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Imagining a future family: students with care experience

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ABSTRACT

Although a significant number of care experienced parents have their own children taken into care, most go on to parent without intervention from services, suggesting a complex relationship between experiences of parenting in childhood and parenting practices in adulthood. This research provides unique and compelling evidence that directly challenges deficit-based narratives, illuminating the agency and potential of care-experienced individuals. Findings are drawn from interviews with care experienced university students, enrolled in universities across England and Wales. Through in-depth qualitative analysis, the study demonstrates that care experienced students possess strong desires for stable, secure family lives, actively drawing on positive role models from their past to inform their future parenting. Significantly, participants revealed that they aspired to be 'excellent' parents and were confident that they gained knowledge of what 'not to do' from those who previously caused them harm or distress. A minority of participants disclosed that they did not plan to have children in the future due to their previous experiences in childhood. This paper contributes unique insights into the shifting identities of care experienced university students as they consider their hopes and aspirations for their future families.

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Introduction

Over 83,000 children in England were looked after by the state in 2023, meaning that around one child in every 140 will have spent some time in care (DfE 2023). Care experience is heavily associated with disadvantage and the stigma of being in care has been noted to have lifelong impact (Care Experienced Conference 2019; Ellis and Sen 2024; Murray, Lacey, and Sacker 2020). While the Children [Leaving Care] Act (2000) notes that children in care should be encouraged to progress to higher education, only 13% of care experienced pupils progress to university by the age of 19, in comparison with 49% of the general population (DfE 2023). The research presented in this paper explores the perspectives of care experienced students. Biographical interviews were conducted to gather data on participants' care experiences, their transition to higher education, and

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their future hopes and aspirations. This paper addresses a crucial gap in knowledge by exploring the family aspirations of these university students, offering insights into their perspectives at a time of significant economic uncertainty and evolving societal expectations around parenting.

This paper reports on data collected in 2018, a period marked by almost a decade of government-imposed austerity in the U.K. While attending university might have once guaranteed graduates a well paid job, current economic climates have made economic stability less certain, with young graduates facing zero-hour contracts, high rents, and soaring house prices (Nikunen and Korvajärvi 2022). Care experienced young people are further disadvantaged by the absence of familial support (Baker 2024) and are known to have poorer educational and employment outcomes compared to their peers who have not been in care (Cameron et al. 2018).

Little is known about the parenting practices of care leavers who go on to parent without service intervention. Earlier research by Wade (2008) suggests that parenthood was 'mostly welcomed' by new care leavers, who celebrate the transition for bringing them a 'sense of purpose'. Yet those with a history of family disruption and professional intervention are aware that they are observed more routinely than others (Chase et al. 2006) and that their parenting practices are often judged adversely (Mannay et al. 2018). Broadhurst et al.'s research (2017) with birth mothers who experienced repeat care proceedings for the removal of their children, discovered that 40% were themselves care experienced. Similarly, Roberts et al. (2017) report that more than a quarter of birth mothers and a fifth of birth fathers with children placed for adoption in Wales were care experienced. This indicates that being 'looked after' can create cyclical disadvantages that manifest across generations. Yet, most parents from a care background go on to parent without intervention from services, suggesting a complex relationship between experiences of parenting in childhood and parenting practices in adulthood. Research by Neil, Rimmer, and Sirbu (2023), which focussed on the experiences of parents who were adopted in their childhood, reports that participants shared a powerful motivation to avoid contact with social care and to prevent cycles of loss and maltreatment.

Child care proceedings instigated by Local Authorities are informed by value judgements made by professionals using different standards and frameworks to assess whether or not parenting can be deemed acceptable, or 'good enough' (Kellett and Apps 2009; Winnicott 1957). Yet the notion of 'good enough' lacks formal definition, and can be fluid and contextual, depending on individual interpretations (Keddell 2011). Scholars have argued that 'good enough' parenting is infused with middle class values, and thus privileges parenting styles that are difficult to replicate with limited resources (Valentine, Smyth, and Newland 2019). While debates around care experienced parenting are concerned with breaking the care cycle, it is important to note that the context of parenting has changed for the general population too. While traditional expectations of 'good parenting' were constructed around 'keeping one's children safe, healthy and well fed' (Goodall 2021), it is now considered that 'good' parents centre the needs of their children to ensure that they grow up to achieve their best potential: educationally, physically and emotionally (Faircloth 2023). It is understood that the 'good mother' is one who puts her children's needs above her own, and does so willingly (Arendell 2020). While celebrated as a progressive step for children, concerns remain about the additional burdens placed on parents (Elliott and Bowen 2018).

While becoming a parent can be 'meaningful and positive', it is also recognised that parenting can be simultaneously 'demanding and stressful', which is made more or less so by parents' own social and circumstantial factors (Neil, Rimmer, and Sirbu 2023; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). Parenting burdens are not shared equally and despite the increased demands of women in the labour market (Mannay et al. 2018), the majority of parenting responsibility remains with mothers (Budds 2021). Research shows that the pressure of being 'good enough' is felt by most mothers, but perhaps more acutely by those already feeling 'watched' by services (Mannay et al. 2018; Roberts 2021). Indeed, the risk averse nature of English child protection processes (Featherstone et al. 2018) means that services seek to protect children from future risk as well as current risk, thereby judging some mothers before their children are born (Morriss 2018). This surveillance bias places additional scrutiny on those already known to services. Although service providers interviewed by Purtell, Mendes, and Saunders (2021) suggested that increased surveillance was sometimes necessary, due to increased risk, they also confirmed that intensive monitoring could be harmful to parents and children. Research notes that care leavers can be reluctant to trust professionals (Fitzpatrick et al. 2024) and can subsequently opt-out of support services (Ellis and Johnston 2020; 2024). While considered 'risky' by professionals, Bottrell (2007) argues that resisting formal support can indicate an 'exercise of agency' enabling those perceived as 'vulnerable' to develop their own support strategies (Hart et al. 2016).

Methods

The Pathways Project was funded by The Leverhulme Trust to explore the experiences of young people making the transition from being in Local Authority Care to becoming a university student. The project was developed with a steering group of three care experienced undergraduate students, aged 19–23, whose advice and insights helped to shape the research design and methodology. The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Sheffield (approval number 026083).

Interviews were conducted with 42 care experienced students from four universities to explore transitions to university and future aspirations. Universities were chosen to reflect differing journeys for those attending research intensive Russell Group universities and students attending 'new' universities offering vocational training geared to industry needs. Students, who had been identified by their institution as being care experienced, were invited by their own universities to contact the research team for information about the project, following which, they were sent a project information sheet and consent form. Interviews were conducted within a private space in participants' own universities and all students were asked to sign a consent form before being interviewed. Students were reminded that they could drop out at any time.

Interview data was anonymised and uploaded into NVIVO where findings were initially coded deductively according to the themes explored, for instance: 'going into care', 'placement changes', 'relationships', 'university life'. Each code contained a series of sub-themes, for example, the code 'relationships' contained sub-themes: 'birth family', 'friends', 'university peers', with additional codes being developed inductively. As such, the code of 'relationships' acquired new sub-themes: 'personal relationships', 'own children' and 'future family'.

While the focus of this study was to explore young people's transitions from care to university, in-depth interviews revealed that students had high aspirations for their future families. This paper will thus explore this element of the data in more detail. Findings presented have been compiled from data analysed under the themes of 'own children' and 'future family', and will share the experiences of those who were parents already alongside the views and aspirations of those who were not yet parents. Interviews collected the perspectives of students at different stages of study, 90% were undergraduates (n.38), three were studying at a foundation level and one participant was studying at a postgraduate level. The sample comprised of 16 men and 26 women who were undertaking courses in diverse areas of study. While 8 participants were registered on courses focused on traditional caring roles (such as nursing or social work), the others were studying across a broad spectrum, including; medicine, politics, economics, law and engineering.

Recognising the temporal specificity inherent in qualitative research (Boddy 2019; Nilsen 2023), the insights shared in this paper represent a particular 'snapshot' in participants' lives, rather than a conclusive narrative of their long-term trajectories. As such, analysis concentrates on their aspirations and future-oriented perspectives, at the time of data collection. From the 42 participants interviewed, three were parents already and were unanimously positive about the impact of children on their motivations and aspirations. Quotes from parents will be considered alongside those of non-parents. All names have been anonymised to protect the identity of participants.

To be settled and secure

Including those who had children already, the majority of interview participants (88%) professed that they would like to have children in the future. For many, having children was described as an early and unshifting life goal:

> I just want my own family … I want children. That's the only thing I've ever really known what I want to do. I think it will be really nice. I'd possibly adopt … I think I'd be a good parent! (Katya, age 19, non-parent)

In line with research that suggests that parenthood was cherished by care leavers (Purtell, Mendes, and Saunders 2021), participants described eagerly anticipating parenthood, noting that they hoped to create a family life characterised by stability, purpose and love for their own children. Marcus confirms 'I'd have it very secure'. For those who had children already, being a parent was described as a life changing experience that reshaped understandings of unconditional love:

> I have such a connection with my son … if I was put in a position where I had to choose him over anything else it would always be him … he was the first source of love I never questioned. (Jill, parent, age 21)

In common with the majority of looked after children and young people (DfE 2023), participants entered care after encountering abuse, neglect, bereavement and other trauma. It was perhaps unsurprising that when participants imagined their futures, they were reflective about the kinds of behaviours from their past that they would be careful not to replicate. Ben explains:

> Anything that weren't the same as what happened when I was younger. As long as that don't happen, I'm perfectly happy. (Ben, age 23, non-parent)

Participants recounted difficulties in their experiences of care and most described tumultuous relationships with carers. Students also described spending much of their childhoods living in poverty and overwhelmingly described seeking a future of financial security for themselves and their families. For these reasons, despite the fact that some were keen to have children immediately, participants noted that their current circumstances were far from compatible for the family lives that they imagined:

> I'd like to have a lot of kids … I would have them now but I know it's not realistic because I'm living on student money and part time working money, which is enough for me but … it's only just enough. (Harry, age 25, non-parent)

Being 'secure' in a family context was described as having sufficient access to the financial resources needed to maintain a stable living environment. Therefore, as well as planning to steer away from particular behaviours as parents (such as alcohol abuse or drug taking), participants also described a desire to create a secure economic environment for their future children:

> Definitely in a stable job, I just don't want to have to worry about money really, I just want to be in a nice, stable job, a nice house, obviously have my own house. (Peter, age 22, non-parent)

The desire to wait for children until they were financially independent was expressed by both men and women. In an attempt to be settled, participants reported that they aspired to own their own homes, planning to buy a property to live in permanently, rather than moving frequently:

> Well I would like to own a house, so I set up a Help to Buy ISA a couple of weeks ago. None of my family have a mortgage on a house, it would be nice to have a house, you know. (Louise, parent, age 20)

As noted by Louise, in the context of family life, being settled and secure referred to living in one place, and to having a consistent supply of food. Others, like Lydia, described living in abject poverty for much of their early lives and shared a desire to protect their future children from the hardships that they had experienced:

> I want my children to feel secure, I don't want my children to move on places. I don't want my children living in poverty, because we lived in poverty for quite a lot of our childhood … we'd eat a bag of rice for two or three days just because that's the only thing we had. (Lydia, age 19, non-parent)

When encouraged to define their meaning of the term 'secure', in the context of having children, as well as having access to sufficient money, participants also discussed the importance of living in a 'nice' area: '*I'd want to live in a nice area. I'd want them to go to a nice school' (David, non-parent, age 21)*. Similar aspirations were evident in the narratives of those participants who were already parenting at the time that they were interviewed for the project. These participants unanimously expressed the view that they wanted their children to enjoy an easier childhood than the one they had experienced and confirmed that having children had acted as a motivating factor to pursue further education:

> It was only through having [my child] that I got my love of education back … wanting to give him a life that I didn't have. (Jill, parent, age 21)

Striving to be 'normal' and 'excellent'

Aside from the three participants who had children already, discussions about parenting and 'future families' were abstract and considered ambitions and aspirations, alongside wider issues of 'family'. In considering the term 'family', participants frequently referred to their own birth families. As noted by others (Rees, Roberts, and Taussig 2024), participants described feeling a range of emotions about their birth families, including love, anger, pity, sadness and grief, sometimes simultaneously. Regardless of how they perceived individual members of their birth families, as in other research (Fitzpatrick et al. 2024; Neil, Rimmer, and Sirbu 2023), all hoped to break the cycle of intergenerational social service involvement. In part, the breaking with this cycle co-existed with an additional desire to be seen as being 'normal'. Words like 'normal' and 'ordinary' were frequently used to describe participant's hopes for their future family:

> [I'd like to be] happy for a start, you know, living in a nice house, nice area, go out all the time, be active, do things that normal people do. And the kids'll go to school, they'll get a good education, I'll be the wise old dad that'll teach them new things, tell them bad dad jokes and all that stuff. (Jack, age 21, non-parent)

Participant's visions of parenthood were bound to an idealised notion of 'normal' that was felt to belong to those who grew up in traditional, nuclear, heterosexual, two-parent families. Participants frequently used their own experiences of living with birth families as a backdrop to explain how their 'normal' future family would be different from the one they experienced in childhood:

> [I'll have children] … Maybe mid-30s, something like that. Husband, secure job … I want just normalcy and just ordinary things, I don't want any of the drama … just normal, ordinary … I would be able to have my own kids and bring them up properly, instead of bringing them up in the way she's taught me to … she's actually taught me a lesson and it's not to be like her. (Gabriella, age 18, non-parent)

Gabriella considers being 'normal' and 'ordinary' a tempting prospect and aims to be a different mother to the one she was born to. Ada confirms that she would also ensure that she would be in a 'settled' position and would carefully consider the needs of any child before committing to have one. Like Gabriella, she confirms that her own experiences of childhood taught her what not to do:

> I wouldn't want to bring my child to go through half of what I [went] through, that is horrible, you should never do that to somebody … When I find a job, when I'm a lot more settled, when I'm able to manage my finances a lot better, then I would want a baby and a husband and a family, it would be really, really nice … I'm looking forward to it, but at the right time, because I just don't want my child to go through what I went through. (Ada, age 25, non-parent)

Although mothering is required only to be 'good enough' (Winnicott 1957) to break negative cycles of child removal, participants instead described aspiring for perfection in their own mothering:

> I think my calling in life is to be a mum and to be the best mum that I could ever be … I'm going to be the mollycoddler, like 'come to mummy', 'mummy will give you loads of cuddles'. (Lydia, age 19, non-parent)

Although planning to be emotionally mature, calm and attentive future mothers, it was also recognised that parenthood would likely require a big shift emotionally. Female participants described seeking to acquire knowledge that would be necessary to become 'good parents':

> I obviously don't want kids just now … we've got so much to learn yet … want to be strong ourselves first to be there for our kids in future. We're going to teach them good things and just what we didn't have … as they get older they'll see us as an example and their role model. (Aisha, age 19, non-parent)

Striving to break the care cycle and to do parenthood differently has been remarked in research by Rees, Roberts, and Taussig (2024) whose data showed that young care leavers made distinctions between the family they had grown up with and the desire to 'do family differently' (471). Aspirations around future motherhood were similar to those described by scholars as 'intensive mothering' and entailed putting children's needs ahead of their own, ensuring that the 'world revolves around the needs of her child' (Caputo 2007; Faircloth 2023). Although not yet parents, pressures around intensive mothering were already apparent to female participants, like Clara, who describes her plans to invest time in developing herself emotionally before becoming a mother, so that she can offer herself 'fully' to her future children:

> I want to offer my children the maturity and experience that I still think I aim to acquire … so when that time comes I can fully commit to being a mother and I can offer myself to those children fully and not just partly like my mum did … I think it's because my mum messed up so much, there's a lot of pressure – when I think of being a mother … I want to take my time and I just want to make sure that I'm the best self. (Clara, age 21, non-parent)

The topic of social services and fears of repeating the 'care cycle' was raised by a number of participants in relation to their own future children. Although many described striving to be different to ensure that their children benefited from an improved early childhood, it also became apparent that participants were anxious about intervention from social services. Participants also reported evidence of this care cycle within their own birth family relationships. Such experiences meant that participants resolved not to 'make any mistakes', as Louise explains:

> I'd never go down the road my parents went down. Sadly my brother has, and his kids are now in a foster family, but I've always made sure that I would never let that happen to any of my children … I just get on with it, make sure I don't make any mistakes. (Louise, age 20, parent)

Although female participants expressed certainty about their own parenting ambitions, they were also aware that circumstances outside of their own control (such as their own mortality) could place their children in care, therefore confirming that the burden of care very much remains in the thoughts of young women (Budds 2021). Lydia explains:

> I worry about not being able to protect my future family … [my partner's] like, 'Stop overthinking and go to sleep now'. I'm like sitting there going, 'I wonder what my kids will go through when I'm no longer here to protect them'. (Lydia, age 19, non parent)

Research shows although parenting can be a positive choice for care leavers (Neil et al. 2023), parents with a care background sometimes feel anxious about their abilities to parent (Rees, Roberts, and Taussig 2024). Our participants described anxiety that others

might judge their ability to parent based on their lack of experience of being parented. This was highlighted by Jack, who explained that perceived 'normal' family was an unknown concept and one that he struggled to imagine:

> I don't really know what it's like to have a family. I was very young when I was separated from my family … I've never, through any part of my life, had a family structure, so I can't really elaborate on what being a family is like. (Jack, age 21, non-parent)

While Jack and a minority of others were concerned about their own lack of experience of being part of a family, the majority of participants (n.37) reported that they were keen to become parents and felt confident that they would adapt well once their children arrived:

> [I'll] just treat my kids with respect and love them! (Katya, age 19, non-parent)

Participants rejected the view that their early experiences of being parented might hinder their own parenting practices. Kali explains that although she 'missed out on parental love', rather than lacking in parental ability, she instead understands precisely what children need because it was missing from her own life:

> I'll be the most excellent parent, because I know what to do and I know what a person needs. (Kali, age 26, non-parent)

Participants also drew on positive relationships with previous carers whose parenting practices they might like to emulate with their own children. It was evident that experiences of care also shaped future views of parenting and eight of our interview participants noted that their own experiences of being in care had shaped their desires to foster or adopt a child in the future:

> I would consider fostering and stuff like that because it is a good thing and there are a lot of children who do just need a family to care for them and love them … that'd be something that I'd like to do in the future. (Willow, age 23, non-parent)

Although inspired by their own care background to foster or adopt, participants reflected upon the aspects of parenting that they would do differently and considered how they, as adults, could improve the lives or wellbeing of others. Chris describes how his previous experiences would enable him to be responsive and empathetic to an adopted child struggling to manage their place in his future family:

> I'd be a lot more understanding [and] … a little bit more lenient on some of the things I feel that [my adoptive parents] should have been more lenient on … I went through this whole thing of 'you're not my parents!' … and refused to call my mum and dad my mum and dad … And every time I did it, it was like 'you're grounded'. If I had a kid that was adopted and they didn't want to call me dad, they wanted to call me 'Chris', I'd be perfectly fine with that. (Chris, age 19, non-parent)

Deciding not to have children

Around a quarter of participants were undecided about whether they would go on to have their own children and around 10% (5 participants) professed that they did not plan to have children in the future:

> I don't really see myself having much of a family, that's not my aspiration really. I'm not going to say never but, it's not my aspiration to have kids. (Jess, age 21, non-parent)

Research highlights a plethora of reasons for choosing to remain childfree, such as, concerns around global population, concern for future children or lack of maternal/paternal instinct (Nakkerud 2024). As well as sharing similar concerns, participants described additional concerns about their own mental wellbeing and their suitability to parent. While there is a stigma associated with those who parent after being in care (Neil, Rimmer, and Sirbu 2023), our findings revealed that participants sometimes internalised these narratives and reflected negatively upon their own capacities to be parents:

> I don't plan on having a family … I don't want to do the same thing as what my mum promised not to do to us. (Dawn, age 22, non-parent)

While previous sections showed that participants were keen to parent differently from the parents that they had been born to, or raised by, other participants feared that their background might determine their abilities to parent in the future. Julia explains:

> I definitely don't want children, No. Not at all. I just don't think that I'd be a good parent, particularly coming from the background that I've come from … I don't often show emotion … I don't think it would be good for them to have a mother that's not caring towards them. I just really don't want that. (Julia, age 22, non-parent)

This belief was also shared by Chaman, who describes an 'irrational fear' of becoming a parent and behaving like the one she grew up with. Chaman clearly explains that she is aware of the stigmatising messaging around care experienced parenting and describes an internal 'nagging fear' that her upbringing will define the type of parent that she will become:

> I can't really imagine myself having kids … I'm scared I'm going to turn out like my parents. It's an irrational fear … hasn't it been proven that a lot of people who turn out to be bad parents is because they were parented badly? It's just a nagging fear. (Chaman, age 19, non-parent)

Discussion

This paper has presented findings from care experienced university students contemplating their own future families. As participants were often sharing their aspirations for parenting rather than their direct experiences, this paper outlines their intentions and aspirations for the parents that they hope to become in the future. The majority of participants (n.37) aspired to have children of their own and, as noted by others (Fitzpatrick et al. 2024; Neil, Rimmer, and Sirbu 2023; Purtell, Mendes, and Saunders 2021), were keen to break the cycle of social service involvement that they had experienced in their early life. These aspirations were tightly bound with expectations around their own abilities and hopes for their future child, as well as their hopes for their own future parenting practices.

Participants aspired to create stable, normal and secure living environments for their future families. 'Secure' families were described as being nuclear ones, living in homes that were owned or mortgaged by parents who enjoyed a stable income. It has been suggested that universities are implicit in the normalisation of middle class values and expectations (Goodall 2021; Loveday 2015) and it is therefore understandable that these students held middle class aspirations for their own future families (Gillies 2008; Riggs 2006). Participant narratives were underpinned by notions of financial self-dependence, which are prominent and normalised goals for the youth of western civilisations (Nilsen

2023), hence it can be considered that providing a secure and stable base for an intended child is a normalised part of being a 'good' parent (Kellett and Apps 2009). While students aspired to secure stable employment and sufficient finance to live independently, to buy a home and to be secure, the economic landscape across Europe, where job insecurity is especially prevalent for young people, makes these ambitions less certain (Nikunen and Korvajärvi 2022). Although these issues are frequently reported in the media, participants were seemingly undeterred and spoke positively about their futures, while Peter explains that 'obviously' he will have his own house, Louise describes already saving towards her future mortgage. These findings differ perhaps from research by others (Brannen and Nilsen 2002) who note that students experience being young as a chance to 'try out all the fun things'. While those with familial support may have flexibility to do so, this cohort of students often do not have access to additional support (Baker 2024), perhaps because of this, and due to increased economic instability, participants biographies were strongly focused on generating security and stability.

Participants shared anxiety that their parenting might be judged adversely by others because of their background. Indeed, Neil, Rimmer, and Sirbu (2023) note that those with childhood adversities can sometimes experience increased parenting stress or parental mental health issues in their transition to parenthood. Similar considerations were shared by Rees, Roberts, and Taussig (2024) who noted that young people with a care background sometimes felt anxiety about being able to 'do family differently'. Yet overwhelmingly participants rejected the view that their early experiences of being parented might hinder their own parenting practices, believing instead that rather than lacking parental ability, they understood precisely what children need because it was missing from their own lives. Participants acknowledged that they gained insight about the types of parent they aspired to become from the families of friends, teachers and previous carers. Likewise, they gained a knowledge of what 'not to do' from those who previously caused them harm or distress.

While only 'good enough' standards of parenting are considered necessary to break the cycle of care, female participants described seeking to be better than 'good enough' and hoped instead to exceed the expectations of others in regards to their mothering. Louise declares that she will not 'make any mistakes' and Lydia claims that she will be 'the best mum'. While aims like this are laudable, it is of course human to make mistakes and parenthood can at times be challenging for all parents, regardless of their background (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020; Pedersen 2016). The intentions expressed by this cohort were often to be better than 'good enough' and participants were by no means unusual in their aims. Responses like those shared by Lydia and Louise are also representative of a wider drive in parenting trends around 'intensive mothering' in which women invest increasing time, money and effort in raising children (Faircloth 2023). Authors note that intensive mothering methods are socially and culturally endorsed as being 'the proper approach' to bringing up well rounded and 'successful' children (Arendell 2000; Hays 1996). While aims of parenting without error were commonplace, it was notable that these views were expressed by young women alone. This indicates that the burden of parental responsibility remains with mothers (Budds 2021) and that the 'motherhood myth', of ensuring high maternal investment, is still as prevalent as it was a decade ago (Liss, Schiffrin, and Rizzo 2012).

Research by Baker (2024) and Cotton, Nash, and Kneale (2014) affirmed that graduates with care experience can be drawn into careers with a focus on 'caring', such as social work or education. While our participants were more broadly spread in their career ambitions, it was notable that 19% of participants planned to foster or adopt a child in the future. Motivations were often due to altruism and with a view to doing 'a good thing'. Similar motivations have been noted by Melkman et al. (2015) whose work with Israeli and German care experienced students noted that assuming a 'helper role' created a purpose for life and helped to process early difficult experiences. There was a recognition that there are a number of children in need of a supportive and loving home and participants, like Willow, felt well placed to help and suggested that their own offer of care could provide a safe space for a future child that would be understanding and non-judgemental.

While it was apparent that both male and female students had high aspirations for their future families, it was also notably young women who shared fears that they may parent 'badly' and claimed a responsibility for their children that transcended their own physical capabilities. Lydia confirms this when she shares her fears about the fate of her (yet unborn) children if she were to die. These findings highlight the societal pressures and expectations for women to be the main carers of children, even in their absence (Arendell 2000; Budds 2021). Despite being career focused and hopeful of financial stability, findings show that these young women still anticipate being wholly responsible for the care of their future family.

Even though participants had already challenged the negative stereotype that children in care are unlikely to attend university, they still recounted instances of facing adverse judgment from others due to their care experience (Ellis and Johnston 2022; 2024). These judgments had a significant emotional impact, and participants shared that sometimes experienced self-doubt regarding their future abilities as parents. This was confirmed by Jack, who explained that perceived 'normal' family was an unknown concept and one that he struggled to imagine. Five participants maintained that they did not want children in the future, four of those were women. The awareness of the gendered burdens of parenthood, which disproportionately fall to women (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Budds 2021) could be responsible for this finding. Indeed, it has been suggested that a childfree life can offer women the freedom and liberation to develop fulfilling professional and social identities that are not bound to the function of family life (Peterson 2015).

Although this research considers the experiences of students who are care experienced, we must be careful not to ascribe their decisions to remain childfree with their past unnecessarily. There is evidence that the global birth rate is in decline (Bhattacharjee et al. 2024) and in their international research with young people, Hickman et al. (2021) reports that almost 40% were reluctant to have children due to fears around climate change. While some participants claimed that their previous experiences played a part in their choices, it is not to say that they are wholly responsible for them and instead these choices may be considered alongside evidence that an increasing number of women see education, employment and financial security as more central to a happy life than motherhood (Lee and Gramotnev 2006). It is also important to consider that participants were reflecting on their future families, and therefore their position may change.

Conclusion

This paper presents key findings about the future parenting aspirations of care experienced students across England and Wales. While research has shown that care experience is heavily associated with disadvantage (Cameron et al. 2018; Murray, Lacey, and Sacker 2020), these findings offer a crucial counter-narrative that directly informs and improves our understanding of care leaver outcomes. Reflecting on their own experiences, the overwhelming majority of participants expressed a strong desire to create stable, secure, and notably 'ordinary' families. This emphasis on normalcy prompts us to consider the persistent societal stigmas surrounding family structures that deviate from traditional nuclear models (Boddy 2019). To counter these biases, collaborative efforts across research, policy, and practice are crucial in challenging negative language and assumptions associated with both care experience and diverse family formations.

Participants expressed high aspirations for their future families and rejected the notion that their care experience would negatively impact their parenting. Rather than anticipating a lack of parental ability, participants considered themselves well equipped to offer love and support to their future children. Likewise, participants reported that they learned what 'not to do' from the adults who cared for them as children. Many of the aspirations shared by participants can be considered to align to societal norms and expectations for parents. There was an evident gender divide regarding future expected parental loads, confirming that the burden of responsibility seemingly remains with mothers (Budds 2021). Findings suggest that these young women appear to have internalised societal expectations of 'perfect' mothering and rather than seeking to be 'good enough', instead planned to parent without error. These unattainable standards necessitate the need for collective action to challenge dominant expectations of mothering (Arendell 2000; Budds 2021; Liss, Schiffrin, and Rizzo 2012).

Although participants in this study were describing their imagined future families, their accounts offer powerful insights that locate their experiences in contemporary understandings and expectations of family life. While these students had clear ideas about the type of parent they hoped to become, it is important to note that the research from which this data was drawn focussed upon understanding their parenting aspirations and not their parenting practices. Considering that idealised views and anticipated experiences of parenthood can significantly diverge from the practical difficulties and everyday realities, this point is particularly pertinent. Despite sharing participants' aspirations, still little is known about those who do go on to create their desired 'normal' and 'ordinary' families and further work is necessary to enhance our understanding of parenting practices for those considered marginalised or vulnerable.

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