



“I know I have some trauma responses, but it’s not my identity”:

Amplifying diverse narratives of care experienced and estranged students

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Background context

- Priority for HE equity and widening participation
- Discussion tends to repeat familiar refrains about underrepresentation:
 - Lower progression (Harrison, 2017; Centre for Social Justice, 2019)
 - Belonging (Ellis and Johnson, 2019; Stevenson et al, 2020)
 - Financial insecurity (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2018; O'Neill et al, 2019)
 - Mental health (Hauri et al, 2019; Rouncefield-Swales and Bland, 2020)
 - Attrition (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Office for Students, 2020a)
 - Awarding gaps (Harrison, 2017)
 - Precarious graduate transitions (Office for Students, 2020a; 2020b)
- **These inequalities should - and do - demand our continued attention. However, they do not tell the whole story** and can produce a negative effect, particularly when coupled with...

News media and public imagination

Blackpool's children in care conviction rate 'absolutely not good enough'

Jeanette Richards said work was being done to address it and the council was "aspirational for our children."

Towns and gowns

'All my safety nets went overnight': how Covid-19 is isolating student care-leavers

Without financial help and emotional support, progress in getting more care-leavers into university could be undone

Tess Reidy

Mon 20 Jul 2020 07:00 BST

Students estranged from their families could end up destitute this summer

Becca Bland

Why have so many people in prison spent time in care as children?

October 26, 2016 2.02pm BST

A postcode lottery is stopping children in care from going to university

Debra Humphris

Coronavirus: Students with no relatives 'may have to drop out'

By Max Evans
BBC News

Estranged students: 'Homeless' in the holidays

8 May 2019

University or prison? Why getting to the former can feel out-of-reach for care-leavers...

Methods: Two-phase narrative study

- First phase: 11 biographical-narrative interviews (see table below)
- Second phase: Follow-up analysis interviews (in progress)

Status	6 care experienced	5 estranged	NB: Kinship care in both
Discipline	6 STEM	4 Social Science	1 Arts/Humanities
Stage of study	3 first-year UG	6 second-year UG	2 PGT
Care experience/estrangement bursary	9 receiving bursary	2 not receiving bursary	
Ages	Ranged from 18 to 29		

Labelling and deficit discourses

'Most people will see me as just a white male, so then I walk away with that privilege [...] but then they find out I was in care, that I grew up in care, it seemed to be that I've then had all that privilege ripped away and some oppression added onto it'

Phoenix, Social Science student

'If I could turn around and say they're dead... But for me it's more like saying, "Oh, my parents are in prison", kind of. [...] My situation, my estrangement, is laced with stigma'

Marissa, Arts/Humanities student

However, students' narratives highlighted a wealth of powerful resources, strategies and ambitions which undermined deficit interpretations...

Independence, maturity and financial literacy

'Things like commuting in, studying at my own time, I was part-time. [...] because I had to go through those extra bits to get here, I had a lot of skills that I needed'

Gray, Social Science student

'I went straight into my second year of college doing a BTEC and the council put me into independent living, so I was living on my own in a flat from 18 to 20-ish [...] I was working about 30 hours alongside college'

Harry, STEM student

Passion for learning and postgraduate ambitions

'I've always been quite academically driven, so when there were hardships in my life, I've always thrown myself into my work, even when I was a kid'

Abigail, STEM student

'I hopefully will get into management [...] and then do a [...] Master's alongside. So, then if I do that, that would then allow me a pathway into working into the UN, which from working in the UN I can then edit public policies'

Phoenix, Social Science student

Socially-oriented professional horizons

'I want to, you know, do a job which [...] is going to change people's lives'

Louise, Social Science student

'Something I'm really interested in [...] was to do some sort of development, humanitarian-type projects'

Sarah, STEM student

'Emergency critical care for me, I think'

Mirai, STEM student

'My biggest goal is to stand for Parliament. [...] maybe even make it!'

Michael, Social Science student

Loved ones and connections

'I don't think I would have been as eager or as able to do [university] without [...] my wife. [...] it was kind of like almost doing a really personal, emotional thing, being able to move all our stuff in together and having the space'

Gray, Social Science student

'My grandparents are like my favourite people in the world, they're really cool. They like take me to really cool educational places. Like, I would miss school a lot but it would be to go to a convention about global warming or something like that.'

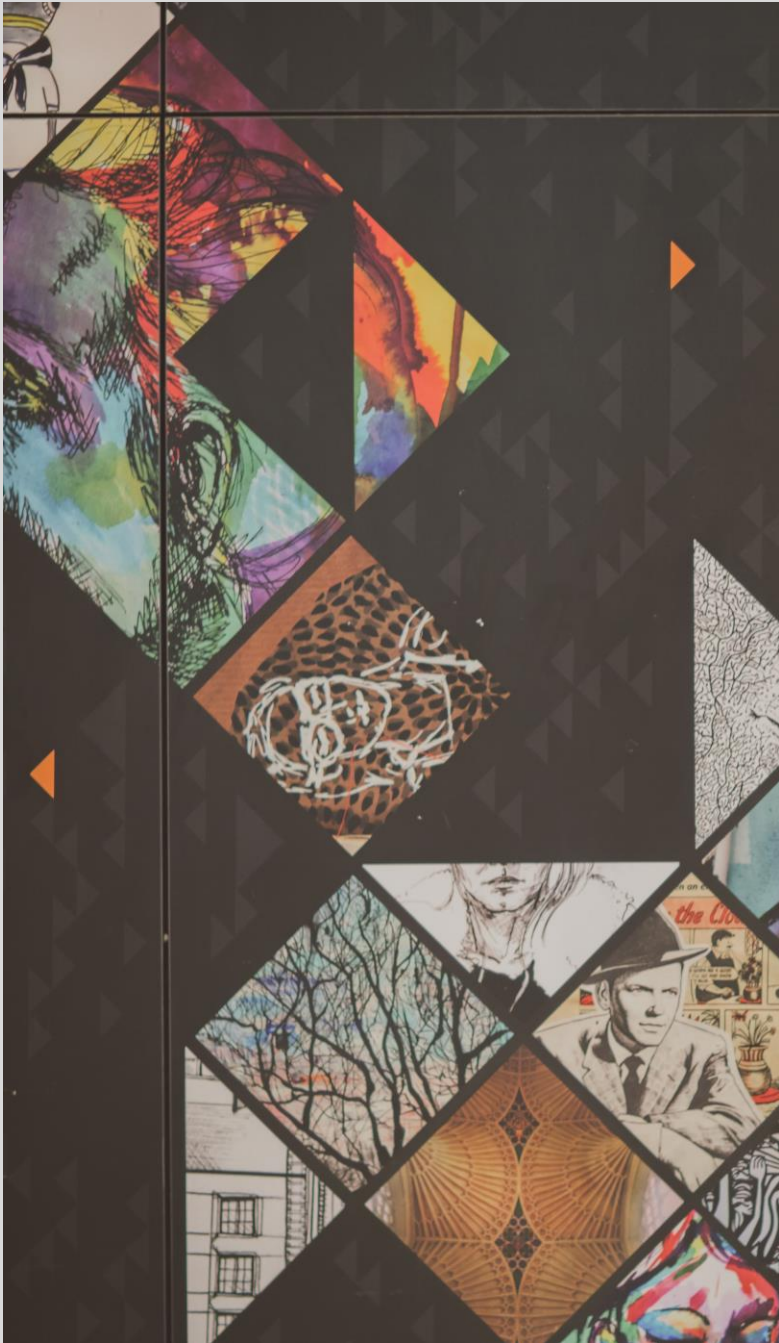
Ellie, STEM student

Conclusions and implications

- Clearly not intrinsically lesser than the typified Gen Z student. On the contrary, embodying a wealth of powerful resources, strategies and horizons as a result – not in spite – of past experiences.
 - Challenges how the dominant discourse interprets these experiences solely through a lens of trauma.

Implications

- Does not lessen the reality of material inequalities or the need to tackle them but introduces parallel narratives which recognise students as subjects of value
- Need to amplify students' voices and their plural lived experiences to destabilise negative representations – **speaking with not over and for.**



Prompts for campfire discussion:

1. How we can simultaneously tackle (and not diminish) real inequalities whilst recognising underrepresented students as subjects of value?
2. How can we best amplify students' lived experiences?

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