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Bionote

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Abstract

People who spent time in public care as children are often represented as ‘care leavers’. This paper investigates how ‘care leaver’ is discursively constructed as a group identity, by analyzing 18 written personal experience stories from several charity websites by people identified or who self-identify as care leavers. Several approaches to narrative analysis are used: a clause-level analysis based on Labov’s code scheme; the identification of turning points; an analysis of ‘identity work’; and an analysis of subject positions relative to ‘master narratives’. The findings from each of the methods are then combined to reveal how intertextual, narrative-structural, and contextual factors combine to constitute a common care leaver discourse. This forms the basis for a characterization of ‘care leaver’ group identity as ‘survivors of the system’. The findings also reveal how ‘care leaver’ as type, including stereotype, influences how identity is constructed in the personal experience narratives.

Keywords: care leaver, identity work, narrative analysis, subject positioning, care system

Investigating ‘care leaver’ identity: A narrative analysis of personal experience stories

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1 Introduction

The term ‘care leavers’ is widely used to represent, as a single group, people who spent time in care when they were children. In the mainstream media, ‘care leavers’ are often depicted as traumatized and stigmatized (e.g. The Guardian 2018), suggesting a group united by shared psychological and social experiences. On the other hand, ‘care leaver’ might be read as a description of the situational status (i.e. leaving or having left care) common among individuals who may otherwise have vastly different life experiences from one another.

This raises the question: is there such a thing as a ‘care leaver’ identity and in what sense can one be said to exist?

It is an important question to answer. As ‘care leavers’ are said to be more likely to experience limited life chances (BBC 2017), there is good reason to identify them as a socially disadvantaged group. However, representations of ‘care leavers’ as sufferers may be at odds with, and therefore risk invalidating, the experiences of individuals who spent time in care.

To account for these issues with ‘care leaver’ identity, I present in this paper a study that analyzes personal experience narratives, written by people who spent time in care and used by charities for the purposes of raising awareness of ‘care leavers’ as a disadvantaged group.

The approach taken is a multimethod narrative analysis that addresses several ways in which ‘care leaver’ is discursively constructed as an identity. This approach addresses shortcomings of previous research in which ‘care leaver’ has been represented but not explained (e.g. Bluff et al. 2012; Hiles et al. 2014). In this paper, I aim to *explain* ‘care leaver’ as an identity by answering the question: what evidence does language use in context provide for the existence of a ‘care leaver’ collective identity?

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on ‘care leaver’ identity, group identity and categorization, and narrative and identity. Section 3 presents the methodology, which includes a summary of the data, a note on ethics, and then, in turn, outlines of each of the narrative analytic methods used. Section 4 presents the analysis which is divided into three subsections. This is followed by a discussion in Section 5 where findings from the analysis are considered in relation to the context of the data. The paper then ends with a short conclusion.

2 Literature review

2.1 Care leaver identity

Broadly speaking, the term ‘care leaver’ refers to people who have previously lived in public care as children. There are an estimated 73,000 children in care in England as of 2018 (Ofsted 2018), with approximately 12,000 leaving care each year (Social Security Advisory Committee 2018). An often-cited definition of a ‘care leaver’, such as the one that appears on

charity and university websites, is ‘someone who has been in Care for at least 3 months including their 16th Birthday’ (Lancaster University 2018).

This definition is based on an interpretation of the Children’s (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which outlines the legal entitlements of people in the process of leaving care and for a period after they have left care (Legislation.gov.uk 2000). With several levels of entitlement based on age specified, including an upper age limit of 24 for people in education or training (Legislation.gov.uk 2000: 8), ‘care leaver’ is arguably similar to ‘school leaver’ in denoting a transient institutional status.

However, the omission of upper age limits in other representations of ‘care leaver’ suggests it signifies a group beyond the temporary institutional situation of receiving pastoral and financial support post-care. In the 2012 ‘Care Leavers’ Stories Project’ (SCIE 2012) organized by the Social Care Institute for Excellence and the British Library, life story interviews were conducted with 17 people, aged between their 20s and 90s, who had spent time in public care as children. The use of ‘care leaver’ as a lifelong signifier, and as a category of archived testimonies that imply a ‘care leaver’ history, suggests the notion of ‘care leaver’ as a cultural identity. ‘Care leaver’ is also sometimes represented as a political identity, as in the following example from the homepage of a charity website where care leavers are defined as an “‘invisible minority’ of young adults [who] have survived turbulent childhoods” (The Care Leavers’ Foundation 2018: n.p.).

In these examples, ‘care leaver’ is a category used by institutional actors (staff at the charities mentioned) to represent people who have spent time in care as a group, with a cultural and

political identity. However, such representations do not necessarily reflect the lived reality of the people they are attributed to.

2.2 Group identity and categorization

How categories relate to identity has been a particular concern in research on gender and identity, where criticism has been leveled against the unquestioning use of categories to represent identity (Cameron 2007; Mullany 2007). For example, variationist sociolinguistic studies have been criticized for linking language variation to fixed categories, which assumes that such categories represent an adequate basis for defining social identities (Cameron 1997; Benwell and Stokoe 2006). The argument against using pre-existing categories is that social identity is socially constructed and in a state of potential ongoing change, where identity is affirmed, resisted, and performed (Schiffrin 2006; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012). However, social constructionist approaches to discourse and identity do not entail a complete rejection of identity categories, with some research describing the influence of cognitive categories, based on culturally established norms and expectations, on social identity construction (Koller 2012).

The constitution of group identity can be considered at two levels: the macro-level of established cognitive categories, such as schemata that are the basis for cultural stereotypes (Koller 2012); and the micro-level where groups sharing in social activities form ‘communities of practice’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1998). De Fina (2006) observes how identities at both levels are linked, with identities constructed in social interaction being influenced by “well-defined categories” while at the same time being the site at which such categories can be redefined (p. 355). In some cases, the relationship between the micro- and

macro-levels may be affected by identity type, such as migrant identity, where conflict between established categories and individual experiences may result from the struggle for people to find a sense of belonging (Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2008).

In this paper, ‘care leaver’ will be treated as both a category and the aggregate of people engaged in a common social activity. This will form part of a consideration of whether, and how, ‘care leaver’ can be said to constitute a collective identity.

2.3 Narrative and identity

In the naming term ‘care leaver’, the word ‘leaver’ identifies a person in temporal relation to a ‘care’ that is currently or soon to be past. It is appropriate, therefore, that this study should focus on narrative, a type of discourse that can be defined in terms of time.

At a conceptual level, identity and narrative can be linked by the idea that “narration produces a sense of identity coherence by incorporating notions of connectedness and temporal unity” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 138). In the past, research on narrative and identity has primarily operated within a biographical paradigm where researchers privileged whole-story narratives and treated identity as something revealed through the process of people telling their stories (e.g., Labov 1972; Ochs and Capps 1996). In more recent work, biographical approaches have been criticized for treating stories as “transparent and unmediated records” where the retelling of a life story over time supports the notion of a narrative identity as a single coherent whole (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012: 161). Proponents of an alternative interactionist approach have argued that, far from being a fixed entity, identity, whether individual or collective, is a dynamic, relational process and emerges

through ‘small stories’: the performative, fragmented narratives of everyday talk (Bamberg 2007; Georgakopoulou 2007; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012).

One argument for focusing on small stories to analyze narrative and identity is that, as unplanned aspects of in-the-moment social interaction, they represent reality more than biographical accounts, or ‘big stories’, which are non-immediate and deliberately structured to fit themes (Bamberg 2006). Freeman (2007) argues against the idea that the approaches are opposed, suggesting they are complementary and that big stories provide distance for reflection that is not available in small stories. For others, combining approaches is not contingent on theoretical justifications but serves a practical purpose: for example, the research participant in one study reveals different aspects of their identity depending on which story type is being used (Phoenix and Sparkes 2009).

On some occasions the choice to focus on big or small stories depends on a study’s research purpose. Lanza (2012) elicits personal experience narratives to consider the influence of societal discourse on migrant identity, which she argues cannot be achieved through a microanalysis of interaction. Meanwhile, for Oostendorp and Jones (2015), small stories provide a way of looking at the constitution of workplace identity beyond the official discourses that dominate in organizational contexts.

The division of interactional and biographical approaches to narrative and identity, as reflected in the binary distinction between big and small stories, is regarded as artificial oversimplification by some researchers (Stanley 2010; Wilson and Stapleton 2010). Stanley (2010) notes the “complex overlaps and inter-dependencies” that exist between the story types (p. 6) and makes the argument that letters containing big story “allusions and

references” also represent exchanges that constitute social interaction (p. 11). In another example, overlap is further demonstrated by biographical subgenre categories, ‘workplace anecdotes’ and ‘working stories’, which illustrate how big stories occur in workplace interaction (Holmes 2012).

In the present paper, the view of narrative and identity adopted treats big and small stories as interconnected. While the data being analyzed are personal experience narratives, they were not elicited by the author but have been selected from a context in which they occur as part of the social practice of charity campaigning.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data

The data used in this study are personal experience stories written by people who spent time in care as children. There are 18 stories in total that average 682 words in length. Eleven of the stories are from a 2013 report, accessed as a PDF via a charity website, titled ‘Voices of Care Leavers’, by the educational charity NIACE (National Institute for Adult Continuing Education). The other seven come from the following charity websites: The Who Cares Trust, the National Youth Advocacy Service, The Fostering Network, and Fosterline. The stories appear to have been elicited by staff working for the identified organizations, all of which are concerned with raising awareness about the needs of ‘care leavers’. However, as the stories have been retrieved from the internet to be analyzed in the context in which they were intended to be read, the precise circumstances of elicitation are not known. (The context in which the ‘care stories’ occurred will be considered in the discussion, Section 5 below.)

3.2 Note on ethics

While these data are in the public domain, the question of whether it is ethical to use personal experience narratives without the express consent of the authors of those narratives still arises. The reason why consent has not been obtained is because many of the stories have been shared anonymously, meaning that identifying them for the purposes of obtaining consent would be against the authors' wishes. Instead, I refer to the judgment made in Seale et al. (2010) when faced with a similar ethical concern. In this study, data from online discussions about breast and prostate cancer were analyzed, and the researchers decided to exclude posts written by others while including "postings made by people participating by virtue of their own experiences of this cancer" (p. 597). This principle can be applied to the care leaver stories because by publicly sharing accounts of their experiences, the authors are participating in an interactive situation where it is reasonable for others to consider the meaning of those accounts.

3.3 A multimethod approach

A review of the literature and the context of the data has suggested three ways that 'care leaver' as a collective identity is potentially constructed in discourse. These are through: (1) organizations that represent care leavers as a cause, constructing them as a group with a specific identity; (2) the influence of 'care' stereotypes on how people with care experience represent themselves and are represented by others; and (3) patterns in the way people identified as 'care leavers' reference wider discourses when representing their individual

lived experiences. These processes of collective identity construction merit different methods of analysis; the ones used in this study are summarized below.

3.3.1 Narrative structure in context

To identify how organizations construct care leavers as a group with a specific identity, I will consider the influence of the context in which the stories occur on the kind of stories told.

The situation of charities using personal experience stories, by people whose cause they promote as a socially disadvantaged group, seems likely to encourage stories about personal struggle. The accumulation of such stories would produce a representation of care leavers as sufferers. However, interpretations of the aboutness of stories can be very subjective.

Therefore, in this study, the influence of context on the kind of stories told, and what this implies about the discursive construction of group identity, will be considered at a narrative-structural level. To this end, two types of structural elements will be analyzed: those from Labov's code scheme (1972) and turning points (Mishler 2006).

Labov (1972) found that people would follow a specific code scheme to make their personal experience stories tellable (see also Ochs and Capps 2002). The scheme consisted of the following components: abstract (summarizes main point); orientation (situates people, action, place, time in narrative); complicating action (develops on initial orientation by reporting that something happened); evaluation (conveys value of the story being told); resolution (describes the result of events in the narrative); and coda (indicates the end of the story). I will draw on Labov's code scheme to analyze the narrative structure of care leaver stories.

I will also consider turning points, which refer to events in narratives that mark a change in a narrator's "understanding of their past experiences" (Mishler 2006: 39). The momentousness of turning points can help make a story tellable, but they are also important for considering identity as they represent the recreation in stories of transformative moments from the lived experiences of narrators.

3.3.2 Identity work in relation to stereotype

The second method used in this paper focuses on how people who have spent time in care represent their lived experiences relative to typical care experiences, and the process of identity construction this entails. The context of charities representing a disadvantaged group as a social cause gives rise to expectations about the identity and experiences of someone who qualifies as a member of that group.

How the care experiences of individuals measure up to these expectations is likely to influence how they tell their stories, which may include carrying out 'identity work'. Identity work refers to people's efforts to maintain a positive self-identity relative to a "socially viable identity position" (Ghadiri et al. 2015: 596). This identity position can take the form of an established group identity within a specific social context, such as the workplace, as observed in Mallet and Wapshott's (2012) study of 'knowledge workers'. Here, identity work refers to the Ricoeurian notion of mediating 'self-interpretation', an activity performed when a person's sense of self in the moment becomes separated from the sameness of their more permanent sense of identity, with which it is normally aligned (Ricoeur 1991). In their study, Mallet and Wapshott (2012: 18) identified how graphic designers used narrative strategies to

mediate between existing expectations of their identity as specialists and their sense of personal identity at a time of organizational change.

An established group identity category that may be applicable in the stories considered here is a looked-after child (i.e., someone in care) or care leaver stereotype based on the authors' perception of typical care experiences. For example, the perception that typical care experiences involve being mistreated may give rise to a stereotype of people who have experienced care as victims of abuse (Smith 2008). In the present study, instances of authors reflecting on how their lived experiences compare to typical experiences will be analyzed for what these reveal about how they mediate between an individual identity and a collective identity category linked to stereotype.

3.3.3 Positions in wider discourses

The final method used in this paper focuses on how identity construction is linked to a broader discursive context. This approach is based on the idea that speakers adopt the subject positions of 'master narratives' in their talk (Davies and Harré 1990). Master narratives are cultural storylines that form part of the shared knowledge of speakers and interlocutors (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). These storylines and the norms they represent can vary in type, including stories from the literary canon, such as fairy-tales, where available positions include heroic princes and passive princesses (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 43); storylines that are culturally specific, such as one about fathers being stoic when dealing with tragedy (Thorne and McLean 2003); and institutionally established narratives, for example in a work context, where LaPointe (2010) identifies the master narrative of career development being

about finding an authentic area of expertise. The type of master narrative considered here will be that which emerges from an analysis of the data.

The positioning theory introduced by Davies and Harré (1990) was adapted by Bamberg (2004) to the situation of small stories. Bamberg identified three interconnected levels influencing how narrators might adopt, offer, or resist positions: the story world of the narrative, in-the-moment interaction, and the indexed norms and ideologies of wider discourses (i.e., the master narratives). As the present study looks at written narratives, positioning will only be considered at two levels: that of the individual narrative and master narratives. The main purpose of this is to consider if, and how, authors of the care leaver stories frame their experiences in terms of similar themes, and in what way common themes may be constitutive of a group identity.

4 Analysis of ‘care leaver’ stories

The following analysis is divided into three main sections. The first of these presents findings from the analysis of the structural aspects of narrative, and is split into two subsections, one looking at Labov’s code scheme and the other at the notion of turning points. This is followed by a section that considers the influence of typical expectations on the way ‘care leaver’ identity is constructed, and then a final section that presents the findings of an analysis of subject positions in the personal experience narratives.

4.1 Applying narrative-structural aspects to identity

4.1.1 Applying Labov’s code scheme

An analysis of narrative using Labov's (1972) code scheme highlights that the structural component 'orientation' is a prevalent feature in the care leaver stories. Information about the participants, location, time, and situation of an event is included near the start of a narrative according to Labov's code scheme. In the care leaver stories, this kind of information is provided at intervals, usually in chronological order. Here, authors represent a timeline of events so that the kind of information Labov analyzes as 'orientation' is not limited to an initial scene-setting function but is repeated throughout the narrative, as in the following example from CLS5:

Example 1

I was around five or six when I went into care (line 3) ...

I stayed at the school I had been at from reception age (line 4) ...

I then went to another primary school (line 5) ...

I then left this school (line 6) ...

I moved to a foster placement that I was in for 11 years. (line 9) ...

From secondary school I attended college. (line 14) ...

After two years of college I was accepted into university (lines 14–15)

The recounting of events in this way is typically interspersed with representations of positive or negative attitudes to those events, for example: *I had plenty of friends at school and have never really had a problem making them* (CLS5, lines 10–11). In terms of narrative structure at the sentence/clause level, this pattern tends to constitute the main body of care leaver stories: a list of early life events is accompanied by intermittent representations of attitude. The stories then typically end with a report of the storyteller's situation in the present, what

might be analyzed as a ‘resolution’ using Labov’s code scheme (e.g., *I am currently sitting my A-levels and will be attending university in September* – CLS1, line 44). Finally, many of the stories also include a final summing-up statement (a ‘coda’ in Labov’s terms), for example: *Thanks to respite care, and the amazing families that helped us out over the years, me and my dad are still really close* (CLS15, lines 55–56).

A further influence on the structure of care leaver stories may be the expectation that the authors tell their ‘care story’, one that might consist of multiple events potentially spanning a long period of time. This expectation arguably arises in the context of charities promoting care leavers/children in care as a cause, where authors may be expected to recount events that typify having been in care (e.g., the circumstances that led to someone being in care, moving between placements, interactions with institutional actors, etc.) so that the stories about such events are identifiable with care leavers as a group.

The influence of context on narrative structure has implications for how care leaver identity is constructed through the act of people with care experience telling their stories. The condensing of a chronology of care-related events into a short personal experience narrative, especially when those events span an early life period, arguably creates an effect of a life-defining story having been told. This results from a reported sequence of past ‘care’ events coming to signify a pattern of causation when they precede a description of the storytellers’ present life situations at the end of their stories.

For example, one narrator recounts how *[b]eing in care* (CLS6, line 6) negatively affected their education and how they did not get *help off [their] social worker* (line 13), before listing positive accomplishments in the present (e.g., *I have a good job and good money too* (lines 25–26)). In a short personal experience narrative, the position of past adversity relative to present success can imply a causal link where the success may be interpreted as defiance of the adversity, an interpretation that is suggested by the narrator’s

own remark toward the end of their story: *people think you can't achieve anything because of being in care but you certainly can and I have proved that* (lines 27–28).

4.1.2 Turning points

Another structural feature that can influence how identity is constructed in narrative are turning points. A turning point represents the recreation in narrative of transformative moments from lived experience, as represented in the following examples. Turning points tend to be a frequent feature of care leaver stories, and typically take the form of the described intervention of others bringing about a positive change in the life of the storyteller. Such interventions include: a) being taken into care; b) receiving help from individual support workers; c) being inspired; and d) experiencing near-misses in relation to potential negative outcomes of a particular situation:

Example 2

- a) It is safe to say that if I had not been taken into foster care I would not be where I am today (CLS1, lines 45–46)
- b) I don't know what I would have done without her (CLS4, lines 58–59)
- c) I was not inspired until uni and it made all the difference to my studies (CLS7, lines 70–71)
- d) I didn't get a prison sentence, it was like someone looking down on me (CLS12, line 36)

While the types of intervention represented in these turning points may differ, they all denote a moment of change from a negative past, and the prospect of a continued negative

future, to a positive present in the reported life of the storyteller. In stories told by people who are identified or who self-identify as ‘care leavers’, this recurring turning-point pattern arguably encourages a particular interpretation of ‘care leaver identity’ as that of a survivor – in particular, as someone who has survived by escaping an expected bleak fate.

4.2 Care identity based on typical experience expectations

A recurring theme in care leaver stories is the concealment of a care status, which narrators often recall doing as children: *I didn't like to tell anyone I was in care, maybe if I did tell people then I might have found making friends harder* (CLS5, lines 11–12). A reason for people concealing their care status may be its association with negative stereotypes: *I know that people think kids in care are criminals in waiting* (CLS14, line 23). However, this recalled resistance to being associated with being in care as a child contrasts with the act of now-adult care leavers publicly sharing their care stories. Even if done anonymously, this can still represent staking a personal claim on the care experience and its associated identity: *I want to tell my story so that I can show that people's idea of teenagers in care isn't always right* (CLS14, lines 5–6).

This intention of ‘setting the record straight’ involves narrators rejecting identity expectations based on stereotypes: *once they got to know me they understood that I wasn't what they expected a typical foster child to be* (CLS1, lines 22–23). It does not, however, amount to a complete rejection of a fixed category of ‘care identity’. Another recurring theme in the care leaver stories is that of narrators explaining their individual lived experience relative to their expectations about typical experiences of people who have spent time in care. Consider the following:

Example 3

I know that I am generally an exception to the rule, and most care leavers experience more moves than I ever did. (CLS13, lines 41–42)

I feel that my story is a lot more fortunate than that of many other foster children. (CLS1, line 49)

A lot of young people in care didn't have the stable background that I had when I entered the system. (CLS2, lines 7–8)

In the stories, the narrators acknowledge that their personal experience deviates from what they perceive to be typical care experience. Typical care experience is represented as instability and uncertainty and constitutes a 'care identity' that is about being disadvantaged. By stating that their stories differ from typical experiences, the narrators demonstrate a concern about how their own accounts match up to what might be expected of a care story.

In the story (CLS2) from which the final example above is taken, after acknowledging that their *stable background* made them untypical of children in care, the narrator goes on to frame their experiences in terms of another theme, namely that of being let down by the system:

Example 4

[I had] to take time out of lessons to go to [social services] meetings (lines 23–24) ...

I became a successful case for them (line 37) ...

[y]et still I seemed to be fighting them at every corner (line 38). (CLS2)

In this instance, the narrator represents their situation in contrasting terms: as professional achievement from the perspective of the social services and as the struggle for social

services' support from their own perspective. This has the effect of dramatizing a conflict between children in care/care leavers and social services, from which emerges a 'care leaver identity' that could be characterized as a 'survivor of the care system'. In this way, the narrator's individual account can be said to reflect a more common experience associated with having been in care.

The theme of surviving the system recurs throughout the care leaver stories:

Example 5

social services made it really hard for me (CLS12, line 10)

in my experience the system makes it much harder for care leavers (CLS16, lines 7–8)

I try to forget my time in foster care as most of it was unhappy and miserable (CLS17, line 12).

The notion of a 'system' is especially unifying. While individual situational experiences of care can vary considerably in terms of type of placement (foster home, children's homes, respite care) and length of time spent in care (anywhere from days to years), the institutional practices and procedures that constitute 'the system' are a constant. Likewise, commonality exists regarding the experience of leaving care, as is illustrated by some narrators' accounts of coping at university:

Example 6

[U]nlike other students, I have no home to return to in the holidays. (CLS7, lines 78–79)

I didn't have the choice to ... go travelling like so many of my university friends. (CLS10, lines 83–84)

[Personal belongings would be] stored at your parents' house in a 'normal' situation.

(CLS10, lines 62–63)

The particular idea of familial deprivation represented here produces some instances in the stories where individual and collective care identity converge. Consider the following:

Example 7

I have far more obstacles and difficulties than another child who is raised by two parents in a stable environment. (CLS7, lines 13–14)

In this excerpt, the narrator attributes their personal struggles to being deprived of what they perceive to be the norm for anyone not growing up in care: *two parents* and *a stable environment*. The inaccuracy of this blanket representation of non-state-care family experience aside, the way a care status is conflated with individual experience here represents a claim to the not-the-norm distinctiveness of 'care identity'. This meaningful distinctiveness is alluded to in several of the stories:

Example 8

The housing department didn't seem to understand my circumstances. (CLS16, lines 17–18)

I feel one thing universities fail to understand is the emotional wellbeing of care leavers and how the past can sometimes affect the present. (CLS9, lines 40–41)

Here, the words *my circumstances* and *the past* refer to a unique experience associated with having been in care, something that, it is suggested, merits special consideration. With no

accompanying explanation to account for the uniqueness of the experience, it is left to readers to infer the meaning of these allusions based on their expectations about the experiences of children in care. In this way, the extent to which care leaver narrators are associated with a particular kind of ‘care identity’ will depend on the existing knowledge of those reading their stories.

Most of the analysis so far has considered the tendency for narrators to position themselves relative to a group identity category based on being in care. However, mediation between individual and common ‘care’ experience and identity does not only necessarily entail unity; it can also involve a deliberate expression of a separation of the two.

This is the case when one of the narrators self-identifies using a term that could be associated with being in care while rejecting this as the source of their identity: *I was seen as an outcast because of how I looked/smelled before I went into care* (CLS10, lines 11–12). Distinguishing personal experience from care-linked experience in this way seems to represent a claim to individual identity. It perhaps also represents a resistance to the idea that the experience of care should be all-defining in a care leaver’s story.

4.3 Identity as subject position

In this section, I will analyze how narrators position themselves in relation to the subject positions of broader storylines, or what in positioning theory has been termed ‘master narratives’ – discourse that helps constitute the sociocultural context in which the care leaver stories have been produced (Davies and Harré 1990).

For the purposes of brevity in an exploratory study that applies several approaches to narrative analysis, I will limit my focus to one storyline in particular: that of individuals as victims of institutional tyranny. This storyline is about the abuse of power by people in roles

intended to be supportive of society. In this respect, it is applicable to the situation of children in public care and one that is in the care leaver stories considered in this study.

Institutional tyranny is represented in a number of forms in the care leaver stories. This includes representations of the practice of segregation and acts of persecution by people in institutional roles, such as teachers, foster parents, and housing department officials. For example, one narrator describes their experience of the domestic situation of a foster home where they lived:

Example 9

My brother and I were made to eat off a different table, use a different toilet and bathroom and stay in the toy room while our foster carers sat in their living room with their son. (CLS17, lines 34–36)

This description of separate spaces having been created for daily life activities, divided on grounds of biological and non-biological family relationship status, echoes other accounts of segregation in wider cultural narratives about established discriminatory practices. One dominant narrative in this regard is the history of racial segregation.

Instances of subject positioning in the care leaver stories are also in evidence in relation to institutionalized discrimination in an educational context. Cultural narratives about prejudice in some school settings arise from the close interrelationship between education, monetary wealth, and social class. These are especially prominent in the UK, where traditional public schools and elite universities are potent symbols of superiority. In one of the care leaver stories, the narrator positions themselves in relation to such wider narratives:

Example 10

I was sent to a boarding school by social services and was the only poor child there. Teachers left letters lying around stating that social services pay my fees and these letters were found by other students. (CLS7, lines 30–32)

In this account, teachers are not only represented as being complicit in creating an environment where prejudicial attitudes can thrive; they are also depicted as agents of that prejudice. Whether or not this is an accurate representation of the reality of the situation is a moot point. What is relevant in an analysis of positioning is that the narrator casts themselves as a *poor child* in relation to a narrative about social class discrimination. This is interesting as it shows that, even though the narrator's status as a child in care was revealed in the *letters [left] lying around*, they report on experiencing the stigma of being poor rather than a stigma based on the specific situation of being a child in care. Later in this story, the narrator reinforces this position when they describe their school as being *full of rich kids who did not take kindly to having a poor kid in their midst* (CLS7, lines 53–54).

The positions of people who experience social class discrimination and of those who are subject to segregation practices, as illustrated by these examples, suggest an identity of second-class citizen. This self-representation is further demonstrated in an example from another care leaver story when the narrator recounts their experience of moving into their first flat. After describing their questioning of a housing department official about the poor condition of the flat, the narrator reports the official's response: *You'll take what you're given* (CLS16, lines 24–25).

These words represent a version of 'do as you're told', a phrase commonly associated with demanding a child's obedience. In this story, they have the effect of casting the care leaver narrator in the role of an insubordinate child and the housing official as a kind of authoritarian corporate parent. A dictatorial stance is represented here in a situation where a

cooperative one might be expected, and later in their story the narrator reflects on this notion of being treated as second-class: *I wondered if anyone from the local authority would have housed their own children in such a place* (CLS16, lines 33–34).

Another example of narrators positioning themselves as victims in a master narrative about institutional tyranny is when they represent their experiences as having been prison-like. Adopting the position of prisoner by telling a story that shares characteristics with a prisoner narrative is illustrated in the following excerpt. Here, the narrator recounts the experience of being *made* to complete a daily ‘to do’ list while in foster care:

Example 11

It was awful and they made me sign it to show that I’d done everything. It included waking up at 8am, be washed and dressed for half 8 and I was not allowed out, so what was I meant to do? (CLS12, lines 19–21)

They made me write words out of a book it was horrible. (CLS12, line 26)

In this example, the narrator describes the experience of an enforced regimented routine and a situation of confinement. The repetition of one party acting against another – *they made me* – emphasizes the forcefulness of that action which, when combined with strong negative evaluation (*[i]t was awful; it was horrible*), helps convey a sense of the oppression experienced.

In the story, from which the above excerpt is taken, the acting party imposing the routine is a social worker who is not physically present to enforce daily rules. Nonetheless, the narrator represents their experience as prison-like, even when elsewhere representing the foster carers, who are physically present, as being on their side (lines 44–46). That the narrator positions themselves in a prisoner narrative, therefore, suggests a remote controlling

influence of social services on their life in care. A reason for this influence might be the context of the relationship between social services and children in public care, where the former has considerable power over the latter, including the power to remove a child from a foster placement should they deem it necessary.

5 Discussion

The multimethod analysis in the previous section demonstrates how several processes construct ‘care leaver’ as a group identity. These processes can be explained by the situational circumstances in which the ‘care leaver’ personal experience narratives occur, which is as part of the practice of charities promoting care leavers as a social cause.

The promotional purpose of the personal experience stories is demonstrated through the persuasive language used by the charities that have included the stories in their report or on their websites. For example, in the foreword to the NIACE report, from which over half the stories are taken, the rhetorical question ‘can you imagine’, followed by a description of a scenario of hardship represented as typical ‘care leaver’ experience, is repeated three times. This repeated question represents a challenge to the reader to empathize with care leavers as a socially disadvantaged group. Evidence of the clear promotional purpose of the charities suggests that ‘care leavers’ may have produced their stories with the expectation that they should illustrate hardship in order to justify their status as a worthy cause.

A further purpose of the ‘care leaver’ stories is indicated by one of the aims of the NIACE report, as stated at the outset: ‘[to] encourage and inspire other young adult care leavers’ (NIACE 2013: 4). The idea that the storytellers are playing the role of helping others by

sharing their stories may have the effect of inducing them to put a positive spin on their personal experience narratives. This is not to say that the same stories would not have been told in different contexts, but the tendency of most of the stories to be organized around turning points, representing present success relative to past hardship, could be attributed to this perceived role. The implication for identity is that ‘care leavers’ could be viewed as survivors if they or their readers interpret those stories as being about overcoming adversity.

The context of personal experience narratives being provided for charity promotional purposes also arguably encourages storytellers to reconcile the narration of their lived experiences with perceived typical care experiences. This is because, given their position as representatives of a socially disadvantaged group, it is reasonable to expect that the authors of the stories would reflect on the typicality of their experiences. This is shown in the above analysis to indeed be the case. The duality of individual and typical experiences, and any identity associated with these, is potentially a site of tension should these be different when the context demands they be represented as one.

In the situation of ‘care leaver’ identity, where people’s experiences of care can vary considerably – for example, someone’s experience of a long-term foster placement is likely to differ from someone else’s experience of short stays in multiple children’s homes – the prospect of tension between lived and typical experience is especially likely to be high. This suggests that a characterization of ‘care leaver’ identity might be one of instability and uncertainty. Such a characterization may stem from uniting a disparate group of people as part of a common social cause. Incidentally, the link between ‘care leaver’ identity and instability can also be associated with the lived experiences of many care leavers who have not had the stability of a permanent family home.

6 Conclusion

The processes of the discursive construction of identity considered in this paper produce a representation of 'care leaver' as an identity based on the experience of hardship. One reason for those who have spent time in care to tell stories about hardship is that they reflect their lived experiences. However, as the analysis in this paper has demonstrated, the construction of group identity in narrative is as much about the interaction between context and narrative-structural norms, or the influence of expectations associated with identity categories, as it is about the textual reproduction of lived experience. This highlights how representations of care leavers need to be questioned, even when produced by people with care experience, especially when those representations are primarily of victims or survivors and lead to a reductionist view of a socially disadvantaged group.

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