

Exploring history in the social ecology of care leaving: Northern Ireland as illustration

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Abstract

This paper aims to promote thinking about care leave leaving from a historical perspective. It suggests that Bronfenbrenner's social ecological modelling of human development provides a promising conceptual framework for doing that. It not only provides a micro to macro layered systemic perspective but also draws attention to the 'chronosystem', covering both biographical and historical changes. The potential use of the historical dimension to Bronfenbrenner's modelling will be illustrated by considering the development of care leaving within Northern Ireland over a 50-year period (1968–2018). Reflecting the historical trajectory of recent political conflict in this UK jurisdiction, the dynamics of the chronosystem of care leaving within two periods will be described and discussed: the 'Troubles' (1968–1998) and 'Post Conflict' (1998–2018). It will be concluded that there is a need for further work of this type because acknowledging history in this way as part of social ecology provides a deeper understanding of the systemic dynamics of care leaving.

KEY WORDS

Bronfenbrenner, history, leaving care, Northern Ireland, social ecology, youth transition

1 | INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to contribute to promoting recognition and interest in thinking about care leaving from a historical perspective. The first part of the paper will argue that Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development provides a promising conceptual framework for encouraging this. This is because not only does it provide a micro to macro layered systemic perspective but it also draws attention to the 'chronosystem', covering both biographical and historical changes.

The argument will be illustrated by considering the development of care leaving within Northern Ireland (NI)—a jurisdiction of the United Kingdom (UK) in which there is a heightened sense of the immediacy of history due to its deep community divisions and at times violent politics. The period considered will be the 50 years between 1968 and 2018. A Children and Young Persons Act (NI) was passed in 1968, and in the same year a new phase of the NI 'Troubles' erupted.

Five decades later in 2018, the failure to get a power-sharing Executive re-established after it had collapsed the previous year revealed the continuing deep political cleavage within NI politics and society. That year also saw the issuing for consultation of a Northern Ireland Looked After Children Strategy providing a benchmark for developments, including care leaving.

Having used that period of NI history to consider how paying attention to Bronfenbrenner's 'chronosystem' might be applied to care leaving, it will be concluded that there is a need for further work of this type. Acknowledging history in this way as part of social ecology provides an important contribution to deeper understanding of the systemic dynamics of care leaving. That understanding is needed to better inform practitioners and the young people they work alongside, service designers and programme managers, policy makers and politicians, and all those interested in improving the life chances of care-experienced young people.

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2 | HISTORY AS A DIMENSION TO SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Without being complacent, it is can be said that much is now known about the needs of young people leaving the care system in the UK (Stein, 2012), including NI (Coyle & Pinkerton, 2012; Access All Areas (NI), 2017; <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/care-leavers>). Practice, policy and research commentaries show that care leavers are not a homogeneous group. Many care-experienced young people go on to lead productive and satisfying adult lives, often having had the support of a range of statutory and voluntary sector services along with informal networks of support (Morrison, 2016). However, the overall picture remains one of poor outcomes and inadequate support and services (Pinkerton, 2012). Why that should be the case in the UK continues to be perplexing given the considerable legislative, policy, programme, practice and research attention now given to care leavers. One reason may be that attempts to understand care leaving continue to be primarily descriptive accounts 'detached from theory in terms of context, conceptual exploration or theory building' (Stein, 2006, p. 431). Despite there being an increased interest in such matters (Brady & Gilligan, 2018; Dima & Skehill, 2011; Pinkerton & van Breda, 2019; Stein, 2012; van Breda, 2016), there continues to be no generally accepted theory of care leaving, nor even a widely used conceptual framework for thinking about it. There is insufficient attention to the explanation of what drives this particular experience of youth transitioning.

The use of theory to better understand how context impacts transitions from care is particularly undeveloped. As one American writer has observed,

Outcomes of the transition from foster care [generic term for out-of-home care in the USA] depend heavily on the processes and structures that make up the external environment. Youths exiting from foster care may be especially influenced by the larger social context because they often lack the mediating advantages of a strong familial connection, which for other young people may buffer negative environmental effects and facilitate engagement with positive ones (Collins, 2015, p. 2).

Successful or unsuccessful outcomes reflect the processes and structures, the social ecology, within which a care-experienced young person engages in the social construction of interdependence as they move into adulthood. Accordingly, one reason for the stubborn persistence of care careers followed by poor outcomes may be that understanding of care leaving is insufficiently focused on the characteristics and the dynamics of their social ecology. The result is an inadequate understanding of what it is that mitigates against care leavers having available and being able to access the supports and services they require and which may be on offer. If that is the case, then greater attention needs to be given to understanding what might improve engagement with an enriched social ecology of care leaving.

One theory that could prove helpful to improving understanding of the social ecology of care leaving is Bronfenbrenner's developmental psychosocial modelling (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This has been influential generally within British child welfare for some time. In a seminal article 20 years ago, it was argued that an ecological approach reflecting Bronfenbrenner's work provided 'the cultural environment within which all other policies and practices should be developed' (Jack, 2000, p. 713). Bronfenbrenner's approach has also been noted as useful for providing youth studies with 'a model of a nested ecology: one that constructs a systematic analysis of how the social environment is shaped and intersects with systems and wider ideas and practices ... it is the interconnections, ordering and social relationships embedded in these contexts that are important in structuring young people's everyday lives.' (France, 2016, p. 23).

By drawing on a Bronfenbrenner perspective adapted for family support (Canavan, Pinkerton, & Dolan, 2016) and applying it to care leaving, the goal for young people leaving care can be expressed as achieving their full rights as flourishing citizens (Mendes, Pinkerton, & Munro, 2014). That goal is both expressed through and dependent on the interaction within and between four levels of social ecology—the micro, meso, exo and macro. The various forms of informal and formal interactions (micro and meso systems directly experienced by young people in their daily lives) need access to resources and scaffolding from a wide range of formal institutions within the statutory, community, voluntary and private sectors (exosystems—generally operating beyond the lived experience of young people, but shaping their life opportunities). That resourcing and scaffolding is necessary to enable young people to meet their educational, employment, health and recreational needs and give expression to their rights in those areas. In turn, the statutory, community, voluntary and private sectors require support from national and international institutions, policy and legislation (macro systems).

That systemic, rights-orientated conceptual framework is fairly much in line with the generally accepted view that a range of needs and services must be addressed as young people prepare to leave care, leave care and then make their lives after care. For example, the NI government standards for care leaving are set out to cover the full set of high-level outcome statements contained within the region's 10-year strategy that applies to all children and young people: being healthy; enjoying, learning and achieving; living in safety and with stability; economic and environmental well-being; contributing positively to community and society; living in a society which respects their rights (Department of Health [DOH], 2006).

However, as a conceptual framework, Bronfenbrenner's four-level modelling is also open to the criticism that it provides only superficial, descriptive attention to the various spheres that provide the context of young people's lives, in particular beyond the micro and meso levels.

The contradictions, points of resistance and the opportunities for synergy between these spheres are not considered; nor is there any historical view of how

these spheres have interacted and developed over time. Without this understanding, Bronfenbrenner's model cannot account for the impact of ideology and hegemony on cultural experience because the legitimating role of the state is not fully appraised. If social workers are to think systemically in terms of the effects of macro- and exo-systems on child outcomes, then they must do so with a critical and nuanced understanding of these areas. (Houston, 2002, p. 308).

In responding to that criticism, it is important to note that Bronfenbrenner's developmental psychosocial model was constantly developing. A Swedish review of his work identified three major phases; noting that his work 'underwent significant changes since its first inception during the late 1970s, as he constantly revised the theory until his death in 2005.' (Eriksson, Ghazinour, & Hammarstrom, 2018, p. 416). Specifically in regard to the charge that it lacks a historical dimension, a defining aspect of what the Swedish review identified as his second phase is the introduction of the chronosystem—a fifth, temporal dimension to the model.

Although Bronfenbrenner mentioned time already in his book from 1979, the concept of chronosystem was not added until this second phase. By adding chronosystems, Bronfenbrenner wanted to take into account changes over time, not only within the person but also in the environments in which that person is found, to investigate how these changes may affect a person's developmental outcomes (Eriksson et al., 2018, p. 416).

As Bronfenbrenner's focus is always on the person in environment and on development, that is to say change over time, it is not surprising that he drew particular attention to two types of chronosystem: 'normative (school entry, puberty, entering the labor force, marriage, retirement) and non normative (a death or severe illness in the family, divorce, moving, winning the sweepstakes)' (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 724). The accumulation of these normative and nonnormative transitional experiences drive and give expression to what, following the American sociologist Glen Elder, he termed the individual's life course.

The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes producing development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environmental context—both immediate and more remote—in which the processes are taking place, and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course, *and the historical period during which the person has lived [JP's emphasis]*; and, of course, the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration. (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, pp. 118, 119).

Historical period is an essential part of the complexity of individual experience as it expresses the navigation of multiple transitions within a life course. If that is the case, understanding the historical period within which care-experienced young people move into adulthood is clearly important. Accordingly, it may help tease out what it is about the social ecology of care leaving that allows the stubborn persistence of too many care careers being followed by poor outcomes.

3 | THE 'TROUBLES' PERIOD 1968–1998

In order to explore what attention to history as chronosystem might mean for understanding care leaving, NI will be now be used by way of illustration. This small jurisdiction of the UK seems an appropriate case study as it is perhaps best known for its deep political divisions and at times violent political conflict, which express a heightened sense of the immediacy of history. NI shares a state with three other linked national jurisdictions, England, Scotland and Wales, and an island with another independent jurisdiction, the Republic of Ireland. As a result of the complex political, social and economic history that has given rise to these arrangements, since the creation of NI in 1921 there has been persistent and often violent conflict over national identity and legitimacy of political structures—euphemistically known as the 'Troubles' (Mulholland, 2003). The 50-year historical period to be considered here includes 30 years of the Troubles, that left over three and half thousand people dead, a third of them in the age band of 15 to 25, and thousands more physically and psychologically traumatized (Smyth, 2006). In the 20 years following, attempts have been made to develop a post conflict accommodation between that section of the population supporting the union with the UK, unionists and the section that support a re-united Ireland, nationalists.

Given the notoriety of the Troubles and then the celebration of the peace process that followed, it is not surprising that 'NI politics can blind people to the more mundane but equally important implications that Northern Ireland's peculiar situation has on every area of life. Child care is no exception' (Kelly & Pinkerton, 1996, p. 41). There have been historical accounts of personal social services in NI (Caul & Herron, 1992; Heenan & Birrell, 2011), but no attempt to date to chart the general postwar history of child welfare, never mind specifically that of care leaving. So what follows is sketchy and restricted to the purpose of illustrating the potential of attention to the historical dimension of the social ecology of care leaving using Bronfenbrenner's concept of chronosystem.

In 1968, the year in which it can be argued the most recent phase of the Troubles erupted, a Children and Young Persons Act (NI) was also passed by NI's regional government. It updated the legislative mandate for child welfare, including care leaving. The legislation was almost word for word the similarly titled 1963 English and Welsh Act. Given that in most areas of NI social policy at that time, the goal of the unionist government (in power since 1921) was to ensure parity with the rest of the UK, that might appear to be of no surprise. Indeed 'parity as catch up' between an offshore region and the economic, social and political developments of the 'mainland' might seem to

provide a useful way of characterizing the chronosystem dynamic of this period. However, it is important to note that the parity principle allowed for policies that were 'a similar standard to that attained elsewhere, but they need not be identical' (Evason quoted Kelly & Pinkerton, 1996, p. 41). Indeed, it has been argued that the passing of the 1968 Act was not to follow suit, but rather to allow the unionist government, within the constraints of its dependent relationships within the UK, to pre-empt legislation it did not want—the interventionist- and prevention-focused legislation being debated at the time in England and Wales that was to become the 1969 Children and Young Person's Act (Kelly & Pinkerton, 1996).

From the establishment of the British welfare state in the 1940s, the regional government in NI had opted for a much weaker version than that implemented in other jurisdictions of the UK (Buckland, 1981). This lack of political commitment to state intervention was seen in assumptions about family responsibility, the absence of children's departments at the local government level and the acceptance of extensive provision of substitute care by religious institutions in situations where families were regarded as having failed. In that context, it is not surprising that the experience of care leavers appears to have been primarily about doing as best they could with their own personal resources and such informal support as they had. Some sense of that can be gleaned from the report of the Northern Ireland Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry published in 2017. Its remit covered institutions in NI that provided residential care for children from 1922 to 1995. The report clearly shows the lack of attention to leaving and after care in the decades up to the 1960s.

We received evidence from many witnesses which indicated that, in the earlier decades in particular, the professional standards of care were poor. Some homes kept virtually no records of children's progress. In the case of children privately placed in homes there was little assessment of children's needs and no move to see whether reintegration into their families was possible. In the earlier decades, even when welfare authorities were involved in placing a child in a home, there was often very limited follow-up contact maintained with the children. Consequently, there were no individual care plans, no monitoring of the progress of the children or consideration of their future needs. A number of witnesses described being discharged from children's homes at short notice and being unprepared for life after care and receiving minimal ongoing support. While people who had left homes were often welcomed back for a meal or visit there was no systematic follow-up. This was particularly marked in the case of children who had been sent to Australia who for all intents and purposes appeared to have been forgotten. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2017, p. 31, para 86).

However, the intensity of the resurgence of the Troubles between 1969 and 1972 was to introduce a new dynamic into the

chronosystem of leaving care as part of child welfare in NI. Communal violence, armed conflict with the state and the wide spread dislocation and discrediting for discriminatory practices of regional and local government under unionist control led to direct military and political intervention by the UK state. In 1972, Stormont, the regional parliament, lost its powers to Direct Rule from London. Everyday matters were handled by government departments within NI, but major policy was determined by a UK NI Office, under the direction of a Secretary of State for NI. Legislation was introduced, amended or repealed by means of Order in Council. Local government was also stripped of powers in areas where it was held to have abused them such as housing. That restructuring of local government impacted on personal social services which were combined with health services to form, uniquely within the UK, four regional Health and Social Services Boards. Child welfare became the responsibility of these Boards acting on behalf of the NI Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) and delivering services through management units at the district level (Heenan & Birrell, 2011).

One result of these political and administrative developments in pursuit of the British Government's Direct Rule strategy of 'technocratic management' of the Troubles (O'Dowd, Rolston, & Tomlinson, 1981) was an increased authority for professional groups within relatively well-resourced, expanded statutory agencies (Pinkerton & Campbell, 2002; Heenan & Birrell, 2011). As the period of Direct Rule continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, robust systems of health care and social work evolved under the integrated service (Heenan & Birrell, 2011). At the same time, the Troubles continued but with a declining level of violence and became characterized by a sense of stalemate, with deepening political division and community separation and little expectation or hope of resolution. Socially and economically, that same sense of stagnation was characteristic of the period (Gaffikin & Morrissey, 1990).

Within child welfare, this period of technocratic management was expressed by social workers articulating and developing a relatively high-status service providing primarily case-focused assessment and management of risk. This drew on a professional culture and training that was heavily influenced by the experiences and preoccupations of an English system, though NI did share in some of the changes occurring in family and community life across the UK (McShane & Pinkerton, 1986). The authoritative assessment and intervention required by child protection and the associated professional distancing from families and communities fitted with the broader British government Direct Rule strategy of management from above. That is not to say that there were no gains for children and young people in out-of-home care from an emphasis of what was seen as greater professionalism in children's services. Clear improvements were noted by the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry.

Over time, standards improved and sound professional practices were introduced. There was evidence from the 1970s onwards of: assessment of children's needs; the planning of care programmes; the maintenance of family contact where possible; the availability of

systems of advocacy and for making complaints; and, aftercare on returning home or living independently. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2017, p. 87).

This progress was apparent in the first study of care leaving in NI. It was carried out by statutory residential care staff in the mid-1980s and examined the experiences of 12 young people who left social services residential care. It noted that at this time, 'significant progress was made in providing a more structured and relevant programme to prepare young people in care for their discharge to the community' (Coyle & Conway, 1991, p. 33). But the research also questioned the 'expectation that our young people with an adequate degree of preparation while in care, can survive ... on a low income in an unsupported environment where the opportunity to develop appropriate social networks is limited' (p. 33). Understanding why there was that expectation is helped by recognizing its link back to the previous historical period with its defining characteristic of limiting state intervention.

Early in the period of Direct Rule, a review was undertaken of the law and services relating to the care and treatment of children and young people, taking into account both child welfare and juvenile justice, with a view to making recommendations on legislation and organization. It was also tasked to take into account developments in the rest of the UK. The Review Group Report, known as the Black Report after the name of the chair, noted that 'the primary determinant of children's behaviour ... is the social, moral and economic climate within which they have to grow up ... There can be no complacency when so many children are faced with what amounts to multiple deprivation ... the rapidly changing nature of modern society ... the continuing problem of political and social instability associated with the decade of civil unrest' (DHSS, 1979, p. 3). At the same time, it noted the continuing strength of relationships within the family, extended family, church and community as a counterbalance to the difficulties faced by children and young people. Accordingly, it proposed a 'Strategy for Help' aimed at prevention through resourcing families and other formal and informal institutions and networks—arguably a return to the opportunity of the debate about the 1969 English legislation that had been missed a decade earlier.

The Black Report's only reference to leaving care was to call for places in residential hostels for adolescents. This was as part of a more general concern to have a wider range of residential provision so as to be able to respond to the professional assessment of need that the Report, in keeping with the characteristic of the period, saw as requiring greater emphasis. These hostels were to 'provide an intermediate form of care between the children's home or training school and the independence of living in the community where a young person, because of an unsatisfactory home, is unable to return to live with parents' (DHSS: NI, 1979, p. 22). Ironically a major reason for the Black Report failing to have any significant impact was that shortly after its publication, a major scandal broke over the sexual abuse by staff of young men in just such a hostel—Kincora. The outcry over Kincora (Pinkerton & Kelly, 1986), which included speculation about the involvement and cover up by unionist politicians and

paramilitaries as well as police and military intelligence, was to reinforce the technocratic systems management style of child welfare. That did not sit well with the more open, creative but risky community-orientated approach that would have been required for the 'Strategy for Help'. Such an approach would have required explicit attention to the dynamics within the social ecology of family and neighbourhood, including their negative features rooted in a defensive sectarianism.

Reflecting the narrow technocratic case management that characterized the chronosystem dynamics of the period, it was professional policy makers and practitioners who drove developments in leaving care during the 1980s. The DHSS Regional Plan for 1987 to 1992 included two objectives directly relating to leaving care: 'the development of programmes to prepare young people for leaving care' and 'the provision of support to young people who have left care' (cited Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999). To some extent, this interest from policy makers reflected the growing number of young people who were leaving care at an age which suggested that they might require an 'after care' service. Between 1980 and 1989, there was an increase in both the number of young people who had reached 18 years old on leaving care (from 123 to 185) and the proportion of 18-year olds as a percentage of all young people leaving care (from 13% to 19%) (cited Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999). But that systems management concern also resonated with a demand from practitioners. In 1990, Barnardos (NI) organized a 2-day Conference on 'After Care' in 'recognition and acknowledgement that this was an area which for too long had not been given a platform of its own' (Barnardos [NI] quoted Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999, p. 5). As a result of the interest and motivation generated by the conference, an Aftercare Special Interest Group was established with a brief to facilitate interagency collaboration in addressing the many issues which had been raised.

As noted, the 1979 Black Report's 'Strategy for Help', which could have provided opportunities to promote a community-orientated approach to leaving care, was out of sync with the dynamics of change of the period. By contrast, at the end of the 1980s, the interest, aspirations and concern about care leaving in NI was to be provided with a boost from the Children Act of 1989. Thanks to the impact of the leaving care lobby that had developed in England, that Act included significant strengthening of the legal mandate for leaving care services and support. The contents of the new legislation held out real hope to those concerned with leaving care in NI as it became apparent that, rather than reform based on the Black Report, the Direct Rule politicians and their civil servants were preparing to 'write over' the English and Welsh legislation. The Children (NI) Order passed as an Order in Council in 1995 is almost word for word the same legislation as the 1989 Act—including its provision for care leaving.

The pace of change within this period was picking up. In the 5-year plan developed for the 1990s (1992–1997), leaving care was targeted as a key objective. The Health and Social Services Boards were to ensure that all care-experienced young people had 'adequate preparation for independent living and that them have access to an aftercare programme, to include an after-care plan and a designated

after-care worker.' (DHSS [NI] 1991 quoted Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999, p. 3) Leaving care was also picked out for particular mention in the First Annual Report from the Chief Inspector of Social Services in 1994. 'Young people who leave care in their adolescence are a disadvantaged and vulnerable group. Many become homeless, single parents, involved in petty crime and the mortality level in this small population is not insignificant. There is an increasing responsibility on Boards to support these young people into adult life and some improvement has been achieved in the level of service in recent years. There is on-going concern, however, that services need to be more proactive and flexible if the needs of these young people are to be adequately met.' (SSI 1994 1991 quoted Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999, p. 3). That last comment is particularly notable given that it clearly went against the risk management and procedural compliance thrust of the period—exactly the sort of 'contradiction' suggested earlier as necessary for a 'critical and nuanced understanding' of outcomes for looked-after children (Houston, 2002).

The Historical Abuse Inquiry noted for the pre-1968 period that it was 'important to acknowledge that ... some staff provided good care and warmth to children and were genuinely concerned to help them grow and develop and often worked unstintingly with little support to do so' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2017, p. 82, para 88). So too in this later period characterized by professional distancing, there were practitioners whose involvement with young people before and after they left care made them only too aware of the challenge faced and the need for supportive relationships, not systems management. As a result that other characteristic required for a critical and nuanced understanding of care leaving in any particular period, 'resistance', can be detected. One practitioner-undertaken evaluation of a befriending scheme for care leavers saw it as push back in an unresponsive policy and agency context.

In the past 14 years, nothing appears to have been done to alleviate the loneliness, isolation and stigma experienced by young people in care. We are still struggling to recognise and support this vulnerable group. Legislation and its' guidance leave much provision discretionary and as a consequence, services have developed patchily. Frequent government reorganisation and limited resources continue to push preparation and aftercare services down the scale of priorities. (McBriar, Noade, & Ringland, 2001, p. 172).

In another evaluation study of the leaving care services of an adolescent team, a similar sense of working against the thrust of the period was apparent.

It hasn't been great over the years but it was always adequate ... we had a group running there for eight or nine years. People were coming in and it was like a drop-in centre and it fitted ok. I know sometimes it was shabby and falling apart but at least it was accessible and they could come and sit or play a game of pool

and it served its purpose at the time. I know it has changed dramatically and a lot of that has to do with the organisation, the agency has changed. The whole stuff about the charter ... having a receptionist downstairs ... the shape of the office has changed. It has changed the whole atmosphere and it is not as accessible for young people.(Pinkerton, Higgins, & Switzer, 1998, pp. 20, 21).

Care-experienced young people themselves also became more visible during the 1990's as part of the dynamic of the period (Voice of Young People in Care [VOYPIC], 2012). In 1993, a forum with membership of practitioners and managers from voluntary and statutory services was set up to explore the means of enabling care-experienced young people to express their aspirations and concerns. That led to a meeting attended by young people from across NI where they had the opportunity to talk about their feelings and experiences of the care system. A young people's working party followed to disseminate the information gathered through presenting it in a format suitable for young people as well as for professionals. The working party wrote a newsletter and circulated it to young people in care throughout NI. A report was also produced by the participating practitioners and circulated to all relevant agencies. The young people and practitioners then worked together to produce a statement of the philosophy, principles, aims, objectives, structure and vision of a new organization that was to become VOYPIC.

In 1995, the first VOYPIC conference and annual general meeting (AGM) was held. Three morning workshops were run by VOYPIC, Who Cares Scotland and Voices (Wales), and a panel addressed issues raised in the workshops. The format was planned to inform the AGM that followed in the afternoon. A draft constitution was agreed, and an Executive Committee was elected. Committee members comprised four care-experienced young people aged 14–25 and two practitioners. Save the Children and Barnardo's NI both provided a seconded worker to coordinate and facilitate the Executive Committee. Funding was secured, and VOYPIC was established in 1996. It was staffed by four care-experienced development workers and a regional coordinator. During the first years of its existence, VOYPIC was involved in a range of projects—advocacy, participation, volunteering, drama, newsletters. It also ran residential groups, conferences, workshops and responded to legislation and policy (VOYPIC, 2012).

4 | POST CONFLICT DEVELOPMENTS 1998–2018

At the end of a brief account of its origins, VOYPIC adds 'All the while we were working in partnership with social services to bring about change' (VOYPIC, 2012). That sense of the possibility of change through partnership had a particular resonance with the climate of the 1990s when a cessation of paramilitary violence was enabling a renegotiation of the political and community relationships within NI and

with the British government. The result was the Belfast Agreement of 1998 that established a regional assembly based on cross community support, with an executive containing both unionist and nationalist ministers, a North-South Council to develop cooperation on the island of Ireland and a British Irish Council to promote relations between all parts of the British Isles.

The Agreement provided an opening for all those whose marginalized social status was compounded by the undemocratic and violent culture of the state and civil society during the Troubles—families in poverty, women, disabled people, members of minority ethnic communities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and not least vulnerable children and young people. A new period was opening up in which the chronosystem dynamic looked set to take a new turn, post conflict—to be characterized by partnerships in pursuit of social inclusion and human rights. ‘Promoting Independence’, a review of leaving and aftercare services published by the Social Services Inspectorate in 2000, clearly identified that the ‘wider public policy context for work with young care leavers is provided by the New Targeting Social Need initiative (New TSN). The purpose of New TSN is to tackle social need and social exclusion. As a group, young care leavers are liable to social exclusion due to unemployment, low educational attainment and social and emotional disadvantage’ (McLaughlin & Reynolds, 2000, p. 1). The review noted the continuing poor outcomes across a range of dimensions: health, education; identity; emotional and behavioural development; family and social relationships; social presentation; and self-care skills (p. 12). It reported that most statutory leaving and aftercare services were located in adolescent services and were judged ‘to be at a developmental stage’ (p. 4). The review emphasized, as part of the New TSN approach, the need for ‘developing new and innovative ways of helping people’ (McLaughlin & Reynolds, 2000, p. 2) and noted work bring undertaken in NI by the English care leaving nongovernmental organization (NGO) First Key—work that was to lead to a First Key NI between 1997 and 2003. However, the review still very much reflected the top-down technocratic approach of the previous period: outcome data on needs and targeting of provision with associated performance indicators, all within available resources. It made no mention of the Troubles nor did it mention children’s rights.

It had been hoped by many of those involved in what had become during the 1990s an active, rights-based, children’s sector lobby, that the new Executive would include a Minister for Children. That did not happen, but the first Programme of Government did make clear, in its opening paragraph, the responsibility it had towards NI’s children as part of a new relationship between the state and civil society. ‘This Programme for Government sets out the Executive’s proposed strategic aims and priorities which will be pursued working with and for all the people ... It will provide an important focus of co-operation, to enable us to create a better future for ourselves and for our children.’ (Northern Ireland Executive, 2000, p. 9, para 1.1). That aspiration was given expression in a Children and Young People’s Unit in the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers’ Office. It was charged with setting up the post of Children’s Commissioner (appointed in 2003) and drawing up a cross departmental Children’s Strategy informed by

the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. That was launched in 2006 under the title of ‘Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge’ (DOH, 2006). Care leaving was included as part of a range of measures targeted at young people in care (p. 60). One of the eight overarching pledges directly addressed ‘the challenges of a society emerging from a period of prolonged conflict’ (p. 91) and another committed to ‘a culture which respects and progresses the rights of the child or young person’ (p. 91).

The first Programme of Government also included a commitment to a Children (Leaving Care) Bill similar to that enacted in 2000 in England and Wales, and in 2005, a Leaving Care (NI) Act was passed by the Assembly. That was supported by a substantial policy statement on Transition to Adulthood in a consultation document produced by the Executive: ‘Care Matters in Northern Ireland - A Bridge to a Better Future’ (DHSSPS 2007). With this legal and policy mandate, the pace of activity around care leaving was ratcheted up with systems and structures for supporting care leavers being significantly developed (Coyle & Pinkerton, 2012). This was apparent in improved coordination of interdepartmental and interagency collaborations, resulting in greater investment and provision for care leavers. Key developments included improved processes for gathering statistical information, production of interagency protocols, the growth of jointly commissioned supported accommodation, and the launch in 2006 of the Going the Extra Mile (GEM) scheme—the first UK programme enabling care-experienced young people to remain in foster placement beyond the age of 18 years. In 2015, the legal mandate for cross departmental collaboration was boosted by the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (NI).

The increased professional engagement with care leaving of the period was also seen in the level and consistency of practice. This was aided through the work of the Northern Ireland Benchmarking Forum. It continued to bring practitioners and their managers together to exchange and discuss the experience of service delivery to care leavers. Forum meetings regularly included presentations given by colleagues from an equivalent English forum. In 2012, minimum standards for Leaving and Aftercare Services were developed. The standards statements and associated criteria were developed from the high-level outcome statements contained in the overarching regional Children’s Strategy. Two additional standard statements were included to reflect corporate parenting responsibilities and to strengthen preparation and care planning as core requirements of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2002. The development of the standards engaged a wide range of agencies, from across both the statutory and voluntary sectors, involved in commissioning and in delivering services. VOYPIC provided a service user perspective, and the standards were also subject to public consultation.

By the early 2010s, given the combination of legislation, policy and service standards, alongside focused provision and practice, it was not surprising that an overview of care leaving at the time stated: ‘we have a sense of a high point having been reached in the understanding and the practice of care-leaving in recent years, at least in knowing what could and should be done to support young people in what can be a very challenging but also a very rewarding period of

their lives. We are conscious not only of advances being made locally but also globally. In 2009 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child produced a formal benchmarking of global expectations with regard to care-leavers as part of its Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN, 2010).¹ (Coyle & Pinkerton, 2012, p. 297). The professional technocratic dynamic within the chronosystem in the period of the Troubles followed by its post conflict version would seem to have driven forward the four levels of the leaving care ecosystem,

However, the same review commented that: 'It also has to be said that in the present political and economic climate of austerity there is a need to benchmark what has been achieved, not only to improve it but to defend it' (Coyle & Pinkerton, 2012, p. 298). Concern was expressed as to how the care leaving system would fare as choices over political priorities had to be made under the pressure of the British Government's austerity programme following the global banking crisis of 2007/2008. Those pressures were accentuated by the continuing political and community divisions despite the peace process. This was reflected in the re-imposition of Direct Rule on four occasions in the period after the Belfast Agreement of 1998. It was also seen in dominance of two big political parties (one unionist and one nationalist, between them accounting for almost 60% of the votes cast in 2017) with the ability to collapse the Executive when tensions between them ran high, as happened in 2017. On that occasion, the British Government did not introduce Direct Rule but for over 2 years left the civil service to administer NI in the absence of ministers.

It was within that policy context that a 'Strategy for Looked After Children: Improving Children's Lives' was issued in 2018 by the Departments of Health and of Education. The strategy made a clear commitment to 'Supporting children and young people returning home from care and their families; extending support for children and young people after-care, including care leavers, to help them make a successful transition into independent living as adults' (DOH/Ed, 2018, p. 14). How that was to be delivered was not so clear. There was mention of provision of supported living and the need for more effective services to disabled young people leaving care. It also noted that 22% of young people subject to the Leaving Care Act were waiting for or receiving mental health services. That figure was very much in line with other poor outcome indicators apparent in the government statistical bulletin published for 2018/2019 (DOH [NI], 2020). Of care leavers aged 19 in contact with statutory social services and whose economic activity was known, 37% were unemployed or economically inactive. Amongst female care leavers, 21% became mothers on or before they became 19 years old. In the general population, the equivalent figure was 1%. Almost half of the care leavers (49%) were living in an area of the same deprivation rank when leaving care as before their last entry into care, and 23% were living in a more deprived area. The need for aftercare support is clearly apparent in that 71% of care leavers aged 19 were receiving some form of ongoing support from social services: 45% were receiving financial support, 41% were receiving support for a GEM placement, 19% were receiving

financial support towards accommodation, 14% support for mental health issues, 8% financial support for their education and 6% other forms of support.

So it would seem that despite the dynamic of the chronosystem having shifted in the post conflict period with advances having been made in the social ecology of care leaving, it could still best be characterized as technocratic management from above, and it was still not delivering sufficiently to meet the needs of care-experienced young people. Certainly, it was far from being part of the vibrant rights-based politics of empowering young people that it has been argued NI requires and has the opportunity for as a post-conflict society (McAlister, Scraton, & Haydon, 2009). 'Despite the highly politicised nature of Northern Ireland society and the rights based context this sets for all social policy (Collins & Pinkerton, 2008), care-leaving has not become part of any explicit youth politics. Missing as yet ... is any clear political commitment to care-leavers as both children of the state and children of a society in transition from conflict' (Coyle & Pinkerton, 2012, p. 298).

5 | ENGAGING WITH HISTORY AS PART OF THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF CARE LEAVING

VOYPIC has campaigned since 2013 to 'change the narrative' about care-experienced young people. That goal would seem to be in sync with the faltering development of democratic structures and rights-based policies in NI, which include looked-after children. Progress, albeit uneven, is apparent at all levels of the leaving care ecosystem. But the history sketched above cautions that the region's present post-conflict potential has to be understood as having emerged from earlier periods. Each period has its own characteristic dynamic. That includes carrying the legacy of what went before in a way that can promote but can also hold back advance, recognizing that systemic effect can help describe, analyse and address what it is that mitigates against care leavers having available and being able to access the supports and services they require.

Bronfenbrenner's modelling with its attention to the chronosystem would seem to provide a framework for the much needed detailed description of the form, content, and direction of the care leaving social ecosystem as it changes overtime. One aspect of that change can be captured through taking a historical perspective. It is however important to note that through the frameworks' recognition of systemic levels, the focus on change overtime is not restricted to historical change at a macro level. The chronosystem also directs attention to biographical change at the micro level—both normative and nonnormative. The changes in a care-experienced young person's life are not historically determined. Those changes cannot be accounted for without considering the young person's own particular starting point precare, the care pathway followed, and the aftercare experiences and the dynamic for change within that journey.

Acknowledging history in this way as part of social ecology can contribute to a deeper understanding of the systemic dynamics of care leaving—the continuities and contradictions, the opportunities

and barriers to advancing the goal of care-experienced young people achieving their full rights as flourishing citizens. A historical understanding is needed to better inform practitioners and the young people they work alongside, service designers and programme managers, policy makers and politicians, and all those interested in improving the life chances of care-experienced young people.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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