the ages of thirteen and fourteen. Research shows that exclusions and truancy commonly occur at this age (Pearce & Hillman, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998b; SSI/OFSTED, 1995). Explanations about why the young people in the sample stopped attending school varied between “it was boring” or “I couldn’t be bothered” and frequently included, “no-one [in the children’s home] went to school”. Nearly all of these young people could remember care staff attempting to get them to school, which reflects the spirit of the Children Act 1989. The attempts by the care staff involved either the offer of financial incentives or a physical escort to school, usually a mixture of both. Vivian recalled various attempts made to encourage her to go to school.

“They gave me extra pocket money for every day I went to school but I still couldn’t be bothered going. Or I used to get money off them for dinner money...I remember them taking me to school in a car a few times. They’d take me in then I’d walk back out and wave at them and say I’m going spending my money on fags now.”

When Vivian was describing this scenario, the sense of power she may have felt at the time was tangible. Indeed, Vivian commented on the staff’s inability to make her do anything she did not want to do. Levi tells a similar story. Levi stopped attending school on a regular basis around the age of twelve or thirteen. She describes the staff in the children’s home as offering to increase her weekly spending money by one pound for every day she attended school in a given week. At the time, Levi was working on the streets as a prostitute.

“They were offering to up my spending money to £7.50 a week if I went to school. Who needs £7.50 when I were earning £200 a week on the streets? It were pissing them off even more coz they knew I got money anyway whether they gave it to me or not. I used to buzz off them.”

Like Vivian, Levi's narrative implies truancy involved a sense of assuming some control over her own life. Boothy's experience contains some similarities.

"I didn't want to go to school. When I did go I just used to mess about and kick off with the teachers. Then I'd get excluded which meant I couldn't go to school."

Concern has been raised about the high levels of truancy and exclusions among young people in care (SSI/OFSTED, 1995). If young people are not in school then they cannot reasonably be expected to achieve any educational qualifications. The low levels of educational qualifications among young people in care is seen to be a negative outcome of care (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Broad, 1997; Coles, 1995). It is, however, important to recognise that truancy was described, by some of the young people in this sample, as a positive strategy for taking some control over their own lives.

Only six young people in the sample completed their secondary school education without any disruption. Wesley, Alexandra, Dave and Courtney attended mainstream schools and each achieved between five and ten GCSE qualifications. Geoffrey attended a special school and was awarded a number of Certificates of Achievement mainly of a vocational nature. The sixth young person, Nicky, also attained GCSE qualifications despite a change in secondary school at the age of thirteen. Nicky's experience of changing schools is very different from the other young people's in that he requested his change of school.

"The first school I went to was too far away. I had to get up at half past six in the mornings and catch two buses to get there. There was a school just down the road from the children's home and I wanted to go there coz it were closer and all my friends went to that school."

Nicky, Alexandra, and Wesley all experienced 'long-term stable' placement histories. Alexandra's long-term foster placement did breakdown when she was fourteen years of age. She did, however, complete her education without changing schools. Dave and Geoffrey had 'long-term unsettled' placement histories, and both experienced four different placements from being admitted into care at the ages of eleven and twelve respectively. However, like Alexandra, their placement changes did not necessitate a change of school as they were moved within the same locality. Courtney was a 'teenage entrant'. Her school attendance had not been a factor in her admission to care and, again, she completed her education in the same school. This might suggest that the effects on education caused by the disruption of admission into care and between placements can be minimised by stability in education.

Even though these young people did complete their education, they all thought that they were treated differently in school because they were in care. Nicky and Courtney made similar comments about their teachers asking whether they were okay in their respective children's homes. Both said they felt encouraged to perform educationally even though, on occasions when they had failed to do some homework, they felt that teachers did not chase them up because they were in care. Similar experiences were disclosed by Wesley, Geoffrey and Dave. Whether this indicates low expectations on the part of their teachers is impossible to assess. It could be, as was found by Heath *et al* (1994), that the teachers knew the young people well and were making appropriate judgements about when to intervene. For Alexandra, the interface between care and education was more acute. At primary school Alexandra was entered for and passed the entrance examinations for a local, public school. However, her pride in her ability was short-lived. She said,

"I was really brainy at primary school which is why they put me forward for the exam. I couldn't believe it when I passed. But then social services refused to pay for my uniform and stuff. I think my [foster] mum argued with them and they eventually agreed to pay if I wanted to go. By then I thought stuff it, I'm not going."

Not surprisingly, recollections of being treated differently at school varied between those who completed their education and those who did not. For the young people who did not complete their education, comments were made about teacher's expectations of their exhibited behaviour when they were in school, in that the teachers appeared to expect them to be disruptive. It is likely to be the case, as has been noted elsewhere (Fletcher-Cambell, 1990), that teachers' expectations of young people they know to be in care will depend largely on their knowledge of the care system, particularly at a local level, and their previous experiences of teaching young people who are in care. Within the local authority, two secondary schools excluded five of the young people in this sample (sometimes on more than one occasion). These five young people also, at various times, lived in the same children's home. Children's homes are arguably more public and more visible places than foster care placements and research has shown that young people in children's homes are likely to experience a much higher rate of exclusions than young people in foster care (Blyth & Milner, 1993). This particular children's home and one of the schools were situated on the edge of a sprawling council estate in a notorious part of the town. Within the sample of young people, the home seemed to have gained an unenviable reputation for crime and prostitution. Its reputation is likely to have gained a degree of popularity amongst a wider population, including school

teachers. Therefore, it could be that teachers' expectations of young people are formed less by them being in care *per se* and more by the specific care placements in which they reside.

It is clear from the above, that the education of all young people is affected, in manifestly different ways, by being in care. The extent of the differences experienced by the young people suggests that a single theory is insufficient to explain the interface between care and education. Moreover, the evidence presented shows that the educational under-achievement of young people in care is a more complex process than the somewhat simplistic association inferred between being in care and a lack of qualifications. Research into the education of children in foster care (Heath *et al* 1994) suggests that children's early histories before entry into care may have a profound effect on their educational attainment, particularly if their histories included maltreatment. Yet, disruption in care placements cannot be ignored, particularly when changes in placements necessitate changes in schools or, more extremely, result in young people being moved out of mainstream school altogether as they move into CHEs. It is possible that these two issues are related in that early childhood experiences of abuse and neglect later manifest themselves as difficult behaviour, thus resulting in young people being excluded from school and moved between care placements. The net result for many young people is, however, increasing instability in their lives and a lack of educational qualifications, both of which are likely to effect their lives after they leave care.

Family Contact

For children and young people in care, maintaining contact with their natural families is something of a contentious issue. Many are removed from the care of their families due to serious concerns about their welfare. On the other hand, the importance of maintaining family contact, with parents and siblings, has been given increased importance in the Children Act 1989. The reasons for this are two fold (DoH, 1991a: para 6.9). Firstly, maintaining family contact is of importance in terms of facilitating a sense of origin and identity. Secondly, families are seen as the most beneficial environment for children. If they are to be returned to their families, it is vital that contact is maintained. Even in situations where it is unlikely that a child will be returned to their family, contact will keep open options for family relationships in later life. Other research would support the importance of the long-term benefits of family contact. Biehal *et al* (1995) found that many young people leaving care sought support from their families as they made their transitions into independent accommodation. There is a sense

in which this can only occur if some degree of contact is maintained whilst young people are in care.

The idea that young people should, where possible, be brought up by their families is evidenced by the fact that seven of the young people were, at some point, returned to their families and three of these young people were returned home on more than one occasion. This supports other research which has shown that some children and young people removed from their families oscillate in and out of care over a period of time (Bullock *et al*, 1993; Farmer & Parker, 1991; Rowe *et al*, 1989) However, only one young person in this sample remained with their family without a subsequent return to foster or residential care. Dave lived with his father until the age of twelve. He was admitted into care soon after his father re-married. The relationship between Dave and his step-mother was problematic. Over a short period of time, she began to physically abuse him. Whilst in care, Dave continued to see his father.

“I used to see him at least once a week, usually on a Saturday. We usually went to the football match... I always wanted to live with him. I never really wanted to be in care but I'd been told that I couldn't live with him because of my step-mother.”

Dave's step-mother died and, after spending almost four years in care, he was eventually allowed to live with his father again. Dave believes that his return home was eased because of the contact he had been able to have with his father.

For the other six young people, their placements with their families did not last. For some of these young people and for different reasons, there was a marked deterioration in the level of contact which was maintained thereafter. Levi was returned home on two occasions. The violence which had been evident prior to her admission into care continued and she was subsequently returned to foster care. It was the nature of the relationship between Levi and her mother which caused the contact to become less frequent over time.

“We used to see each other quite a lot but it weren't good. As I got bigger I could hit her back and we'd just end up scrapping. There were no point in seeing her really.”

For other young people, the cessation of contact with their families was due to more structural reasons. Ashley, for instance, returned to live with his mother on three separate occasions, the longest of which was for one month. These home-on-trial placements occurred quite early on in his care career. He continued to have some contact with his mother and his brother while he lived in various children's homes. However, Ashley's placements eventually changed to out-

of-borough CHEs. Once he had moved out of the town, he says the only contact he had with his mother was at review meetings when his social worker could bring his mother to the CHEs. Stevie was also placed at home very early on in his care career. His home-on-trial placement lasted for approximately a year before it broke down although he does not remember it as being a happy time due the violence he suffered from his step-father. Stevie said he saw very little of his family after the breakdown of this placement and the contact ceased altogether once he was placed in out-of-borough CHEs. Indeed, all of the young people who were placed in out-of-borough CHEs commented that their contact with their families decreased dramatically during this time. Given the geographic locations of some of the placements this is not surprising. The time and costs would necessarily be prohibitive for the parent(s), particularly for those who had other children to look after.

More generally, for many of the young people in the sample, contact with their families tended to be problematic. Although nearly all of the young people did have some contact with their families whilst they were in care, this seemed to be on an ad hoc rather than a regular and frequent basis. For some young people, contact with their families depended on the willingness of their families to have contact and also the willingness of social workers or carers to facilitate the contact. This latter point is largely concerned with the perceived risks involved for the young people. For example, Nicky recalled wanting to have contact with his mother but the care staff in his children's home and his social worker were reluctant to allow the contact to take place because Nicky's mother was an alcoholic and she still lived with the man who was known to have physically abused Nicky.

“When I first went in care they were all a bit iffy about me seeing my mum coz her boyfriend were there. They tried to stop me going but they didn't succeed coz I used to see her anyway. Eventually they agreed I could go and they used to take me to her house.”

Although Nicky did maintain contact with his mother, he lost contact with his two sisters even though they were all admitted into care at the same time. His sisters went to separate foster placements in different towns. For a long time Nicky did not know where they were. It is very likely that social services did know where his sisters were placed and could, therefore, have arranged contact between the three siblings yet Nicky has no recollection of this taking place. This raises an important issue. Contact with families means more than contact with parents. Siblings are, arguably, as much a part of a young person's origins as parents, perhaps more so in terms of shared childhood experiences. This is recognised in the Children Act 1989

(1991a). The loss of contact and, in Nicky's case, a lack of knowledge of their whereabouts must impact on a young person's development and sense of identity.

For other young people in the sample, contact with their families was constrained by the families themselves or specific members thereof. Jane recalls arranging secret meetings with her mother away from the family home where her father made it clear she was unwelcome.

"I used to go to see them about once a month but my dad used to shout at my mum for talking to me. He hit me once when I went so I stopped going. In the end I just used to meet my mum when she went shopping but that were only for about half an hour."

Like Nicky, Jane also lost contact with her sister who was admitted into care at the same time as her. The situation with her father also meant that Jane had little contact with her other siblings who had remained at home. A similar situation arose for Chelsea. After a short time in care Chelsea began working as a prostitute. Her family found out about it and Chelsea said her father would throw her out of the house when she went round to visit. As a consequence, Chelsea's contact with her mother became secretive. In such circumstances, questions could be raised about the quality of the contact thus experienced.

Despite the success of Dave's return home, there is another aspect to Dave's story which raises wider issues about the nature of family contact. Up to the age of seven Dave lived with his biological parents and his twin brother. His parents divorced and Dave's mother had custody of the two boys. When Dave was about nine or ten years old, his mother returned him to his father but she kept custody of Dave's twin brother. Dave has not seen his mother or his twin brother since then. This has been a constant pre-occupation for Dave.

"I think about my brother all the time. I think it's because we are twins. Social services tried to help me find him but they couldn't trace him. I keep wondering what he looks like, whether he's like me and what he's doing."

The only knowledge Dave has of his twin brother are memories and one photograph of them both as children. Dave's story finds resonance with two other young people. Wesley had fond recollections of another boy, George, who had lived with Wesley and his foster family for a number of years.

"We used to do everything together. We always used to have pillow fights before we went to bed. Mum were always shouting at us. I don't know what happened to

George though. He left when I was about seven. My mum thinks he was adopted but she's not sure. I've tried to find some photos but there aren't any."

It is arguably the case that photographs play an important role in terms of objectifying memories of people as well as events. For many people, family albums provide a photographic chronology of childhood and, more generally, various events over the life course. The importance of such objective memories is reflected in life history work undertaken with young people in care. For example, Jane did have some contact with some members of her family whilst she was in care. However, during the first interview it became apparent that Jane found it very difficult to remember all her placements in care or how long she had stayed in each. She found this extremely frustrating both for herself and in terms of recall for this research. Her frustration is made more poignant by her offer to look through her life history book which she had made in the past with one of her social workers,

"...it would have been really helpful for your book but I don't know where it is...you could have had it but I must have lost it somewhere when I was moving around."

These issues and the absence of material reminders of aspects of their past lives symbolise the importance of looking beyond the objective criteria of what it means to grow up in care. If our identities are bound up in our past and in histories of family events, then there is more to maintaining family contact than regular visits.

This chapter has explored the young people's lives up to being the age of sixteen. Their lives before care could generally be described as abusive, uncertain and unstable. For many of the young people, being in care appears to have done little to ameliorate that situation. For a small but significant number of the young people, being in care probably compounded the uncertainty and instability. The effects of the extensive placement disruption experienced by some of the young people is best described by Chelsea who actually experienced fewer placements than a lot of the young people in the sample.

"In the end I used to keep my things in bin liners...there was no point in unpacking them coz I knew they would move me again."

When the young people talked about their placements, there was a noticeable lack of emotion. For those who experienced numerous moves between placements, a frequent comment was "you just get used to it (moving)." This might suggest a growing sense of resilience which may be employed as a mechanism by which young people protect themselves from others and from adversity (Rutter & Rutter, 1993). However, some recalled foster parents who abused them and others described themselves as other people's meal-tickets in that people were paid to look

after them. Jim talked about nobody listening to him and, with reference to review meetings, everyone talked about people discussing them as if they were not there.

Despite all this, most of the young people could remember at least one placement which felt like home and they felt cared for. Everyone could remember a holiday or a day-trip which they enjoyed. Indeed, these were often cited as the best things about being in care. Most appreciated the amount of pocket money they received on a weekly basis and, even though they hated having to go shopping with social workers and obtaining receipts for everything, many said they liked having money for clothes. In this and many other ways, they had become teenagers like all other teenagers. Except that, by the age of sixteen, two of the young men were in custody, four of the young women were mothers and another young woman had spent her sixteenth birthday living alone in a bedsit. At sixteen, nearly all of them were being asked to consider their impending move out of care and towards independent accommodation.

Growing Up In Biological Families

The differences in experiences between the two groupings of young people in this research become apparent at this early stage. In discussing their experiences of growing up in their biological families, a common response from the young people in this sample was that their childhood “was just normal” and had included “ordinary things”. By the age of sixteen, they were all living in the same houses in which they had spent most, if not all, of their formative years. They had left school and had begun to pursue their post-sixteen careers. They had, for all intents and purposes, grown up in stable environments. However, two of the young people, Alisha and Thomas, did recall incidents which had been somewhat unsettling for them. Alisha remembered her grandmother dying. Alisha, who was seven or eight years old at the time of her grandmother’s death, said she could not remember how she felt at the time but the absence of her grandmother was important to her. Alisha commented about feeling “left out” when her friends talked about visiting their grandparents.

“My gran was my only grandparent. On Sundays all my friends would go and visit their grandparents and I couldn’t do that. I felt left out of something that everyone else did. It’s strange not having a gran or a granddad at my age. It would have been nice to have got to know her a bit really. Even though I was only young when she died, I miss her.”

Thomas recalled an incident which had occurred much more recently, when he was thirteen years of age. It needs to be noted that Thomas is considerably younger than his brother and

sister. Since being nine years old, he was the only sibling to live at home. Thomas remembered his mum and dad splitting up because his dad had been having an affair. This proved to be a temporary separation as his father returned to the family home in a matter of few weeks. It seemed to be his father's return which has effected Thomas.

“Before my dad moved out we used to get on alright. I mean I've always been closer to my mum but things were okay with my dad. I don't know what happened but when he came back he used to go on at me all the time. It wasn't bad but he used to call me 'soft' or 'a mummy's boy'. He still does sometimes...it gets on my nerves. I keep out of the way if I thinks he's going to go on...I usually go round to my sister's.”

Both these incidents indicate the different ways in which families and family members can be seen to be important. For all the young people in this grouping, changes in family relationships over time seemed to characterise their experiences of childhood. Of particular importance were their relationships with their parents. These appeared to be transformed by the processes of the development of trust and the negotiation of autonomy within the context of a family environment. These issues are discussed in more detail in the next two chapters. For now, these young people were 'ordinary kids leading ordinary lives' (Williamson, 1997a).

CHAPTER FIVE

Leaving Care and Leaving Home

Introduction

Despite the amount of disruption in placements experienced by some young people in care, research suggests that the most turbulent time in terms of movement is between the ages of sixteen and eighteen (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Garnett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986). This is largely because of the increasingly common practice by social services departments to encourage young people in care to move towards independent living around the ages of sixteen or seventeen. Although research suggests that young people in the wider population, are first leaving the parental home at an earlier age than in previous years, (Jones, 1995) for many young people leaving home is a temporary transition as they often return to the parental home. Nevertheless, the average age at which they first leave home is around twenty years (Jones, 1995). Factors such as gender and social class are known to be associated with the ages at which young people leave home (Ferri & Smith, 1997; Jones, 1987). Family breakdown and re-constitution are also recognised as factors (Ainley, 1991; Kiernan, 1992). Despite the changing trends in leaving home, it remains the case that young people in care are expected to move into independent accommodation at a much earlier age than the rest of their age cohort. This chapter will explore the housing transitions of young people who grew up in care and make comparisons with the housing transitions of the young people who grew up in their families.

The housing transition is seen as the process by which young people leave the parental home and move into independent accommodation, usually a form a intermediary or transitional accommodation prior to establishing more permanent accommodation associated with the transition to family of destination (Jones & Wallace, 1992). It is important to recognise that within the youth transition model, there is an explicit assumption that young people undertake their housing transitions from the parental home. It is also assumed by some (Jones & Wallace, 1992) that it is, to an extent, structured by the other transitions and especially the school to work transition. The housing transition is, therefore, presented as linear and unproblematic. This is not the case for young people leaving care. For them, their housing transitions can be seen to commence at the time they leave care. It will be shown that the social context of their transition and the manner in which it is experienced renders the youth

transition model simplistic. Moreover, for many young people leaving care, it is the 'housing transition' which impacts upon their school to work transitions rather than the other way round.

The housing transition is, therefore, synonymous with leaving care. There are, however, inherent difficulties in defining the point at which young people leave care. Garnett (1992), operationalises the concept of 'leaving care' as the time at which young people's care orders are legally discharged. This usually occurs when young people reach the age of eighteen years. However, Biehal *et al* (1992, 1995) define 'leaving care' as the point at which young people leave their last care placement, which frequently occurs before a young person's care order is discharged. The age at which young people are understood to leave care is, therefore, subject to some debate. The local authority in which this research was undertaken has a policy of involving the after care team in young people's care plans when they reach sixteen years of age. This gives a strong indication of the age at which young people are expected to consider their moves towards independent accommodation.

Preparation for leaving care is seen to be an integral part of being in care and responsibility for preparing young people to leave care lies primarily with the social services department, children's homes and foster carers. The Guidance and Regulations accompanying the Children Act 1989 (DoH, 1991a,b) outline three broad aspects to preparing young people to leave care. These are:

- 1) enabling young people to build and maintain relationships with others;
- 2) enabling young people to develop their self-esteem; and,
- 3) teaching practical and financial skills and knowledge.

Preparation for leaving care is, therefore, seen to be a holistic process. However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is the third aspect which will be examined.

The local authority in which this research took place has a relatively structured system for preparing young people to leave care and move into independent accommodation. There are three separate institutions which provide incrementally independent facilities. Briefly, these are the pre-independence unit, the semi-independence unit and an independence unit. Yet the existence of leaving care system does not necessarily mean that all the young people in the sample were able to access the service. The routes by which the young people left care are examined. This will highlight the differences in the housing transitions between the young people who grew up in care. Comparisons with young people who grew up in their families

are, however, difficult to make as all but one of these young people were still living in the parental home at the end of the research period. This, in itself, is a pertinent issue which throws into sharp relief the experiential differences between the two groupings of young people. However, the issue of leaving home was discussed with the young people. Their opinions and intentions of leaving home do raise some interesting issues about the role of the family and the nature of independence.

Transitions Out of Care

It was shown in the previous chapter that being in care is a highly differentiated experience. One aspect of the differences concerned the types of placements young people experienced. It could be argued, therefore, that to categorise young people as 'being in care' over-simplifies their experiences. Similarly, when young people leave care, they leave a wide variety of types of care placements. The type of placement from which young people leave care has been considered to be an influential factor in determining outcomes of leaving care (Garnett, 1992). Indeed, one of the aims of Garnett's research was to analyse the extent to which the outcomes of leaving care were influenced by the types of last care placements. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that her data would not allow such an analysis. The reason which prohibited the testing of her hypothesis was the amount of disruption experienced by the young people in her sample prior to leaving care which made it difficult to identify a last care placement. This was undoubtedly compounded by the fact that many of the young people in Garnett's research were no longer living in care placements by the time she defined them as leaving care.

Research by Biehal *et al* (1992) does, however, highlight the diversity of placements from which young people leave care. Their survey of young people leaving care in three local authorities showed the last care placement before independence or legal discharge included residential placements, foster care, home-on-trial, and custody. Over half of the young people (52.5%) were in residential placements and one in three were in foster care. Although the majority of young people were in a residential placement prior to leaving care, the category includes placements in children's homes, assessment centres, independence units and CHes. This further diversifies the types of placements from which young people leave care. By the age of sixteen, the young people in this sample were in similarly diverse placements. Nine young people were in some type of residential placement and four were still in foster care. Of the remaining three young people, one was in custody, one was living in a bedsit, and one was

placed at home. For some of these young people, as will be seen, the process of leaving care had, by the age of sixteen, begun in earnest.

It was already indicated that the local authority provides a three stage, leaving care system. The following description of each unit shows the incremental nature of moving towards independence. The pre-independence unit is similar in set up to a children's home. Each young person has their own bedroom and there are communal facilities for cooking and laundry. In the pre-independence unit, young people are expected to buy and prepare their own food, make a nominal contribution to fuel costs, and do their own laundry. It is staffed twenty four hours per day. The semi-independence unit contains bedsitting rooms and there are communal laundry facilities. Young people have to pay rent and make contributions to fuel costs. Although the unit is staffed twenty four hours per day, young people are expected to be much more self-reliant. The independence unit consists of small flats. There are no communal facilities and the unit is not staffed. Young people who reside in the independence flats do have access to the staff at the other two units even though they are in different parts of the town. In this unit, young people have to pay all their own rent and utilities bills. In principle, young people are able to progress through this system until they eventually move into completely independent accommodation, usually at eighteen years of age. The whole leaving care system is managed by an after care team who become involved in young people's leaving care plans at case reviews held when young people are sixteen years of age. In line with Section 24 of the Children Act 1989, the team also offers after care support services for young people until they reach twenty one years of age. (The system suggests a structure of gradual de-institutionalisation and increasing self-reliance.)

At sixteen years of age, Jim and Vivian were already living in the pre-independence unit. Jim had moved into the unit because his placement in a children's home had broken down due to his behaviour which by his own admission was disruptive.

"I kept kicking off all the time and running away. I didn't want to go to (the pre-independence unit) but they couldn't find anywhere to put me"

Perhaps not surprisingly, Jim found it very difficult to cope in the unit particularly with the domestic tasks he was expected to perform for himself. He continued to display increasingly disruptive behaviour, including setting fires in the and around the unit. He also continued to run away from the unit, variously spending nights with friends or on the streets. Research into

young people who run away, found that two of the most commonly cited reasons for running away were 'people didn't listen to you' and 'people didn't care about you' (Stein *et al*,

1994:39). Jim's experience would certainly support these findings. Within a few months of being in the pre-independence unit, Jim was hospitalised under the Mental Health Act. On his discharge from hospital he was placed in a nursing home. It could be that Jim may have eventually moved into the nursing home whether or not he had spent time in the pre-independence unit. However, his experience suggests that the pre-independence unit adopts a dual role of providing specialist leaving care services and providing emergency placements. The appropriateness of this duality is, perhaps, questionable.

Vivian's experience is remarkably different in that her move to the unit shows a sense of planning and purpose. Vivian gave birth to her first son when she was fifteen years old. At the time she was living in a children's home. She remembered her reaction to the suggested move to the pre-independence unit.

"I didn't want to go. I went mad every time they mentioned it but they said I couldn't stay (in the children's home) with the baby. I went to live with my mum instead but her husband was interfering with the baby so I moved to pre-independence. It worked out alright. I got a lot of help...I don't really know why I didn't want to go in the first place."

Vivian received practical help and emotional support in the unit. She said she was helped to get organised with the baby and with shopping. Vivian also recalled the staff baby-sitting for her on a fairly regular basis so that she could have some time on her own or with friends. Although the circumstances pre-empting Vivian's move into the pre-independence unit were not planned, it is clear that the unit did serve its primary purpose in terms of preparing and supporting Vivian as she moved towards independent living.

Only two other young people in the sample, Tenpenny and Courtney, moved into the pre-independence unit directly from a care placement. Both were sixteen years old at the time. Tenpenny and Courtney moved both from their different children's homes and for different reasons. Tenpenny's experience was very similar to Vivian's in that she had a baby daughter. The children's home in which she was living had become somewhat chaotic and arguably an inappropriate placement for Tenpenny and her baby. She recalled,

"it was mad all the time...people running in and out, banging on doors all night long. The police were always there. You'd just get the baby settled and then something would kick off."

Courtney's move into the pre-independence unit was largely predicated on her age in that she was considerably older than the other children in the home in which she lived. She was told that she would have to move on and remembered being given a choice of placements,

"They said I could do go to pre-independence, semi-independence or shared housing. I'd done a lot of growing up but I didn't want to be on my own. At pre-independence there were a bit of independence but there were still people looking after you. It seemed like the best place for me."

In fact, Courtney was the only person in the sample to move, systematically, through the three-stage structure.

Three other young people in the sample moved directly into the semi-independence unit from care placements. Alexandra, Nicky and David were all seventeen years old at the time of their moves. This may be a factor explaining why they did not move, in the first instance, into the pre-independence unit. Unlike Alexandra and Nicky, David's move into the semi-independence unit appears to have been planned. At sixteen his foster placement had broken down and he had moved into a small children's home. His subsequent move to the semi-independence unit was described, by David, in terms of his age and feeling ready to start living on his own. Alexandra and Nicky were also in foster placements at the age of sixteen. By the time they were seventeen years old, their placements had broken down, for remarkably similar reasons. Both remembered feeling unhappy in the placements because, it would seem, of the control their foster parents attempted to exert on their lives. Nicky recalled that his foster parents,

"tried to tell what to do all the time...where I could go, how much money I could spend. I had some money in the bank and they used to tell me that I couldn't spend it so I drew it all out and blew it. They weren't impressed. I started taking things from them, like loose change that were hanging around and packets of fags. It went wrong then really so I thought it were better if I moved out. They (social services) were going to put me with other foster parents but I didn't want any more so I moved into the semi-independence unit. I wanted to sort myself out and get ready for moving into my own place."

Alexandra's recollections of her foster placement echo Nicky's sentiments. She said,

"There were all these rules, what time you had to come in, what time you could stay in bed, what you had to do round the house, who you could go out with. There were loads of rules and she (foster mother) were always going on about something. It did my head in. He (foster father) was really creepy and I didn't like being in the house with him anyway. I started doing daft stuff like shoplifting and

staying out without telling them. They (social services) offered me a place at the semi-independence unit. I knew I would have my own space there so I went."

Prior to these foster placements, Alexandra and Nicky had been in long-term placements. Alexandra had been with a foster family for fourteen years and Nicky had been in a children's home for six years. They both found it difficult to adjust to their new foster placements and their behaviour evidently caused them to end sooner than had been expected. Their moves into the semi-independence unit may have occurred at a later date anyway. However, it could also be argued that, as in Jim's case, the units were used as emergency placements when Alexandra and Nicky's foster placements broke down.

In total, then, seven young people in the sample moved into the pre- or semi- independence units in preparation for leaving care. David's stay was, as was detailed above, short due to his diagnosed mental health problems. His story is unique and it could be argued that the inappropriateness of David's placement in the pre-independence unit hastened his return to institutionalised living rather than prepared him for independent living. For the other six young people, their experiences in the units suggests that they did begin to learn some of the practical skills required for independence. Although none of these young people talked about learning specific skills, there is a sense in which their experiences of increasing self-sufficiency generated a sense of being prepared to live independently. Courtney's recollections reflect the process:

"When I first moved into the pre-independence unit it were a big shock to the system having to do everything for yourself. When I did my first shop I felt really adult going round buying all these things that I wanted. But when I had to pay for them out of my own money I thought 'I could buy a new outfit or something rather than waste money on this'. I needed a lot of help with cooking at first coz I'd never really cooked before. Even with help I used to set the fire alarm off when I cooked...I'm better now, more organised with everything like washing, buying my electricity and stuff. I still don't cook very often unless I'm making something with someone else. When it's just me I can't be bothered with the hassle."

Other aspects of being in the units which were cited as beneficial were having staff around for support if it was needed and being with other young people for company. Interestingly, the latter also appeared to serve as an indicator for feeling ready to live alone. Alexandra commented,

“it was a good laugh being with everyone else...in and out of each other’s rooms and stuff, always having someone to talk to. It got on your nerves though sometimes...you couldn’t be on your own. Even if you closed your door someone would come knocking. I was glad I was moving into my own house for a bit of peace and quiet.”

Wanting their own space and a general feeling of being ready to live alone were frequently cited reasons for moving out of the pre- and semi- independence units. Associated comments inferred that the staff in the units concurred with the feelings of the young people. Indeed, it was with the assistance of the staff that these young people moved into independent accommodation. The types of accommodation the young people moved into seemed to depend on individual circumstances and availability of accommodation. Alexandra and Tenpenny, both moved into council houses. They each had a baby and Tenpenny was pregnant for the second time. Vivian was also a mother and had two children. She moved into a flat in the independence unit whilst she was waiting for a council house. Courtney also moved into a flat in the independence unit whilst David and Nicky moved into a council flat and one rented from a housing association respectively. The local authority paid leaving care grants of approximately £1,000 to each young person. All these young people received advice and practical help from members of the after care team with regard to buying utensils and furniture, and decorating their respective homes. Yet the ease and excitement with which they moved into independent accommodation belied the problems that most of them were to experience.

The table below shows the extent of movement experienced by the young people in this sample between their placements at sixteen years of age and the accommodation in which they were living at the end of the research period. By this time, most of the young people were eighteen or nineteen years of age.

5.1 Accommodation patterns in the process of leaving care

Young Person	Type of placement at 16 years of age	Number of moves	Type of placement at end of study
Wesley	foster care	0	foster care
Dave	home on trial	0	home on trial
Ashley	custody	3	custody
Stevie	residential	3+	not known
Sebastian	residential (CHE)	3	lodgings
Jim *	residential	4	nursing home
Levi	residential	4	hostel
Vivian *	residential	4	independent house
Alexandra *	foster care	4	independent house
Tenpenny *	residential	4	independent house
Boothy	residential (CHE)	4	custody
Chelsea	independent bedsit	5	not known
Courtney *	residential	5	lodgings
David *	foster care	5	independent bedsit
Nicky *	foster care	6	lodgings
Jane	residential	7	independent house

* denotes movement through the independence units from a care placement

It is clear from the table that the young people who moved through the independence units experienced as much and, in some cases, more movement between placements and different types of accommodation after the age of sixteen than the other young people in the sample. Some, but by no means all, of the moves can be explained by movement into and out of the independence units. However, it is also important to note that none of the young people stayed in the accommodation into which they moved after leaving the independence units. Nor, in most cases, had the reasons for the moves anything to do with the appropriateness of the accommodation.

The circumstances precipitating the moves are different for each of these seven young people. However, it is possible to highlight broadly common factors. Alexandra and Tenpenny, who both moved into their own council houses from the semi-independence unit, moved again due to their desire to live in closer proximity to their families. Although they were both receiving continued support from the after care team, they also received a lot of emotional support and practical help with child care from their families (or foster family in Alexandra's case). Their relationships with their families had become very important to them despite the difficulties they had experienced previously. This is not unusual. Other research has shown the frequency with which young people leaving care renew family and foster family relationships and benefit

from that support (Stein & Carey, 1986; Fry, 1992; Biehal *et al*, 1995) Tenpenny managed to secure an exchange with another council house tenant and moved to a house very close to her mother's. She was still there at the end of the study period and said she had no intentions to move again.

Alexandra's move was much more complicated and proved to be highly problematic. From her council house, she moved into a privately rented house which was close to her foster family and, indeed, was owned by her foster brother. Around the same time Alexandra had given birth to her second baby and her boyfriend moved into the new house with her. Their relationship was episodically violent and Alexandra's foster mother disapproved of the it and began to exert pressure on her to end the relationship. The pressure appeared to be linked with Alexandra's tenancy of the house.

"She kept going on about what he was like and not wanting him in the house. She said she got me the house and she didn't want him in it. She was round all the time just going on about it. It really did my head in. In the end she told me I had to get him out or she would take the house off me. I thought fuck it and moved out."

Alexandra then went to stay with friends for a while before moving into another privately rented house. All this movement occurred in the six months between the second and third interviews. Alexandra's relationship with her foster family had broken down. Her relationship with her boyfriend also ended. At the third interview, Alexandra's appearance had noticeably deteriorated, as had her motivation to care for her children. The two children were later admitted into care and within days, Alexandra's whereabouts were unknown. The speed at which the changes in Alexandra's life had occurred should give cause for concern. Moreover, the rapidity and complexity of the changes were evident in some of the other young people's lives.

Vivian had moved from the pre-independence unit into a flat managed by the after care team as a short-term measure pending allocation of a council house. She moved into a council house within a couple of months and, with the help of the after care team had spent time and her leaving care grant on furnishing and decorating her new home. However, her boyfriend started to spend increasingly more time at the house and Vivian recalled this being the start of her problems.

"He started staying over a lot. He started taking drugs and treating me bad...knocking me about. I kicked him out but he kept coming round all the time, giving me shit...coming round like at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, hitting me,

kicking the doors open, throwing stuff out of the windows...it were horrible...the kids used to just scream and scream and cry their eyes out...then he got his mates involved and it got worse..."

Vivian eventually went to her father's before contacting a local homeless advice agency. She was placed in a refuge for women and children where she stayed for approximately four months. Vivian experienced a great deal of difficulty in securing another council tenancy. Under the Housing Act 1985, she was deemed to have made herself homeless. She was eventually allocated another house but only after making daily visits to the housing department. At the third interview, Vivian and her two children had settled into their new home and had begun to rebuild their lives.

It is arguably the case that for Vivian and Alexandra it was their relationships with significant others which were the root causes of the disruption they experienced in their after care accommodation. For Courtney, Nicky and David, the changes in their accommodation can be explained as social issues rather than as housing issues. Courtney's move from the semi-independence unit into a flat managed by the after care team was likely to have been relatively short-term. She was sixteen at the time and was eventually hoping to secure council or housing association accommodation. Courtney celebrated her seventeenth birthday in the flat by having a party with some friends. The party was disrupted by some young men from the local neighbourhood who also caused extensive damage to the flat and stole some of Courtney's belongings. Courtney recalled being frightened.

"It was a crazy night, scary. The police came round and took a statement from me and after they'd gone the lads came back and told me not to press charges or else. The flat was wrecked and I knew I would be in trouble coz you're not supposed to have parties. I was frightened to stay because I thought they would come back again so I just left and went to my mum's. I didn't tell anyone where I was going."

Courtney lived with her mother for a few weeks but the problems which had characterised their relationship throughout Courtney's childhood remained. She then moved in with her boyfriend's parents as a lodger. The stability of this arrangement largely depended on her relationship with her boyfriend. Courtney had applied for accommodation from the council and various housing associations. She was still waiting for her own house at the final interview.

David and Nicky experienced similar problems in that both their flats were burgled on a number of occasions within a short period of time. This seemed to generate feelings of

insecurity which were compounded by problematic relationships with their neighbours. David eventually moved into a privately rented bedsit in the same building in which his mother lived. He was living there at the final interview. He commented, "it isn't as good as my other flat but at least I'm near my mum." Nicky's decision to leave his flat proved to be more problematic. He moved into a privately rented house with a friend whom he had known from being in care. Again, their house was burgled. Their landlord insisted that they pay for the damage or leave. Nicky said they could not afford to pay so they left which set in train a series of moves for Nicky.

"I went to stay with our Karen (Nicky's youngest sister) but it was mad because I was sleeping on the couch in the living room and her kids were always around. I wasn't settled so I went to live with my mum for a bit...that was a big mistake...her and her boyfriend were still drinking and fighting all the time. It was bad. Then I met our Tracey (his older sister) again when I were walking through town one day. That was weird coz I'd not seen her since we were in care together...She took me under her wing and I went to live with her and her boyfriend so it worked out well really."

Nicky was living with Tracey at the second interview. In the following six months he had moved again because Tracey's relationship with her boyfriend had broken down. Nicky returned to Karen's house before eventually moving back to Tracey once she had found another house. At the final interview, Nicky was living, as a lodger, with Tracey. He was hoping not to have to move again.

Despite their different circumstances, a common theme for all these young people appears to be their reliance on family support in times of crisis rather than on support from their after care workers. Although many of the young people did have regular contact with their after care workers, none of the young people approached them for help when a crisis occurred. The reasons given were variations on "she would have just gone on at me" or "he'd think it was my fault" and perhaps the most common reason was "they wouldn't have done anything anyway". All of these arguably reflect the young people's experiences of the historic responses of care and social workers to situations in the past. Furthermore, these experiences were seemingly powerful disincentives to ask for help despite the statutory provision of after care support services.

The emerging picture for these young people is one of continued disruption as they were leaving care and moving into independent accommodation. The evidence certainly supports the

assertion that the first year or so after leaving care tends to be a problematic time for young people (Garnett, 1992). Importantly, these were the seven young people in the sample who *did* move through the leaving care system and were, for all intents and purposes, prepared for living independently. The problematic nature of the issues faced by these young people should raise concern about the young people who were unprepared for leaving care.

Seven of the sixteen young people in the sample had no contact with the independence units from a care placement. Instead, they moved directly into independent accommodation but only in the sense that they were living out of care. Four young people did eventually spend some time in one of the independence units but, as will be seen, these were unplanned, emergency placements rather than planned moves in preparation for leaving care. Again, the dual use of the units becomes apparent. An issue that is less apparent is why these seven young people did not move into the independence units in preparation for leaving care. It is evident from their experiences that many were ill-equipped to live independently particularly given the seemingly inappropriate nature of their accommodation.

Chelsea and Jane were both living out of care at sixteen years old. Chelsea was living in a bedsit having been moved out of a children's home due to her involvement in prostitution. She remembered moving into the bedsit.

"They had this meeting and said that if I started behaving myself they would find me a nice flat. If I didn't they would put me in a bedsit. They moved me to the bedsit the next day. It was a really horrible place, damp and dirty. I hated it. I stayed out just so I wouldn't have to sleep there. It was a bad time. My mum could see how bad it was so she let me move in with her."

Chelsea's stay with her family was short-lived due to the problematic nature of her relationship with her father which had further deteriorated because of Chelsea's work as a prostitute. She then moved into a supported hostel for homeless young women which she disliked as much as the bedsit but for different reasons, such as the rules and "staff going on at you all the time". Again, Chelsea stayed away from the hostel as much as possible.

"I were out working or at my mum's. I really wanted to go back to my mum's but because I were still doing what I were doing she wouldn't let me. I lost my place at the hostel because I stayed out so much. They found me a place at a mother and baby unit which were okay."

Chelsea's move to the mother and baby unit appeared to be a short-term, emergency measure. The appropriateness of the placement ought to be questioned since Chelsea was not a mother

at the time. However, within weeks she realised she was pregnant and was allowed to stay. Chelsea was still only sixteen years old. On discovering she was pregnant, Chelsea stopped working as a prostitute and her placement seemed to be going well. Soon after the birth of her daughter she remembered things going wrong.

“Social services were round all the time checking on the baby and talking to the staff to see what I were doing. It got really heavy and I thought they were going to take my baby away. I went to stay with some friends for a while but they found me and said if I didn’t go back they would take the baby into care. I went back and they just kept going on about what I used to do...being a prostitute...they said I weren’t looking after the baby properly. I were and the health visitor said I were doing really well but they took her off me anyway and put her in care.”

Chelsea’s anger and upset was directed towards the staff at the unit. She was subsequently evicted. She then moved into the pre-independence unit. Again, this was a short-term, emergency placement but did last for approximately five months. Chelsea said that her stay was a good experience. She welcomed the support she received whilst she was trying to have her daughter returned from care. She moved to another mother and baby unit once her daughter was returned to her. Chelsea and her daughter eventually left this mother and baby unit and they went to live with Chelsea’s family.

Jane was also moved into a mother and baby unit despite not being a mother. At fifteen years of age, Jane’s placement in an out-of-borough CHE had broken down. She remembered being told that she would have to start living independently.

“My social worker explained that I had to start living on my own and that he was trying to get me a flat. They put me in a mother and baby unit whilst I were waiting for a flat. It was a bit odd being there with all these babies around but it were okay. I had a lot of freedom.”

Jane was living in the mother and baby unit when she was sixteen years of age. She moved into a flat within a few months and stayed there until she was eighteen years old. She managed to keep her tenancy despite spending four months in custody for robbery when she was seventeen. Jane talked with pride about living on her own,

“I did really well. Even my social worker thought I were doing well, that I were doing a lot better than before. He said I changed a lot when I moved to my flat, calmed down a lot. It were always tidy and everything. I did get into arrears with my electricity but I was paying that off. I was doing well.”

This situation changed in a very short period of time. Jane's younger brother moved into her flat after having problems at home. As a consequence, her flat was increasingly used by her brother and his friends as a meeting place or as Jane put it, "a doss house, people coming round and banging on the door all the time". She was served with an eviction notice due to the disturbances. Jane moved in with her boyfriend and his mother. The situation was not stable due to the problematic relationship between Jane and her boyfriend's mother. Jane was forced to leave when she became pregnant.

"She just told me to get out. Andy and me were really pleased that I were pregnant coz we'd just got engaged and things were going alright. I think she was jealous of all the time Andy spent with me. I don't know...she just packed all my things up and told me to go."

Jane moved in with her sister for a while but became homeless when this arrangement broke down. She did approach social services for help and was placed in a women's refuge before eventually being allocated a council house. At the final interview, Jane was living with her boyfriend and her baby was just weeks old. That Jane had apparently managed to live independently for a period of time belies the early age at which she was moved out of care. The problems she subsequently encountered are further evidence of the kind of issues experienced by other young people in the sample who left care without any independence training. It is also significant that Jane was in an out-of-borough CHE prior to moving out of care.

The remaining five young people had all been in out-of-borough CHEs. Levi had been moved to a CHE placement following the admission into care of her baby daughter. Levi was fifteen at the time. She had a history of running away and this behaviour continued at the CHE as did her work as a prostitute. She was eventually moved back to a children's home in the local authority because, Levi believed, "they wanted to keep an eye on me and see what I was doing". She became pregnant for the second time and Levi moved into a mother and baby unit after the birth of her twin daughters. She was still only sixteen years of age. Her placement at the mother and baby unit came to an abrupt end when Levi's twin daughters were admitted into care.

"I just cracked up when they took the twins. I went for one of the social workers that come to take the babies. I hit him in the face and goes 'you fucking bastard, you're not taking my fucking kids. I schized out big time. I rammed his head into the car. They did me for GBH (grievous bodily harm) but the charges got dropped coz they said I was mentally unstable at the time."

Levi was evicted from the unit. Her recollections of where she lived in the preceding months were somewhat blurred but appeared to include staying with her mother, friends and boyfriends. As well as the admission into care of her twins, she was also dealing with the adoption of her first daughter. She described herself as being “all over the place” emotionally. Levi was hospitalised under the Mental Health Act after attempting to commit suicide. When she was due to be discharged from hospital, she remembered a meeting taking place to decide where she was going to live.

“They were arguing about where I should go. They said I couldn’t go to semi-independence coz I’d never stayed anywhere before so there’d be no point. The hospital said I had to leave but they weren’t happy about me living on my own...which I would of been coz me mam were in hospital herself...it just went on...in the end they said I could go to semi-independence until they could get me a place at a homeless hostel.”

At seventeen, Levi did move into the semi-independence unit but her move there was, essentially, an emergency placement. It did, however, last for a number of months during which time Levi appeared to settle down. She had regular contact with her twins and had started to attend adult literacy classes. The sudden death of Levi’s mother and the subsequent adoption of her twins set in train a series of events which included “doing a runner”, “living with a man I’d met”, and “just getting by”. At the third interview, Levi was back in hospital after a further suicide attempt. She did have a room at a hostel for homeless young women but thought she was going to be evicted when she was discharged from hospital because of her rent arrears.

Boothy and Sebastian were still in their respective out-of- borough placements at the age of sixteen. Sebastian’s placement continued until he was eighteen years old. At this age, his care order was discharged and the local authority ceased paying for the placement. He had been hoping to be able to stay in his placement as a lodger but was unable to do so.

“They had told me that they wouldn’t kick me out and that we could come to some arrangement about me paying for board and lodgings. When they stopped getting the money for me they said it would probably be better for me to get somewhere on my own because I was old enough. I didn’t have any choice really. They could get £450 a week for my place so I had to go. I was just a meal ticket to them.”

Sebastian tried, unsuccessfully, to find somewhere to live in the same area and decided instead to return to his home town and live with his step-father. This arrangement did not last because of the difficulties they had in adjusting to living together after a long separation. Sebastian

moved in with a friend of his mother's for a few months until moving again to the lodgings he was in at the end of the study. He was thinking about getting a place of his own but was concerned about the financial costs of running a flat.

Boothy's out-of-borough placement was brought to an abrupt end when the local authority decided to withdraw the funding. Boothy appeared somewhat confused by this decision.

"They said they couldn't afford it but they'd paid nearly £3,000 a week to send me to a residential school in the Lake District and that didn't do me any good. I liked where I was. I weren't getting into as much trouble or anything but they said they couldn't afford it so they brought me back and put me in a shared house which were stupid."

The alleged stupidity of the decision was based on Boothy's experiences following the cessation of his out-of-borough placement. He was still sixteen when he moved into a shared house and it was the first time that he had been expected to live independently. It is difficult to assess whether Boothy had the practical skills with which to run a house because soon after taking up his tenancy another young man moved in and within weeks they were both remanded into custody for a series of burglaries. Boothy again thought the decisions made by social services were "stupid".

"I don't know why they moved him in with me. It was stupid coz they knew what I was like and he was worse. Him and his mates started going out robbing and bringing stuff back to the house. When the police raided the place they found stuff in my room so we both got locked up. I were on remand for two weeks and then some of the charges got dropped so they let me out."

As a consequence, Boothy's tenancy was revoked and he was placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. He had been expecting to move into the semi-independence unit but believed the staff did not want him there because of the reputation he had gained whilst in care. Boothy initially enjoyed living in the guest house but as the months passed he remembered feeling increasingly suicidal.

"Things just started getting me down. Me mum weren't speaking to me and me and me brother had fallen out over this bike we'd nicked. I don't know...I'd thought about topping myself before but I was really going to do it this time."

Perhaps because of the deterioration in Boothy's well-being, he was offered a place and moved into the semi-independence unit. His placement there appeared to be going well. He remembered looking after himself properly and he had started a relationship with a young woman who was also living in the unit. The relationship ended after a couple of months and

soon after this Boothy committed two serious offences against a female member of staff. By the third interview Boothy was in prison and had been told that his release date would be in the year 2005 by which time he will be twenty five years old. He was hoping to get some help whilst he was in prison, specifically “to get [his] head sorted out”. It would be hard to describe Boothy’s brief spell of living out of care as independent. His foreseeable future was totally institutionalised.

An institutional future was also likely for Stevie and Ashley. Both had received custodial sentences when they were fifteen and Ashley was in prison for the second time when he was sixteen. On his release from prison, Ashley remembered his social worker offering him a range of options regarding his accommodation.

“He told me I could go to my mum’s or they would find me a bedsit or some bed and breakfast place. I weren’t sure what they were so I said I’d go to my mum’s.”

Like all his previous attempts at living with his mum, this one also broke down. Ashley was homeless for a while until he was arrested for a burglary. He was placed with remand foster parents. This placement also broke down. He was then moved to the pre-independence unit: a move which Ashley described as “either there or prison”. Whilst at the unit he was arrested again and was remanded into custody. He was coming towards the end of his sentence by the third interview. His social worker had been to see him to discuss accommodation on his release. Unlike his previous release from prison, living with his mother was not an option as she had ended contact with Ashley. His options were a bedsit or bed and breakfast accommodation. He asked for an explanation of what they were!

Stevie was serving a prison sentence at the age of sixteen years for offences committed at his out-of-borough CHE. Upon his release he was placed in a children’s home in the local authority for about three months before moving into a shared house. Stevie had not undergone any independence training but he remembered wanting to move into the house largely because he wanted to move on from the children’s home. He moved in with another young man who Stevie described as “a nutter who got me into all sorts of things”. Stevie was quickly remanded into custody for a series of burglaries and eventually received his second custodial sentence. Stevie was only interviewed once for the research. Information from his social worker suggested that at the time of the second interviews Stevie was living with his father, although returned letters indicated that he was not known at that address. At the third interview, information disclosed by another young person in the sample suggested that Stevie was in custody again. For the duration of the study period, both Ashley and Stevie had spent

more time in penal institutions than in independent accommodation. Their futures similarly looked to be cycles of institutionalisation and “independence” with the former pre-dominating. At the last interview with Ashley, he commented that he was going to sort himself out this time.

“I’m going to get a house and a job and settle down and stuff...I won’t be in here next time you come and see me”

The fact that the fieldwork had ended was a moot point as Ashley added, *“I probably will be, though, won’t I?”* It was difficult not to concur given his previous experiences of living out of care and out of prison. In many ways, incarceration appeared to provide a multi-dimensional sense of security. Ashley reflected on prison life.

“You know where you are in here. I get me food and me burn (tobacco) and I know loads of people. It’s just like being in a kids home really.”

The sense of continuity which Ashley seemed to infer from his experiences is in stark contrast to two young people in the sample who did continue to live in their last care placements.

At the end of the research period, Dave and Wesley were still living in their respective placements. For them, leaving care amounted to little more than the discharge of their care orders. Wesley was still living with his long-term foster parents who he had been with since being approximately eighteen months old. For the duration of this research, his placement looked, for all intents and purposes, stable. He had not considered moving on and leaving care was not an evident issue. At the final interview, Wesley had reached eighteen years of age and his care order had recently been discharged. This event had also resulted in the cessation of the money paid to his foster parents. Wesley was not anticipating having to move but he had been allocated an after care worker who he met at a recent review meeting.

“They were talking about where I was going to live. This after care guy started talking about finding me somewhere if I needed it but my mum and dad said I could stay with them. I thought I might have to leave because I was eighteen but it was agreed that as long as I behave myself and paid some money to my mum for my keep then it would be alright. I don’t want to leave here but I know I will have to one day because my dad is getting old.”

Although Wesley was not expecting to need the services of the after care team, he did have a named person whom he could contact if the need arose. Dave, on the other hand, had not met an after care worker and did not know who the after care team were. At the final interview, he was still living at home with his father and intended to stay there for the foreseeable future.

“They sent me a letter saying my care order would be discharged on such and such a date. That was it. They didn’t come and see me or anything...[the letter] never mentioned anything about an after care worker or going to them for help. Is that like a social worker?...I’m happy here so I don’t need any help.”

Understanding Differences in Leaving Care

Given the emphasis in the Children Act 1989 on preparing young people to leave care it is important to attempt to understand the differences between those who are ‘prepared’ for leaving care and those who are not. Research has shown disparities between local authority social services departments in the types of services provided for young people leaving care (Biehal *et al*, 1995). Furthermore, some local authorities have been shown to be failing to meet the requirements of the Children Act 1989 (Lambert, 1998; Strathdee, 1993;). Despite differences in service provision on a national scale, the local authority in which this research was carried out had mechanisms and structures in place to ensure both the gradual de-institutionalisation and preparation for independence of young people leaving care. The evidence shows, however, that not all the young people in the sample were able to access these services as they were leaving care.

Equal opportunity to access leaving care schemes has been raised as an important and fundamental issue (Biehal *et al*, 1995). Issues concerning clear policy statements, referral procedures and user information were highlighted by Biehal *et al* (1995) as important factors in terms of facilitating access to leaving care schemes. A further issue which was seen to be important was the type of placement in which young people resided prior to leaving care. In three of the four leaving care schemes they studied, it was apparent that young people in residential care were more likely to access the schemes than those in foster care. The reasons for this concerned the possible lack of knowledge about the schemes among young people in foster placements and their carers. Yet, the vast majority of referrals to all the schemes came from social workers. (The role of social workers can be seen as providing a link between young people, their carers, and other relevant services which raises doubts about the alleged cause of the lower rate of referrals for young people in foster care.) Comparisons between this research and that by Biehal *et al* (1995) should be treated with caution because of the relatively small number of young people leaving foster care in this research.. However, in this research, three of the four young people who were in foster care at the age of sixteen moved into one of the independence units in preparation for leaving care. The fourth young person was still living in

his foster placement at the end of the study and after his care order had been legally discharged. Given that only seven of the sixteen young people in this research moved into one of the independence units as a matter of course, the evidence suggests that the type of last care placement may have little to do with access to leaving care schemes.

One issue did emerge from the data on the routes by which young people moved out of care. This concerns not the type of placement history *per se* but the location of some of these placements. Six of the seven young people who were 'unprepared' for leaving care had previously been in out-of-borough placements. The reasons for these placements were discussed in Chapter Four but, summarily, the young people's continued participation in crime and truancy were pre-dominating factors. In short, it was their exhibited 'bad' behaviour which resulted in them being placed away from the local authority. If a young person was placed away from the local authority then it would arguably cause undue disruption to bring them back in order to prepare them for leaving care. Yet, all of these young people did return to the local authority when their placements ended but none of them were offered access to the independence units in preparation for leaving care. Levi, Boothy and Jane believed that they were not offered independence training because of the reputations they had gained whilst they were in care. Whether this is the case or not arguably matters less than the fact that they believe it to be so. Chelsea was offered a "nice flat" if she behaved herself, or a "bedsit" if she did not. She was not offered a place in the pre-independence unit. This might suggest that the decisions being made about who accessed the services had an underlying deserving/undeserving agenda.

Although some of these young people did eventually reside at one of the independence units, the placements were of an emergency nature and not part of a planned preparation for leaving care. Such implicit discrimination appears to be grounded not in the type of last care placement or indeed, in the type of placement histories but on the received knowledge of young people's past behaviour. Garnett's research (1992) lends some credence to this contention. With regard to after care contact arrangements made by social workers with young people previously in care, Garnett's research indicated that social workers did discriminate between young people. One group of young people were described as 'befriended' by social workers on the grounds of their perceived 'needs' and 'vulnerability'. However, another group of young people were described as 'difficult to engage' and no contact plans had been made. These young people were described by the social workers as 'hostile' or 'unreceptive' to contact. The perceived needs of these young people were not mentioned. The needs of young

people leaving care are likely to vary enormously. Yet, access to leaving care services does not appear to be wholly needs-led.

The importance of access to leaving care schemes becomes more pertinent when outcomes are being assessed. The research by Biehal *et al* (1995) showed that leaving care schemes played a positive role in housing outcomes for young people leaving care, particularly with regard to arranging access to move on accommodation. Evidence from this research supports their findings. All of the young people who moved into one of the independence training units in preparation for leaving care subsequently moved into what Biehal *et al* (1995) would describe as 'good' accommodation, e.g. permanent tenancies or accommodation acceptable to the young person. The accommodation into which the young people who were unprepared for leaving care initially moved was characteristically 'poor', being a mixture of bed and breakfast hotels, hostels and bedsits - most of which were insecure and transitional (*ibid*). However, in this research, the 'good' outcomes for the young people who resided in leaving care units were, in many cases, short-lived. The number of moves experienced by these young people matched those made by the young people who were unprepared for leaving care. However, by the end of the study period, most of young people who had been 'prepared' for leaving care were indeed living in 'good' accommodation once more. This contrasts with those who did not experience pre-independence training and were 'unprepared' for leaving care. Only one young person in the unprepared group was known to be in 'good' accommodation by the end of the study. Planned access to and residence in the independence training units does, therefore, appear to be beneficial despite the disruption experienced. Yet, as Stein (1997) has argued, in the absence of randomised control samples, it is virtually impossible to assess the impact of leaving care schemes.

The evidence in this chapter suggests that the young people's experiences of leaving care are characteristically diverse. The disruption many experienced in care continued as they moved out of care and began to live independently. The disruption in their accommodation was, for many young people, attributable to a range of issues. These can be summarised in terms of the young people's involvement in key relationships, child protection proceedings, and crime. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that for two young people, it was being victims of crime rather than the perpetrators which caused disruption in their accommodation. None of these can easily be defined as housing issues. This is not to say that housing is not important for young people leaving care. It is of fundamental importance. However, as this research shows,

young people face a whole range of issues as they leave care. These were manifest irrespective of whether the young people were 'prepared' or 'unprepared' for leaving care.

It is vital to remember that the young people in this sample were aged between sixteen and eighteen when they were leaving care and having to deal with the issues discussed above. These issues and the evidence presented above raises further questions about the youth transition model generally and the housing transition specifically. In particular, it is arguably the case that the housing transition is too driven by status change, in that there is more emphasis on *where* young people live rather than on *how* they live. The young people in this research who were growing up in their biological families were also aged between sixteen and eighteen years. All six of these young people were living in the parental home at the start of this research. By the end of the research, only one young person had left home. This is interesting in itself as it throws into sharp relief the differences between them and the young people leaving care.

The Housing Transition for Young People in Families

Mark was the one person brought up in a biological family to have left home. His experience raises interesting issues about the speed at which changes can occur. At the start of the research period, Mark was living at home with his parents and was in full-time employment. In the first interview, he disclosed that he had thought about leaving home to get his "own place" but had no real intentions of doing so in the immediate future. There appeared to be two reasons he had thought about leaving home. One concerned his relationship with his parents. The other was focused on his perception of personal freedom.

"I've thought about it when there are arguments and they (his parents) are getting on my case about something. It's brilliant as well when they (his family) go on holiday and I've got the house to myself. I can do what I want and have who I want round. It's good. I mean I can do that now but it's not the same when your mum and dad are there."

Despite this, Mark had not looked for his own place. He thought he would leave home eventually, particularly when he had saved some money. For the time being Mark thought it was "cheaper" to live at home. Six months later, at the second interview, Mark had left home, although not for the reasons he had previously intimated. He had met and moved in with a young woman who already had her own house. By the third and final interview, Mark was engaged and was in the throes of sorting out who would be the best man at his wedding.

Mark's experience of leaving home is traditional in the sense that he had left the parental home in order to establish his 'family of destination' (Jones, 1988). Among the other young people in this grouping, his actions were unique.

The experiences of the other five young people reflect the sentiments disclosed by Mark in the initial interview. All had thought about leaving home but none had done so. Thomas had, perhaps, come the closest to actually putting his thoughts into actions and had looked for his own place. The reason for this seemed to be the nature of his relationship with his father.

"We don't really get on and haven't done since my mum kicked him out for having an affair. Since he came back he's always on about something...calling me a 'mummy's boy'. It gets on my nerves and I don't think I can put up with it for much longer."

Although Thomas had not actually left home, the issues mentioned as reasons for wanting to leave are indicative of the 'family problems' frequently stated by young people who leave home at an earlier age than the rest of their cohort (Jones, 1995). Thomas was managing to cope with these issues by spending a lot of time at his sister's house although he maintained that once he had got a full-time job and was earning some money he would leave home.

The perceived need for a job and some money as prerequisites for leaving home were mentioned by all the young people. Indeed, many did not believe that they would leave home until they were "in their mid-twenties" which may reflect their perceptions about how long it would take them to get a job and save some money. This is similar to other research (Jones, 1995) which shows that young people believe there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to leave home. This assumes, of course, that young people have choices about leaving home. The overwhelming majority of the young people in this sample who grew up in care cannot be seen to have had any choice about 'leaving home'. Similarly, other research shows that family problems can compromise the choices of some young people to leave home at an early age (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994; Jones, 1995). In these circumstances, leaving home early can result in young people experiencing a range of social and financial difficulties. Jones (1995) found that some young people later return to the parental home: an option not widely available to young people who grow up in care.

In terms of leaving home, Jones (1995) also makes a further distinction between the experiences of young people. She differentiates between 'leaving home' and 'living away from home' with the latter reflecting young people who live away from home because of education

courses or employment but who intend to return home. In this research, three young people were pursuing education or employment which might necessitate them 'living away from home'. Alisha was due to go into the Army. She did, however, intend returning home until she found somewhere of her own. Her intention to return home, therefore, appeared to be a temporary arrangement. Kahia and John were both applying to go to university. Jones (1995) has highlighted attendance at university as a reason for young people to 'live away from home'. However, both Kahia and John had misgivings about living away from home and both were applying to universities close to their home town. John was explicit in his intentions.

"I don't want to leave home. I'm only applying to places close to here...I've got it easy at home, it's cheaper and I don't want to leave my family yet."

Kahia was more concerned about seeing her family, friends and boyfriend rather than embracing the experience of 'living away from home' traditionally associated with going to university. The increasing financial costs to young people going to university may be a factor in young people's decisions to attend universities in close proximity to their home towns but this was evidently not the only factor in Kahia and John's decision making. Kahia admitted to feeling "scared" at the prospect of going to university and it is arguable that the sense of security she would feel by staying at home would minimise her fears.

For all of these young people, their families created a sense of security. Comments such as "my mum looks after me" and "they (parents) care about what happens to me" suggests that families provide a source of continual emotional support as well as providing accommodation. Furthermore, many of the young people had negotiated a sense of independence despite living at home. They knew that their parents were concerned about their welfare and did not want to abuse their parents support. Sheridan's recollections indicate the process through which their independence was negotiated.

"I started going to pubs when I was about fifteen. They knew what I was doing and they just said 'don't do it behind our backs'. My mum said she could trust me to behave myself. I tell them where I am going and who I will be with so they know that I'm alright. I get a lot of freedom as long as I tell them where I'm going."

Leaving home, therefore, was not a requisite indicator of independence. The extent to which changes in the housing market were delaying their transitions from the parental home seems to be an exercise in imposing a policy issue in circumstances which, for the time being, are not appropriate. However, the young people did associate leaving home with jobs and money which supports the argument made by Jones and Wallace (1992) regarding the importance of the school to work transition in structuring the transitions to adulthood. Again, there is a case

for suggesting that, even among young people living in the parental home, it is important to understand *how* they live and not just *where* they live. It is evident that living in the parental home enabled these young people to pursue their transitions into the labour market. As will be seen in the next chapter, the converse is true for the young people who were leaving care. Their transitions into independent accommodation, among other things, severely impacted upon their transitions into the labour market.

CHAPTER SIX

Leaving School

Introduction

It has been argued (Jones & Wallace, 1992) that youth transitions to adulthood are increasingly structured by the school to work transition. The reasons for this assertion are twofold: firstly, the school to work transition is widely seen to be predominant and pivotal to the other transitional strands; and secondly, the protraction of the school to work transition is seen to impact upon the timing of them. There is data to support the assertion (Jones, 1995; Bynner *et al*, 1997). Despite the apparent legitimacy and importance of the school to work transition, its applicability to the experiences of young people who have grown up in care raises some limitations. At its most fundamental, the school to work transition assumes that young people are in compulsory education until the age of sixteen - the age at which the transition is seen to begin. Whilst the interaction of the school to work transition with other transition strand is acknowledged, it is rarely explored. For many young people leaving care, domestic and housing imperatives render the school to work transition marginal to their priorities. This chapter examines these issues in more detail.

The transition from school to work is seen to be problematic for young people leaving care. Rates of unemployment among young people leaving care are disproportionately high (Fowler *et al*, 1996). Two recent studies suggest that around fifty per cent of young people leaving care experience unemployment (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Broad, 1997). This had led some writers to describe 'care leavers' as disadvantaged and vulnerable in the labour market (Coles, 1995; Roberts, 1995). Other research has highlighted the importance of educational qualifications as a factor influencing young people's transitions into the labour market (Banks *et al*, 1992; Courtenay & McAleese, 1993; Sime *et al*, 1990; Roberts, 1993). Given the amount of research which shows that young people tend to leave care with few or no educational qualifications (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Broad, 1992; Gamett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986) it is tempting to see the lack of educational qualifications as a critical link in the causal chain.

It is certainly true that young people's experiences of being in care and their education specifically, are relevant to their transitions into the labour market. This chapter will draw on some evidence presented in Chapter Four and explore the links between young people's education in care and their transitions into the labour market. It quickly becomes evident that

for young people leaving care their transitions into the labour market are structured less by their lack of educational qualifications and more by their biographical experiences of being in care and leaving care. It is, therefore, a complex process of transitions and interactions which result in high levels of unemployment among young people leaving care. It is important to understand and unravel the process if policy solutions are to be effective.

An exploration of the school to work transition among the young people who grew up in their biological families raises a number of interesting issues. It has been argued that social policy changes in education and training specifically, have created an environment in which young people now face a diversity of choices and opportunities as they leave compulsory education (Banks *et al*, 1992; Coles, 1995). This research shows how and why the young people in this sample are making choices within the range of opportunities that are available to them. It will be shown that the choices they make at sixteen are subject to change. It is with support that these young people are able to manage the changes and negotiate better outcomes for themselves.

Comparisons of the school to work transition between these two groupings of young people shows that those leaving care experience the transition in a remarkably different way. For both groupings of young people the school to work transition is not as linear as might be assumed. However, differences are arguably more apparent within the grouping of young people leaving care themselves. Again, the evidence suggests that comparisons based on statistical depiction of 'outcomes' from education, training and labour market participation are overly simplistic. The experience of being in care is greater than the sum of educational qualifications attained at sixteen years of age. It is the experience of being in care which is pivotal to the transition into the labour market.

From Care to (Un)employment?

The decisions made by young people at the end of compulsory education can be seen to have long term effects on their careers in the labour market (Banks *et al*, 1992). The opportunities available to young people and the decisions they make at the age of sixteen are also determined, to a greater or lesser extent, by their educational qualifications (Roberts, 1995). It has long been recognised that being in care can be educationally disadvantageous (Social Services Committee, 1984; Utting, 1991) and certainly there is enough research to show that young people who have been in care are much less likely to attain the level of educational

qualifications of other young people in their cohort (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986). Given their lower levels of educational attainment, the opportunities available to young people in care are likely to be much more limited than for young people generally.

Within the youth transition model, an inherent assumption of the school to work transition is that young people remain in full time education until the end of compulsory schooling. The qualifications gained at sixteen thus provide a basis for analysing young people's routes into the labour market (Banks *et al*, 1992; Courtenay & McAleese, 1993; Roberts, 1993). It became evident in Chapter Four that for some young people in care, extensive movement between placements resulted in educational instability whilst for others truancy appeared to be a mechanism of self-empowerment. As such, not all of the young people in this sample who grew up in care were still in full-time education at the age of sixteen. The table below shows the age at which the young people were admitted into care and gives details about their educational careers including the number of qualifications they attained.

6.1 Education Careers in Care

Young Person	Age at admission into Care	No. of primary schools attended	No. of secondary schools attended	Age at last attendance in full time education	Qualifications Gained
Wesley	less than 1	1	1	on-going	5 GCSEs
Alexandra	less than 1	1	1	16	10 GCSEs
Boothy	7	2	1	13	none
Stevie	9	2	1	13	none
Levi	9	2	1	13	none
Nicky	9	1	2	17	5 GCSEs 1 NVQ Level I
Vivian	10	3	1	14	none
Jane	10	1	3	13	none
Geoffrey	11	1	1	19	Records of Achievement
Sebastian	11	1	3	on-going	none
Dave	12	1	1	16	9 GCSEs 1 NVQ Level I
Ashley	13	2	1	12/13	none
Chelsea	13	1	2	14	none
Jim	14	1	2	14	none
Courtney	14	1	1	16	9 GCSEs
Tenpenny	15	1	1	15	none

As the table shows, whilst some of the young people in this sample did remain in school until the age of sixteen and achieved at least the average number of basic qualifications, the majority of the young people ceased attending full time education earlier than the minimum school-leaving age. It is clear from the table that those young people who did gain some educational qualifications were the ones who not only remained in education until the minimum school leaving age but they also experienced a minimum amount of disruption in their educational careers. Other research has also noted that young people leaving care who do attain some qualifications tend to have experienced stability in their schooling whilst in care (Biehal *et al*, 1995). However, these six young people, as in other research (*ibid*), are in a minority. Most of the young people in the sample did not complete their compulsory education and did not attain any basic educational qualifications. It is possible to explore their transitions from school to work in terms of their lack of basic qualifications at the age of sixteen. However, it will be shown that there are a multitude of factors involved in the decisions made by, and for, some of the young people. It is important to understand these rather than simply asserting that the care system fails to meet the educational needs of young people.

Ten of the young people who had grown up in care had no educational qualifications at the age of sixteen. Of these, only Sebastian completed his compulsory education and indeed, exhibited a belief in the value of education. Despite not having any GCSEs, Sebastian was given the opportunity to continue his education after the age of sixteen.

“I’ve never missed out on education - I’m not a typical care kid. Most kids have to be forced into education whereas I just willingly took to it. When they (social services) cocked up my education they suggested I went to college instead. I did this two year catering course but then I decided I wanted to go into social work so I’m studying sociology and English literature at A’level.”

Sebastian’s longer term plans involved going to university but the cessation of his care placement at eighteen necessitated him moving back to his home town and enrolling at a different college. He was unable to continue with his A’level studies but did enrol for three GCSEs. By the third interview, Sebastian was still thinking about going to university but was also pursuing the possibility of emigrating to Australia to live with his uncle. As well as continuing his education, Sebastian also worked in a number of undeclared, part-time jobs which allowed him to “save [his] Income Support for Australia”. His employment, the most recent of which was in a night-club, impacted on his attendance at college and he was finding it difficult to keep up with his course work. His transition from school to work appeared

bifurcated. Although he claimed benefits, he had never been unemployed and his continued education has yet to yield any educational qualifications. Whether Sebastian goes to university or emigrates to Australia remains to be seen. More immediately, he was “doing the business and getting by” as an ‘unqualified care leaver’.

Sebastian’s experience is somewhat unique among the young people who had no basic qualifications at the age of sixteen years. All the other young people did not, for all intents and purposes, subscribe to the importance of education having truanted from school at an early age. Many had been excluded from school or had been removed from mainstream education by movement into out-of-borough CHEs. For those who did remain in the local authority, attempts were made to ensure that the young people’s educational needs were met. Many of these young people received some education by means of peripatetic tutors and pupil referral units. Vivian remembered a tutor visiting her at the children’s home and attempting to engage Vivian in educational activities.

“She used to come a couple of times a week and bring me work to do. If I weren’t in she’d leave it for me to do. It were like workbooks on maths or English or other stuff. Not like work you used to do at school. I never did it. I couldn’t be bothered.”

Boothy remembered attending what sounded like a pupil referral unit after he had been excluded from school. Boothy described it “like a youth club place...it were a good laugh sometimes.” The provision of these services seemed geared to fulfil the requirements of the Children Act 1989 rather than the needs of the young people. They did little to compensate for school exclusion. Perhaps more importantly, they effectively forestalled the young people’s attainment of basic qualifications. Despite some commonality of experience with regard to education and the lack of educational qualifications, there is a gender dimension to consider.

Four of the five young women who did not complete their compulsory education became mothers. Tenpenny attended a mainstream secondary school until she became pregnant at the age of fifteen years. Whether she would have attained any qualifications had she continued at school would be a matter for debate. In the event, a decision was taken to exclude Tenpenny from mainstream education.

“When I told the school I was pregnant, they told me I would have to leave coz they couldn’t have pregnant girls at school. They sent me to this special school for pregnant girls which were crap. We didn’t do anything so I stopped going.”

Vivian and Levi also became mothers at the age of fifteen years. However, both of these young women had already stopped attending school by the time they became pregnant. Chelsea was sixteen years old when she became a mother but, like Vivian and Levi, had previously ceased attending school and had been excluded. Given that they had ceased attending school and, moreover, were excluded from school it is doubtful that early motherhood had any significant impact on their attainment of basic qualifications. However, motherhood has impacted on their school to work transitions.

Since the age of sixteen, none of these young women have participated in education, training or employment and their intentions to do so were seemingly being postponed until their children were older. The interesting issue is their exhibited *intent* to pursue some type of education or training at a later date. When these young women discussed their own education, none of them voiced any regrets about not having completed their education or about having no qualifications. However, they were concerned about their children's education and development. Vivian spent a lot of time reading to her two sons.

"I read to them alot. I want to make sure they are okay coz I never had anybody to sit and read to me. I'm not clever or owt but I read to them and make sure they learn to talk proper words."

Similarly, Tenpenny was very concerned about her oldest daughter who had started swearing a lot since starting nursery.

"I went to nursery to see if they could do anything but her language just kept getting worse. In the end, I sent her to a different nursery to see if that did anything. I know if it carries on the nurseries won't have her."

For both these young women, their roles as mothers were being prioritised over their potential roles as workers. They did want to work eventually and mainly for financial reasons such as "being able to buy the kids things" or "so that I can take the kids on holiday". For these young women, therefore, the school to work transition was being protracted not because of a lack of qualifications or because they had been in care but, primarily, because they were mothers. Research by Biehal *et al* (1995) noted the tendency for parenthood to stall the transition into the labour market for young women leaving care. The failure to attain at school and to find a positive direction were highlighted by the researchers as providing part of the context in which the young women became mothers. The construction of early motherhood as a social problem has been underlined by Phoenix (1991). Yet, the disproportionate levels of early motherhood among young women leaving care remains a cause for concern (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Fowler *et al*, 1996; Garnett, 1992). The processes of early motherhood for the young women in this

research will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. For now, it is sufficient to recognise early motherhood as an important dimension to being unqualified and unemployed.

For the remainder of the young people who had no educational qualifications, their school to work transitions were protracted through unemployment and/or incarceration. Since being sixteen years old and for the duration of the study, Ashley and Stevie had spent more time in custody than out. However, during one of their brief spells out of custody, both had been involved in a youth training scheme run by a local branch of the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO). Their participation had been arranged by the youth justice team rather than any employment based agency, such as the careers service. It is doubtful whether their participation in youth training was ever going to lead to employment or indeed, motivate them to seek employment. Both did motor mechanics which Stevie described as just “something to do” whilst Ashley was slightly more discursive.

“We learned about cars and that...but I know alot about cars anyway (reference to his t.w.o.c.ing skills). It’s a good laugh but Fridays are the best coz that’s when we get paid.”

Stevie’s youth training ended when he was remanded into custody and Ashley’s place was withdrawn because “they said I messed about too much.”

Jane had been employed in variety of factory jobs since the age of sixteen but none of them had lasted any length of time. Perhaps as a consequence of the sector of the labour market in which she was working, Jane recalled “being ripped off” in terms of not being paid her “proper” wages. She tried to find employment but believed her criminal record and a prison sentence after a conviction for robbery prohibited success. Boothy, on the other hand, believed he could not get a job if he tried because of his lack of qualifications. In fact, Boothy was the only young person to mention his lack of qualifications as a cause of his unemployment. He did, however, add that he did not feel ready to find employment. Boothy was living in bed and breakfast accommodation at the time.

“I need to get somewhere proper to live first. I can’t think about a job yet. I’m not ready...sometimes I can’t even be bothered to play football and I really like doing that. There’s too many things to sort out.”

For Boothy, unemployment seemed to be a minor issue compared to his accommodation and the emotional difficulties he was experiencing. However, being unemployed did create difficulties for some of these young people. None of them were in receipt of Income Support.

At the ages of sixteen and seventeen, all had tried to claim severe hardship payments without success. Changes in social security policy were discussed in Chapter Two. Yet the current rationale for the changes (see McManus, 1998) have failed to reach both the young people and professionals who are affected by them. Boothy recalled his social worker accompanying him to “the dole office” in an attempt to sort out Boothy’s claim for benefits.

“They looked at my claim and said that because I was in care I couldn’t get any money until I was eighteen. I was living in a guest house so I wasn’t in care but they wouldn’t give me any money. My social worker argued with them but it didn’t do no good. Staff at [the semi-independence unit] used to give me some money every Friday.”

The tendency of leaving care schemes to give money to young people without a source of income has been noted elsewhere (Biehal *et al*, 1995). However, the refusal to award severe hardship payments to many young people who have been in care means that only those young people who are in contact with a leaving care scheme may have access to a source of income. The amount of money paid by the schemes is subject to variation and some do not have a policy of financially supporting young people (*ibid*). A worrying consequence is that some young people, for whom the school to work transition is little more than an academic concept, are without the safety net of welfare benefits. Ashley, who had no regular contact with either his social worker or the semi-independence unit “did a few burglaries” for money. Levi, whose Income Support ceased after her children were taken into care, refused to have anything to do with social services. Instead, she returned to prostitution “when [she] needed some money”. The dispute between social services and the benefits agency regarding financial responsibility for young people who have been in care, results in some young people taking financial responsibility for themselves. For Ashley and Levi, this meant resorting to activities which they knew to deliver immediate financial rewards.

For these young people, therefore, their lack of educational qualifications are only one aspect of a complex process which is simplified into the school to work transition. Furthermore, it is a process which begins long before a young person reaches the age of sixteen. It is recognised that growing up in care can be educationally disadvantageous in itself and in terms of young people’s transitions into the labour market (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998b; Utting, 1991). The experiences of the young people above would certainly lend support to that assertion. However, the young people in this sample did not acknowledge their alleged disadvantage nor indeed did they see their lack of educational qualifications as singularly problematic.

Moreover, as the table showed, six of the young people in the sample did complete their compulsory education and achieved some basic qualification. This would suggest that being in care *per se* may not be as educationally deleterious as is sometimes assumed.

It was mentioned earlier that one of the factors effecting disruption in education was changes in care placements. This is particularly the case for movement into CHEs which involve geographic relocation to a different type of placement. Clearly, for young people who experience relatively little movement between care placements there is a sense in which that stability is reflected in their educational careers. However, there is a case for examining how this grouping of young people undertook their school to work transitions having completed their compulsory education and having achieved some educational qualifications. Whilst it is possible to suggest that being in care had a minimal effect on their attainment of educational qualifications, the process of leaving care can be seen to impact significantly on their transitions to work irrespective of the qualifications they gained.

Five of the young people - Wesley, Alexandra, Nicky, Geoffrey, and Courtney - decided to continue in post-sixteen education although their decisions to do so and the pathways taken were quite different. All but Geoffrey had attended mainstream school. Geoffrey had attended a special school since the age of eleven years old. He remained in the school until he was nineteen although he could not remember why he chose to stay in education. It is doubtful whether Geoffrey's continued education was an active or positive choice on his part. Indeed, he mentioned that people stayed at his school until they were eighteen or nineteen anyway. This suggests that Geoffrey may have been swept along by the culture of special education rather than entering into any kind of rational decision-making. Nevertheless, when he talked about his numerous Records of Achievement he exhibited a great sense of pride. Many of these were of a vocational nature, such as basic word processing, business and enterprise, woodwork, and numeracy skills. After leaving school Geoffrey commenced a full-time training placement at a local college which had been arranged by the staff at his special school. However, this lasted only four weeks. He said,

"It was supposed to be retailing, like how to start a business and other things but it were babyish...they had me spelling short words and that. I did that at nursery so I sacked it off."

Instead he decided to look for work himself. Geoffrey concentrated his search for work on manual work as he said that he was better with his hands than his head. At the third interview, by which time Geoffrey was nineteen years of age, he had been unemployed for a couple of

months and was claiming benefits. He was, however, optimistic that he would get work eventually. He was a frequent visitor to the Job Centre and had been interviewed for bar work in a couple of local pubs, none of which had resulted in a job offer. It is arguably the case that the point at which Geoffrey made an active choice about his school to work transition was when he realised his own expectations of himself exceeded those of others as indicated by his decision not to continue with his training placement. For him, being unemployed was preferable to undertaking what he perceived to be inappropriate and demeaning training.

The other four young people who continued in education did so in different circumstances and with varying degrees of success. Courtney had always aspired to study medicine at university and eventually become a general practitioner. Her aspirations were supported at school. Despite achieving nine GCSEs, Courtney only got a very low grade in her science subject which forestalled her ability to study science at A'level. Nevertheless, at sixteen years of age, she was still determined to get to university so started sixth form college and began studying three arts subjects at A'level and a GCSE in Science. By the end of the first term, Courtney had become frustrated with her studies.

“I was really disappointed at college. I was disappointed with my science result and I couldn't get my head into the work. I used to skip lessons and go in town. It seemed like things were changing...I was moving out of pre-independence. I didn't know whether I still wanted to be a doctor. I was disillusioned so I took a year out and found a job instead.”

Courtney did find full-time work as a waitress in a coffee shop. Although she found the work boring she enjoyed having some money. She kept this job for approximately twelve months before being sacked for absenteeism. Courtney said she was being sexually harassed by her male manager which was why she had taken a lot of time off work. At this point, Courtney thought about returning to college to continue her A'level studies but she experienced problems with her accommodation which resulted in her moving back into her mother's house. Having missed the start of term, Courtney spent about four months being unemployed before getting an office job. During this time she left her mother's due to a breakdown in their relationship and moved in with her boyfriend at his parent's house. She felt the support of her boyfriend had been an important influence in terms of accommodation and her return to employment. However, at the time of the third interview, Courtney was talking about getting her own flat rather than talking about going to university. Clearly, Courtney had made the transition from school to work but not in the manner she had intended at the age of sixteen. If she had passed her GCSE in Science initially then perhaps her transitional path would have

been different. However, it is doubtful that a GCSE pass in science would have prevented the manifestation of her accommodation problems and the subsequent breakdown in her relationship with her mother. Courtney's account also illustrates the way in which the school to work transition is influenced by housing, domestic and partnership issues.

Alexandra, Nicky and Wesley all followed college based NVQ routes. Alexandra and Nicky both decided to study for NVQs in catering. Alexandra regretted her decision soon after the course had started.

“Everything I did was a flop. I couldn't make anything and couldn't do the silver service stuff. I don't know why I did it really coz I didn't get a good mark in my GCSE for food studies. My bakery tutor used to shout at me all the time then he refused to have me in his class.”

Alexandra became pregnant during the first year at college and she exhibited a sense of relief at the realisation that, for the time being at least, college was finished. For most of the study period Alexandra talked about her wish to go back to college to study social care with a view to becoming a social worker. She recognised that she had the capability to undertake academic studies. At the age of eleven Alexandra had passed an entrance examination to attend a public school. She had managed to get ten GCSEs despite placement disruption and extensive truancy in her last two years at school. The birth of her daughter, when Alexandra was seventeen years old, effectively postponed her return to college “until the baby is old enough to go to nursery”. Whilst Alexandra was waiting for her daughter to go to nursery, she experienced three accommodation moves and the birth of another baby. At the end of the research period, thoughts of returning to college to become a social worker had been superseded by efforts to prevent social workers taking her own children into care. In many ways, Alexandra did commence her transition from school to work in terms of choosing vocational education at the age of sixteen. However, it remains uncompleted largely due to motherhood. It is tempting to contemplate, as Alexandra herself does, what may have happened had social services agreed to pay for a school uniform when Alexandra was eleven years old.

Unlike Alexandra, Nicky did finish the first year of his NVQ course and started the second year. However, during his second year Nicky moved from the semi-independence unit into independent accommodation. This affected his studies.

“When I were in semi-independence I were doing alright at college. I'd got my NVQ Level I and started Level II. But when I moved into the flat I got really behind

with my college work. I was going to have to repeat a load of the course work so I left.”

Nicky was unemployed for a number of months before finding work as a kitchen assistant at a local hospital. He lost this job when the hospital closed down. However, after a few weeks he had found another job as a chef in a public house. At the end of the research period, Nicky was still working in the same place and had returned to college on day release to finish off his NVQ Level II. Despite numerous moves in accommodation and two periods of unemployment, Nicky was working in a job he enjoyed and in a sector of the labour market which he had intended to enter. His decision to return to college was, however, based upon his perceived fragility of the labour market. It is interesting that Nicky explains his entry into the labour market solely in terms of the support he had begun to receive from his older sister.

“If I hadn’t bumped into our Tracey I don’t know what would have happened. After leaving college I became a real dole dossier but Tracey took me under her wing. She helped me look for work. She was really proud of me when I got taken on at the hospital. When I got finished she wouldn’t let me sit around doing nothing. I didn’t want to anyway coz she were going out to work everyday so it wouldn’t have been right. We were both happy when I got the job at the pub.”

Again, Nicky’s account shows the impact of domestic and housing issues of the school to work transition.

Wesley’s decision to continue in education at the age of sixteen was prompted by the encouragement of his long-term foster parents and his wish to do an electronics degree at university. He chose to do an NVQ in electronics but did not complete sufficient coursework by the end of his first year at college. This was largely because he said he lost interest in the course and that the course was more difficult than he had anticipated. Instead of leaving college, Wesley decided to start another course and began an NVQ in motor mechanics. This decision seemed to be based primarily on his recent acquisition of a car. At the end of the research period, Wesley had sold his car and was struggling to maintain an interest in his course. It became evident that Wesley no longer knew what he wanted to do.

“I did want to go to university...I still do but I don’t know what I’d study. I keep thinking about going abroad but things like Camp America are just slave labour. I think I’d like to work abroad though. I might win the lottery and buy a bar somewhere then I wouldn’t have to finish college.”

Wesley appeared to be pondering on that which was achievable and expecting the unlikely. He felt under pressure from his foster parents to finish college and was concerned about “letting

them down". Wesley's two years in post-sixteen education had yet to yield anything other than uncertainty about his future. His experiences do, however, highlight the instability of post-sixteen education (Audit Commission, 1993).

Dave is the only other young person in the sample who attended school until the age of sixteen and achieved some basic qualifications. His transition from school to work is characteristically traditional in that, with the help of his father, he was offered a three year apprenticeship at a local bakery. The rate of pay was higher than that offered by Youth Training and the position was secure until he reached nineteen years of age. He took up the apprenticeship which included one day a week at college throughout the first year of his employment. He achieved his NVQ Level I in warehousing but did not exhibit any motivation to continue with Level II. Instead, Dave learned to drive.

"I thought about college but I couldn't be bothered. I know though that if I've any chance of being kept on when I'm nineteen then I need a driving license so I'm taking lessons at the moment. If I pass my test I should be alright coz I'm a good worker."

Dave did pass his driving test. However, at the third interview, he had been advised that his contract at the bakery was not going to be renewed and he was facing the prospect of unemployment in the near future. Despite this, Dave's continued participation in the labour market can be seen to reflect the stability he experienced in his accommodation. At the age of fifteen, Dave had returned to live with his father and was still there at the end of the research period. His father also worked at the bakery and Dave knew that his father would "put in a word" to help him to secure another job.

It would appear that the young people in the sample who finished their compulsory education and achieved some basic qualifications were better placed to make decisions about their transitional pathways. The outcomes for some of these young people, in terms of education and employment, appear to be better than those who had no qualifications at the age of sixteen. However, the processes by which these outcomes were attained appear to be a complex of factors in which educational qualifications was only one. It is evident that the decisions they made and the routes they chose to follow were, in some cases, impacted upon by changes in their accommodation and by their relationships with others. To this end, Dave and Wesley's experiences, in terms of having stable accommodation and stable relationships, mirror those of some of the young people who grew up within a family unit.

From Families to Jobs and Careers

The school to work experiences of the six young people who grew up within their family units raise some interesting issues in terms of the powerful effects of parental support. All six of the young people attended the same primary school and made the transition to secondary school at the age of eleven. With the exception of Thomas, all of them completed their compulsory education to the age of sixteen at the same secondary school. Thomas's experience highlights further the problematic nature of disruption in education. He moved to secondary school at the age of eleven and attended the same secondary school until the age of fifteen when he was excluded for fighting. He was then registered at another secondary school. Thomas acknowledged the reasons for his exclusion as fair since the fight with another pupil was violent and the police had become involved. However, he outlined the difficulties he had experienced in having to change schools.

"I went to my new school which were okay because some of my friends went there but I think my reputation had gone before me. The teachers expected me to be trouble like fighting all the time and some of the other kids who didn't really know me were winding me up to get into fights."

As well as having to deal with these issues, Thomas also had some difficulties with his academic work. The school to which he transferred did not follow the same aspects of the National Curriculum as his previous school. Thomas said he had to re-select GCSE option courses and complete two years of course work in his remaining final year. Not surprisingly, Thomas admitted that the whole incident "really cocked [him] up".. He did attain six GCSEs but said his grades were low.

Among this grouping of young people, Thomas's experience was an isolated one. All said they attended school on a regular basis and when the issue of truancy was mentioned they admitted to having been fearful of reprisals from their parents. Comments such as "I would have been grounded" or "they (parents) would have gone mad" were not unusual. Fear of parental reactions has been cited elsewhere prohibiting young people from truancy (O'Keefe, 1993). The young people in this grouping also mentioned the fact that there was little else for them to do. Only Mark admitted to having missed school without reason.

"I used to miss my cookery class. I hated doing it and I hated the teacher more. Me and a mate used to go and sit the park when it were cookery but that was the only class I missed."

This kind of truancy usually remains hidden within schools and from parents (Pearce & Hillman, 1998). However, Mark believed that his teacher and his parents knew he missed this particular class. It appeared that his otherwise regular attendance at school was seen to legitimise his behaviour.

More generally, parental influence over their behaviour and with reference to education specifically was evident. All the young people said that their parents had taken an active interest in their education. Sheridan's recollections are reflective of the thoughts of all the young people.

"My mum and dad always went to parents evenings. I used to dread it even though I knew I was doing okay...they never really put any pressure on me. They just used to say that it was my life and if I messed it up then I would pay the price."

All of the young people said that they felt free to socialise outside the home "as long as [their] school work was done". This contrasts noticeably with the comments of some young people who grew up in care who commented that their carers "couldn't make them do anything..." Interestingly, most of the young people who grew up in families exemplified the case of a mutual acquaintance who had missed school regularly and who was, at the age of sixteen/seventeen, variously described as "a criminal", "a druggie" and "a dole dosser". In short, participation in education was accepted as the norm. Although they did not attend the same school, all attended schools within the same locality as their homes and as such went to school and socialised with broadly the same group of people.

In terms of levels of attainment, the young people in this grouping took GCSE examinations. They attained between three and nine GCSEs and one young man thinks he might have got one but he never went to school to find out. Mark explained his lack of interest in his results in terms of him already being in full-time employment by the time the results were published. Mark's direct entry into the labour market was a positive choice in that he had never wanted to go to college. However, his accelerated transition from school to work was initially precarious.

"My first job was with this packing company. My friend already worked there so I got a job straight away. It didn't last long coz it were too hard. I were working twelve hours a day and I'd only just left school so I weren't used to it. I packed it in after about a week."

From leaving school at the age of sixteen until the end of the study period by which time Mark was eighteen years old, he had worked in at least seven or eight different jobs of an unskilled,

manual nature. Most of these he left of his own accord due, in the main, to the chance of a better paid job, usually involving less work or better hours. Mark's entry into the labour market could be described as unstable although he had only experienced one short period of unemployment.

Alisha was the only other young person in this sample who entered the labour market at sixteen years old. She was awarded three GCSEs, all of which were below grade C. Like Mark, Alisha had a variety of jobs initially but eventually found a job in a printers which she had kept for about twelve months. Both Mark and Alisha exhibited short-term attitudes toward their jobs in terms of them being enjoyable and financially rewarding when compared to youth training allowances or the part-time work many of their friends did whilst they were at college. However, towards the end of the research period Alisha had decided to join the Army and had begun to talk about her long-term career prospects which she recognised as limited in her job as an assistant in a printers.

"I like the people at the printers but it's really dead boring. I couldn't imagine doing it for the rest of my life. The Army is going to be a challenge and I'll learn new skills which will make it easier to get a good job when I get out."

It was difficult to discern the extent to which Alisha had internalised the slogans of the Army's recruitment advertising. However, this perhaps matters less than Alisha's obvious excitement at the last interview when she was about to start her Army career. She felt as though she was getting out of a "dead end" job without having to suffer "being skint and studying all the time" which she believed going to college entailed.

The other four young people, who had all gained six or more GCSEs, had all decided to continue their education after the age of sixteen. These decisions were seemingly based upon their longer term career aspirations. Sheridan wanted to work with children and was therefore studying for a nursery nursing qualification. Thomas wanted to be an electrician and was undertaking an NVQ course at college. John and Kahia both wanted to go to university although their chosen routes were different in that John was doing a Business Studies course at GNVQ level and Kahia had chosen to take A'levels at sixth form college. All of these young people had the support of their parents in their chosen routes and all said they had made their decisions in consultation with their parents. A major factor in their consultations seemed to be the financial implications of continuing their education. All reached an agreement with their parents that as long as they were at college they could remain in the parental home without making financial contributions. Despite these agreements being reached, there was a

sense in which the young people recognised the financial costs to their parents as all of them were working as well as studying. Kahia's recollections also indicate that these young people did not come from financially secure families.

"My mum and dad work but they don't earn loads of money. When I said I wanted to do A'levels they said it was alright coz my dad was really keen about me going to university but they couldn't give me much money. I mean they didn't hassle me about getting a job but my mum were always saying like, there's a job going here or there's another one there. They didn't say I had to get a job but I wanted one anyway so I could have some money."

All four of these young people had jobs in shops or restaurants which were variously described as "boring" and "badly paid". Whilst their jobs facilitated a degree of financial autonomy from their parents, they also acted as motivating factors to continue with their college work in that there was a recognition that the only way to avoid doing such jobs on a long-term basis was through education and the attainment of further qualifications. The level of commitment to education and the routes they had chosen at the age of sixteen was, however, put under some pressure during the research period.

In the middle of the research period Thomas found out that he had failed his end of year examinations which he would have to re-sit if he wanted to progress into the second year of his electronics course. He was extremely disappointed but his results had also forced him to reconsider his commitment to the course. During his first year at college Thomas had started working in a voluntarily capacity at a youth club. He had found this work rewarding and the feedback he had received from the manager of the club suggested his skills were valued. Thomas had fleetingly thought about pursuing this kind of work on a long term basis, however he was advised by his father to continue with his electronics course in order "to get a trade under his belt". His examination results brought this issue to the fore again and it was clear that Thomas felt torn between his father's expectations of him and his own desire to pursue something that would go against his father's advice. Whilst Thomas was trying to reconcile these issues and make a decision about his future, he received a regional award for his voluntary work at the youth club. The local newspaper covered the award ceremony which Thomas's parents attended. Following this event, Thomas described a change in his father's attitude and a compromise was reached. Thomas would retake his examinations for the electronics course so that he could return to the course if he wanted to in the future. In the meantime he could pursue his voluntary work. With help from the manager of the youth club,

Thomas arranged a work based NVQ course and funding from the local TEC. Within the twelve months of the research period Thomas had changed not only the direction of his transition from school to work but also the means by which the transition would be undertaken. The opinion and support of his parents were, however, critically important to his career decisions.

Research by the Audit Commission and OFSTED (1993) shows that a commensurate effect of the expansion of post-sixteen education has been an increase in the proportion of young people who do not complete the courses they commence at sixteen. The aptly titled *Unfinished Business*, could not shed any light on the subsequent destinations of the 'drop-outs'. It was hypothesised, however, that the drop-out rate was related to inappropriate enrolment practices, particularly with regard to the low level of basic qualifications attained by young people at sixteen which rendered them ill-equipped to pursue the further education courses for which they had enrolled. Statistically, Thomas and Wesley, whose change of course was discussed earlier, would undoubtedly be seen as young people who 'dropped out'. However, his experience gives an insight into the possible reasons why young people do not complete post-sixteen education courses. Similarly, Sheridan's experience adds a further dimension to the flexibility of career routes and gives further insight into why some young people fail to complete their further education courses.

After leaving school at sixteen, Sheridan commenced a two year nursery nursing course at college. Her parents were supportive of her decision to continue her education. She completed the first year successfully despite having had to work in the evenings and at weekends in order to earn some money. During the early part of her second year, her father lost his job. His unemployment appeared to have two major effects on Sheridan's life. One was the emotional issues that arose within the family, particularly between her parents with which Sheridan found it difficult to cope. The other was the financial implications of his unemployment. Sheridan said she felt a sense of guilt about not contributing to the costs of the home when she knew that money was tight. She had offered to pay some money from her part-time work but this had been refused by her parents. Her own suggestion that she get a full-time job was also rejected. At about the same time, Sheridan had begun a nursery placement as part of her course and she had discussed her feelings with the manager of the nursery.

"She was great. There was a job coming up at the nursery which she said I could have. She explained what NVQs were and assessments, how much money I would

get paid, everything. It seemed ideal really. College said I should finish off my course coz I was so close to the end but...I just thought I should get a job."

A package was agreed and Sheridan took the job. She felt that her decision created the opportunity to gain work experience in a sector of the labour market which she had intended enter anyway and assessment for NVQ meant that she would have recognisable qualifications. Most importantly for Sheridan, her employed status enabled her to make a financial contribution to the family household.

A key point to make is that for Thomas, Sheridan and, indeed, Wesley, their decisions to leave their college courses were taken in a context of an otherwise stable, domestic environment. A comparison can be made with the experiences of Nicky and Courtney from the sample of young people who had been in care. Both of them commenced post-sixteen education but left their courses uncompleted. However, at the same time as having to make decisions about college and their transitions into the labour market, Nicky and Courtney were having to sort out issues to do with their independent accommodation. This must be seen as a factor explaining the comparative ease with which Thomas and Sheridan changed their transitional routes despite the evident difficulties they each experienced in making their decisions.

Kahia and John were both intending to go to university but were pursuing different routes to get there. John was doing a GNVQ in Business Studies. Although he said he had wanted to go to college, it was evident that his family had been influential in his decision-making.

"My dad thought it would be a good idea to go to college. Business studies seemed the best thing to do because my dad has a business. All my cousins went to university as well so it seemed natural for me to go."

John was finding his course difficult. He was also having to work in a restaurant for extra money which meant he had less time to spend on his studies. Nevertheless, he did seem determined to pursue his chosen route. Kahia was doing A'levels and was also working in a restaurant. Her decision to continue her education seemed to be based on her childhood yearning to be a solicitor and a more recently acquired determination not to get a "dead-end job like some of my friends." Kahia would be the first person in her family and the only one in her peer group to go to university. Throughout the study period, Kahia seemed to feel increasingly worried about her decision.

“It’s scary...thinking about going to university...I don’t know. My dad thinks I’d be mad not to go. He reckons I’ll have a better life if I go...My boyfriend doesn’t want me to move away coz he will never see me...There’s a lot to think about and I don’t really know what it is going to be like, whether I’ll like it.”

Kahia was evidently under competing pressures and felt quite isolated in her decision-making. She had been to the Careers Service for advice but said that they only gave her university prospectuses. By the final interview, Kahia had applied to various universities and was due to take her A’level examinations. However, her concerns about going to university remained apparent.

The experiences of these young people suggests that the expansion of post-sixteen education have indeed created a wide range of opportunities. However, as Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have argued, these increased opportunities carry risks which young people are expected to negotiate as individuals. The four young people who decided to continue their education all exhibited varying degrees of uncertainty about the different routes they had chosen. Although the uncertainty seemed to be generated by different issues, it could be argued that the uncertainty was exacerbated by the range of options available to the young people. In the brave new world of post-sixteen education, there are, perhaps, too many opportunities and too many choices to be made. Coles (1995) makes an interesting and useful analogy between the young people’s transitions and the game of snakes and ladders. He does this in order to highlight the risks that accompany the ladders of opportunity currently available to young people. The experiences of the young people in this research suggests the need for a codicil to the analogy. Most people know how to play snakes and ladders and even if they do not, the game usually comes with instructions. The game of post-sixteen education carries no such instructions. In deciding to change their transitional pathways, neither Sheridan nor Thomas knew what NVQs were or whether NVQs carried the same status as more traditional qualifications. Kahia’s decision to go to university was a venture into waters uncharted by either her family or members of her peer group. John seemed to take some comfort from the experiences of his cousins who had recently graduated from various universities. He was, however, somewhat disconcerted by one of his cousins who had graduated and was now a taxi driver.

The uncertainty exhibited by these young people was tangible during the interviews. It is difficult, however, to specify the mechanisms by which they coped with their uncertainty. The stability they were experiencing in other aspects of their lives was, perhaps, an important

factor. These young people felt secure about where they were living and they had the support of their parents. These two issues alone may have been sufficient to create a safety net which thus enabled them to risk the opportunities of change. It is a safety net which many of the young people who grew up in care simply did not have.

From School To Work, In and Out of Care

By the end of the research period, when the young people in the whole sample were around eighteen years of age, only a minority of the young people could be defined as having completed their school to work transitions. Given the changing context of the school to work transition, this should not be too surprising as research shows that entry into the labour market is increasingly protracted (Banks *et al*, 1992). Adapting a typology developed by Roberts (1993) of the main routes from school to work, Biehal *et al* (1995) describe three routes undertaken by the young people leaving care in their evaluative study of leaving care schemes. These routes are; 'academic' for those who continue in full-time, post-compulsory education; 'work' for those in full-time, permanent employment or on a stable youth training programme; and, 'insecure' for those unemployed, in casualised labour or on unstable youth training programmes. At the initial stage of their research, Biehal *et al* found that the young people using the leaving care schemes were more likely to be on 'insecure' career paths than the comparison group of young people who had no contact with the schemes. However, over the two year research period, the differences between the two groupings of young people became less significant as fewer young people in the comparison group remained on the 'work' or 'academic' routes. The researchers explained the young people's shift from the 'work' and 'academic' routes in terms of the young people's inability to manage their lives and their accommodation once they had moved on from the stable placements from which they had launched their career routes.

The evidence from this research largely supports the findings of Biehal *et al* (1995) with regard to the impact of after care accommodation on young people's transitions into the labour market. Only two young people, Dave and Wesley, managed to continue in their chosen routes for the duration of this research. They were also the only young people to experience stability in their accommodation and to receive continued support from their carers. This is similar to the safety net provided by the families of the comparison grouping of young people in this research. However, disruption in accommodation appeared to affect the young people leaving care in different ways. In terms of their transitions into the labour market, there is a sense in

which Nicky and Courtney recovered from the disruption they experienced. Both entered post-sixteen education from the relatively secure base provided by the semi-independence unit. However, their moves into independent accommodation resulted in commensurate moves from education into unemployment. Their eventual recovery and entry into the labour market can be largely explained by a renewed sense of stability in their accommodation and the emotional support they received from others. For Nicky, this came from his sister and for Courtney, it was her boyfriend who proved to be important. Again, similarities can be drawn with the experiences of the young people apparently coping with their uncertainties within the supported environments of their families.

Biehal *et al* (1995) make a further point regarding the post-sixteen routes of young people leaving care. The researchers noted that the young people who had experienced less than four moves between placements whilst they were in care were more likely to be on the 'work' or 'academic' routes as they were leaving care. The effects of placement histories finds resonance in this research. The young people in this sample whose transitions from school to work were characterised by unemployment, incarceration and early motherhood were much more likely to have experienced extensive disruption in their placement histories. However, such statements assume that the 'work' and 'academic' routes are better outcomes than the others. Biehal *et al* (1995) assessed a range of outcomes for young people leaving care as 'good', 'fair' or 'poor'. By their assessments, unemployment and incarceration would be described as 'poor' outcomes. It is indeed difficult to see unemployment and incarceration as anything other than 'poor' outcomes. It is, however, important to remember that the young people concerned may dispute the assessment. For example, unemployment for Geoffrey was preferable to the training course arranged by staff at his special school. Similarly, incarceration for Ashley provided food, tobacco and contact with people he knew. Compared to homelessness and rejection by his mother, incarceration may not be such a 'poor' outcome for Ashley.

If all the young people in this sample had experienced similar placement histories whilst they were in care then it might be justifiable to make critical comparisons of their transitions into the labour market. The evidence presented in this chapter has provided an insight into the different ways in which both groupings of young people experienced their school to work transitions. For a significant number of the young people who had been in care, their transitions from school were, for all intents and purposes, experienced around the age of thirteen years. The effects of the timing of this transition is all too apparent in terms of their

transitions into the labour market. These were not so much protracted as arrested (literally in three cases). Given that the school to work transition is seen to be pivotal to the attainment of adulthood (Jones & Wallace, 1992) does the protraction or cessation of this transition necessarily affect the attainment of adult status?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Feeling More Grown Up

Introduction

Within the life cycle perspective, the attainment of adulthood signifies the end of 'youth' as young people make the transition, or set of transitions, from one life cycle stage to the next (Jones & Wallace, 1992). However, the life cycle approach has been criticised for its tendency towards universalism, its failure to recognise diversity and its negation of cultural and social contexts (Pilcher, 1995). The evidence in the preceding chapters highlighted the different ways in which young people experience 'youth'. The school to work and the housing transitions are acknowledged to be key processes within the life course stage of youth (Banks *et al*, 1992; Jones & Wallace, 1992; Jones, 1987, 1995). Young people's undertaking of these two transitions are seen as significant indicators of movement towards adulthood. Yet, this research has shown that the timing of these particular transitions is far from universal. Moreover, the social context in which individuals grow up was shown to be influential. Some young people who grew up in care, like the sample of young people who grew up in their biological families, did commence their school to work transitions at the age of sixteen. For others, the school to work transition remained, and seemed likely to remain, nothing more than an academic concept. Similarly, for the majority of the young people who grew up in care, housing transitions were undertaken when they were fifteen or sixteen years old: an age at which they would legally be defined as children. There is, therefore, a need to look beyond the 'stages and ages' of the life cycle, particularly with regard to the manner in which young people attain adulthood.

The lack of sociological studies into adulthood might suggest that it is a stage in the life cycle which is largely unproblematic. Pilcher states (1995:103) that adult status is seen to be a status which 'once attained [is] forever retained'. Taking adulthood for granted means that little consideration has been given to the way it is achieved and how being an adult changes over time. Within the sociology of youth, much emphasis has been given to the attainment of adulthood especially within the changing contexts of social policies and family life (Coles, 1995; Jones & Wallace, 1992). Policy changes in employment and social security benefits have been such that Jones and Wallace (1992:103) have concluded that 'the transition to adulthood is now structured by access to employment to a greater extent than ever before'.

For some young people, therefore, the lack of secure, full-time employment opportunities is understood to have protracted the attainment of adulthood. Yet, if the process of attaining adulthood is about growing up and becoming a 'grown up' then it could be argued that young people do not stop 'growing up' because of unemployment. Similarly, 'grown ups' who are unemployed do not cease being adults, although the socio-psychological effects of unemployment are acknowledged (Jahoda, 1982). The process of growing up has been the focus of this research and this chapter will explore what 'growing up' means to all the young people in this sample.

The youth transition model, which treats youth as an interstitial phase in the life cycle, is only one representation of youth. The tripartite model of youth has been adapted by Coles (1995) who suggests that youth consists of sequences of status transitions. It remains explicit, however, that youth is a distinct stage between childhood and adulthood. Research by Coffield *et al* (1986) noted that the young people in their study did not identify with the concept of adulthood or indeed with the notion of becoming an adult. This should raise questions about the validity of conceptualisations of youth modelled around an outcome which seemingly lacks member authentication. Indeed, all the young people in this research re-interpreted 'adulthood' and becoming an 'adult' into a concept which they could understand and with which they could self-identify. The concept of adulthood was discussed in the final interviews with the young people. Many of them questioned what they were being asked about and instead, talked about "feeling more grown up than before". Their experiences of feeling more grown up suggest that youth is a period of development. Comments such as "not kicking off as much" or "not arguing with parents" may reflect the 'storm and stress' model which underlies much of the psychological literature on adolescence (Coleman, 1992; Hall, 1904; Shantz & Hartup, 1995). Many of the young people talked about the process of feeling more grown up occurring over a short period of time and, in particular, used the twelve month research period as an indicator. From observations made over this twelve months, it was evident that these young people had developed personally and did, indeed, appear to be "more grown up" in a number of different ways. However, the experiences which they said had made them feel more grown up were, on the whole, more socially rather than psychologically defined. The next section of this chapter will examine the young people's experiences and indicators of "feeling more grown up".

The social indicators the young people used to explain "feeling more grown up" combined with the inferred psychological changes, indicates the importance of a psycho-social approach

to development and identity formation. Erikson's work (1968) has some applicability in terms of the recognition he gives to the processes of identity formation: processes which begin in childhood and evolve throughout the life course. An exploration of identity formation was not an explicit aim of this research. However, during the research period, many of the young people seemed to exhibit a number of identities which could be understood as a partial reflection of the process of growing up. Furthermore, it became apparent that, in some situations, some young people exhibited identities which appeared to be implicitly used as coping mechanisms. These issues are discussed as *emerging* identities which recognises that these young people are still in the process of growing up and that their identities are still evolving.

The final section of this chapter explores how the young people gauged the outcomes of their own lives *in their own terms*. Their emerging identities or, more accurately, their sense of self, appeared to act as yardsticks by which the young people adjudged their own situations in comparison to others. The evidence suggests that the young people in this sample adopted a more holistic approach to defining their own success than the objective indicators sometimes imposed in social research. They recognised the historical and social contexts of their experiences of growing up and assessed their current situations accordingly. The stark differences between the young people's assessments and those found in other research might suggest, as Griffin (1993) indicates, that the way some researchers see the problem is the problem.

Feeling More Grown Up

The majority of the young people in this research were interviewed three times over a period of twelve months. It is clear, therefore, that the young people had *grown older* by the time of the last interview. By the end of the research period, many of the young people had changed noticeably. Some of these changes were evident at an objective level, such as changes in their statuses, for example from student to employee. However, the most noticeable changes were, somewhat ironically, more subtle and more subjective. In the final interviews, the young people were more considered in their answers, more reflective about their experiences and generally more serious in their outlook on life, particularly in terms of the long-term outcomes of current actions and behaviour. Many of these subtle changes may have been a consequence of the development of relationships between the young people and the researcher rather than any real changes in the young people themselves. It is not intended to disregard the influence

of the researcher/interviewee relationship. However, it was clear that this was interpreted in different ways among the young people in the sample.

Many of the young people who had grown up in care commented that they felt as though the research had taken longer than a year. Courtney commented, "I feel as though I've known you [the researcher] for ages...I can't believe it's only a year since I met you." Nicky appeared to be similarly surprised about the time span of the research when he said, "no...it can't only be a year...haven't things changed?" It is possible that the extent of changes experienced by many of the young people who had grown up in care explains their own perception of the passage of time. Indeed this is borne out by the fact that, for the young people who had grown up in their families, the time span of the research appeared to be much shorter. Sheridan said, "I feel as though I've only just met you...". When Thomas was reminded that the third interview was the final one he said, "I thought you [the researcher] said it would take about a year." Despite the different perceptions of time, all the young people recognised changes in their lives and in themselves. Many were able to highlight *instances* of feeling more grown up at the end of the research period than at the beginning. It is important to emphasise the word 'instances' as it became evident that, for the young people in this sample, feeling grown up was not a constant feeling or a permanent state of being.

The young people in the sample differentiated between "being grown up" and "feeling more grown up" which indicates a gradual process rather than something accorded by status change. A "grown up" was described by Mark as,

"someone in their forties, married, working and with a mortgage...someone like my uncle who stays in all the time...boring."

Ironically, by the last interview Mark was cohabiting with his girlfriend and was in the process of planning his wedding, after which they intended buying a house. When the parallels between Mark's life and his description of a "grown up" were highlighted, he was quick to point out some differences which enabled him to distance himself from being grown up.

"...But I still go out with my mates and she goes out with her mates. It's different coz we still have a laugh. We don't stay in and watch telly all the time."

The notion of "having a laugh" could be interpreted as a sense of light-hearted freedom from the responsibilities perceived to be associated with being grown up. Certainly, when the young people talked about the instances in which they felt more grown up, "having a laugh" or "messaging about" were phrases which they used to describe the separate aspects of their lives. The types of instances in which they felt more grown up varied between the young people. For

example, Wesley said he felt more grown up because, "I can drink more pints (of beer) now than I used to be able to" whereas many of the young people cited instances, such as motherhood, employment, and learning to drive.

Motherhood

Experiences of motherhood were specific to the young women who had grown up in care. Six of the seven young women in the sample who had been in care had experienced motherhood by the end of the research period. Two recent surveys have also highlighted the large proportion of young women leaving care who are either already parents or are pregnant (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992). Five of the young women in this research were mothers by the time they were sixteen years old and one young woman became a mother when she was eighteen years old. This contrasts noticeably with research on general samples of this age group. Kiernan and Wicks (1990) found that, in the late 1980s, the average age for becoming a first time mother was twenty six years. More recent research indicates that, in the mid 1990s, women are postponing childbirth until even later (Bynner *et al*, 1997). For young women in and leaving care, therefore, transitions to motherhood occur at a much earlier age than the rest of their age cohort. Given the recent increases in 'teenage pregnancies' combined with the public discourse which constructs teenage and lone motherhood as a social problem, there is a need to examine and understand the social context in which motherhood takes place.

None of the six young women in this research said they planned their pregnancies. Moreover, all said they used oral contraception to avoid becoming pregnant. In reflecting on their pregnancies, three of the young women thought that the life-styles they were leading at the time of their conceptions probably rendered their contraception ineffective. Vivian, Levi and Chelsea frequently ran away from their children's homes, often spending two or three nights away. Yet, their contraception pills were kept in a locked, medical cabinet in the children's homes which meant that they frequently missed taking their pills. Tenpenny, Alexandra and Jane all said they had "got caught on the pill". Although, it appears that these young women did not choose to become pregnant, they did choose to become mothers in that they refused the option presented to them of having their pregnancies terminated. This appeared to be a straight-forward choice as they all said that they did not agree with abortion. The option of terminating their pregnancies was generally raised by their carers although none of the young women said they felt pressurised into pursuing abortion. However, pressure did appear to come from their boyfriends, particularly for the fifteen and sixteen year old young women. Vivian recalled her boyfriend's reaction to her pregnancy.

"He went mad. He told me to have an abortion but I don't agree with them. So he said he would shove a knitting needle up me and kill it himself. That's what he said and he meant it."

The extreme reaction of Vivian's boyfriend is matched by Levi's experience. Her boyfriend, who was violent towards her anyway, began to hit her in the stomach in an attempt, Levi believed, to end her pregnancy. Only Jane, who was eighteen and engaged to be married, had the support of her boyfriend when she became pregnant. The younger women, for all intents and purposes, received no practical or emotional support from their boyfriends during their pregnancies or indeed, following the births of their babies.

On becoming mothers, many of the young women commented that they had "had to grow up". The responsibility of being a parent appeared to modify their behaviour. Alexandra, who was living in the semi-independence unit during her pregnancy, recalled being "normal" whilst she was pregnant but felt as though she changed rapidly once she had given birth to her baby.

"I were just like everyone else in the place...running round late at night, messing about and stuff. The staff used to tell me off coz I were eight months gone and I'd be running down the corridors and stuff...Once I'd had the baby I changed...it became real and I got fed up of the other's messing about all the time even though it's what I used to do...you just realise that it's you and the baby and if you don't look after her, no-one will."

Vivian made a similar comment.

"You got to grow up when you've got kids. It's like other people my age (seventeen years old) seem a lot more childish than me. I don't know...like you see things in a different way...it's just there all the time that you've got the kids to look after...Like with [her ex-boyfriend] when he were hitting me, if I'd been on my own I would have stayed longer and stuck it out but with the kids I couldn't do that. I had to think about them which was why I left."

Despite the constant status of motherhood and feelings of "having to be grown up", it became apparent that many of these young women only felt grown up in certain aspects of their lives and in certain instances of motherhood. Tenpenny said she felt more grown up because she had two children but added a number of caveats.

"It's weird coz I act childish when I'm not with the kids. Like if I go round to my mates or we go out I act different, not childish really but having a laugh and doing

stupid things...I'm like a kid sometimes when I'm playing with the kids...I can be worse than they are but then when I'm tidying up after them I feel like a housewife or an old biddy or something. It's weird, like I'm different people."

The "weird" feelings Tenpenny talked about, particularly with regard to feeling like "different people" is understandable as it could be argued that Tenpenny had a dual existence: she was both a mother and a 'teenager'. This duality became more apparent in the experiences of two of the young women who witnessed the removal of their children from their care. Both Levi and Chelsea were involved in child protection investigations when their babies were only weeks old. Levi and Chelsea were fifteen and sixteen years old respectively and were themselves, in a legal sense, children in care. Yet, the admission of their own children into care shifted the emphasis of social work intervention in their lives. Their own social workers became the social workers for their children - a situation which is not uncommon and has led to the suggestion that mothers themselves "run the risk of losing support *in their own right* as care leavers" (Biehal *et al*, 1995:137 emphasis in original). This is an important issue particularly when the same social worker is supposedly working with the mother and on behalf of the child. Chelsea said she felt as though her social worker "changed sides" when her baby was taken into care.

"He used to be okay but then I hardly ever saw him when they put her in foster care... just at meetings really."

It was at these meetings that Chelsea felt as though she had changed and become more grown up especially when she compared her own review meetings with those of her daughter.

"I never used to go to my reviews or if I did, I'd just sit there and say nothing coz I never used to be able to talk in a room full of people. I can now. I've got to. I realise that now I've got a baby I've got to talk. I'm a mother and I've got to talk for the baby."

For these young women, experiences of motherhood were, therefore, exceptional in that they were variously characterised by domestic violence, child protection issues and undertaken in the throes of being both a 'teenager' and a 'care leaver'. All were financially dependent on social security benefits. Phoenix (1991) in her study of young mothers noted that poverty was a principal constraint on mothering and the young women in her study required considerable resilience and resourcefulness to manage. For the young women in this research, poverty was only one aspect of the experience of motherhood. Feeling "more grown up" therefore, could

arguably mean feeling more able to cope with the barrage of issues which, for these young women, motherhood entailed.

Employment

For many of the young people in the sample, employment provided an environment in which they felt “more grown up”. Employment is seen to be a fundamental aspect in the transition to adulthood largely because of its capacity to generate financial independence from parents (Jones & Wallace, 1992). Other research (Jahoda, 1982) has highlighted the socio-psychological aspects to employment, including its role in terms of status enhancement and identity formation. This is reflected in the evidence from the young people in this research. Five of the young people who had been in care and all six of the young people living with their biological families were in some kind of work at the end of the research period. Seven of these eleven were in full-time employment and the remainder were undertaking part-time jobs. It can be assumed that the financial recompense of their work was important. However, when they discussed their employment with regard to feeling “more grown up”, the *context* in which the young people were employed appeared to be more influential. There were two aspects to employment which were commonly cited as generating feelings of being “more grown up” almost irrespective of the type of employment in which the young people were engaged. Firstly, there was the responsibility associated with their work and secondly, there was the nature of the social interactions which took place at work.

Responsibility was perceived in a variety of ways. Thomas, who had recently changed from being a volunteer at a youth club to being a full-time employee, cited a number of occasions in which he had organised and run events for the five to eleven year olds at the club. He believed it was the responsibility of the job and the trust which was placed in him which had made him feel “more grown up”. He also commented that his behaviour outside work had also changed. More specifically, he had learned to control his temper which had previously resulted in his involvement in fights.

“I used to kick off really quickly but now I can’t afford to get a police record coz I wouldn’t be able to work with kids. My mates think I’m going soft coz I used to be fighting all the time but...well, I think I’m growing up.”

Nicky, who was a chef in a public house, also said the responsibility he was given at work made him feel “more grown up”, particularly on the one day per week when the head chef was away and Nicky was in charge of the kitchen.

“It’s all down to me to get everything organised, cooked and served right. They (the owners of the pub) must think I’m okay or else they wouldn’t let me do it. I’ve not made any cock-ups yet anyway. It’s good to have the responsibility, it makes you feel good.”

Similar sentiments were echoed by Dave whose job with a large bakery involved delivering bread to shops over a large geographical area. He recalled working with a new driver.

“He didn’t know the round so basically it were down to me to get it sorted out...tell him where to go and which shops to go to...I had to make sure everything was alright. It was like a notch on my belt.”

With the exception of Wesley and Sebastian, all the young people who were in employment mentioned their interactions with others in their work environments as instances of “feeling more grown up”. Sheridan and Kahia both talked about the older women they worked with in terms of having “grown up conversations”. When asked to explain a “grown up conversation”, Kahia, who worked in a restaurant, said,

“I don’t know really but it’s different from when I’m talking with my mates...sensible really, not messing about or saying stupid things.”

Many of the young people found it difficult to explain the differences between their behaviour at work and their behaviour away from work. “Grown up” and “sensible” were frequently cited adjectives. Nicky, however, perhaps summed up the amorphous nature of the differences. He said,

“...when you get treated like an adult then you behave like one.”

This suggests that employment is an adult environment in which young people can adapt their behaviour and interactions whilst retaining the freedom to “have a laugh” outside the world of work. This point is highlighted by the experiences of Wesley and Sebastian, who worked in a hamburger restaurant and a night-club respectively. Neither of them said they felt any different at work because, evidently, they both worked alongside other young people. For Wesley and Sebastian, work was about “having a laugh and earning some money” and did little to generate feelings of being “more grown up”.

Driving

If youth is a period in which the transition is made from the dependency of childhood to the independence of adulthood, then evidence from this research suggests that learning to drive should arguably form a fundamental aspect of the youth transition model. Learning to drive

certainly appeared to have important socio-psychological affects on some of the young people in this sample. Moreover, given the financial cost of this activity, the protraction of the school to work transition can be seen as excluding some young people from what appeared to be a key status transition. Throughout the interviews generally, and in discussing “feeling grown up” specifically, learning to drive was the only activity which was explicitly associated with independence. It was also the only activity which, for some, was associated with failure. Eight of the young people in the overall sample were either learning to drive or had passed their driving tests. Three of these young people had been in care. All these young people thought that having a driving license would increase their employment opportunities at some point in the future. However, more immediately, being able to drive was about independence. Courtney, who had lived independently for a short time after leaving care, said,

“I want my independence. If I could drive then I’d be able to just jump in a car and do things. That’s why I’m taking lessons.”

For the young people who had grown up in their families, learning to drive was also about independence and explicitly about not having to depend on their parents or others to take them somewhere. Sheridan, who appeared to be devastated after failing her first driving test, said,

“I can’t wait to pass my test. I get sick of asking my dad to drive me some where or pick me up from work if I’m working late. When I’ve passed I’ll be able to just go where I want, when I want.”

The importance of learning to drive is perhaps indicated by the amount of money and effort expended. Kahia, who earned forty five pounds per week working part-time as a waitress, spent thirty pounds per week on two driving lessons. She said she was relieved when she passed her test as she had some extra money with which to go out. Thomas commented on how much effort he had put into learning his driving theory and the highway code by saying that he would have sailed through his GCSEs if he had have put in the same amount of effort. Mark, who lacked the motivation to find out if he passed any of his GCSEs, insisted on taking me for a drive in his newly acquired car. How long he would have the car remained to be seen. Wesley, who had also insisted on giving me a guided tour of his car, had sold it by the final interview because it had failed its MOT and he could not afford the repairs. Yet, the expensive reality of driving did little to detract from the enthusiasm with which these young people anticipated or enjoyed their “independence”.

Voting

By the time of the final interviews in December 1996 and January 1997, it was likely that a General Election would be called in the coming months. The majority of the young people in the sample were, or would be, eighteen by the time of the election and would, therefore, be eligible to vote for the first time. It seemed propitious to explore the significance of voting with regard to adulthood. However, none of the young people attached any significance to being eligible to vote. Nicky's response to whether voting contributed to feeling "more grown up" summed up the feelings of the majority when he said,

"It's not hard is it? You just have to put a cross in a box. A three year old could do it."

Despite the lack of significance attached to voting itself, it became apparent that the young people who had been in care were more politically aware than the young people who had grown up in their families. Among the latter, comments such as "I wouldn't know who to vote for" or "I'm not interested in politics" were not unusual. Among the young people who had grown up in care, however, there appeared to be a greater awareness of political issues. Tenpenny and Alexandra both commented on social security benefits for lone parents and their concerns about having their benefits reduced. Sebastian and Nicky both thought it was important that people voted particularly in terms of having a say and being able to comment on the performance of a government. Wesley thought voting in this country was becoming a waste of time because of the power of the European Union. Levi said Blair and Major were exactly the same in terms of promising things and then not doing them. Some of these comments are particularly interesting in that they could be understood to be projections of the young people's feelings about being in care. Political attitudes were analysed as part of the 16-19 ESRC Initiative. Drawing on the work of Marsh (1990), Banks *et al* (1992) noted the prevalence of 'political cynicism' exhibited by negative attitudes towards politics, among some of the young people in their survey. The researchers found that 'political cynicism' was associated with wider issues including negative attitudes towards authority. The possible links between this and being in care are evident in Courtney's sentiments. Courtney was unlikely to be eligible to vote because she would not be eighteen until the summer. She was vociferous in her disappointment and feelings of injustice.

"I'd like to be able to vote but I'll just miss out. It's not fair. I mean I've lived on my own, I work full-time and pay tax and national insurance yet I can't have a say in who runs the country. I mean think of all the under eighteen's who are working

and they get no chance to say what they think... It's just like people in care, we've got no voice, no chance to say what happens..."

It could be argued that the increased political awareness among the young people who had been in care was due to their first hand experiences of a wide range of social policies and social policy issues. It could also be argued that being in care is, for some young people, a political issue in itself, with battles for individual voices to be heard juxtaposed with battles against power and authority. This may include what Erickson (1968) calls processes of introjection and identification which lay the foundations for the development of identities in later life.

Emerging Identities

Transitions throughout the life course involve movement through a sequence of statuses from which a sense of identity is derived. This research has shown that some of the transitions and statuses changes which young people experience occur over a short period of time. For example, it has been shown that some young people make the transitions from 'being in care' to 'leaving care' to 'living independently' concurrent or interspersed with transitions to motherhood, student, employee, and prisoner. In each of these statuses, an identity can be imposed on a young person by definition of their social position. Yet, identity is not static but, as Giddens argues (1991) should be seen as a dynamic project in which individual identity has to be routinely created and sustained. Identity is not therefore a given, rather is a lived experience which individuals can adjust to suit the audience to which they are presenting themselves (Goffman, 1959). There are seen to be two elements to identity formation in that there are 'structural' determinants such as social class, gender, ethnicity which interact to shape identity. There is also the role of individual agency in which identities are negotiated and created from personal biographies, social relationships and social circumstances (Breakwell, 1987). Both of these elements were explored by researchers in the ESRC 16-19 Initiative in order to probe the shaping of young people's identities (Banks *et al*, 1992). An important aspect of identity formation was the manner in which social roles affected feelings of self-efficacy and estrangement. (The researchers found that during the late teenage years, young people generally experienced slight increases in self-efficacy and reduced feelings of 'estrangement'. However, the considerable stability in these attributes over time lead to the conclusion that self-efficacy and estrangement should be seen as contributing to, as much as being influenced by, post sixteen socialisation experiences (*ibid*, 1992:126).

During the course of the interviews with the young people, the data suggested a fluidity in the identities or 'fronts' (Goffman, 1961) which were presented over time. Crespi (1992) makes a distinction between *personal* identity which is the inner, conscious and unconscious, elaboration of an individual's biographical experiences, and *social* identity is the external self-image given by the individual to others. The distinction is pertinent to this research as, in a number of cases, the two aspects of identity became evident. These are worthy of further exploration, particularly in terms of understanding how some of the young people appeared to cope with, or make sense of, the gaps and the sometimes rapid changes in their lives.

Two of the young men who had grown up in care knew little about their biological fathers. Both had been living with their biological mothers prior to being admitted into care. Wesley, who is mixed race, had lived with his white, foster family for seventeen years and had, to an extent, adopted the identity of his foster family in that he had begun to use the foster family's surname in place of his biological mother's. He had stopped seeing his biological mother some years earlier and said he no longer felt any attachment to her. During the time of his contact with his mother he had learned something about his parentage. He knew his mother was of Norwegian origin and that his father was Nigerian. Wesley also knew that his parents had met when his father was studying in Britain but that he had subsequently returned to Nigeria. From this scant information, Wesley had constructed an image of his father. He went on,

"I've never seen my dad in my entire life. I've never seen one picture of him at all. All I know of him is that I look like him and I know what he's called. I want to seek him out but I don't know how to do it...You never know, he might be one of those Nigerian kings in a village and I might be a prince. I might be rich..."

Wesley's constructed personal identity as a possibly rich, Nigerian prince appeared to fill a gap in his biography which has resulted in him growing up as an illegitimate black person in a white, foster family. In other aspects of his life, Wesley did not appear to be suffering from delusions of grandeur. He recognised that his image of his father and, by association, his image of himself were something of a fantasy. Yet, the extent to which he was prepared to believe his fantasy might be true is indicated by his rhetorical question, "...you never know, do you?" Wesley may never know "the truth" and can continue to fill this gap in his biography with something less socially stigmatising than his illegitimate status.

Sebastian's story contains some remarkable similarities. Sebastian is also mixed race. His mother is white, British and his father is of Afro-Caribbean origin. Like Wesley, Sebastian has never met his father but knows that his parents met in a night-club where his father used

to work. Again, from very little information, Sebastian has built an image of his father in which he is now a night-club owner and a key player in the city's criminal and drug-dealing underworld. Interestingly, both of these young men had created images of their fathers which carried status, albeit in different forms, in which they, perhaps, wanted to reflect. For all intents and purposes, the identities they had elaborated were personal and remained largely indisputable.

The fact that Wesley and Sebastian were both male and mixed race is interesting but it may matter less than the fact that they had a gap in the biographies which they wanted, or needed, to fill. During the course of the three interviews, a gap arose in Levi's life which she similarly filled in by elaboration. Prior to the third interview, Levi's biological family appeared to consist of her mother and a male cousin, both of whom had physically abused her as a child. During Levi's time in care, she continued to have infrequent contact with her mother. However, in the six months between the second and third interviews Levi's mother died. This effectively meant that Levi had no biological family. Indeed, Levi said that the only people at her mother's funeral were herself and two social workers who had helped Levi to arrange the funeral. Around the same time, Levi had experienced the adoption of her twin daughters who had been taken into care as babies. Levi was, therefore, a daughter without a mother, and a mother without her children. During the third interview, it became evident that Levi believed in the existence of an extended family who lived in Scotland.

"I met my brother when I were in hospital. I were talking about me mam to one of the other patients. This lad heard me mention her name and goes 'is this your mum?' and handed me this photo. I goes, 'what are you doing with a photo of me mam?' He said it were his mum as well. I thought he were joking til he showed me his birth certificate. He told me that I'd got other brother and sisters in Scotland...I've actually got a twin sister."

It is possible that Levi had constructed this new identity as a way of coping with her mother's death and the adoption of her twin daughters. The fact that she believed in the existence of this newly discovered family is perhaps not too surprising and may be no different from Wesley and Sebastian constructing identities for their fathers. There is, however, an important caveat. The hospital in which Levi met her 'brother' was, in fact, a psychiatric unit where she was staying after attempting to commit suicide. This added context may suggest that Levi was constructing delusions rather than projecting fact into fantasy. Her aftercare worker said that she thought Levi "was getting worse". Levi, however, was "just shocked" that, at the age of eighteen, she had only just found out about her new family.

Wesley, Sebastian and Levi evidently believed their elaborated personal identities, which is, perhaps, more important than whether the stories on which they were founded were actually true or not. It is clear that such identity formation has to be interpreted by reference to the specific biographies of the young people concerned. Furthermore, it is the biographical experiences of these young people which make their stories about their personal identities understandable. Ashley's experiences add a different dimension to identity construction and exhibition. Ashley was admitted into care at the age of thirteen due largely to his offending behaviour and his mother's inability to cope with his behaviour. Ashley experienced sixteen different placements in three years, all of which broke down because of his continued criminal behaviour. Ashley's mother eventually refused him access to the house and to his brother for fear that Ashley's behaviour would contaminate his brother. In all aspects of his life, Ashley's identity as an offender was reaffirmed and amplified. By the end of the research period, Ashley was in custody for the third time. Prior to being incarcerated Ashley had acquired a tattoo which he proudly exhibited on his arm. The tattoo was an ace of spades playing card with the word "Gangster" inscribed above it. His explanation for choosing the design was that he intended becoming a gangster by joining the world of organised crime where, he believed, he could make a lot of money. A key aspect of Ashley's biography and his future aspirations were, therefore, permanently etched onto his skin. The extent to which he was ascribed and had assumed an identity as a "gangster" indicated by the following extract from an earlier interview, carried out whilst Ashley was in prison for the second time.

A: My mum said I would end up in prison again.

DB: She wasn't wrong.

A: She reckons I'll do a murder one day.

DB: Do you think you will?

A: Dunno. You can't tell what's gonna happen. I might do. It's hard to say.

Ashley's inability to dispute his mother's predictions arguably say as much about his identity as the tattoo on his arm. It is impossible to know the extent to which Ashley's identity as a potential "gangster" would have developed without being fuelled by his mother's beliefs or by those of the professionals who decided to move Ashley to so many different placements. This example does, however, support Crespi's (1992) assertion that social identities depend, at least in part, upon some reciprocal recognition.

The concept of identity, as was mentioned early, is dynamic and the above examples give an insight into the processes through which identities can be constructed. However, they are also interchangeable, depending on the social situation in which individuals find themselves

(Goffman, 1959). This is highlighted by Tenpenny who was a member of the sample because she had been objectively identified as a 'care leaver'. Tenpenny had been admitted into care at the age of fifteen because her parents refused to have her at home after she had given birth to her daughter. On a number of occasions during the research process, Tenpenny pointed out that she did not consider herself to have been in care. This seemed to be because of the specific reasons precipitating her admission into care and because she was fifteen when she went into care, therefore, had spent very little time in care. When Tenpenny left care she was allocated a council house on a large housing estate. In the last interview, Tenpenny said that she was frequently asked by other residents on the estate how she had managed to get a house at her age. Tenpenny's reply was that she had been in care. Tenpenny was also a lone, teenage parent and was aware of the political discourse which suggests young women get pregnant to get housing and benefits. So whilst at an individual level she did not identify as a 'care leaver', in terms of explaining her housing situation, she appeared willing to adopt a collective identity based on the assumption that it is socially acceptable for young people who have been in care to be allocated housing.

Tenpenny perhaps felt less socially stigmatised as a 'care leaver' than as a lone, teenage parent. However, for some of the young people in the sample, being identified as having 'been in care' or as a 'care leaver' appeared to be socially stigmatising in the sense that others made assumptions about the young people's behaviour and biographies based on this one piece of information. Courtney's experiences highlight the point.

"When I worked in the cafe, I told them that I was in care but they said it didn't make any difference but there was this one person who made a point of not leaving her purse around when I was there. I think she thought I was going to nick it...I felt as though I was dirty or something...People have a stereotype image of what people in care are like. Where I'm working now there's this girl who knows someone who lived in the semi-independence unit so I said I used to live there. She started looking down her nose at me and asking me why I lived there."

Nicky felt unable to disclose to his employers that he had been in care because, he believed, they would then make assumptions about him and he was concerned about losing their trust. The stereotype image, if one exists, effectively meant that Nicky hid a fundamental aspect to his biography and, indeed, a facet of his identity. It was interesting that some of the young people themselves held a stereotype image of the type of person who was or had been in care. Even Courtney, who had felt stigmatised by others, admitted that before she went into care at

the age of fourteen she thought that care was for “thieves and criminals”. Sebastian, who talked about not being “a typical care kid” because he willingly attended school on a regular basis, also thought that children’s homes were for “druggies and criminals”. Sebastian’s beliefs were based on his experience of being in care and having lived in some children’s homes. However, Sebastian thought, like many of the other young people who had been in care, that being in care had generated a survival instinct and a more positive identity as a “survivor”.

“Going into care at the beginning, everyone has got this fighting attitude...you’ve got to survive. You’ve got to be able to defend yourself. Like if you brought an average fourteen year old from an average family into a children’s home they wouldn’t survive. You need to have an identity that warns people away from you so you get this survival instinct. You’re not a nasty person. You are just a survivor of the system. Like now, I know I’ve got to move in a couple of weeks. I don’t know where I’m going, whether I’ll have any money, any food. I’ve got no security. Some people would top themselves but I’ve just got used to it. I think I can stand a lot more pressure than people my age...my breaking point is a lot higher.”

Sebastian’s strength of conviction that he was a survivor is echoed in other young people’s stories. Vivian was, at seventeen years old, living with her two children in a women’s refuge after fleeing from her home due to domestic violence. She was uncertain about her future but felt sure that she would survive her situation.

“I don’t know how long we’ll be here or what’ll happen. I mean I’ve lost my house and all my furniture...but, well you get used to these things. I got my house nice before so I know I can do it again. You learn to cope with shit like this.”

The idea of “getting used to things” and “learning to cope” emerged as a key aspect of socialisation for many of the young people who had grown up in care. Chelsea who experienced five placements in care over a two year period said, “I hated moving around but you just get used to it, you have to.” Levi similarly felt that she had also got used to the negative aspects of being in care. She said, “...being in care was a bastard but you just had to get on with it.” Dave and Courtney both said that when they first went into care, they found it difficult having to talk about things with so many people but again they “got used to it” and thought that, in the longer term, their experiences of being in care had made them “stronger” people.

Growing up in care and the emotional upheavals they experienced had, for many of the young people in this sample contributed significantly to their sense of self-efficacy. They appeared confident in their ability to deal with uncertainty and to negotiate and manage their complex lives. This is not to say that the young people found it easy. Jane said she found it difficult when she first moved into her own flat,

“it was really hard being on my own. I was only fifteen or sixteen. It was lonely at first...but it turned out alright.”

Levi said that she found it difficult to cope when she thought about her past and what had happened in her life. Indeed, Levi was one of three young people who had admitted to thinking about committing, or had attempted to commit, suicide. Like Nicky and Boothy, she said,

“Things just get too much sometimes. You think about what’s happened to you and you just think that life isn’t worth living, what’s the point in carrying on...but then something happens and you forget about it.”

In research by Biehal *et al* (1995) it was noted that although many of the ‘care leavers’ in their study had become more confident in dealing with responsibility as they were leaving care. However, the ‘care leavers’ whose self-efficacy was seen to be lower were the ones who were trying to resolve issues about their life histories and the abuse they had suffered. This leads to an important point. (Social policies and social work practices can be effective in making the transitions out of care and towards adulthood easier and apparently more successful for the young people concerned) (Biehal *et al*, 1992; Coles, 1995; Stein, 1997). However, whilst policies and practices appear to impact on the objective outcomes of young people’s lives, they can do little to alter the life histories of young people. Many of the young people in this research made the same comment about their past experiences which was, “you can’t turn back the clock”. Young people may be able to learn to cope with difficult issues and be able to resolve some of the emotional trauma of their life histories but the past is always there.

Assessing and Comparing Outcomes

Youth is a period of change and this research has highlighted the magnitude and speed at which some young people experience changes in their lives. This raises some serious issues about ‘outcomes’. Parker *et al* (1991) have stressed that time is a crucial factor in assessing outcomes particularly in relation to children and young people. Given that childhood and youth are seen to be developmental stages in the life course, there also needs to be a distinction

between outcomes at different phases in the life course. A further issue concerns the multi-dimensionality of young people's lives. It is possible to assess outcomes across a number of dimensions, such as education, employment, housing, life skills and social networks. All of these and outcomes along other dimensions were assessed by Biehal *et al* (1995) in their research based on outcomes from leaving care schemes. The researchers, themselves, comment that in the field of social care outcomes are rarely clear cut and that any single outcome measure cannot reflect the complexity of young people's lives. Furthermore, the outcome dimensions they devised were acknowledged to reflect current debates and priorities in sociology, social policy and social work. This suggests that some outcome measures are, therefore, subject to trends in political discourse and academic thinking. These trends can give a broader understanding of some previously neglected issues. Nevertheless, there is a danger of separating young people's lives into quantifiable measures and dimensions of fragments which negate both qualitative aspects and personal starting points.

Parker *et al* (1991) argue that outcomes must be assessed in terms of their desirability, their relativity and their context. It seems, therefore, that young people themselves are best placed to judge the outcomes of their lives so far. They are, after all, acutely aware of their starting points and the processes through which they have reached their current situations. Yet, (a potential danger in letting the young people speak for themselves is that they might present a more positive picture of their lives than exists in reality) It is difficult to assess the extent to which the young people 'tidied up' their lives or presented more positive outcomes. However, most of the young people did appear to reflect on their lives when discussing their current situations. This was especially true of the young people who had grown up in care, many of whom assessed their current situations in terms of what might have happened to them if they had not been taken into care. In other words, they placed their current situations into an appropriate context. There was also a tendency for all the young people in the sample to assess their own situations relative to the situations of other young people. Banks *et al* (1992) noted a similar tendency among young people with regard to self-esteem, in that one mechanism by which young people acquire self-esteem is by comparing themselves to appropriate others and thinking themselves better. The young people in this sample were also more likely to draw comparisons with other young people who were perceived to be worse off in some way. This served to create a more positive impression of themselves. However, many of the young people did acknowledge that their current situations could be improved. This suggests a degree of honesty and foresight which would probably be absent from an outcome measure devised by a third party.

An overwhelming message to emerge from the research was that all the young people who had been in care were glad that they had been taken into care. Almost without exception, they all believed their current situations to be better than they would have been had they not grown up in care. Sebastian, had recently been to visit a friend who lived on the same estate as Sebastian and his mother prior to his admission into care. He appeared to be horrified by the visit and reflected how he might have turned out if he had not gone into care.

"Everyone was unemployed...all the kids I used to play with were just hanging about, doing nothing. At least I'm going to college and trying to do something with my life. I'm not a dole dossier which is probably what I would've been."

Nicky also reflected on his starting point when considering his current situation. However, he began by talking about how he had felt about his situation a few months earlier which again raises the important issue of the timing of 'outcomes'.

"If we'd been talking about this before I started living with my sister, I'd say my life was shit. I went through a really bad time but things have turned round again now and my life's okay...I've got somewhere to live, a job and I'm going to college again. I'm doing very well...It was hard when I first left care but when I think about what was happening to me I'm glad I went into care. I think my step-dad would've killed us eventually...I don't know. I know I wouldn't have got any qualifications if I hadn't been in care and I don't think I'd have this job now."

Both Sebastian and Nicky were able to highlight positive aspects of their current situations. However, even some of the young people who were not attending college or in employment also highlighted positive aspects of their situations. Geoffrey was unemployed and living in a bedsit after being evicted from his flat. He thought he was "doing alright",

"I'm managing my money okay, doing my own shopping and feeding myself. I've got a girlfriend. She's called Emma and I see her a couple of times a week. I think I'm doing alright. It would be better if I had a job but I think I'll get one soon."

Jim, who was living in a nursing home, also thought he was "doing alright" in the context of his own life,

"I'm happy here. I trust people here. They listen to me...I've stopped drinking and I've not got in trouble for ages. I'm supposed to be moving into the bungalow soon. That's a good step for me coz I'll have to look after myself a bit more."

The subjective issues that Jim talked about such as happiness, trust and being listened to, would be difficult to measure as outcomes in themselves, whereas his lack of educational

qualifications and his institutionalised status would be less so. Nevertheless, it is the former that are important to Jim in terms of his self-esteem and well-being.

For other young people, they seemed more able to judge their lives by making comparisons to other young people in similar situations. This was particularly evident among the young women with children. Vivian compared her situation with two other young women she knew. In doing this, she believed herself to be doing better than them.

"Life was bad when I was at the refuge but I had to go there for the sake of the kids. I mean there's this girl who I know is getting beaten up by her boyfriend but she's still with him. It was bad at the refuge but at least I did something about what was going on. I thought about the kids. I mean, that's another thing. When I were in care there were this girl who had all her babies taken off her. Me and the kids are still together and social services have no concerns about 'em. Now I've got my own house again things are okay. I'm more settled."

Tenpenny also highlighted the fact that her children were with her and not in care. This was presented as a positive aspect of her current situation.

"I've had problems with the eldest with her swearing and behaviour but hopefully it's sorted now and social services didn't get involved. I know a few people who've had their kids taken off them. It were alright for me in care coz I felt neglected at home and stuff but I don't want my kids going into care. It's hard sometimes with having no money but they never go without anything, I make sure of that."

The fact that Vivian and Tenpenny both mentioned their children might suggest that the welfare of their children was both a priority and a yardstick by which they judged their own abilities as mothers. Despite the sometimes adverse circumstances, having their children with them was clearly an important and positive 'outcome' for Vivian and Tenpenny. They both had some support from their families and Tenpenny said that her boyfriend "sometimes helped with the kids". On the whole, though, they were managing as lone, teenage, parents living on social security benefits.

Only two of the young people who had been in care said explicitly that their lives were "a bit of a mess at the moment". Levi's children had been taken into care and subsequently adopted. Levi's mother had recently died. Alexandra's children were taken into care at the time of the last interview and her long-term foster parents were no longer supporting or in contact with her. They both acknowledged that they were finding it difficult to cope. Yet, when they discussed their lives in care, they both believed that, on the whole, their lives were better than

had they not been in care. Alexandra specifically stated that she probably would have died at the hands of her parents had she not been taken into care. Another young woman, Jane, said she “hated” being in care because “people weren’t nice to me”. Jane had also experienced prison, eviction and periods of homelessness since leaving care. Yet, she had no regrets about running away from home at the age of ten and subsequently going into care. The personal circumstances of young people who have been in care seem to be frequently overlooked in terms of assessing outcomes, despite them being acknowledged as important (Biehal *et al*, 1995). For the young people in this research, starting points were important indicators of how their lives have progressed.

For the young people who grew up in their families, there was no similar context by which they could judge their progression. Indeed, they had lived in a largely stable environment. With the exception of one young person, they had even lived in the same houses since early childhood. Alisha knew she had moved house when her mother remarried but said that she was too young at the time to have any recollections about the change. Even her mother’s remarriage appeared to have had little impact. Alisha’s step-father was, as far as she was concerned, her dad as it was he who had brought her up. Not having experienced any significant changes in their childhood with which to assess how their lives might have been, these young people tended to compare their current situations with other young people. The sample of young people in their biological families all knew each other. They had grown up on the same housing estate and had spent many years attending the youth club from which they were recruited for the research. Their first point of reference then, was each other. They were accepting and uncritical of the different routes their lives were taking. Furthermore, their friendships were such that within the group there was a strong sense of support for each other. This appeared to be important to the young people, particularly when they needed to talk about issues which concerned their parents. Sheridan commented on the support offered by Kahia and Alisha when her father lost his job and she was considering leaving her college course.

“It was hard to talk to me mum and dad because they were trying to work stuff out and then there’d be arguments about money. I’d mentioned about getting a job but they said ‘no’. I was difficult being in the house sometimes. I used to go round to Kahia’s or Alisha’s and talk to them. They were really good, listening to me go on.”

Thomas also said that Mark had fulfilled a similar role at various times, especially “when [his] dad was ‘going on’ again.” The continuity of their friendships arguably contributed a

further sense of stability to the environment in which they were experiencing the processes of growing up

In terms of assessing their own situations, the young people tended to make reference to changes that had occurred recently in their lives. For example, Thomas talked about the change from doing his electronics course at college to working full-time at the youth club.

"It was difficult making the decision especially as my dad didn't want me to stop going to college but I'm much happier now I'm working at the youth club. I feel as though I've got something to aim for."

Sheridan made similar comments about her decision to change from her college based nursery nursing course to working in a nursery and doing NVQs. These changes had occurred during the course of the research and it was clear during the interviews that Thomas and Sheridan were struggling to make decisions. Given that these were arguably the first major decisions they were making, their apprehension was unsurprising. This example provides a remarkable contrast to some of the issues and changes with which the young people who had been in care were dealing. A further point of contrast was the way in which the young people in their biological families looked forward in terms of assessing their current situations. The young people who had been in care tended to draw on the past.

Like Thomas, the other young people had got things about which they felt optimistic. At the last interview, Mark was looking forward to his wedding, Alisha was joining the army and Kahia was filled with anticipation about going to university. Sheridan was settling into her job and was enjoying the feeling that she had made the right decision to end her college course. Their apparent contentment with their lives was emphasised further in comparison to the lives of others. All the young people drew comparisons with one particular young man who had previously attended the youth club. He was described as having gone "off the rails" when he was about fifteen years old by becoming involved in shoplifting. His incipient criminality had apparently escalated and Thomas described him in the following way,

"He just got worse. He was always getting in trouble and he got banned from the youth club. He used to live round here but he's now living with this girl and their kid. He's on the dole and he's a druggie. He doesn't come round much but when he does he's always off his head."

It was evident that their knowledge of how this young man's life had turned out served as a yardstick against which they assessed their own lives. Their sense of "doing well" in comparison was tinged with a sense of relief, especially as he had previously been a member

of their peer group. The inference was that they too could have gone “off the rails” but had not. Instead, there was a sense in which, like the young people who had been in care, they were making the best of the opportunities that were available to them.

It seems fitting to end this chapter with an poignant incident from the fieldwork for this research. After the final interview with Sheridan, she invited me to buy her a drink in a local pub. In the pub we met Nicky, a young man from the sample of young people who had been in care. I introduced Sheridan and Nicky to each other and they both identified themselves as participants in my research. I offered to drive Nicky home as it was on my way to Sheridan’s house. After dropping Nicky off, Sheridan asked if Nicky was one of the young people who had been in care - a question based on Sheridan not having met Nicky before whereas she knew the other young people who had grown up in their families. I responded affirmatively and Sheridan’s reply was, “he was alright. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for him. It must have been awful. I can’t imagine what it would have been like not having my family around me.” Sheridan’s reply arguably emphasises the crux of the matter. Sheridan was selected for the sample because she came from a similar socio-economic background to the young people who had been in care. Yet, the differences between Sheridan’s and Nicky’s biographical experiences are too numerous to mention. It is because of this that I couldn’t imagine Sheridan having to deal with some of the issues that Nicky had only recently experienced and survived. Yet, in their own terms, they were both “alright”.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Care-ful Considerations

Introduction

This research aimed to meet two objectives. The first was to gain an understanding of why some young people appeared to leave care more successfully than others. The second was to develop a more informed understanding of the different ways in which young people who have grown up in care experience youth compared to young people who have grown up in their biological families. The research was designed to furnish an understanding of these two issues by exploring the experiences of a sample of two groupings of young people whose biographies are frequently fragmented, quantified and, as a consequence, only partially visible. Despite the intentions, this research only alludes to holism. The narratives voiced and the pictures portrayed are only a small part of the aspects of their lives which the young people described and disclosed in the interviews. Furthermore, these descriptions and disclosures are, similarly, only a small part of the young people's lived experiences. This research, therefore, suffers as much from partiality as any other research. Having acknowledged this, the research has generated an informed understanding of the importance of recognising difference and, moreover, the processes by which difference becomes manifest in individuals and in groupings of young people.

The adoption of a life course approach has enabled an insight into the beginnings of the processes of becoming different. This research has shown that the category of 'care leavers' as an homogenous group is a social construct. Despite some similarities in the ages and circumstances in which some of the young people in this research were admitted into care, the experience of growing up in care is characteristically diverse. The diversity is evident in key areas, most notably in placement histories and educational careers. It is the young people's experiences in these two areas which were shown to be influential in the process of leaving care and the transitions into independent accommodation and the labour market. It is arguably the case that the differences within the grouping of young people who had been in care is as important as the differences between some of them and the comparison grouping of young people. These themes and the issues they raise are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Within the field of social work, research appears to be gaining a welcome impetus towards improving social work practices. Titles such as *Patterns and Outcomes in Child Placement: Messages from current research and their implications* (DoH, 1991) and *What Works in Leaving Care* (Stein, 1997) are indicative of the shift towards more efficacious practices. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that the same trend has yet to appear in social policy. The policy process generally and policy changes specifically are inherently incremental, involving small changes to what has been done before (Hill, 1993). Some policy changes during the 1980s may be exceptional but the changes themselves were not as radical as had been intended (Young, 1989). This is not to say that research is not influential, rather, it is to make the point that changes in social policies can be a long time in coming. It is unfortunate that some of the social policies for which this research has implications have withstood some long-standing criticisms. It is tempting to ask if anyone is listening. At the risk of falling on deaf ears, this research does have implications for social policies. These will be discussed in conjunction with some recent recommendations from the newly established Social Exclusion Unit. The hope that someone is listening to them is, however, tempered by feelings of *deja vu*.

In the wait for more effective social policies, there are a number of issues raised in this research which are worthy of further investigation. Although this research was carried out with a social policy perspective, the nature of the research has given an insight into social work practices. The divide between social work and social policy as disciplines or as perspectives guiding research is apparent and is sometimes real. A possible, and admittedly contentious, argument to be made from this research is that social work practices in childhood can be seen to contribute to the manifestation of social policy issues in youth. A case could be made for conflating research agendas in key areas. An obvious example would be future research on children and young people in care. These issues will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

In concluding this research, it needs to be remembered that nearly all the young people who had grown up in care were glad they had gone into care. Moreover, they thought that their lives had turned out better than perhaps might have been the case had they not been taken into care. It might be assumed from this, that the care system is working, in that it is meeting its aim to provide a positive service aimed at assisting the child (DoH, 1991a, b). Such an assumption would be dangerous, particularly if it resulted in an attitude of 'if it's working, don't fix it'. For many of the young people in this research, their self-assessments were based on their beliefs that they may well have died from the abuse they were experiencing at the

hands of adults prior to their admissions into care. In these circumstances, their positive assessments of their 'outcomes' are not surprising. Despite this, many expressed negative comments about their experiences of growing up in care. These were commonly based on the actions and decisions of the adults who were 'looking after' them. This research has highlighted the importance of a life course perspective, particularly with regard to the importance of the social context in which transitions from childhood to youth are undertaken. There is an argument to be made for a recognition of the importance of childhood as a context to some of the perceived social problems of youth. To borrow from two very different pieces of research with the same title (Qvortrup *et al*, 1994; Williams, 1996), this research asserts that 'childhood matters'.

Themes and Issues from the Research

This research has been undertaken against a backcloth made up of previous studies and a range of social policies which constitute the legislative environment of growing up in and out of care. The research has sought to bring some coherence to the multi-dimensional and frequently fragmented approach to being in care, leaving care and youth. Importantly, it has shown the need to see these separate stages as an integrated, dynamic and multi-faceted process. A fundamental aspect of this process is, what Giddens (1991) calls, 'structuration'. Growing up in care and the transitions into and throughout youth are experienced, for all intents and purposes, within the same legislative environment. Yet, for young people who have been in care, youth is seen to be characterised by disadvantage, social exclusion, and 'failed' transitions (Coles, 1995; Roberts, 1995). This research has shown that the inferred vulnerability of young people who have been in care compared to young people growing up in their biological families might be misplaced. Young people grow up in care and leave care in remarkably different ways. It is an understanding of these differences which facilitate an awareness of the different experiences of youth.

Some studies of young people leaving care have recognised the importance of young people's experiences of being in care, particularly the extent of placement disruption, as influencing the outcomes of leaving care (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986). In particular, attention has focused on the number of placements young people experience in care (Biehal *et al*, 1995) and types of placement histories (Garnett, 1992). There are two important aspects to Garnett's typology of placement histories. One is the age at which young people were admitted into care. She makes a distinction between 'teenage entrants' and those who

were admitted into care at the ages of twelve years and under. The second aspect concerns placement stability of those admitted into care before the age of thirteen years. Garnett categorises the placement histories of these young people as 'long-term stable' or 'long-term unsettled'. The application of the typology to this research, however, has highlighted some of its limitations. Specifically, the typology was shown to mask some remarkable differences between young people with the same *type* of placement history. Most notably, the typology disguised the extent of disruption experienced by some young people. It has been possible in this research to gain an understanding of the factors leading to placement disruption. Some of these can be traced back to the experiences of the young people prior to their admission into care.

It was shown that admissions into care occur for different reasons (Farmer & Parker, 1991; Packman, 1986; Rowe *et al*, 1989). The age at which children and young people are admitted into care has been argued to be a factor. The categorisations of 'the protected' and 'the disaffected' (Farmer & Parker, 1991) and 'the victims' and 'the villains' (Packman, 1986) indicate vividly the differences between those admitted for reasons of abuse and neglect and those admitted because of their own behaviour which is seen to be beyond the control of parents and may include criminality and truancy. The former tend to be younger whilst 'the disaffected' and 'the villains' tend to be older and usually young people in their teenage years. Such distinctions are interesting but this research has clearly shown that 'the protected' and 'the victims' tend to become 'the disaffected' and 'the villains' as they grow up in care. Many of the young people in this research who were admitted into care because of concerns about abuse and/or neglect later exhibited 'villainous' behaviour. This included criminality which in some cases resulted in incarceration, truancy resulting in exclusion from school, and aggression towards carers. We should not be surprised by this. These types of behaviour 'problems' have been shown in other research to be associated with abuse in early childhood (Gibbons *et al*, 1995). It has not been possible in this research to infer causality but the evidence would seem to lend support to the work of Gibbons *et al* (1995). What this research has also shown, however, is that such behaviour, whatever its critical cause, also tends to lead to placement disruption.

There are two aspects to placement disruption. One is the number of placement changes experienced by the young people. The second is the *types* of placements experienced. Although the young people in this research tended to say they "just got used to" moving around, other research has shown that placement endings can be traumatic and have adverse effects on the

young people concerned (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Millham *et al.*, 1986). Indeed, this research has shown that placement disruption did little to alter the exhibited behaviour of some of the young people. This was shown to be the case for the young people who experienced numerous placement changes involving different *types* of placements. The tendency for children to be placed in foster care and for teenaged young people to be in residential care (DoH, 1993) was reflected in this research. However, this research has provided a sense of the dynamics of that static picture provided by Department of Health statistics. Many of the teenaged young people in residential placements were previously children in foster care. Moreover, for some young people, the transitions between foster care and residential care also involved transitions to specialist residential placements (CHEs) which were located out-of-borough. Placement disruption, therefore, is not merely about numbers. For many young people, it involves adjustment to qualitatively different types of placements.

Placement disruption can, in itself, be unsettling. However, it does have wider implications for the experience of growing up in care. This is particularly so when changes in placement also necessitate changes of school. The education of children and young people in care has long been a cause of concern (Social Services Committee, 1984; SSI/OFSTED, 1995; Utting, 1991). Placement disruption has been seen as an important factor in the low levels of educational achievement of those in care (Jackson, 1987). This research has shown that many of the young people in this sample experienced extensive disruption in their education. Some of this was caused by admission into care and placement changes thereafter. For some young people, disruption in their education began at an early age, as with one young woman having to attend three different primary schools due to changes in her placements. For others, disruption occurred later when they were at secondary school. One effect of disruption in placements and education can be seen by levels of attainment at the age of sixteen. Those young people who experienced relative stability in their placements and in their education achieved at least the average number of GCSEs at sixteen years of age. Those who experienced disrupted placements and education did not achieve any basic qualifications. Turning this latter statement into a causal explanation may seem straight-forward but it would also be misleading.

Nine of the young people in this research who had grown up in care ceased attending a mainstream school *before* the age of sixteen. Many of these left school around the age of thirteen years. It should be noted that nearly all of the young people who had been in care admitted to truanting from school at some point. The reasons given included feeling unhappy

in their placements or being swept along by the pervasive culture of non-school attendance in some children's homes. For many these were short-lived experiences due, it appeared, to the timely intervention of their carers. For nine young people, their decisions not to attend school regularly and to "mess about" when they did go, frequently resulted in exclusion from school. Truancy, for some of these young people, appeared to be a mechanism by which to take some control of their lives. Their resultant exclusions from school merely served to convert their voluntary absenteeism into official absence. Another consequence, in some cases, was to further the disruption in their placements as they were moved to community homes with on-site education facilities (CHEs). In different ways, therefore, these nine 'unqualified care-leavers' were structurally removed from mainstream education at an early age.

The fact that truancy, for some young people, was a short-lived experience suggests that appropriate interventions can be made (DfEE, 1995b). However, this probably depends on who is making the intervention. The young people who completed their compulsory education and achieved some basic qualifications also experienced relatively stable placements. They talked about having positive relationships with their carers which had developed over a period of time. The nature of these relationships must be seen to be important in effecting the young people's return to school. Indeed, comparisons can be made with the exertion of parental influence on school attendance for the young people growing up in their biological families. In contrast, the extent of placement disruption experienced by the nine young people mentioned above, means that the attempted interventions to encourage their attendance at school were likely to have been made by relative strangers. Again, this shows that placement disruption results in qualitatively different experiences of growing up in care.

Despite the extent of difference evident in these young people's experiences, it is possible to make some general comments on growing up in care. For many of the young people in this research, admission into care provided relief from the abuse and neglect they were experiencing in their family homes. For some young people, the relief was temporary. A small number disclosed subsequent abuse by foster parents. For nearly all the young people, growing up in care resulted in some disruption in their placements and in their education. Even for those who experienced relatively stable placement histories, growing up in care resulted in a childhood bureaucratised by care orders, six monthly review meetings, receipts for clothes and the continued intervention of social workers. In addition, for a significant number of young people, growing up in care was also characteristically unstable and uncertain. The manifestation of criminality, aggression, truancy and prostitution casts doubt on whether local

authorities are, on the whole, providing 'a positive service aimed at assisting the child.' (DoH, 1991a, b).

The uncertainty and instability which characterised some young people's experiences of growing up in care was evident in nearly all the young people's experiences of leaving care. Indeed, only two young people remained in the same placement between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. For them, leaving care involved no more than the discharge of their care orders. For all the other young people in this research, leaving care was the difficult and disrupted process described by others (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Garnett, 1992). Some of these young people were 'prepared' for leaving care in that they moved into one of the independence training units provided by the local authority in which this research took place. However, they experienced as much, and sometimes more, disruption in their accommodation after leaving the units as those who were 'unprepared' for leaving care. The provision of the independence training units certainly meets the requirements of the Children Act 1989 but questions arise about their effectiveness and, perhaps more importantly, their accessibility.

Other research (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Stein, 1997) has shown such leaving care schemes to be effective, particularly with regard to practical independence skills training and arranging access to appropriate, move-on accommodation. The evidence in this research would concur with these assertions. The seven young people who moved into the units in planned, preparation for leaving care felt as though they had learned some practical skills, such as budgeting, cooking, and, more generally, organising their time and resources. With the help of the staff in the units, these young people also moved into appropriate, move-on accommodation. The fact that none of these young people stayed in their move-on accommodation arguably has less to do with the effectiveness of the leaving care schemes and more to do with a range of issues for which the leaving care schemes would be unable to prepare them. For example, some of the issues which served to disrupt the young people's move-on accommodation were domestic violence, burglaries, and family relationships. However, it was only after experiencing periods of homelessness, staying with family and friends, and living in a women's refuge that these young people eventually secured appropriate accommodation again.

The experiences of the seven young people who were 'unprepared' for leaving care are different in that, at the ages of fifteen and sixteen, they were placed in arguably inappropriate types of accommodation such as bedsits, bed and breakfast hotels, shared housing, and mother

and baby units (without being mothers!). As others have pointed out (Biehal *et al.*, 1995; Garnett, 1992) and as this research showed, these types of accommodation tend to be short-term and insecure. Although some of these young people were eventually offered places in one of the independence units it was only after they had variously experienced homelessness, incarceration, and attempted suicide. By the end of the research period, only one of these young people was known to be in appropriate and secure accommodation. It is possible to suggest, therefore, that planned movement into the independence units can be seen to be effective. So why did *only some* of the young people experience planned moves into the units?

In their evaluative research into leaving care schemes, Biehal *et al.* (1995) noted that the vast majority of referrals for all the schemes were for young people who were in residential care placements and concern was raised about the lack of referrals for young people in foster care. This is not the case in this research. Three of the seven young people who had planned moves into the independence training units were in foster care immediately prior to their moves. (This research does, however, suggest that type of placement appears to be a factor in movement into the independence units. None of the young people who were placed in out-of-borough CHEs left care via the independence units. Among these young people there seemed to be a belief that their behaviour and the reputations they had gained whilst growing up in care were the main reasons for them not being 'prepared' for leaving care. This research has shown that movement to CHEs appeared to be predicated upon the young people's 'problem' behaviour. This would substantiate the young people's beliefs regarding their lack of opportunity to access the independence units. Whether they were actively discriminated against or not arguably matters less than they believe it to be so. There should be concern about the message this sends to the young people, particularly when it is noted that their lack of access to leaving care services is matched by their lack of access to financial support from the Benefits Agency. It is difficult not to see a culture developing of some young people leaving care being seen as 'undeserving'. Yet, many of these young people would be classified by some as 'the victims' (Packman, 1986) and 'the protected' (Farmer & Parker, 1991) when they first entered the care system.

Growing up in care has been shown to lead to very different experiences of youth when compared to the young people in this research who grew up in their biological families. At the age of sixteen, the young people who had been in care were experiencing movement into independent accommodation and variously experiencing motherhood, domestic violence, incarceration, and homelessness. Some were also trying to manage their transitions into the

labour market. For the young people living with their families, their transitions into the labour market appeared to be their main pre-occupation. For some of these young people, their transitions were not as smooth or as unproblematic as is sometimes presumed. The expansion of post-sixteen education has resulted in many young people facing numerous pathways into the labour market. Some writers (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997) have argued that these new opportunities carry a certain amount of risk which young people have to negotiate at an individual level. The evidence from this research lends support to this. The uncertainty that some of the young people experienced was evidently distressing. Their choices and opportunities for change were arguably the first major decisions that these young people were making. Although they appeared to be making their decisions individually, the support of their families and the stability of their accommodation perceptively reduced the risk, if not the uncertainty, of their decisions.

The importance of support and a sense of stability finds resonance in the experiences of four of the young people who had grown up in care, particularly with regard to their transitions into the labour market. Two young people, Wesley and Dave, remained in the same placements whilst they were undertaking their transitions into the labour market. Their respective participation in post-sixteen education and employment was managed with relative ease. Similarly, the disruption in accommodation and post-sixteen education experienced by Nicky and Courtney was eventually managed with the support they received from others. It was with this support that both gained footholds in the labour market at the same time as experiencing some stability in their accommodation. These four young people were also some of the few young people who had been in care to have gained some basic educational qualifications. Yet, for Nicky and Courtney, their attainment of GCSEs could not prevent them dropping out of post-sixteen education because of the changes they were experiencing in their after care accommodation.

It is clear from this research that for young people who have been in care, their school to work transitions are much more complex than can be explained by their levels of educational attainment at the end of compulsory education. Given that this appears to be one of the most frequently used points of comparison between 'care leavers' and 'average' young people then there is a case to be made for recognising difference rather than assessing comparative success and failure. The care system provides a remarkably different social context for growing up than the biological family. Young people's experiences of growing up in their families are seen to be differentiated by, among other things, social class and lone parenthood. Similarly, young

people's experiences of growing up in care are differentiated by, among other things, the number, type and location of placements. These issues can enhance or undermine young people's sense of stability, security, and affection. Importantly, for the young people concerned, they also generate a sense of resilience and an attitude of survival.

Why do some young people appear to leave care more successfully than others? Young people simply leave care in *different* ways. To infer success or otherwise is to negate their biographical experiences. 'Care-leavers' who are unqualified, unemployed, incarcerated, and/or teenage mothers are *seen* as a social problem. 'Care-leavers' who are qualified and employed are simply *seen* to leave care more successfully because of the yardstick by which they are judged. In both these cases, young people's 'start points' are ignored. To modernise an old Indian proverb, 'do not judge a young person until you have walked a kilometre in their trainers.' The young people in this research recognised that they were still walking their kilometres but they did know where their walks had started. (A noticeable difference between the young people who had been in care and those who were still living with their families was that the former were more concerned about where they had come from whilst the latter were focused on where they were going.) It might be that for these young people their future was more clearly signposted. For the young people who had been in care, the amount of changes they were experiencing rendered their future as uncertain as their past had sometimes been. In the context of their individual lives and in comparison to others with whom they chose to compare themselves, these young people were "doing alright." At the end of the research period, Nicky thought his life was better than it had been six months previously whereas Alexandra thought her life was worse than it had been six months previously. Geoffrey would have preferred to be employed but his ability to care for himself and his relationship with his girlfriend were, for him, successful 'outcomes'. For many of the young people in this research, their experiences of being in care were variously described as "shit", "a bastard" and "horrible". Yet, almost without exception, they were all "glad" they had been taken into care. The thought that they may not have survived their childhood years perhaps explains their relief at being able to grow up...in care.

Implications for Policy and Practice

With specific regard to growing up in care, this research seems to indicate a number of areas in which social policies and social work practices could be improved. In some areas, the distinction between a policy issue and a practice one are slightly blurred since social work

practice is guided by social policy) The Children Act 1989 is a case in point. Its implementation in 1991 was expected to provide a sound basis for good practice in child care (White *et al*, 1990). An important theme in the Children Act 1989 is that in looking after children in care, and as they leave care, local authorities should act in the manner of a 'good parent'. It was shown in Chapter Two that the Children Act 1989, and its accompanying Guidance and Regulations, contains sufficient guidelines and statutory duties to ensure local authorities can act in the manner of a 'good parent' and provide a positive service aimed at assisting the child. These are put into practice by social workers and related professionals. This research has implications for the Children Act 1989. Furthermore, it supports the argument made by Rogers and Roche (1994) that changes in law alone do not result in changes in attitude or practices.

There are two broad areas of policy and practice for which this research has implications. These are being in care and leaving care. However, it is important to recognise them as part of a continuum rather than as separate and distinct stages. (Interventions into the lives of young people in care and the provision of services as they leave care are guided by the Children Act 1989). It was suggested in Chapter Two that some of the good intentions contained within the Children Act 1989 were unlikely to come into fruition because of the legislative environment in which it was implemented. The Children Act 1989 promotes multi-agency working in order to meet the needs of children in care. Yet, many of the agencies or statutory departments whose work affects the lives of children in care have different aims and values which would be difficult to coalesce. These will be discussed in more detail shortly. For now, it is the Children Act 1989 which is of concern.

There are a number of aspects to the Children Act 1989 for which this research has implications. One of these was discussed in the preface to this thesis. It is worth returning to the issue because of its cultural and symbolic importance. (The term 'looked after' was introduced in the Act in an attempt to break down the stigma attached to being in care.) Similarly, 'providing accommodation' rather than 'admitting into care' was an attempt to recast the care system into a positive service aimed at assisting children and families. The young people in this research described themselves as having been "in care". Moreover they were "moved around to different places" and not 'provided with different accommodation'. This may be semantic pedantism but it does raise questions about the extent to which the Children Act 1989 has managed to change the culture and practices of the care system. The Act has now been in force for almost seven years. Yet some of issues raised in this research

are remarkably similar to other research carried out long before the Children Act 1989 was implemented (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Millham *et al*, 1986; Stein & Carey, 1986).

The Children Act 1989 requires that children and young people are placed as close as possible to their own homes. This facilitates continued contact with family and peers, and alleviates the need to change schools. It has to be acknowledged that many of the young people in this research were admitted into care prior to the implementation of the Children Act 1989 but all of them grew up in care under its auspices. All of them experienced at least one change of placement. None of them remained in the same locality as their families and a significant number did not even remain in the same town. Ten of the sixteen young people experienced disruption in their education as a result of placement changes. Many also lost contact with parents and siblings. These issues are raised to highlight the apparent failure of policy to influence practice. However, it should be acknowledged that resources play an important role. The availability of appropriate placements is likely to result in spatial disruption but this cannot, and should not, be viewed as a legitimate excuse for the extensive disruption experienced by some of the young people in this research.

Research has shown that placement endings can be traumatic and that numerous changes can be unsettling leading to adverse emotional and behavioural problems for the children and young people concerned (Berridge & Cleaver 1987; Millham *et al*, 1986). Again, these issues are reflected in the Children Act 1989. It could be argued that changes in placements, in themselves, are not always a bad thing. A small number of young people in this research experienced some placement changes because of the abuse they were experiencing at the hands of their 'carers'. However, many more did not know why they experienced so many placement changes although as they got older some young people attributed the changes to their own behaviour. In recognising that some placement changes are inevitable, there is a case to be made for ensuring that the changes are managed in such a way as to reduce the trauma associated with placement endings. The young people in this research frequently remembered visiting new placements only for an overnight stay prior to moving. This must be seen as a token gesture rather than adequate preparation for change. The speed at which some of the young people experienced placement changes, therefore, can only contribute to the trauma and unsettling nature of disruption.

The Children Act 1989 places great emphasis on promoting the welfare and development of children which includes, among other things, physical, emotional, and social behavioural progress. Again, placement disruption can be seen to undermine these aims. As they got older and had experienced an increasing number of placement changes, many of the young people talked about “kicking off” which referred to displays of aggressive behaviour, usually in children’s homes. Jane talked explicitly about hitting members of staff in some of the homes in which she was placed. Others talked about causing criminal damage to, stealing from, and setting fires in their placements. Again these were commonly children’s homes or CHEs. This research has shown that, in many cases, growing up in care involves the transition from being children in foster care to being ‘teenagers’ in residential care. Other research has shown that early childhood abuse can lead to behavioural difficulties in adolescence (Gibbons *et al*, 1995). It could be argued that the (mis)management of young people’s placements contributes to the manifestation of behavioural difficulties. It is unfortunate that these then become factors for increased placement disruption. This research supports the argument made by others (Triseliotis *et al*, 1995) that more effort should, perhaps, be invested to prevent placement breakdown.

It is important to highlight specifically, the experiences of the young people who were moved into out-of-borough CHEs. This research has shown that these types of placements potentially cause the most disruption to young people. They also appear to have very little effect on their exhibited behaviour - a reason cited by the young people for their placement in CHEs. As well as causing further placement disruption, such placements also appear to result in the complete removal of young people from mainstream education, tended to fracture contact with parents, and necessitated adjustment not only to a new placement but also to a new geographic location. Many of the young people who were placed in CHEs continued to experience placement breakdown resulting in movement to other CHEs. Their exhibited behaviour apparently remained unaffected. A further issue regarding placement in CHEs concerns the process of leaving care. None of the young people who were placed in CHEs had planned moves into the independence training units in preparation for leaving care. Placements in CHEs are expensive. Sebastian said his placement cost social services £450 per week. Boothy said that one of his CHEs cost £3,000 per week. It is difficult to prove the accuracy of these figures but research by the Audit Commission (1996) has shown that some local authority placements have a weekly cost in excess of places like Eton public school or The Ritz hotel. The use of CHEs, therefore, carries financial implications as well as policy and practice ones. Questions need to be asked about whether they provide an efficient and *effective* use of resources.

In looking at the wider implications of this research there is a danger of merely constructing a social policy wish list. Many of the issues concerning education, training, housing and social security benefits are well rehearsed elsewhere (see for example, Coleman & Warren-Adamson, 1992; Coles, 1995; Craig, 1991; Fowler *et al*, 1996; Jones, 1995; Maclagan, 1994). This research supports the calls for a more effective and co-ordinated approach to social policies affecting young people generally and those in, and leaving, care specifically. However, it is important to assess the messages emanating from the current legislative environment, specifically with regard to young people growing up in, and leaving, care. It is possible to show an unwillingness to take responsibility compounded by a developing culture of low expectations which can be seen to render young people leaving care as undeserving.

It is well known that children and young people in care are educationally disadvantaged. Some have suffered educationally before their admission into care (Jackson, 1994). For these and for other young people, being in care does little to enhance their educational performance (Social Services Committee, 1984; SSI/OFSTED; 1995; Utting, 1991). As this research and others have shown, many young people leave care with few or no educational qualifications (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Broad, 1997; Garnett, 1992). This research has shown that many young people ceased attending school at an early age. Truancy and “messaging about in school” were shown to be factors which resulted in exclusion from school. It was inferred that such behaviour is possibly linked to both childhood abuse and placement disruption. Although the Children Act 1989 says that social workers should have a ‘regard’ for the education of young people in care, other research has highlighted the dramatic increase in exclusions from school (Pearce & Hillman, 1998). If this trend continues there is a sense in which having a ‘regard’ for young people’s education is unlikely to improve the levels of attainment for those in care.

The importance of educational qualifications for young people’s life chances is recognised in the Children Act 1989 and in two recent reports. The Education and Employment Committee (1998) notes the association between truancy, educational under-achievement, and disaffection in youth. In response, their report outlines the governments plans to launch a series of initiatives to tackle disaffection, including truancy, among fourteen to nineteen year olds. These efforts should be welcomed with caution. By the age of fourteen, disaffection may already be entrenched. The report on truancy and school exclusion from the Social Exclusion Unit (1998b) outlines the government’s plans to tackle the education of children (sic) in care by setting targets. Current thinking is that by the year 2001, fifty per cent of all children in care should achieve ‘a qualification’ and by 2003 the proportion should increase to seventy

five per cent. A number of questions immediately spring to mind. 'A qualification' of what kind? Will 'a qualification' realistically improve the life chances of young people leaving care? Are these targets so low to increase the likelihood of them being achieved? Or, are they so low because the expectations of children in care are so low? To a large extent these are rhetorical questions because of the way in which the targets are to be met. The Social Exclusion Unit reports that the government is to promote better co-ordination between the professionals involved in the lives and education of children in care. We have been here before. In 1984, the Social Service Committee recommended the exact same course of action. It was a recommendation which was included in the Children Act 1989 and has, therefore, been guiding practice since 1991! It is possible that we might be here again in the not too distant future.

Another policy area which generates feelings of *deja vu* is that of housing. An important need of young people leaving care to live independently is secure and appropriate accommodation. This research has shown that with the help of leaving care services some young people did move into such types of accommodation. For a variety of reasons, none of them stayed in their accommodation. They, along with the young people who moved out of care without the help of leaving care services, experienced difficulties in accessing other appropriate accommodation. The experiences of the young people in this sample are reflected elsewhere (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Stein & Carey, 1986; Strathdee, 1993). In 1984, the Social Services Committee commented that the lack of suitable accommodation was the single greatest obstacle to a young person leaving care. At that time, the Housing Act 1977 was still in force and the Committee recommended that it should be amended to include young people leaving care as a priority-need category. The Act was not amended but the 1985 Housing Act did identify young people leaving care as a 'vulnerable' group but not a group with priority-needs. The Children Act 1989 (DoH, 1991b) states that the primary responsibility for housing lies with local authority housing departments. The 1996 Housing Act does not even identify young people leaving care as a 'vulnerable' group let alone a priority-need group.

One consequence of the accommodation problems experienced by young people leaving care are evidenced by research which shows that around one quarter of people who are homeless have previously been in care (Anderson *et al*, 1993; Evans, 1996; Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). In a recent report, the Social Exclusion Unit (1998a) has acknowledged that the over-representation of people who have previously been in care among 'rough sleepers' is a matter of concern. In response, the report states that the Department of the Environment, Transport

and the Regions intends issuing guidance to local authority housing departments. The guidance is expected to state that care leavers (sic), with very few exceptions, should be regarded as vulnerable and considered under the homelessness legislation. Apart from wanting to know who the exceptions might be, the stasis in housing policy is striking and, ultimately, regrettable. If and when the new guidance is issued, then young people leaving care can only expect more of the same.

The final policy area to be considered is social security legislation. Of specific concern is the eligibility of young people leaving care to claim severe hardship payments. Despite the criticisms made about the changes to social security legislation as they affect young people (Craig, 1991; Maclagan, 1994) the Benefits Agency still assumes responsibility for income maintenance for those without employment or other sources of financial support. The exception is for sixteen and seventeen years olds who have been in care. These young people are deemed to be the responsibility of local authority social service departments. This and other research (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Gamett, 1992) has shown that some young people have little or no contact with leaving care services or indeed their social workers when they leave care. They are, therefore, forced to take financial responsibility for themselves. For two young people in this sample, burglary and prostitution provided their sources of income.

In Chapter Seven, the young people who had grown up in care identified themselves as survivors. They had survived abuse and neglect. They had survived the care system. At the final interview, they were all surviving in a neglectful social policy environment. Sebastian said his breaking point was high. Vivian said she had learned to cope with shit situations. If it was possible to give an NVQ for survival in the face of adversity then many of the young people in this research who had been in care would probably complete and pass the coursework with flying colours. The government might even exceed its intended target that by 2003, seventy five per cent of young people will have 'a qualification' when they leave care. This approach would at least give recognition to the biographical experiences of many young people who have grown up in care. They are, without exception, deserving and they are our responsibility.

The Need to Know More

This research has compared the experiences of youth and youth transitions between two groupings of young people. In the twelve month research period, both groupings of young

people experienced some changes and some uncertainty in their lives. For the young people living in their biological families, the changes and uncertainty was most evident in their transitions from school to work. With the exception of Mark, who left home during the research period, leaving home was not a transition these young people were undertaking. For the young people who had been in care, the changes were evident in many more aspects of their lives. These young people were variously leaving care, leaving school, moving into independent accommodation, dropping out of college and bringing up their own children. Yet, for two of the young people who had been in care, their experiences of youth appeared to be remarkably similar to those living with their biological families. Both Wesley and Dave had experienced stable placements for a number of years and for the duration of this research. Their school to work transitions were being undertaken within these supported and stable environments. This research has shown that young people who had grown up in care do, on the whole, experience youth in very different ways to young people who had grown up in their biological families. However, there are greater differences in experiences between the young people who had been in care. It is these differences which provide the initial focus for further research.

In this research, nearly all the young people who had grown up in care admitted to truanting from school at some point. Indeed, the Social Exclusion Unit (1998b) reports that children in care are ten times more likely than others to truant. Evidence from the young people in this sample suggests a number of reasons why this might be the case. Dave truanted when he felt unhappy in his foster placement. Levi and Vivian truanted in an attempt to take some control of their lives. Nicky's truancy was a reaction to a culture which had developed in his children's home. Given the links between truancy, school exclusion and low levels of education attainment there is a need to know more. Is truancy a different kind of self-harm? Is it a way of coping with other psychological and social problems? Research shows that young people who truant are more likely to become involved in criminal activities than non-truants (Audit Commission, 1996). It is also known that around forty per cent of those incarcerated in Young Offender Institutions have previously been in care (Walmsley *et al*, 1992) . In this context, truancy has implications beyond educational attainment. However, it is only by knowing more about why young people in care truant that effective interventions can be made.

Many of the young people in this research who truanted persistently, or exhibited disruptive behaviour in school, were subsequently excluded. Some did become involved in criminal activities. Others were already involved. A significant number of these young people were

moved to CHEs. The cost and apparent willingness of social services to place some young people in this type of placement suggests that some benefits are to be gained. This research has been unable to shed any light on the effectiveness of CHEs but some adverse consequences for the young people who resided in them were discussed earlier. There is a need to know more about who benefits from CHEs. Are they therapeutic communities aimed at helping young people resolve emotional issues from the past and consequently modify their current behaviour? Or are they expensive repositories into which 'problem' young people can be placed before they contaminate others? This research showed that the six young people who resided in CHEs were 'unprepared' for independent living. The five young people in this research who had experienced, or were experiencing, incarceration had all previously resided in CHEs. There is a need to understand why.

As well as needing to know more about these two aspects of young people's experiences of being in care, the issue of leaving care requires further research. This and other research (Biehal *et al*, 1995) has shown that leaving care schemes can be seen to be effective in some key areas such as practical skills training, move on accommodation, and to a lesser extent, post-sixteen education and employment. However, not all the young people in this research were given the opportunity to access the independence training units. They thought it was because of the reputations they had gained whilst they were in care. However, Biehal *et al* (1995) have suggested that type of placement is a factor. The researchers found that young people in foster care were less likely to be referred to leaving care schemes than those in residential placements. Equal opportunities to access these types of services is important. There is a growing awareness of what works in leaving care (Stein, 1997). Although not all local authorities provide specialist leaving care services, there is increasing pressure for them to do so (Lambert, 1998) (Stein (1997) advocates randomised control trials to assess more accurately the effectiveness of leaving care schemes in terms of outcomes. In terms of access, it might be as useful to know who is gate-keeping the services, why and using what criteria.)

The longitudinal approach to this research has facilitated an insight into the rapid changes experienced by the young people in the sample in a very short period of time, particularly by those who had grown up in care. Other longitudinal research into young people leaving care (Biehal *et al*, 1995; Stein & Carey, 1986) has followed samples of young people for up to two and a half years. Like this research, the focus has been on the process and outcomes of leaving care for young people aged between sixteen and nineteen years. (It would be expensive and methodologically difficult to maintain a sample of young people leaving care until they

reached their mid-twenties. It would be less so to undertake research with a sample of people in their mid-twenties who had grown up in care. Very little is known about the effects of having been in care and the experiences of individuals after the age of nineteen years. It might be time to know more.

The comparison of two groupings of young people in this research has facilitated an insight into the differences in these experiences, particularly in terms of actual experiences and how they were managed by the young people. This research has been the first attempt to explore and compare experiences of young people leaving care with young people living with their biological families. It has raised some interesting issues. However, if this research were to be undertaken again efforts ought to be made to access a comparison sample of young people who have experienced social work intervention but were not admitted into care - the initial intention of this research. It was issues to do with access which prevented this research from including such a grouping of young people. The importance of trying to overcome the difficulties of access concerns the possibility of gaining a more informed insight into the effects on young people of practical interventions which take place within the context of the family and those which take place within the context of the care system. The Children Act 1989 assumes that, in most cases, families are the best place for children to grow up and it promotes working in partnership with parents to prevent both family breakdown and the reception of children into care. The practical issues and difficulties of working in partnership with parents are discussed elsewhere (Buchanan, 1994). Given the message from the young people in this research that they were glad they went into care, there is need to know whether working to preventing the reception of children into care is more effective in the longer term.

The Need for a Different Perspective

In conclusion, this research has also advanced an argument for the need to adopt a different perspective in youth and social policy research. The young people in this research were all experiencing youth in different ways. There are various ways of explaining those differences. Their levels of educational attainment at the age of sixteen may be seen to be important. Their accommodation and living arrangements may also be influential. The opportunities and pitfalls of social policies cannot be ignored. However, it is the argument of this thesis that it is their childhood experiences which far outweigh the above in terms of how these young people were experiencing youth. In trying to understand the different ways in which young people make their transitions to adulthood there is a tendency for childhood experiences to be compressed

into a few explanatory variables, such as social class, ethnicity, gender, number of parents, and educational attainment. These are clearly important issues. Nevertheless, it needs to be remembered that youth is a product of childhood and that childhood is more multi-faceted and dynamic than these variables would suggest.

This research has shown that for some young people, childhood is a period in the life course which is characterised by traumatic experiences such as physical and sexual abuse, neglect, separation from families and admission into care. Yet, the young people in this research and young people in care generally are arguably a visible minority of the many whose childhoods are marred by abuse. The National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse (Williams, 1996) estimated that;

- at least 150,000 children annually suffer severe physical punishment;
- up to 100,000 children each year have a potentially harmful sexual experience;
- 350,000 - 400,000 live in an environment low in warmth and high in criticism; and,
- 450,000 are bullied at school at least once a week..

Other research (Reder *et al*; 1993) has documented the cases of children who did not survive such abuse. These are social policy issues. These children are likely to become the vulnerable, disaffected, and disengaged young people of tomorrow. Such social policy issues will be more easily recognised but less easily remedied. Children need to be recognised as individuals and not just as invisible dependants in lone or two parent families (Bradshaw & Miller, 1991; Kiernan & Wicks, 1990; Morgan, 1995). Most, but not all, of them will grow up to be young people. Some will be tomorrow's 'care leavers'. All will have experienced childhoods that mattered. We should take more of an interest.

POSTSCRIPT

In Chapter Three, attention was drawn to some of my concerns about the ethics of undertaking this research and some of the ethical issues which became manifest during the fieldwork. As the series of interviews came to an end I was again haunted by my original concerns about the ethics of carrying out the research. I was acutely aware that I may never see any of the young people again and, indeed, many of the young people commented that they were sorry that the research had come to an end. This served as a reminder of the effects of research on the researcher and the researched. Completing the data collection meant breaking the ties with the young people. Surrounded by fifty seven transcripts, I realised that I had actually enjoyed the interviewing but was not completely happy with the prospect of analysing the young people's lives. I felt a need to pass on my thanks to the young people although this had already been voiced at the last interviews. I had previously decided not to pay the young people for the interviews and the reasons for this decision were discussed earlier. However, I sent a card to each young person individually and enclosed a postal order for ten pounds as a token of my appreciation of the amount of time they had given me. It could be argued that this was merely a different way of paying the young people to participate in the research which contradicts the arguments made earlier. However, none of the young people expected to be paid for their time and efforts and I believe the money was received in the spirit in which it was sent - as a civil way of saying thank you. Letters from two young people suggested gratitude on their part and one young man, in particular, said that he had been able to go to a football match which he had been resigned to missing because he had not been able to afford the ticket.

The gratitude expressed by a few of the young people for the money and the comments made by many of them during the last round of interviews suggested that the research had not been as prurient as had originally been thought. Many young people commented that they had never had the opportunity to talk about themselves before. Moreover, they had found it to be a beneficial exercise. This was particularly the case among the young people who had been in care. Very few had reflected on their lives in care and, whilst the interviews had uncovered some painful memories, they commented that they were glad to be able to talk about them. One young woman wrote to say that the interviews had allowed her "to exorcise a lot of ghosts from the past." Another young woman commented that it was the first time someone had listened to her. The fact that the research seems to have benefited the young people in an admittedly, unexpected way goes some way in allaying my preoccupation of selfishness. Yet,

my original concerns remain pertinent and it is right that they should. Social research is an ethical issue. It needs to be remembered that our interviewees are real people with real and sometimes harrowing stories to tell. Their stories do not end with the printed word.

APPENDIX

This appendix contains a brief outline of the topics discussed with the sample of young people at each interview. It is clear that some topics were specifically focused on the experiences of the young people in care. These were not discussed with the young people who had grown up in their biological families. It should be stressed that these 'topic guides' were used to direct the interviews. They were not used to structure them.

First Interviews

1. Biological Family Information (prior to admission into care)

- where did you live
- with whom
- quality of relationships, especially with parents

2. Careers in Care

- age at admission
- reason for admission - intervention by whom - admitted/placed with siblings
- memories/feelings about going into care
- types of placements experienced including:-
 - knowledge about placement
 - quality of relationships with carers/others in placement
 - Feelings of belonging
 - duration of placement
 - reasons for any placement breakdown - feelings about breakdown

3. Educational Career

- schools attended including primary school
- reasons for any changes
- experiences at school - relationships with teachers, other pupils
- parental/carer involvement in educational progress
- truancy including age, reasons, availability of alternative tuition
- perceived importance of education
- attainment at GCSE

4. Criminal Career

- experiences of criminal activities - if none explore reasons
- age of first involvement and reasons for participating
- escalation of criminal career/reasons/consequences

5. Family Contact and Social Networks

- frequency of family contact - which nuclear/extended family members
- quality of contact
- reasons/feelings about lack of contact
- friends & peer group - context and quality of relationships

6. Leaving Care

- age moved towards independence - choices, reasons
- preparation for leaving care - nature of preparation and by whom.
- perceived ability to live independently
- levels and nature of support
- move-on accommodation
- feelings about leaving care

7. School to Work

- participation in education, training, employment
- factors leading to current status - process of decision-making
- future goals

Second Interviews

1. Changes since last interview

- a - accommodation - appropriateness, stability, moves
- b - education, training, employment
- c - family contact
- d - statutory support
- e - social networks/peer groups

2. Intimate relationships

- experiences of intimate/sexual relationships
- social and emotional aspects to relationships
- situational aspects to relationships - frequency of contact, private/public
- importance of relationships - needs, support, reciprocity
- development of relationships towards co-habitation
- orientation towards long-term relationship.

3. Pregnancy and Motherhood

- preconceptual orientation towards pregnancy - use of contraception
- feelings about conception - reactions of others
- termination/adoption as alternatives to motherhood
- emotional and practical support through pregnancy
- feelings about motherhood over time and in different contexts
- orientation towards future pregnancy

4. Income and Finances

- main source of income
- amount of expenditure
- other sources of financial support
- budgeting skills

Third Interviews

1. Changes since last interview

- a - accommodation - appropriateness, stability, moves
- b - education, training, employment
- c - family contact
- d - statutory support
- e - social networks/peer groups
- f - intimate relationships

2. Growing up in care

- feelings about having been in care - good and bad memories
- feelings about leaving care and living independently
- feelings about being 'looked after', supported
- perceived impact of care generally and specifically in terms of personal development, education, family and social relationships

3. Towards Adulthood

- meanings and indicators of adulthood
- self-identification of movement towards adulthood - changes over time, contexts, interactions
- extent of control over own life, decision-making
- self-efficacy, self esteem.
- voting - intentions, political awareness.

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