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Thinking Through Family: Implications for Theory and Practice

> Attempts to fathom the depths of life by examining our flesh and blood create new imperatives for the state.
>
> Sue White and David Wastell, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 2017, p 441

Why 'thinking through family'?

This is a book about family, based on the narratives of 35 young adults with care experience. These individuals are not typical, or statistically representative, of care experienced adults in England. They took part in one of two studies, which were very different in focus: *Against All Odds?* was a cross-national project focused on people who were in education or employment at the time of joining the research; the *Evaluation of Pause* examined the work of a programme of intensive support for women in England who had been identified as being at risk of recurrent child removal. This book is focused on the experiences of two subgroups within those studies: *Against All Odds?* participants who were living in England, and participants in the *Evaluation of Pause* who were part of a 'care leaver pilot'. The population of people with care experience is diverse and, inevitably, there are striking similarities and differences in people's experiences within and between the two studies. But my aim in bringing the studies together was not to compare, nor have I tried to identify pathways to risk or protective factors. Rather, the purpose has been to illuminate the diversity of experiences and narratives of family for people with care experience, and to enable the recognition of care experienced lives as varied, specific and socially and biographically located, avoiding the dangers of a deficit-focused

'single story' of the care experienced family. The overarching objective of the book has been to *think through family* in the lives of care experienced people, in order to:

- extend the theorization and conceptualization of 'family', challenging the politicized binary of the 'ordinary' and the troubled 'other';
- inform family-minded approaches to policy and practice that respond to the enduring dynamic complexities of family relationships for young people, during childhood and into adult lives.

Conceptualizing family: thinking beyond the 'single story'

I began this book by discussing the dangers of a 'single story' of family, borrowing the metaphor from Adichie's (2009) discussion of the Igbo concept of *nkali*, meaning 'to be greater than another'. Writing about a very different context, Jamieson (1998) similarly warns that stories of the conventional modern family are never 'just stories', but have political power. They contribute to the stigmatizing judgement conveyed in the term *nkali,* through reductive politicized constructions of some families as 'ordinary' and therefore greater than the 'troubled' and abject 'other'. The diverse narratives included in this book reveal the impossibility of assuming any notion of any 'single story' for the 'care experienced family'. Instead, participants' stories illuminate the multifaceted fluidity of 'family', disrupting its reification as a static and unitary concept. The analysis shows the value of a sociological lens, including attention to family practices, for challenging the myth of the 'cornflakes packet' family (see Morgan, 2011 and Chapter 1). In this, our conclusions reinforce the arguments made by researchers who question the ways in which some families are constructed as 'troubled' (McCarthy et al, 2013; 2019) and as the 'the objects or abjects' of disgust (Tyler, 2013, p 26), through the sociopolitical machinery of stigma (see also Gillies et al, 2017; Crossley, 2018; Tyler, 2020).

By recognizing the 'care experienced family' as one distinctive but diverse category of unconventional family form, the work also resonates with efforts within queer theory to expand the parameters of the concept of family, challenging the presumed deviance of 'family configurations that run counter to … hegemonic structures' (Allen and Mendez, 2018, p 76) while recognizing the enduring significance of family in people's lives (see also Gabb, 2011a; b; Heaphy, 2011; 2018; Roseneil et al, 2016). Care experienced families *are* unconventional: they are statistically unusual within the population as a whole (see Chapter 2) and they are distinctively (and unavoidably) complex, because care is a fundamental intervention into family and household structure and family practices. As the child moves from one

set of regular and taken-for-granted family practices to another household, whatever the form of placement (whether family-based or institutional care), the practices of everyday life will differ and cannot be taken for granted. In common with other studies of complex or nontraditional family forms (for example, Heaphy, 2011; 2018), the narratives shared in this book illuminate the value of attention to family *practices* and family *display* for understanding how people navigate the conventional and unconventional aspects of their family lives.

Family practices and family display

The stories of family shared in this book include accounts of family practices of 'everyday life' in both of the senses that Morgan (2011) sets out: regular and taken-for-granted practices of family living, and significant family events, experienced by a large proportion of the population. Narratives of quotidian practices in childhood – such as playing, sharing meals, watching TV and listening to music – act as a reminder that memories of family for people with care experience are not restricted to problems, or even the experience of being 'in care'. In Chapter 1, I drew on Phoenix's (for example, 1987) discussion of 'normalized absence and pathologised presence' in research with families from minoritized ethnic groups. I argued that these dangers were also present in research with care experienced people, if they are only studied and discussed in terms of vulnerability or risk. Through their narratives of family practices of love and care, participants in our research make the 'unremarkable' remarkable and resist reductive, stigmatizing imaginaries of the care experienced family. In sharing narratives of everyday childhoods, participants in the two studies also underline the significance of the ordinary for understanding what family means to them. They highlight that fond memories of family life can be part of a childhood which included significant trauma and hardship. Recognizing one does not negate the other. Nonetheless, participants' narratives also illuminated the ways in which quotidian family practices such as mealtimes and swimming lessons could be closely juxtaposed with experiences of significant adversity. Taken-for-granted practices are not necessarily benign.

Participants' description of traditional family practices – linked to key lifecourse events such as birthdays, weddings and funerals – evoked Heaphy's (for example, 2018) conceptualization of 'double think' in his research with same-sex couple families. His work highlights the ways in which families may be recognized as simultaneously conventional and non-conventional, drawing on tradition in order to legitimate their status through family display. In our research, this was apparent in accounts of both quotidian and traditional practices – even when the re/configuration of family practices was forced by circumstance, rather than a chosen rejection of norms. A close

analysis of narratives of everyday family practices also revealed accounts of family and relationships that might superficially be seen as inconsistent or contradictory, but are in fact indicative of dynamic complexity, in lives that often seemed to 'change gears and directions, along with its rules, every day' (Carver, 1997, p 35).

Practicing family with a lifeworld orientation

Chapter 3 introduced the social pedagogic concept of lifeworld orientation (following Schutz, 1932/1967 and Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009). Schutz conceptualized the lifeworld as both individual and socialized, shaped by societal structures as well as by life histories and relationships over time. The conceptualization of lifeworld orientation as a framework for practice is concerned with understanding how these different factors interact. It is also about recognizing the practice of social work (in the broadest sense of that term) as a social justice project, as Roets et al (2013, p 539) observe: 'The theoretical framework of lifeworld orientation was developed as a radical social criticism, challenging taken-for-granted institutional problem constructions that are wielding an alienating and colonizing influence on people's everyday experiences.'

Linking a lifeworld orientation with a family practices lens has particular value in thinking through family for people with care experience: helping to understand complex experiences at the intersection of biography and society and highlighting the importance of recognizing and respecting relational subjectivities. This in turn helps to illuminate why lack of recognition and respect for children's existing relationships and caring responsibilities could contribute to placement breakdown and spiralling difficulties.

Welch (2018, p 200) observes that 'when children are removed from their parents, the alternative care arrangements they are provided with often seek to reconstruct a normative family through "family-based" or "family-like" care', highlighting questions about how this normative family is conceived. In line with previous research (see Biehal, 2014), our analysis indicates that narratives of everyday practices illuminate the subjectivities of what makes a placement feel 'like family' – or not. It was also apparent that the presence of 'family-like' quotidian practices in placement were not confined to foster care. Some participants spoke of residential care feeling like home or family – for example, with residential care workers described as a second mum and dad, and memories of familiar cooking and shared mealtimes. Morgan (for example, 1996; 2011) argues that a family practices lens allows a sense of the active. In the context of our analysis of care experience, this enables thinking about what families *do* and how positive and valued family practices might be replicated within placements of different kinds.

Equally striking across the two studies were examples of practices within placement that could mark experiences as 'not-family', which signalled to participants that they did not belong. These ranged from the quotidian to practices linked to key lifecourse transitions, such as starting university, or having a baby. Thinking about (residential or foster) care in terms of family practices – and recognizing how these function to configure the boundaries of family (see Morgan, 2011) – makes it possible to recognize, and seek to avoid, those practices that reinforce for the young person that they are not family and cannot rely on family-like care.

Finally, as will be discussed further, this perspective also helps with understanding what it means to practise family-at-a-distance, for parents living apart from their children. Our samples across the two studies meant inevitably that we focused mainly on the experiences of mothers, but the examples given in Chapter 6 also indicated the complexity, and professional neglect, of the experience of fathers (see also Philip et al, 2020). Our analysis shows the importance of maintaining support for, and the recognition of, practices of parenthood, even when permanency arrangements mean it may be many years before direct contact is possible.

The value of the concept of family

As discussed in Chapter 1 (and see also Boddy, 2019), concern about the political and normative implications of reifying 'the family' has led some researchers to argue for a move away from the concept altogether, opting instead to focus on 'personal life', kinship or intimate relationships (for example, Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2011; Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016). The narratives shared in this book reveal the importance of 'chosen' and biological kin, but they also show why it is important to retain the concept of 'family', while recognizing its multifaceted diversity and fluidity. As Finch (2007) observes, 'The need to establish positively the contours and character of 'my family' is further reinforced by the obvious point that families are subject to change over time, as individuals move through the life course and change their mode of living' (Finch, 2007, p 69). The enduring significance of family was underlined in participants' family display: in their music choices and the photographs they took for *Against All Odds?* and, across both studies, in pictures shared on phones, in visible markers such as tattoos, and in their reflections on who counts as family and what family means in their lives. As Edwards et al (2012, p 735) observe: 'People can use the language of family in their everyday lives in a way that is a vital cultural and personal signifier of deep and ambivalent desires for and fears about togetherness, belonging and connectedness.'

Attention to family and family practices illuminates the ways in which temporality and spatiality intertwine. Participants' narratives extend

temporally across multiple generations as well as through the individual life course and into imagined futures; they extend spatially across households, connecting in turn with quotidian and habitual practices which are situated in the practical and emotional time and space of everyday lives (see Morgan, 2011; 2020).

The ways in which participants navigate emotional space and time in their family relationships was perhaps especially vivid in the narratives of women living apart from their children. They described practices that cross households and imagined future reunions, drawing attention to concrete signifiers such as photographs and children's artworks that functioned to situate the absent child within the home, and sharing narratives of maternal knowledge (of children's preferences and characteristics, for example) and intergenerational resemblance. In these ways, participants were able to practise *motherhood* at a distance in their everyday lives, even when living arrangements and legal restrictions mean that it is not possible to practise *mothering* more directly.[1] Kinship endures beyond placement and permanency decisions, but the ways in which family may be practised are configured by wider factors, including legal status and the decisions of more powerful others, as well as participants' own needs and vulnerabilities.

The research discussed here also highlights why family cannot be conceptualized as coterminous with household, or with the mother–child dyad. The importance attached to siblings, fathers and grandparents in narratives of family was striking, across both studies. While relationships with mothers were discussed more often, we also heard several examples of fathers playing a significant and supportive role in young adult lives – an observation that challenges the stigmatized imaginary of the absent or invisible father (see Tarrant, 2021). The discussion of care experienced parenthood in Chapter 6, albeit predominantly focused on mothers (reflecting the profile of participants in the two studies), also highlights the ways in which experiences of fathers can be marginalized – resonating with messages from other research (for example, Philip et al, 2020; Roberts, 2021).

Grandparents were significant in several respects. Some participants shared memories of grandparents which were distinctive in their contrast to quotidian hardship. Some highlighted the importance of intergenerational connections in terms of understanding themselves and their families, even in contexts of intergenerational difficulties. Extended kin, including grandparents, great-grandparents and others, could play a crucial role in family configuration as kinship carers – for participants in both studies during their own childhoods, as well as for children of women in the Pause evaluation. Consistent with other studies of kinship care (for example, Kiraly and Humphreys, 2016; McCartan et al, 2018; Hunt, 2020), our research illuminates both the complex challenges and the importance of these ongoing

connections. Longitudinal analysis in the *Evaluation of Pause* also showed how these relationships could change – often enabled by professional support – generating new possibilities for positive developments in family connections.

In discussing 'who counts' as family, participants from both studies highlighted the importance and complexity of sibling connections. This emphasis on *intra*-generational connection reinforces the arguments that Monk and McVarish (2018) make about the significance of sibling relationships in children's lives and the critical neglect of sibling relationships in decision-making about placement and contact. The implications for policy and practice of our findings in relation to sibling relationships will be discussed further. However, in terms of the focus in this section on the conceptualization of *family,* the research lends weight to a body of literature that argues for attention to siblings within family studies (for example, Punch, 2008; Edwards and Weller, 2014; Davies, 2015; Gulløv and Winther, 2021). Particularly relevant are Gulløv and Winther's (2021) arguments for moving beyond normative and household-specific understandings of siblingship, to a more open-minded recognition of the variety and fluidity of relationships that can span households and diverse parentage. Sibling relationships within our two studies certainly reflect this range. Across diverse family lives, participants' accounts show the importance of recognizing children's mutual love and care in childhood, the significance of sibling relationships for understandings of self and the ways in which intragenerational support and connections between siblings can endure in young adult lives.

The longitudinal design of the two studies – linking past, present and imagined futures – also illuminates the fluidity of families over time, as participants' narratives reveal the changeable dynamics of relationships with kin, in childhood and adulthood (see Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011). A narrative analytic approach, with its attention to multiple and multifaceted stories, also helps with this understanding of family fluidity. Discussing traditional oral storytellers, the cultural critic Walter Benjamin illuminates this point, contrasting their practice with the artificial endpoint of the novel. While the novelist 'invites the reader to a divinatory realisation of the meaning of life by writing "Finis"', the storyteller knows that 'there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate' (Benjamin, 1955/2015, p 99). This understanding is particularly valuable in a context where much research (and research funding) involving care experienced people is focused on understanding 'outcomes' (see Chapter 2). In social research, outcomes are not endpoints, but are snapshots of a moment in space and time (see Bakketeig et al, 2020 for a further discussion in relation to *Against All Odds?*). It is not our place as researchers to write 'Finis' on people's lives, and this is certainly true when we research the concept of 'family' – in care experienced or any other lives.

Reflections on family-minded policy and practice

> The notion of the child as a separate entity, an island, also discounts the potential the family may offer.
>
> Brid Featherstone et al, *Re-imagining Child Protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families*, 2014, p 139

By thinking through family, the analysis in this book supports arguments for a family-minded humane social work developed by Featherstone et al (2014). White and Wastell (2017, p 441), in the epigraph to this chapter, highlight the imperatives for the state that arise from attention to 'our flesh and blood'. Our research illuminates why family-mindedness matters – for recognizing, along with other forms of kinship, the enduring importance of 'what is understood as an immutable biological family' (Welch, 2018, p 213) with all of the complexity and challenges that entails. Participants' narratives also demonstrate why a family-minded approach needs to be maintained *after* leaving care, why the dynamic dis/continuities and ambiguous complexities of family relationships over time must be recognized. It is hardly surprising that experiences of family relationships in childhood shape participants' understandings of those relationships into adult lives. Our research has shown that their narratives document both change and consistency in their relationships over time, showing how they may be both important and troubling, simultaneously difficult to manage *and* crucially supportive. To understand the implications of these findings for work with care experienced families, we need to consider how wider policy and welfare contexts shape possibilities for practice.

Family-minded approaches in precarious times?

> Despite practitioners having sophisticated understandings of assumed and acceptable familial constructs and practices, when the conversation shifts from description to action, these intricate understandings quickly modify to fit institutionally defined priorities, and categories of entitlements.
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> Julie Walsh et al, 'How do you solve a problem like Maria? Family complexity and institutional complications in UK social work', 2019, p 1056

Walsh and colleagues' (2019) analysis of social work responses to a case vignette noted the ways in which '*family* is reduced to a set of problems; a "type" of a family' (p 1059), caught in complicated organizational structures that undermine relational practice. The narratives shared in this book

show why 'sophisticated understandings of assumed and acceptable family constructs and practices' (Walsh et al, 2019, p 1056) are essential for policy and practice concerned with care experienced family lives. Understandings and experiences of family were varied, complex and dynamic. Approaches to policy or practice that are reductive, based on a homogenizing imaginary of the problem family, will inevitably fail to meet people's needs.

Such tensions are heightened in contemporary times, when 'austerity' has become an ideological norm and the public sector has shrunk dramatically (Boddy, 2023). The desiccation of the public sector is evident in Harris and colleagues' (2019) fiscal analysis of local authority funding in England. Analysing a ten-year period commencing 2009/10, they found that the most economically deprived municipalities have experienced the most significant fall in resources. Over the same period, local authority spending on children's social care increased, as rising demand for statutory safeguarding services coincides with dramatic cuts to non-statutory, universally accessible and/or early intervention provision (see also Webb and Bywaters, 2018). These patterns reveal a wider context of constant uncertainty and ongoing change: child and family poverty are increasing at the same time as services to support children and families are diminishing. Any recommendations for improving practice in work with care experienced children or adults, and their families, must account for this policy context.

In his Independent Review of Social Care in England, MacAlister (2022) criticized what he saw as a tendency for children's social care to be 'rigid and linear', arguing that: 'Scarce resources, reactive crisis management and a mindset that does not recognise the importance of family and community are all part of what is keeping services from meeting the needs of families' (MacAlister, 2022, p 11). At a time when the precarization of child and family services *and* family lives has been systematically and ideologically driven by government (Boddy, 2023, following Lorey, 2012/2015), MacAlister's words invite a critical question about whose mindset needs to be changed.

This book has documented the ways in which precarity – in all its intersecting forms – exacerbates pressures and creates risks for care experienced adults (see also Boddy et al, 2020a), leading us to argue that the solution to these problems lies in addressing the welfare policy that drives scarcity of resources and reactive crisis management. Of course, recognizing this wider context does not mean denying the importance of interpersonal relationships, nor does it negate the importance of professional practice. Across the two studies, participants' narratives consistently highlighted the difference made by supportive professionals and time-intensive skilled relational work, helping them to navigate both welfare insecurity and complicated family lives over time.[2] But in considering what the research means for professional work with care experienced families, we must recognize sociopolitical contexts and the corresponding constraints on possibilities for practice.

Supporting relational interdependency

The narratives shared in this book add to a body of scholarship which illuminates the relational interdependencies of adult lives, demonstrating the diverse ways in which young adults support (and are often supported by) family members in their lives over time. This was evident in accounts of the everyday and in key moments of crisis and transition. Of course, interdependence was not confined to kinship; the analysis has also shown the importance of chosen family and friendships. Nevertheless, thinking through family is important in making interdependencies visible, challenging the 'silent discourse' of socio-economic privilege (Nilsen, 2021, p 134), within which intergenerational support can be taken for granted, while fostering the neoliberal myth of autonomous independent adulthood.

We live in a period when young adults (or at least, those who are able to do so) increasingly rely on family for informal, housing and financial support, as youth transitions have become 'increasingly protracted and complex' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2003, p 138; see also Woodman, 2022). Furlong and Cartmel's (2003, p 143) theoretical framework for understanding youth transitions highlights the importance of family as part of the 'resource base' for 'mobilisation of capacities'; they highlight the family's economic resources; its knowledge, assumptions and connections; and its support and encouragement. Arguably, these resources become particularly important in times when the external context is more challenging and uncertain and the welfare state is shrinking further. One consequence is that inequality widens, between those who can take familial resources for granted and those who cannot.

Young people in care experience these social changes more sharply. They often face abrupt and accelerated transitions on leaving the system (for example, Stein and Ward, 2021; Palmer et al, 2022), despite consistent evidence that timely and flexible support makes a critical difference in scaffolding young adults through key periods of transition (for example, Paulsen and Berg, 2016; Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen, 2018; Boddy et al, 2020b; Glynn and Mayock, 2021). The national charity Become, which supports and advocates for children in care and care leavers, terms this experience a 'Care Cliff', launching a campaign in 2020 to remove 'the #CareCliff and the expectation of "independence" asked of young people as they approach 18'.[3] Many care experienced young people will now face this cliff-edge at an even younger age, as changes to requirements for regulated settings means that semi-independent, independent and supported accommodation settings are no longer required to provide day-to-day care for young people aged 16–17 years (see Chapter 2).

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister, 2022) has arguably addressed these considerations, in proposing a shift from 'corporate parenting' to 'community parenting'. MacAlister writes:

> Whilst the state can never provide love for a child, it should obsess over creating loving networks of people around them, to provide the support and care that every one of us needs as the foundation for a good life. Any young person leaving care without a group of loving adults around them is a signal that the care system has failed. It can be easy to consider relationships as a 'nice to have' or a marginal issue. However, you need only consider the importance placed on relationships in an extensive body of research on promoting good childhood development and mental health. Or imagine for yourself what it would be like to live in a world where you struggle to define yourself in relation to others and where your search for belonging and connection is unreciprocated. (MacAlister, 2022, p 144)

Undoubtedly, our analysis shows the enduring importance of loving networks. Many care experienced people do not navigate early adulthood alone; they are loved by family and friends and often rely on their help in the absence of more formal support. However, our research illuminates what this aspiration for loving networks might mean for policy and in practice. In the discussion that follows, we look across different kinds of kin connections discussed by our participants, considering the implications for supporting care experienced people through childhood and beyond.

Supportive siblings?

The importance of sibling relationships, through childhood and into adulthood, was discussed earlier in this chapter. Sibling relationships were clearly emotionally significant, but provided much more than that. Several participants shared accounts of providing significant care for their brothers and sisters in childhood, consistent with Gowen et al's (2021, p 132) description of children taking on 'multiple aspects of the parenting role'. This agency, love and care must be respected in making decisions about placement and best interests. That's not to say that siblings should *inevitably* be placed together – as discussed in Chapter 4, sometimes they may want and need different things. But equally, the analysis shows that, when sibling relationships are ignored, the implications for a child's immediate and long-term wellbeing can be devastating. Supporting sibling relationships *in childhood* is also important because siblings were very often a critical source of emotional and practical support *in adulthood*, spanning quotidian practices such as helping with childcare as well as major responsibilities in significant lifecourse events. As Monk and McVarish (2018) observed, sibling connections are a neglected area of policy and practice for children in care; our analysis shows that they matter enormously, both in and beyond childhood.

Chosen family

The analysis also highlights the importance of 'chosen family' in young adult lives, enabling positive relationships that can endure, with foster carers, residential care workers and other professionals, as well as with friends. Across the two studies, participants' narratives highlighted the significance of these relationships in key lifecourse events such as weddings, funerals and becoming a mother. Their experiences invite the question of how such relationships can be supported, through childhood and beyond. The Lifelong Links programme established by Family Rights Group in England has addressed this issue, working with a child in care to identify important people (who they know, and who they might like to know) and then working to establish contact and supporting the development of a network for the child. Holmes et al's (2020) independent evaluation documented that the programme helped children and young people to build safe and positive relationships and to establish their own understandings of identity and experience. In a reflection that carries echoes of William's metaphor of the 'two moons' of his foster family and his unreachable biological family (see Chapter 4 and Figure 4.2), one of the participants in their study observed:

> It's [Lifelong Links] made me a happier person. It's made me stronger because I now realise that there are going to be family members out there that I have no clue about and that I'm never going to be able to see, but it's made me realise that even if I can't see this family, doesn't mean there's no one there. They're still there; they're still a part of me. (Young person quoted in Holmes et al, 2020, p 43)

Participants in our research also highlighted the importance of geographical proximity for enabling enduring connections, indicating that a family-minded approach to supporting young people in and after care, as they navigate their everyday lives, entails finding out who people want and need to be close to. That understanding depends on thinking through family with a lifeworld orientation (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009). It means attending to relational subjectivities in people's priorities and decision-making in order to understand, for example, why a young person might run away from a placement, or why a young parent might jeopardize decisions about custody of their child by visiting friends and family.

The limits of loving networks – and the need for continuing professional support

Alongside evidence of the importance of family in early adulthood, the narratives discussed in this book documented the limits, contingencies and

unpredictability of familial resources, care and support. Many people had significant, and complicated, caring responsibilities for other family members, including parents and siblings. It seems hardly surprising that when family difficulties are sufficient to necessitate a child's placement, they might continue to constrain possibilities for familial support in adult lives. But this has implications for the role of the state. In times when young adults routinely and increasingly rely on familial resources, there are critical questions for policy and practice about the extent to which the intergenerational contract with the state as 'corporate parent' extends into adulthood for people with care experience. Statutory guidance on the Children Act 1989 stipulates that the state as corporate parent should act 'as any good parent would' (DfE, 2018, p 8). But our research did not show the state engaged in normative patterns of parenting for young adults, ensuring the 'resource base' necessary to 'mobilise their capacities' (see Furlong and Cartmel, 2003). Rather, our analysis indicates that the kinship of the state does not endure beyond the constraints of legal provisions for leaving care support.

To sum up, the narratives shared in this book provide robust evidence of the importance of enabling children in care to maintain and develop loving networks. Yet the research also shows why loving networks are not enough. Young people in care need professional support, through childhood and into adulthood, to manage and (where desired) to maintain family relationships that will endure, in various ways for better and worse, into adulthood. Given the differences in focus of the two studies, the consistency of this finding is striking.

Professional support – continuing into adulthood – was shown to be important in multiple ways. First, the research documented the difference that skilled trauma-informed relational support could make to people who were managing complex relationships with family members, including significant caring responsibilities that threaten to override their own needs. Moreover, there were inevitably limits to the support that loving networks could provide – for example, a sibling might be supportive in some ways, but unable to step in at critical times. The analysis also showed the importance of flexible access to financial, emotional and practical support, relating to events that are both ordinary (not distinctive to care experience) and extra-ordinary. That might simply involve help looking after a much-loved pet during a short hospital stay – which could be seen as trivial but which caused significant anxiety. The striking examples of organizing and paying for funerals illustrate the way in which an 'everyday' lifecourse event (in Morgan's (2011) terms), becomes an extraordinary responsibility for a young adult without financial and practical support from members of older generations. In line with other research with care experienced parents (for example, Barn and Mantovani, 2007; Chase et al, 2009; Roberts, 2021) the lack of timely support, combined with evidence of stigma and destabilization following a pregnancy, highlights

critical questions about the state's responsibilities as corporate *grand*parent: to 'be-there-no-matter-what' (Sjöberg and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, 2017) for both care experienced mothers *and* fathers at such a crucial time.

In an evidence review of contact and wellbeing, conducted with Padmini Iyer and colleagues (Iyer et al, 2020, p 43) for the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (FJO), we argued that 'contact' would be better conceptualized as 'safe and meaningful involvement' of the people that matter in a child's life. The experiences discussed in this book reinforce that argument, illuminating the need to help care experienced children build positive and secure foundations for long-term inter- and intragenerational interdependencies. Our Nuffield FJO review also noted the importance of skilled professional support to manage complex relationships and avoid potential risks including re-traumatization through contact. The analysis presented here takes that message further, showing why a long-term view is vital in managing those considerations. As McCarthy et al (2013, p 16) observe, it is important to 'avoid using children's best interests in a way that assumes it is simple to know what they are'. Difficult relationships, including with parents who have been abusive or have chronic and complex needs, continue to be challenging for young adults who have been in care. Decisions about the best interests of the child need to be made with possible futures in mind. Thinking through family reveals the need to recognize this extended temporality, highlighting the importance of supporting young adults with connections (and welfare concerns) that reach far beyond childhood. The analysis presented through this book as a whole also reinforces a key message from the *Our Care, Our Say* (2021) report, following up on their learning from the 2019 Care Experienced Conference in England: 'Help should not be limited by age or timelines – people need support at the right time and when they are ready. Care experienced people carry their experience for life and need support throughout their lifetime' (Our Care, Our Say, 2021 p 32).

MacAlister's (2022) arguments for the importance of enabling enduring loving networks are reinforced by the analysis shared in this book, but our findings also highlight why the state needs to maintain a role as corporate parent – and as corporate *grand*parent when necessary – that reaches beyond childhood. The experiences of participants in our research demonstrate that there is no clear 'cut-off' or age when a supportive family is no longer required. Again, that conclusion should not be surprising, given the wider literature on intergenerational support in young adulthood (for example, Woodman, 2022). The Igbo term *nkali* ('to be greater than another') is relevant here again. If corporate parenting is defined in statutory guidance as 'acting as any good parent would' (Department for Education, 2018, p 8), why is it acceptable to tolerate something different, something *less than* that, for care experienced people?

Conclusion

The families discussed in this book were all different. Their varied and complex lives resist any reduction to a 'single story' of the care experienced family. The people who took part in our research were all young adults and they all have care experience in common, but one of the key messages from the research is the need to recognize and respect the specificities and relational subjectivities of their lifeworlds and their families. As Lemn Sissay (2016, p 80) put it in the poem with which I opened this book: 'Different eggs/In the same nest'.

One of the critical dangers of the 'single story' of the troubled family is that it effaces complexity. Family lives that do not fit the imaginary of the 'bourgeois household and the romances of the family and the fairy-tales that lie behind its closed doors' (Steedman, 1986, p 139) are marginalized or misrepresented in public and policy imagination. The narratives shared in this book challenge this normative myth, illuminating 'diverse and negotiable family forms' (Heaphy, 2018, p 161) and revealing how the 'ordinary' and 'distinctive' aspects of family intersect. Participants' accounts document enduring kinship, love and care. They also highlight complex adversities and distinctive forms of disruption, corresponding to placement experiences and reasons for care entry, as well as to stigmatizing and destabilizing professional practices that could persist beyond leaving care.

Sissay, who spent his childhood in foster and residential care (see Sissay, 2019), has described care experienced people as superheroes, commenting that, 'like the superhero, young people in care draw on extraordinary skills to deal with extraordinary situations' (Sissay, 2011, np). These words inspired my choice of the cover image for this book: children in superhero capes running forward together. But our analysis also indicates that the exercise of extraordinary skills depends on support, from loving networks of many kinds, and also from the state – including skilled relational support and flexible access to practical and financial help. These resources are necessary in order to mitigate both the normative uncertainties of early adult lives and the distinctive challenges associated with care experience. Butler (2016, p 14) put it succinctly: 'Freedom can only be exercised if there is enough support for the exercise of freedom'.

Ensuring loving networks for people with care experience is important. But achieving that aspiration depends on recognition of the complex meanings of family in care experienced lives. It does not negate the role of the state as corporate parent, acting as any good parent would to scaffold young adults through interconnected lives – in childhood and for as long as needed. Thinking through family helps us to understand that superheroes do not succeed alone.