The Role of Agency in Shaping the Educational Journeys of Care-experienced Adults: Insights from a Life Course Study of Education and Care

Eavan Brady (iD) and Robbie Gilligan (iD)
School of Social Work & Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland

Research examining the low educational attainment of children in care and care leavers tends to under-use social theory (Berridge, 2007). To contribute to addressing this gap, we use life course theory to explore the role of agency in shaping the educational pathways of 18 Irish adults (aged 24–36 years) with care experience. Findings suggest that agency is a valuable conceptual tool for examining the nuance and complexity of how individual actions shape the education of care-experienced adults throughout the life course and interact with contextual and structural factors over time. © 2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children's Bureau

Keywords: agency, life course perspective, care-experienced, education.

Introduction

The educational attainment and progress of children in care and care leavers continues to be the focus of a growing body of international research with findings across jurisdictions pointing to poor educational attainment (Gypen and others, 2017; Sebba and others, 2015). While some young people with care experience progress to later stages of education (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007; Jackson and Cameron, 2012), lower numbers of care-experienced young people pursue higher education when compared to peers (Harrison, 2017; Mendes and others, 2014). However, recent research has raised important questions regarding which groups might be a more appropriate comparator, for example, children in need but not in care (Sebba and others, 2015). Much work in this area has sought to identify factors influencing educational attainment and progress (Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Pecora, 2012). However, there has been limited application of wider social theory to efforts aimed at understanding the reasons for the low educational attainment of those with care experience (Berridge, 2007). This is an issue that was also raised by Stein (2006) in relation to empirical work on young people leaving care. This limited application of theory has led to 'insufficient and simplistic explanations from researchers and policymakers of low achievement' among those with care experience (Berridge, 2007, p. 1). In this paper, we aim to contribute to the theoretical examination of this issue by applying a core principle of the life course perspective — human agency — to the analysis of data gathered as part of a life course study[1] of the educational journeys of care-experienced adults. We will explore the ways in which the life course principle of agency can illuminate our understanding of how educational pathways are shaped over time in the context of structural constraints and opportunities.

Agency and the life course perspective

The principle of human agency has a long tradition in psychology with literature in this area generally focusing on individual concepts such as self-efficacy, control and self-regulation

(Crockett, 2002; Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). While the psychological literature on agency has provided many insights into those processes that underlie agency, the focus has been on the individual, with little consideration given to the environment in which agency is enacted (Crockett, 2002). Conversely, sociological literature has tended to focus on social structure and the role it plays in shaping people's lives (Crockett, 2002). Both perspectives provide important insights into the role individuals and society play in shaping human lives. However, neither the psychological nor the sociological perspective 'fully elucidates the process through which ongoing interactions between person and environment result in a unique life path or biography that is patterned after societal templates but retains the mark of the individual in its details and nuances' (Crockett, 2002, p. 2). The life course conceptualisation of human agency facilitates consideration of these issues in a more integrated way.

Agency has been described as a 'slippery' (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b, p. 170) and 'tricky' (Matusov and others, 2016, p. 420) concept with many definitions found across the extensive literature on the topic. While an influential and prominent concept in the social sciences, agency remains a contested term with many competing definitions (Sugarman and Sokol, 2012). For example, Bandura's (1986, 2001, 2006, p. 164) work on agency emphasises the role of individuals as intentionally influencing their life circumstances and being 'self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting'. Evans' (2007, p. 93) conceptualisation of 'bounded agency' considers agency as 'socially situated', that is, agency is influenced but not determined by our environment. Evans emphasises the role of internal frames of reference *and* our own external actions. Other authors have highlighted the role that our own life histories and context play in shaping our agency *and* identity (Sisson, 2016). While each of these 'takes' on agency arguably provides important insights into the role of agency in various aspects of our lives and development, it is the life course conceptualisation of agency that is the focus of this paper that draws on data gathered as part of a qualitative life course study of education and care.

The life course perspective is an interdisciplinary framework for examining development across human lives from birth to death (Mayer, 2009). Through its core principles (e.g. human agency, linked lives) and core concepts (e.g. turning points, transitions), the life course perspective provides an integrative framework for conceptualising development across multiple domains over time. The life course conceptualisation of agency assumes that we are not 'passive recipients of a predetermined life course' (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b, p. 3). Rather, we make choices, actions and decisions that shape our lives and these actions are taken within systems of opportunities and constraints (Hutchison, 2011). The life course conceptualisation of agency also facilitates consideration of the 'temporal nature of human activity' (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). From a life course perspective, agentic actions are influenced by a person's 'temporal orientation' to their given situation; some decisions will require intense focus on the present while others are influenced by long-term goals (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b, p. 171). Furthermore, choices in one area of life (e.g. leaving school early) may have a 'ripple effect throughout a person's life' and shape a person's circumstances at that point as well as future opportunities (Crockett, 2002, p. 7). As we mature and develop, goals and plans may shift, particularly as we move to new life stages and experience significant life events (Crockett, 2002). This emphasis on the role of age and the passage of time in expressions of agency is critical as with time and maturity our personal capacities and resources may change, our social networks may grow or decrease, and our goals may change in light of various major life events such as becoming a parent and relationships beginning and ending (Crockett, 2002).

When studying human lives, Hitlin and Elder (2007a) assert that we are becoming more concerned with *how* agentic action is exercised and expressed and less concerned with *what*

agentic action is. In this paper, we will explore *how* different kinds of agentic action are exercised in various situations and the role these actions play in shaping the educational pathways of care-experienced adults over time.

Overview of relevant literature

Several studies in the education field have considered the role of agency and structure in shaping educational pathways (Danic, 2015; Schoon and Lyons-Amos, 2016, 2017), with some adopting a life course perspective (Schoon and Lyons-Amos, 2016; Schoon and Lyons-Amos, 2017). Danic (2015) draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected from eight European countries as part of the Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE) research project and considers how 'disadvantaged' students negotiate access to higher education within the context of structural — and institutional — frameworks and individual student agency. The author found that access to higher education was 'defined' by student attitudes, professionals' discourse and national schooling regulations. Drawing on two British cohort studies (2016) and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (2017), Schoon and Lyons-Amos also conclude that structural factors *and* those related to individual agency are linked to variations in youth transitions and diversity in pathways to further and higher education. In their 2017 paper, these authors found that many young people steered 'the course of their lives, and actively cope[d] with given structural constraints' (p. 50). However, they also found that for some young people a lack of socioeconomic and psychosocial resources led to long-term experiences of not being in education or training and difficulty in accessing employment.

While the concept of agency has been applied to educational research broadly, it has been applied overtly in only a small number of studies in relation to the education of people with care experience. Work in this area has tended to focus on children in care (Berridge, 2017; Mannay and others, 2017) and care leavers up to their mid-twenties (Mannay and others, 2017) and has not specifically considered the role of agency in the education of people with care experience from a life course perspective. Recent work by Berridge (2017, p. 86) in England suggests that young people in care exercise 'control' over their educational experiences highlighting the active role individuals can play in shaping their educational journey. Drawing on interviews with 26 children in care Berridge (2017, p. 86) observes that young people often 'chose to engage with learning once they felt the problems in their lives were being managed'. This also indicates the potential need for time to have passed to allow for certain issues and difficulties to have been addressed as well as the impact of the interaction between individual agency and contextual factors. The author notes that participants in this study demonstrated agency in a variety of ways including exercising their choice, developing their own coping styles (echoing Schoon and Lyons-Amos', 2017 findings) and deciding if they wanted to engage with supports offered. For most participants coming into care 'had led to an improvement in their lives' and across the sample participants' birth families continued to influence their lives and education in both positive and negative ways (p. 89). These observations point to the role of external influences in participant education and expressions of agency. While the *interaction* between individual and external factors is not overtly addressed by Berridge (2017), it is apparent in the ways external forces impacted on participant engagement with learning. For example, factors that led young people to being more prepared to engage with learning included living somewhere that was stable and secure, feeling genuinely cared for and having issues with their birth family managed.

Mannay and colleagues (2017) address the impact of external forces on agency in their study examining the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people (aged 6–27 years) in Wales. Most participants in this study reported that professionals had

low expectations in terms of children and young people's achievements and future careers. Participants also discussed the ways that they both challenged and contested the labels that were ascribed to them by teachers and other professionals. One participant, Nadine, reports that 'it was kind of like, I don't know, like that will show her that I could get there [to university]' (p. 692). Participants in the YiPPEE study[2] (Jackson and Cameron, 2012) also reported that when it came to education, their choices were driven by personal determination. Similarly, choices were driven by the expectations of the professionals in their lives and availability of financial resources that would enable them to pursue higher education, once again highlighting the interplay between individual agency and structural factors.

The above studies highlight some of the nuances of the role of agency in the context of education and care. However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have explicitly applied the life course perspective conceptualisation of human agency to the study of the educational journeys of care-experienced adults from childhood to adulthood. Through examining the educational life histories of *older* adults (aged 24–36 years) with care experience, we seek to further extend the application of the concept of agency to the issue of education and care. We propose that this exercise will yield insights into the role of time in the expression of agency while also shedding light on the complexity and nuance of how individual agentic actions shape educational pathways in the context of structural constraints and opportunities over time.

Methodology

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected via educational life history interviews (Moore, 2006) with 18 care-experienced adults in Ireland. Participants who had spent at least 2 years living in care at any age in Ireland and who were aged 25–35 years at the time of interview were invited to participate in this study. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we did not specify the age at which time in care had to have occurred for example, during adolescence. People in this age range were sought to capture 'older' care leavers' views of their education; very few reports of the experience of 'older' care leavers exist within the literature on this topic (Murray and Goddard, 2014). The final sample was aged 24–36 years reflecting a small amount of flexibility in terms of the age range recruited. Using a multi-pronged recruitment strategy, we sought to recruit participants with diverse educational experiences from the conventional to those who had more interrupted, challenging experiences via a number of routes. Study information was shared with gatekeepers in a range of organisations and networks including university Access Programmes, advocacy groups for care leavers and homeless services. Study information was also shared widely via social media.

Participants were interviewed in a location of their choice, for example, public libraries, participant homes and family resource centres. The average length of interviews was 84 min. The first author began each interview by inviting participants to tell their educational story from their earliest memory to the present day. The first author then asked follow-up questions drawing on points raised by participants and informed by her knowledge of the topic from the literature. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. All participants were allocated a pseudonym during the transcription process and all identifying information was anonymised.

Each anonymised interview transcript was entered into the N-Vivo qualitative data analysis package. All interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for theoretical thematic analysis. This deductive approach to data analysis is guided by the first researcher's theoretical interest, in this case the extent to which human agency, as

conceptualised from a life course perspective, influenced the educational journeys of study participants.

Strengths and limitations

The current study drew on the experiences of 18 adults who had spent time in care as children in Ireland providing a snapshot into the diversity of experiences of this group in terms of education. Participants were 'older' than those who tend to be represented in literature related to 'care leavers' and education (i.e. over 25). The study design facilitated the collection of 18 narratives about participant educational journeys yielding rich and nuanced information. In addition to these strengths, there are several limitations to this study. While some participants had left school early, most had pursued, or were pursuing, further and higher education at the time of interview. The sample recruited was therefore broadly 'high achieving' and not as diverse as had been hoped when the study was designed as the experiences of adults who had been in care, had left school early, and had *not* returned to education were not captured. Perspectives of ethnic minorities, for example members of the Traveller community, and non-Irish people who had been in care were not captured either as the sample was all White Irish.

Findings

Of the 18 participants, 11 were women and seven were men. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 36 years with an average age of 29 years. Participants had spent between 2 and 18 years in care with six having placements in foster care only, six having placements in residential care only and six experiencing placements in both residential and foster care. The number of placements participants had ranged from 1 to over 21 with two participants noting that they did not know how many placements they had been in altogether. The number of schools participants had attended ranged from 2 to 9 with an average of four schools attended.[3]

Of the 18 participants, 14 had gone on to higher education including 10 who had completed/were studying for a Master's degree. The majority of these participants had completed further education courses (i.e. Post-Leaving Certificate Courses[4]) prior to pursuing higher education. The remaining four participants had completed, or were planning to complete, courses in further education.

There now follows a description of the key themes identified (see Figure 1):

1. Big *and* small acts of agency have the capacity to influence educational pathways.
2. Agentic actions can have positive *and* negative impacts on educational pathways.
3. Agency is visible in intentional actions focused on long-term goals *and* reactive actions focused on short-term effects.
4. Agency and the passage of time are inextricably linked.
5. The impact of context and structural forces on individual agency is ubiquitous over time.

Big and small acts of agency have the capacity to influence educational pathways

Throughout participant narratives, there was evidence of big and small acts of agency being influential in shaping individual educational pathways. 'Bigger' agentic actions were naturally more obvious, and their impact clearer to see. One such example was when participants left school early or advocated extensively on their own behalf to access funding for their education. These bigger actions often illustrated the ways individual agentic actions and contextual and structural factors interacted throughout participant narratives. Paula (25) recalled
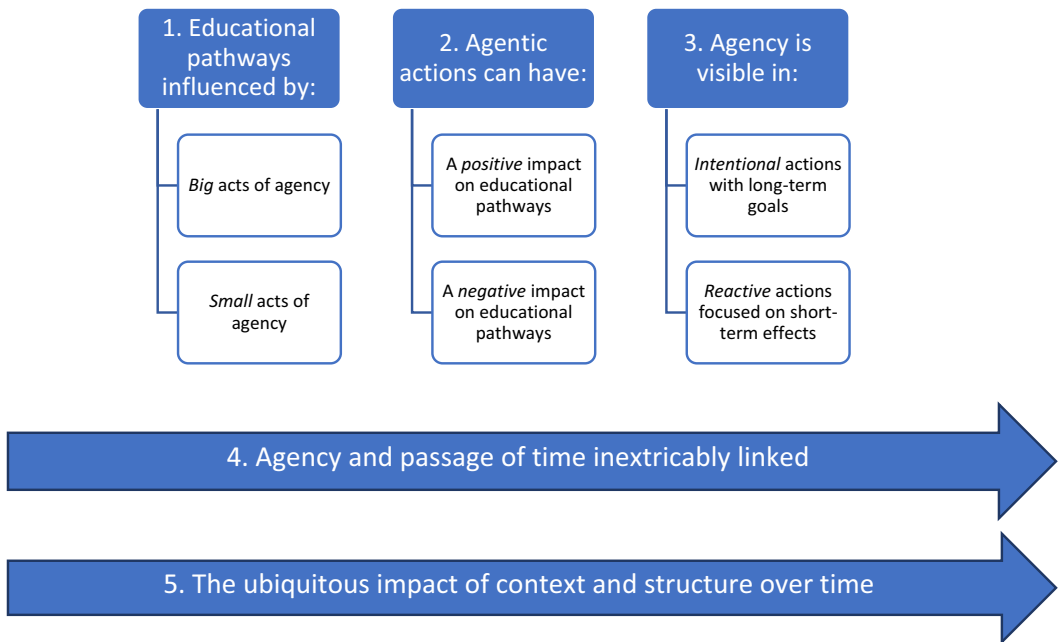
Figure 1. Key themes

a complex and drawn out process regarding accessing funding for her undergraduate degree involving an initial refusal to pay the funds by the Health Service Executive[5] (HSE) followed by repeated letters from her to the HSE appealing the decision. She ultimately secured funding for her undergraduate degree receiving notice of this in the middle of her first year of undergraduate study. While she ultimately got through her degree, Paula recounts the impact this 'battle' had on her studies: *'I was actually like, falling out of college as well, like I wasn't attending cause I was so focused on fighting like'*. Had this funding not been secured Paula may have had to drop out of her degree programme.

Other participants reported taking issues they encountered with funding to the Ombudsman for Children,[6] various politicians and other senior officials. Participants had varying degrees of success in these endeavours. For example, Mary (31), who had a baby when halfway through secondary school, asked for financial support to buy a computer needed for her college course from the head of the regional Health Board when beginning her undergraduate degree in her late teens. This was refused and Mary had to take out a loan herself to buy a computer. Contacting the head of the regional Health Board followed by Mary's decision to secure the loan herself (without which she would not have been able to complete her college course) demonstrates the often-long-term impact of 'big' agentic actions.

Smaller acts of agency were also apparent in study data. While these 'micro' acts were more subtle and 'low key', they were nonetheless impactful and in many cases the repercussions of these micro behaviours were visible at later points in participant narratives. Returning to Mary's story, in the months after she had her child, Mary was encouraged by her grandmother to return to education. When exploring her options regarding returning to education, Mary contacted the principal of her local secondary school to see if she would be able to enrol. After considering this option, Mary soon realised it would not be sustainable

as she was caring for her young child. As a result, she explored homeschool options and secured the relevant materials to homeschool herself:

> [I] rang the Board of Education, explained the situation to them and said that I was looking at the option of homeschool so that I'd kind of work it around me and my schedule.

Mary went on to complete her Leaving Certificate[7] and secured a place on an undergraduate degree which she successfully completed. This led to her securing full-time employment in her field for 5 years. These seemingly small acts of contacting the principal of a local school, making the decision that mainstream education would not be suitable, and accessing the relevant resources to homeschool herself all contributed to Mary's successful pursuit of higher education and ultimate employment. Here we once again see the interaction of the context and structures in which Mary was acting as she had to ask the Health Board for financial support for her homeschool resources as she was in care. They agreed to pay half of her fees: *I said it to them* [Health Board] *and they said that they would pay for half the term fees, I said fine.*

Agentic actions have positive and negative impacts on educational pathways

While it was clear from the participant narratives that many behaviours, decisions and actions had a positive impact on educational pathways, there were also behaviours that had a more negative effect. Some participant educational pathways involved positive *and* negative actions, both of which reflect some of the contextual and structural factors at play. Rosie's (26) story illustrates how both positive and negative actions may be present and influential over the course of an individual's educational pathway. Rosie reports experiencing severe bullying while in her final 2 years of secondary school leading to her 'skipping' school for most of those 2 years. While on the surface this behaviour was negative, it was by all accounts, an act of self-preservation by Rosie and illustrates the potential impact of context (e.g. peer influence) on an individual's educational journey. Upon completing her Leaving Certificate, Rosie was not happy with her results and attempted to repeat her final academic year but ultimately made the decision to drop out of her repeat year:

> I said I need to go and I need to repeat my Leaving Cert., I wasn't happy I needed to go do that and I, I did, I went and I was there from September to December and I felt like ok this is a revise year and I was like but I'm revising something that I haven't even learned you know and I, I didn't do it [hadn't done it before] so I felt like I was at a loss and I just said to, to my, my [foster] dad I was like I just can't, it's not for me.

This 'negative' behaviour led to Rosie working for the rest of the year before being contacted by a friend who encouraged her to apply for a PLC course in a subject area that her friend was convinced would suit Rosie. This friend was right, and Rosie was accepted on to the PLC course and went on to compete her undergraduate and Master's degrees in this field. We see from Rosie's story how individual agency is bound to external factors and how what appears to be a negative act (e.g. dropping out of a repeat year) can ultimately open a space for other, more positive actions, to take place over time.

Agency is visible in intentional actions focused on long-term goals and reactive actions focused on short-term concerns

Intentional actions related to long-term goals were visible among many participant narratives. For most participants, this focus emerged in their late teens, early twenties and beyond. Plans in terms of education were often connected to a future goal, for example wanting to pursue a Master's degree or work in a particular area. Ava (27), who had not pursued further

or higher education since she finished school, planned to complete a PLC course in the next year and had begun the process of applying. She ultimately hoped to pursue a career in social work: *I do wanna go back to college and get* [PLC] *level 5 cause I'd love to do social work* [...] *that's my dream now* [...] *before I'm 30 I'm gonna get into action and become a social worker.* Daniel (25) and Lynne (26), who had left school in their early teens, spoke about the intentional action of returning to education at a later point following critical experiences such as the birth of their child (Daniel) and ongoing encouragement from a relative (Lynne).

While many participants reported intentional actions linked to a long-term plan, several also spoke of the absence of a long-term plan and having difficulty with the idea of having a long-term plan due to instability and challenges in their home lives. Paula (25) reports 'not being able to think longitudinally' and her narrative contained numerous accounts of reactive actions focused on achieving short-term gains. Paula describes losing her focus in her second last year of secondary school resulting in her leaving school in her mid-teens. There followed a period during which she was homeless and out of education. When she was aged 17 she realised that upon turning 18 she would be discharged from care and as a result would not receive any financial support. She therefore sought to return to her previous secondary school:

> I had a meeting with [school principal] and I was like [principal's name] you need to put me on the school roll and she was like what? [...] I was like, listen... it's December. I'm turning 18 in [month] if I'm not on a school roll I'm gone with the HSE like I and I'm fecked.

The goal here was to get back into education to continue to receive support from the State. We are reminded once again of the role of structural forces, in this case the age at which young people are discharged from care and the requirements around securing aftercare support, in influencing individual behaviours. Paula was successful in re-enrolling and completed one Leaving Certificate exam which enabled her to repeat the academic year *with* Aftercare support, an intentional, strategic move on her part:

> In my head I'm like that funding gets cut at 23 you need to like, be strategic about this, I did not care about education all I had in my head was like you're gonna be homeless at 18 like and proper homeless like you know.

Paula went on to pursue a PLC course, an undergraduate degree, and at the time of interview she was completing her Master's degree.

Agency and the passage of time are inextricably linked

The findings outlined so far capture the relationship between agency and the passage of time. For many participants, the wider impact of an action at one point in time was not visible until later. One example is the case of Mary and her pursuit of homeschooling resources. In all cases, the passage of time led to shifts and changes in individual pathways. Furthermore, early actions that may have had a negative impact on individual pathways were often redressed later following key life events or experiences. Gary's (32) story illustrates this process along with the role of external influences and structural forces including professionals, peers and the economy. Prior to coming into care, Gary recalls not liking school and being bullied. Upon coming into care and experiencing multiple residential placements and multiple school moves during his time in care, again Gary reports that he 'hated school' and did not want to go and skipped school a lot. Despite this he completed his Leaving Certificate achieving relatively poor results. With the support of his aftercare worker, Gary completed a four-year apprenticeship after completing secondary school. Gary then reports becoming

heavily involved in drug and alcohol use. His partner (and mother of his child) 'swooped' in at that stage and helped Gary to get his life 'back on track'. At this time, he also began to develop a relationship with his child who was born several years previously. Gary began working again soon after this. During the economic recession of the late 2000s, Gary lost his job and began caring for the couple's child full time while his partner worked. He 'took a massive interest in [child's] homework' during this time and realised 'how much [his] education was hampered'. After a considerable period out of education and some time spent working part time, Gary made the decision to pursue an undergraduate degree: *I was like I'm not doing this for the rest of my life so in* [year] *I went back to college.* Gary recalls his partner being a considerable source of support during this time, when many people were discouraging him from returning to education:

> She [partner] said 'look I'll support you like' now in fairness a lot of people doubted me, they said that I wasn't able, I didn't have the smarts to do it [...] I didn't have the intelligence to go back, to go to college like, she supported me and she said look, I'll support you whatever you want to do you go back, if you feel you need to do it.

Gary's story demonstrates the interaction between individual actions (skipping school, completing an apprenticeship, becoming actively involved in his child's education), external influences (the economic recession) and the passage of time (returning to education after a considerable period). His story also illustrates the critical role of key actors in our lives and the part they can play in encouraging, guiding and supporting such decisions, for example Gary's aftercare worker, partner and child.

The ubiquitous impact of context and structure over time

Until now we have outlined *how* agentic action was exercised by study participants. We will now consider aspects of *why* agentic action was exercised by study participants. It is hoped that this will illuminate understandings of the impact of context and structure on individual agency, a factor that is visible throughout the above themes. A number of these factors are discussed below, namely the role of social influences related to the context of being in care and some of the ways coming into care impacted on participant education. While these are not the only structural forces that were observed as constraining or supporting agency in participant narratives, we have focused on these as their role was particularly visible in the data.

Being in care as influencing participant motivation

When discussing their motivation to undertake various actions related to education, many participants noted that one of their primary motivations to succeed with their education was negative comments they received from others and their perception of the low expectations of people with care experience. Nadine (34) noted that 'it was like I want to prove other people wrong as well, if other people say I can't do it, I'm gonna show you that I actually, I can do it'. Kate (24) missed a lot of school over the course of her childhood due to a lack of focus on education in her birth family and multiple placement and school moves. She notes that *'because I missed that much school and, and all that, most of my foster parents told me that I wouldn't even complete my Junior Cert. [...] that I would probably drop out before I even completed my Junior Cert. so I was like I'm so gonna prove you wrong'.* Kate went on to successfully complete her Junior Certificate before leaving school in her mid-teens and pursuing further education in another jurisdiction.

Perceptions of care and children in care also impacted participant experiences and progress when it came to education. Several participants discussed the effect of stigma they

experienced in relation to being in care. This stigma often impinged on participants' ability to interact with peers in school leading to bullying in several cases while also affecting how some felt they were treated by school staff. Jamie (31) recalls struggling to interact with peers in school due to the stigma and embarrassment he felt at living in a care home:

> I really struggled, really, really struggled with social, socialising with peers like [...] you had the stigma and the embarrassment of you were living in a residential home so it's not like you could go for a playdate.

Participants noted the impact of low expectations of young people who have been in care. Nadine (34), who had completed a Master's degree, discussed how her awareness of these low expectations continues to affect her own sense of her abilities and potential:

> [T]here is always this kind of sense of... I'm a young person who lived in care, I don't deserve... to have good things happen like... somebody's gonna knock on my door and say oh there's been a mistake.

Coming into care as constraining and supporting participant education

For many participants, entering the care system was a positive turning point in their lives, particularly in relation to education. Eileen (36) who came into care for the final time aged 8 years moving to her final placement notes that *'we were fortunate that, you know, our whole world was shifted ... and we have these incredible opportunities'*. Coming into the care system was, however, also experienced as limiting and at times led to considerable interruption and discontinuity when it came to participant education. For Kate who had over 21 placements and attended seven schools before leaving aged 16 years, repeated placement and school moves when she was in secondary school meant that she did the same curriculum in key subjects twice as the schools she attended had different plans in terms of when to cover various aspects of the curriculum:

> [I]t wasn't until I was in college that I ever done physics because I moved school that much I kept missing it, I done biology for years... because I had to move schools, because they don't all follow the same plan.

When it came to leaving care, requirements in the Irish system for young people to leave their residential care home aged 18 years had a negative impact on David (27) and Ava (27). Both had to leave their residential care homes before they completed their Leaving Certificate as they had turned 18 years. This experience led to a challenging final year in school. While both completed and passed their final exams, David recalls the sudden loss of support and encouragement in relation to homework and study:

> [T]hat's the hard part [...] sometimes it's nice to have someone nagging in your ear to do a bit of study or, get that assignment done or get out of that bed [...] you don't like it when it's happening but [...] when it's all done [...] you kind of do miss that.

The above themes highlight the nuances of the role of agency in shaping the educational journeys of adults with care experience. By drawing on this conceptual tool, we see that agency is enacted to varying degrees and in varying ways at different points in time. While the effects of agency are often visible immediately, the longer-term impact of some actions became apparent with the passage of time. The role of contextual and structural factors in constraining and supporting how participants exercised their agency is also illustrated in the above themes.

Discussion

This article explores the role of agency in helping shape the educational pathways of adults with care experience. Study findings provide insight into the nuances of how agency operates over time. They suggest that agency is a valuable conceptual tool for examining the complexity of how individual actions shape the education of care-experienced adults throughout the life course while also taking account of how these actions interact with external and structural factors over time.

Both intentional and reactive agentic actions were identified as key in the study findings highlighting the 'temporal nature' of human activity across the life course (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). While consideration of intentional, positive agentic actions is beneficial and provides important insights into one aspect of individual agency in relation to education, these other more reactive actions that may not be focused on long-term plans or not appear to be overly significant, can have lasting effects on educational pathways. For example, Paula initially returned to education after leaving school early to ensure she would continue to receive financial support from aftercare services reflecting the intense focus on the present observed by Hitlin and Elder (2007b). This short-term action and subsequent actions led her to pursuing a Master's degree in spite of her self-identified difficulties with thinking in relation to long-term goals.

The 'negative' expressions of agency observed in the data are noteworthy in the context of some authors arguing that Western conceptualisation of agency focus excessively on positive agency thereby 'obscuring distinctly anti-social agentic action' (Alexander, 1993; Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). These 'negative' agentic actions point to an important aspect of agency that is visible in the data and arguably requires more attention in discussions regarding agency, education and care. Mistakes and 'negative' decisions are often considered a part of the developmental process, particularly among young people in the throes of transitioning to adulthood and navigating multiple and complex life decisions. Allowing for, and being mindful of, the existence of such actions among people with care experience, and facilitating opportunities to redress these decisions at later stages, is arguably an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to supporting and promoting educational progress and attainment among people with care experience over the life course.

Various actors were often critical in facilitating and encouraging participants to take actions that positively shaped their educational journey echoing the views of Hitlin and Elder (2007b) that agency depends on relationships. Relationships with partners, children, extended birth family and staff in residential homes were primarily experienced as positive and supportive. For some participants, however, the influence of felt stigma from others and awareness of low expectations of care leavers impacted their agency and educational experiences negatively. Negative comments from teachers and carers also served as a key motivator for some participants when it came to their education. Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson (2015) note that discussion regarding the role of expectations is largely absent from much empirical work on agency and argue for the importance of incorporating future expectations in theoretical and empirical considerations of agency. This paper provides support for this assertion while also highlighting the importance of considering how individuals' expectations of themselves impact on expressions of agency.

Consistent with Berridge's (2017) research, many participants in the current study recalled their experience of coming into care as positive, particularly in relation to their education. There were, however, several participants who did not experience their time in care as positive or helpful when it came to their education, often due to the impact of structural factors. This was particularly the case for participants who had multiple placement moves and for

participants who had to leave residential care before completing their final exams as they had turned 18 years. The age that young people leave care is one that is gathering increasing interest (Gilligan, 2018). Findings from the current study highlight some of the ways that a leaving care age of 18 years intersects with a key transition in education while also pointing to the need to increase recognition of this as a structural factor that adversely affects young people leaving care. Considering this issue from a life course perspective highlights the need for increased flexibility when it comes to leaving care and the pursuit of education among people with care experience. The role and value of such flexibility for people with care experience with regard to various life domains (including education) has also been highlighted by Boddy, Bakketeig and Østergaard (2019).

Finally, study findings highlight an important connection between age and agency (Crockett, 2002); agency in relation to education can be exercised across the life course from childhood to late adulthood. We are afforded a unique perspective on this through the lived experiences of an 'older' sample of care-experienced adults reported in this paper. Participant narratives highlighted the impact of stigma and bullying on participant attendance and experiences of school, along with instances of teenagers skipping school and leaving school early. On the other hand, young adults pursued clear educational pathways and 'older' adults returned to education after extended periods out of education. A life course perspective on agency sheds light on the many opportunities for agentic actions in relation to education that are present over time.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the value of drawing on social theory when seeking to develop understanding of key issues in relation to education and life in care. We have successfully applied the life course conceptualisation of agency to the analysis of data gathered as part of a qualitative life course study of the educational pathways of care-experienced adults and several key messages have been identified as a result. The life course conceptualisation of agency is distinctive in that it draws together psychological and sociological perspectives on this concept, integrating the two and thus providing a more complete picture of *how* agency helps to shape educational experiences. This perspective on agency has not previously been applied in existing research on this topic and as such we have extended theoretical knowledge in this area. Big and small agentic actions *and* positive and negative expressions of agency occur across the life course in relation to education and, importantly, can impact on educational pathways in the short, medium and long term. This paper highlights the importance of remaining aware of these various 'types' of expressions of agency along with the interconnectedness of life stages and choices and decisions made at various points in time. Applying the life course conceptualisation of agency to analysis of the current data set — educational life histories of 'older' care-experienced adults — has identified some of the ways in which agentic action can play out later in life. Traces of early choices, decisions and actions may be visible at later stages in life reminding us of the interconnectedness of every life stage. In the context of this paper, the life course conceptualisation of agency facilitates a look back over time to identify how individual actions and external and structural forces have interacted and impacted individual expressions of agency in relation to education from early childhood into adulthood. The life course perspective on agency reminds us of the ongoing potential for new beginnings and new opportunities in education; while people may experience rocky periods, educational journeys can be restarted at any point in the life course, given the right supports and circumstances.

Several implications for practice, policy and research were identified in light of the study findings. Interaction between individual *and* structural factors should be important for

policy-makers and practitioners when considering the educational progress and attainment of care-experienced children, young people and adults. People shape and carve out their pathway within the confines of existing opportunities and constraints. As individuals developing over time, we often make choices and decisions that may not be in our best interest. For the general population, this 'negative' agency is often seen as part of the developmental process. For people with experience of being in care, however, this is often not allowed for, particularly when it comes to second chances when pursuing further and higher education linked to existing aftercare policies. Such developmental 'wobbles' and 'negative' expressions of agency should, arguably, be accommodated when experienced by people in the care system. The passage of time appears critical to considerations of how educational pathways are shaped and experienced. What happens at age 15 years, for example, may influence but does not necessarily predict what will happen at 25 years, 35 years or beyond. There is arguably, therefore, a need for the education and care systems to be flexible and support re-entry to the education system over the life course depending on the readiness of each individual.

Further investigation of the value of the life course conceptualisation of agency for research related to education and care will be important to identify how this concept can further illuminate our understanding of this issue. As the education and care systems are inextricably linked to structures, their role in facilitating or constraining the agency of children, young people and adults with care experience must be considered. This should be done while bearing in mind the potential for these structures and systems to have a positive or negative influence on educational pathways while also remembering the key role individuals play in shaping their own educational pathway over time.

Notes

1 This study forms part of the first author's PhD study which is being supervised by the second author and undertaken in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

2 The YiPPEE study (Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe) investigated the educational pathways of care leavers beyond age 18 years in five European countries — England, Denmark, Sweden, Spain and Hungary.

3 In the Irish context, children generally attend primary school from approximately age 5–12 years and secondary school from age 12–18 years.

4 Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are full time and last for 1–2 years. They offer a mixture of practical work, academic work and work experience while also offering a pathway into higher education (Bergin and others, 2018; Citizens Information, 2018).

5 The Health Service Executive had responsibility for child welfare and protection in Ireland until 2014 when this role was taken over by the Child and Family Agency — Tusla.

6 In Ireland, the Ombudsman for Children investigates complaints about services provided to children by public organisations (www.oco.ie).

7 The university matriculation examination in the Republic of Ireland is called the 'Leaving Certificate' (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018).

References

Alexander JC. 1993. More notes on the problem of agency: a reply. *Berliner Journal fur Soziologie* **19**: 501–506.

Bandura A. 1986. *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Bandura A. 2001. Social cognitive theory: an agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology* **52**(1): 1–26.

Bandura A. 2006. Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* **1**(2): 164–180.

Bergin A, Smyth E, Whelan A. 2018. Post-leaving certificate education in Ireland: managing different goals. In *New Frontiers for College Education: International Perspectives*. Gallacher J, Reeve F (eds.). Routledge: Oxon; 30–43.

Berridge D. 2007. Theory and explanation in child welfare: education and looked-after children. *Child & Family Social Work* **12**(1): 1–10.

Berridge D. 2017. The education of children in care: agency and resilience. *Children and Youth Services Review* **77**: 86–93.

Boddy J, Bakketeig E, Østergaard J. 2019. Navigating precarious times? The experience of young adults who have been in care in Norway, Denmark and England. *Journal of Youth Studies* 1–16.

Braun V, Clarke V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* **3**(2): 77–101.

Citizens Information. 2018. Post Leaving Certificate Courses. Available at http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/vocational_education_and_training/post_leaving_certificate_courses.html [Accessed 11 February 2019].

Crockett LJ. 2002. *Agency in the Life Course: Concepts and Processes*. Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology: University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE; 361.

Danic I. 2015. Access to higher education at the end of lower secondary for "Disadvantaged" students: the interplay of structural, institutional frameworks and student agency. *European Education* **47**(1): 77–92.

Evans K. 2007. Concepts of bounded agency in education, work, and the personal lives of young adults. *International Journal of Psychology* **42**(2): 85–93.

Gilligan R. 2018. Age limits and eligibility conditions for care, extended care and leaving care support for young people in care and care leavers: the case for cross-national analysis. *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care* **17**(2): 1–16.

Gypen L, Vanderfaeillie J, De Maeyer S, Belenger L, Van Holen F. 2017. Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: systematic-review. *Children and Youth Services Review* **76**: 74–83.

Harrison N. 2017. *Moving On Up: Pathways of Care Leavers and Care-Experienced Students into and Through Higher Education*. National Network for the Education of Care Leavers: Hampshire.

Hitlin S, Elder GH Jr. 2007a. Agency: an empirical model of an abstract concept. *Advances in Life Course Research* **11**: 33–67.

Hitlin S, Elder GH Jr. 2007b. Time, self, and the curiously abstract concept of agency. *Sociological Theory* **25**(2): 170–191.

Hitlin S, Kirkpatrick Johnson M. 2015. Reconceptualizing agency within the life course: the power of looking ahead. *American Journal of Sociology* **120**(5): 1429–1472.

Hutchison E. 2011. A life course perspective. In *Dimensions of Human Behaviour: The Changing Life Course*. Hutchinson E (ed.). SAGE Publications: London; 1–38.

Jackson S, Ajayi S. 2007. Foster care and higher education. *Adoption & Fostering* **31**(1): 62–72.

Jackson S, Cameron C. 2012. Leaving care: looking ahead and aiming higher. *Children and Youth Services Review* **34**(6): 1107–1114.

Mannay D, Evans R, Staples E, Hallett S, Roberts L, Rees A, Andrews D. 2017. The consequences of being labelled 'looked-after': exploring the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people in Wales. *British Educational Research Journal* **43**(4): 683–699.

Matusov E, von Duyke K, Kayumova S. 2016. Mapping concepts of agency in educational contexts. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* **50**(3): 420–446.

Mayer KU. 2009. New directions in life course research. *Annual Review of Sociology* **35**: 413–433.

Mendes P, Michell D, Wilson JZ. 2014. Young people transitioning from out-of-home care and access to higher education: a critical review of the literature. *Children Australia* **39**(4): 243–252.

Moore E. 2006. Educational identities of adult university graduates. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* **50**(2): 149–163.

Murray S, Goddard J. 2014. Life after growing up in care: informing policy and practice through research. *Australian Social Work* **67**(1): 102–117.

Nic Fhlannchadha S. 2018. Alternative admissions schemes for young people with disabilities and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. *Internationalisation of Higher Education – Developments in the European Higher Education Area and Worldwide* **3**: 79–91.

Pecora PJ. 2012. Maximizing educational achievement of youth in foster care and alumni: factors associated with success. *Children and Youth Services Review* **34**(6): 1121–1129.

Schoon I, Lyons-Amos M. 2016. Diverse pathways in becoming an adult: the role of structure, agency and context. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* **46**: 11–20.

Schoon I, Lyons-Amos M. 2017. A socio-ecological model of agency: the role of structure and agency in shaping education and employment transitions in England. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies* **8**(1): 35–56.

Sebba J, Berridge D, Luke N, Fletcher J, Bell K, Strand S, Thomas S, Sinclair I, O'Higgins A. 2015. *The Educational Progress of Looked after Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data*. Rees Centre for Research on Fostering and Education: Oxford.

Sisson JH. 2016. The significance of critical incidents and voice to identity and agency. *Teachers and Teaching* **22**(6): 670–682.

Stein M. 2006. Young people aging out of care: the poverty of theory. *Children and Youth Services Review* **28**(4): 422–434.

Sugarman J, Sokol B. 2012. Human agency and development: an introduction and theoretical sketch. *New Ideas in Psychology* **30**: 1–14.

*Correspondence to: Eavan Brady, School of Social Work & Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland. E-mail: bradye3@tcd.ie