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Navigating precarious times? The experience of young adults who have been in care in Norway, Denmark and England

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ABSTRACT

At a time of heightened international debate about youth precarity, how do we understand and support transitions to adulthood for people who have been in care? This paper reports on a qualitative longitudinal study of 75 young adults (aged 16–32 years) from Norway, Denmark, and England. All had been in care during childhood and at the time of their recruitment to the study all were in education, employment or training. Against the context of a literature largely focused on transitions specific to 'leaving care', our analysis addresses aspects of early adulthood which are not specific to being care experienced; some (such as romantic break-ups, or moving home) might be considered normative, whilst others (such as changing course or dropping out of university) are less common. Cross-national analysis shows how care and wider welfare systems intersect with informal networks in everyday lives, functioning to scaffold young people, or to exacerbate precarity, as they navigate biographical transitions in early adulthood. The research shows the importance of developing socially and culturally located biographical accounts of 'transition' that recognise the complexities, uncertainties and essential interdependence of everyday lives and emerging adulthoods.

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Introduction

'freedom can only be exercised if there is enough support for the exercise of freedom'
(Butler 2016, 14)

To design policies and services to support care-experienced young people requires a socially and culturally located biographical account of 'transition' that recognises the complexities, uncertainties and inherent interdependencies of their everyday lives and emerging adulthoods. Traditional linear notions of an individual biographical transition to adulthood depend on a set of economic possibilities that may no longer be in place, and cross-national concern about youth 'precarity' raises fundamental questions about how we conceptualise and enable support for young adults at increased risk of

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disadvantage, including those who have been in care. To understand the ways in which systems and relationships interact to shape transitions through early adulthoods, we employ the Vygotskian metaphor of 'scaffolding' – reflecting his argument that considering 'what children can do with the assistance of others' illuminates capabilities that cannot be understood when focusing only on what they can do alone (Vygotsky 1978, 85), and resonating with Butler's (2016) observations, above, about support for the exercise of freedom. Looking at the experience of young people in and from care shines a spotlight on this conceptualisation of scaffolding, given the complexity of their relationships with the key resource of family, along with their targeting by explicit policy and services designed to substitute or supplement the biological family's role in upbringing (Burns, Pösö, and Skivenes 2017; Boddy 2018).

Through a cross-national analysis of the experience of young adults who have been in care in Norway, Denmark and England, this paper considers how care systems (situated within wider welfare frameworks and economic contexts, and enacted in young people's everyday lives) may scaffold transitions or exacerbate precarity. Even in superficially similar European countries, the impacts of the 2008 global economic crisis varied (e.g. Gryttens and Hunnes 2010), and policy and service frameworks and understandings of the state's role in relation to its citizens differ significantly, with corresponding differences in the nature and extent of social inequalities (e.g. Whelan and Maître 2010). Looking cross-nationally reveals the ways in which different layers of context intersect in countries with distinct (but changing) welfare regimes and economic contexts.

Transitions through precarious times

The concept of precarity has been used predominantly in relation to labour market insecurity, exemplified by Standing's (2011) neologism proposing the 'precariat' as a new social class, 'teetering on the edge, knowing that one mistake or one piece of bad luck could tip the balance' (Standing 2011, 23). Of course, precarity is not a universal experience for young people, within or across countries. New flexibilities in the labour market are experienced differently depending on existing resources and securities; for the young middle-class changing labour markets may incite new forms of mobility and risk taking, while for more disadvantaged youth, the effects may be profound forms of social and economic exclusion (e.g. Shildrick et al. 2012). Moreover, the sense of 'teetering on the edge' that Standing (2011) describes may not be confined to the labour market. Berlant (2011, 192) proposed a 'spreading precarity', rooted in dependence and hence 'significantly more than economic; it is structural in many senses and permeates the affective environment too'. This broader definition resonates with Butler's (e.g. 2016, 16) observations about the essential interdependence of precarious lives, recognising that 'part of what a body is […] is its dependency on other bodies and networks of support'. Precarity encompasses important social relationships and intimacies as well as dependence on social systems and structures, and on the individuals (known and unknown) responsible for enacting those systems.

Butler also offers a broad definition of precarity, referring to 'the vulnerability to dispossession, poverty, insecurity and harm that constitutes a precarious position in the world' (2016, 12). This conceptualisation seems particularly relevant to the experience of people who have been in care, given the ways in which their pathways through childhood

and into adult lives are shaped both by pre-care experiences and by the functioning and entitlements offered by care systems designed to substitute for, or supplement the role of, family (e.g. Burns, Pösö, and Skivenes 2017). For example, the impact of pre-care experiences such as childhood trauma and loss may continue into adult lives (e.g. Stein and Dumaret 2011), and adult care leavers often have complex caring responsibilities for biological families (e.g. Wade 2008; Boddy 2018). Equally, there is a significant literature on experiences of insecurity and disruption that are specific to the care experience, such as placement instability and associated educational disruption, or abrupt and unstable transitions out of care (e.g. Stein 2012).

When young people have been in care, and the state – through its child welfare and after-care legislation – is invoked to ensure elements of the parental role, there is a distinctive dependence in the young person's relationship with the state: young people rely on social systems and structures, and on the individuals responsible for enacting those systems, to scaffold them through transitions in their lives. Potential freedoms and precarities are shaped, exacerbated or mitigated by the professionals and institutions that enact policy and legislative frameworks associated with being in care, as these intersect with informal resources and wider social and welfare systems.

Debate about 'precarity' has often focused on generational in/justice as the impacts of economic recession have been felt most acutely by the young (e.g. Savage et al. 2013); this is reflected in the European Commission's depiction of a 'lost generation' (e.g. Thyssen 2015). Nilsen and Brannen (2014) criticised the individualism inherent in the concept of a 'lost generation', commenting that 'those belonging to a generation (lost or otherwise) exist in relation to other generations […] they are not free floating isolated age groups in society'.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the disjuncture between discourses of individual 'transition to adulthood', which assume linear pathways, and the multiple complex temporalities of young people's everyday lives and identities, intersecting with factors such as gender, ethnicity, migration status, family and community networks, and poverty (e.g. Thomson et al. 2002; McDowell 2012). Important parental and family responsibilities extend far beyond childhood or leaving home, and individualistic concepts of transition fail to capture the importance of familial support for young adults facing insecure labour markets (e.g. Bucx, van Wel, and Knijn 2012). Intergenerational experiences of precarity also frame young people's sense of responsibilities to family, for example, to contribute financially to family budgets (e.g. Skattebol 2011). These findings have sharp implications for care-experienced young adults, who may have complex intergenerational responsibilities, yet fewer intergenerational resources than their peers.

The international literature on care-experienced individuals has consistently documented risk of disadvantage in relation to outcome indicators including education, employment and health (e.g. Stein and Dumaret 2011; Backe-Hansen et al. 2014; Kääriälä et al. 2018). Researchers have also increasingly highlighted the heterogeneity of care-experienced lives, for example, in modelling relative risk of difficulties in relation to experiences pre-care and whilst in placement (e.g. Fowler et al. 2017; Rebbe et al. 2017), and in examining the potentially protective affordances of care systems for young people (e.g. Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan 2015; Sebba et al. 2015). This growing literature has particular value in countering tendencies towards homogenising problem-focused accounts of care-experienced people, which can function as 'dividing practices' of exclusion and objectification

(Foucault 1982, 777), whereby the scientific classification of the 'other' highlights difference rather than mutual recognition. In this way, a decontextualised focus on risk and disadvantage contributes to the stigmatisation and dehumanisation of an already stigmatised group.

Our research was designed to challenge risk-focused paradigms in several ways. First, the study focused on a sample of young adults who had been in care and who were in education, employment or training (full or part-time) at the time of joining the study. In addition, the research sought to illuminate the multi-layered contexts and complexity of everyday lives in time, and the (dis)connections between the ordinary and extra-ordinary aspects of care-experienced lives, avoiding the 'enforced narrative' of a life constructed in relation to problem-focused questions (Steedman 2000). The examples discussed in this article have been chosen as 'emblematic of certain patterns in youth transitions' (Thomson 2009, 154) illuminating the distinctive precarities of care-experienced people as they navigate transitions that are not specific to being in, or leaving, care. Some relate to relatively 'normative' changes in early adulthood – such as break-ups in romantic relationships, or finishing a stage of education. Others – such as changing course or dropping out of university, or losing a job – might be less common, but are still a part of early adulthood that is not distinctive to the experience of having been in care. Crucially, such changes are not *necessarily* precarious, and hence they reveal how the experience of precarity is shaped (exacerbated or mitigated) through the intersection of care systems or care biographies with everyday lives in time, including considering how macro contexts (such as benefit systems, post-18 education provision and labour market opportunities) shape those experiences. Attention to subjectivity means recognising that categories of change often intersect; thus, for example, completing a university course commonly also involves a change of living situation and of financial circumstances. It is only by attending to these intersections, and their significance for participants over time, that we can understand the experience of precarity through transitions in early adulthoods.

A longitudinal cross-national approach

All three countries in our study are (relatively) affluent northern European countries, but they differ in key respects, and those differences are changing (Table 1). They were not equally affected by the global financial crisis of 2008, which had only a 'relatively modest impact' on the Norwegian economy (Gryttens and Hunnes 2010, 2). Denmark and Norway are often considered together in cross-national analyses, as exemplars of the Scandinavian social-democratic welfare state; Esping-Andersen (2015, 132) reported commonalities between Denmark and Norway in the extent to which their welfare regime has been 'effective in equalizing the opportunity structure […] primarily by enhancing the mobility prospects for those with humble social origins'. But these patterns are changing. Denmark – until recently one of the most equal countries in the EU – is now the country where income inequality is growing fastest (OECD 2015). The UK – including England, its largest nation state – has historically had the highest levels of inequality, with labour market insecurity disproportionately affecting the young (e.g. Shildrick et al. 2012).

As Brannen and Nilsen (2011, 604) observe, cross-national research has particular value in 'taking different layers of context into consideration' in understanding individual biographies, bridging the gap between micro, meso and macro contexts and thus illuminating

Table 1. Country contexts: Selected Eurostat cross-national indicators.[a]

	UK	Denmark	Norway
Population and living situation			
Total population (millions)	65.4	5.7	5.2
Population aged 0–14 years, millions	11.5	0.962	0.933
Population aged 15–29 years, millions	12.6	1.08	1.02
Young people aged 16–19 years living with their parents (2013 data)	92.7	86.7	85.6
Young people aged 20–29 years living with their parents (2013 data)	38.3	10.3	17.2
Young people at risk of poverty or social exclusion			
Children (0–15) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (%)[b]	30.4	15.3	13.3
Education, training and employment			
18 year olds still in education of any kind (%; 2012 data)	63.3	86.4	88.4
15–29 year olds not in education, employment or training (%) (2013 data)	11.7	5.6	5.6[c]
Spending on social protection			
Social protection benefits (all functions) (PPS per inhabitant)	7809	10654	11797
Social protection benefits targeting families & children (PPS per inhabitant)	810	1196	1463

[a]Source is Eurostat data (2015/2016 unless otherwise indicated), and age bands relate to those in published data accessed 7 December 2016: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/browse-statistics-by-theme. Eurostat data are provided for all UK nation states together, and separate figures for England are not available.

[b]This is the EU indicator on risk of poverty and social exclusion, and includes people that are at least in one of three categories: people at risk-of-poverty, who have an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers); people who suffer from severe material deprivation and have living conditions severely constrained by a lack of resources (e.g. cannot afford rent or utility bills, cannot afford to heat home); and people in households with a very low work intensity.

[c]2014 data.

the connections between agency and structure. Their arguments are particularly relevant for understanding biographical transitions for young adults who have been in public care; cross-national comparison illuminates the lived experience of child welfare systems in each country and the ways in which child welfare systems are situated within the wider social, economic and cultural contexts of individual lives. Norway, Denmark and England differ in after-care legislation and systems, *and* in normative pathways through early adulthood for young people – for example, Table 1 shows almost four times as many young adults in the UK living in the parental home in their twenties compared with Denmark, and nearly twice as many as in Norway. Looking across countries thus illuminates how care and wider welfare systems function to scaffold young adults through potentially precarious biographical transitions.

Longitudinal analysis helps to demonstrate why 'outcomes' are not 'endpoints': precarity is destabilising, as changes that produce insecurity disrupt transitions and possibilities for 'doing well'. By examining how precarious times are navigated in interdependent lives, it becomes possible to trouble individualising conceptualisations of agency in transitions to adulthood, recognising how 'the instabilities of the life course stem from the tension between uncertain life chances and the culture of individualism' (Heinz 2009, 3), as social relationships and networks shape biographies within linked lives. Following Butler's observations on freedom which opened this article, this approach also informs possibilities for policy and practice to enhance formal structures, scaffolding care-experienced people through early adulthoods.

Methods

The research formed part of a study called *Against All Odds?* funded by the Research Council of Norway (see Acknowledgements), which combined secondary analysis of

national administrative data; in-depth qualitative longitudinal research; and a cross-national documentary review of legislation and policy frameworks. This article focuses on qualitative data from interviews with care-experienced people in all three countries.[1] In total, 75 people took part: 24 (aged 16–32 years) in Norway; 30 (aged 17–29 years in Denmark) and 21 (aged 16–32 years) in England. They were recruited through a range of sources including non-governmental organisations that support and advocate for children in care and care leavers, local government leaving care and participation services, and publicity on social media. The aim was to enhance sample diversity (including geographical spread); we did not seek to construct a sample that was representative of the heterogeneous population of care-experienced young adults in each country, but it must also be recognised that participants were willing to identify as 'care leavers' and as 'doing well'. All were in education, training or employment when they joined the study.

Each participant was interviewed on three occasions across two main waves, using a multi-method qualitative longitudinal approach that addressed both biographical time, as participants looked back and forwards through their lives, as well as quotidian temporalities. The first interview gathered information about participants' current living situation and used a life chart (Thomson and Holland 2002) to map biographical experiences across four domains (living situation, family, education and employment, and free time); participants were then asked to take photos for a week, to illustrate what mattered to them in everyday life. In Denmark and England they were also asked to choose a piece of music with positive associations that would help show what is important in their lives (following Wilson 2013). At least a week later, the second interview focused on discussion of photographs (and where applicable music choices), before ending with questions about expectations for the future. Approximately 12 months later, the third interview focused on their account of the last year, incorporating a future life chart, addressing the same four domains as the first interview. Analysis followed a case-based approach (following Thomson 2009), attending to the particularity of individual biographies; researcher reflexivity was an essential part of working cross-nationally with the data, looking across cases first within and then across countries, to avoid misinterpretations and to interrogate cross-national similarities and differences. This analytic process revealed how experiences that were not specific to leaving care could be rendered precarious through the intersection of macro, meso and micro contexts over time. The 13 cases we discuss here are *emblematic*, chosen from the three countries because the experiences they discuss (relating to flexibility, changing relationships, and financial in/security), illuminate those intersections, demonstrating how precarity unfolds in the connections between normative and distinctive aspects of care-experienced lives.

Precarity and flexibility

Early adulthood is a period marked by normative expectations for education and employment – leaving school, possibly continuing into further or higher education, completing education and getting a job – even while, as Wyn (2009, 98) observes, the challenges of precarious and flexible employment in late modernity create expectations for 'perpetual learning' and an expectation that 'all areas of life are learning opportunities'. Profound changes in the labour market mean that changes of job and periods of worklessness are increasingly commonplace (see Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011). But freedom

and flexibility of opportunities depend on the resources at your disposal, including intergenerational support and the functioning of formal and informal support. In Norway, 18 year-old Adrian's account demonstrates how formal and informal resources intersect to scaffold his plans for his future transition to independent living; he explained that, as well as formal aftercare support, 'my parents have saved up a lot of furniture and stuff to have in an apartment […] And I have mates who I could see myself living with'. By contrast, Emil in Denmark, who was also 18 when the research started, spoke in all three interviews about living with a sense of precarity, of feeling that when good things happen they might just end. He chose the song 'Alive', by Sia, and explained:

> It describes me and my life very well in general. '*I was born in a thunderstorm. I grew up overnight. I played alone. I'm playing on my own. I survived*'. […] I have stood alone my whole life and have been very independent. I've taken the adult role on me.

Absence of scaffolding was evidently critical for 25 year-old Nicola, in England, in leading her to drop out of her university degree. She had very positive memories of the beginning of her studies, and described being happy and financially secure. But in her final year, the break-up of a long-term relationship coincided with study difficulties due to lack of disability support. Nicola became depressed, observing that 'it seemed like everything just spiralled', and dropped out of her course. She did not have any support from her former foster carers, nor did she feel she could talk to her social worker. After looking unsuccessfully for work, her birth mother encouraged her to volunteer at a service she had used. This eventually led to paid work, but Nicola remained frustrated about leaving university, especially because university finance systems would make it very difficult to study again. She explained, 'If I could … if money wasn't an issue I'd go back and study tomorrow.'

Nicola's experiences demonstrate the destabilising effects that arise from an absence of scaffolding from child welfare or wider systems, exacerbated by lack of flexibility and financial costs within the educational system. In this case, informal support from her birth mother was her only resource in navigating through a difficult time, although by the time of our third interview, through exceptional help arising from a chance professional encounter[2], she had returned to university and was completing her degree. Her account also serves to highlight differences between the countries' student finance systems. While changing courses or prolonging studies incur financial implications in all three countries, there are differences in the potential financial burden. In England, undergraduate fees are in excess of £9000 per year, and – as in Nicola's case – this has particularly sharp implications for low income students' concerns about accumulating debt (Callender and Mason 2017). Worry about the financial implications of changing or extending courses of study did not arise in the same way in either the Norwegian or Danish data sets, illustrating how taken-for-granted security within wider systems can scaffold choice in individual biographies.

Liza, in Norway, was 23 when we first interviewed her. She described education as always having been very important to her, through a challenging early life marked by family disruption, multiple placement changes and significant mental health problems. She was well supported through school and by her psychologist, and went to university, but realising she did not want to work in her field of study, she switched into a different course. She subsequently dropped out after her parent's suicide. The death of parents or other close relatives was a common experience across the countries, often relating to

the problems that led to placement (such as parental mental health difficulties or drug or alcohol dependency), and – as for Liza – bereavements in early adulthood could often destabilise pathways through education. But, flexible possibilities in the Norwegian higher education system afforded choice for Liza; she subsequently returned to study for a third time, and when we interviewed her, she was in her second year and enjoying her course.

Fran, in Norway, was also 23 years old, and in the second year of a Bachelors programme. Like Liza, this was her third attempt at undergraduate study, and she had dropped out of other courses twice previously. As for Nicola in England, this was clearly associated with lack of scaffolding from formal systems during precarious times in her life. In common with several others in our sample, Fran had ongoing mental health support needs. When she was 19, enrolled on her first degree programme, she transferred from child welfare to universal adult services ('NAV'; Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration); at this point she said all her support disappeared, including support for her educational aspirations:

> In NAV you really dońt get supported in getting an education […] What they do is, like 'this is very hard like, are you sure you want to do this?' like […] 'You must think through what you feel up to,' and … *(laughs a bit)* there is very much of that.

Fran felt that because of her mental health needs, both NAV and the Child Welfare Service would have preferred that she got a job instead of pursuing higher education. Fran was discharged from the Child Welfare Service at 19 years old, four years below the maximum age limit for aftercare support in Norway; this must have been done at her case worker's discretion. In the absence of other support, she became involved with friends who used drugs, and only managed to return to university and start a new course after a period in rehab, although subsequently she had to drop out again when she became physically ill. Fran was happy with her current, third, course of study; she described it as 'very exciting' and was getting good grades. But at the time of our initial interviews, she was also worried about insecure housing; at the limit of her entitlement to youth housing, she was trying to negotiate an extension on health grounds, although the outcome remained uncertain at the time of our interview.[3] Her experiences show how the flexibility of the Norwegian higher education system allowed her return to study – scaffolding her educational aspirations – even while a lack of support from other systems, filtered through the discretion of professional judgements (about her suitability for education, and about endpoints for child welfare support and youth housing) created discontinuity and hence precarity.

In Denmark, 24 year-old Christina's experience has some commonalities with Liza and Fran. Like Liza, one of her parents had died – in her case when in upper secondary school – and she left her first university degree after two years, explaining that she had not enjoyed her course. In contrast to Fran, this change was not narrated as precarious, because she was otherwise secure; she carried on living in the same flat with her boyfriend, and found employment while applying for a different undergraduate programme. By our second interview she had started this course, and by our third interview she had been studying for a year, was enjoying the course and had made good friends. For Christina, financial security – and avoiding debt – was crucial, and she continued to work part-time while studying, in part to save for her upcoming wedding. She had some inheritance

from her parent's life insurance, but she was also the main income provider in her home and helped her birth family financially – although she commented that 'parents shouldn't ask their children for money'. Christina's account shows that, despite significant financial responsibilities, her relative financial security enabled her to make choices, to save money and plan – for her education, her marriage, and her personal life.

Changing relationships

Romantic breakups in early adulthood are relatively commonplace, and Nico (2016, 401) observes that they can provide 'an enormous window of opportunity for individual action, namely for the reformulation of the original life plan and the recycling of old dreams and projects'. Kasper's experience, in Denmark, resonates with this account. Just 23 when we first interviewed him, he described a past relationship:

> [She] was [significantly older] and had [number of] children. And she also had a man. And then [that relationship] stopped. And we moved to another small town. And then I moved. It did not turn out good. She took amphetamines and everything. That I did not want to be a part of with [number of] children. It did not turn out good.

He described himself as having been 'tricked' into this relationship, 'because there was finally someone who cared to listen' during a difficult time. But he found himself in a very challenging situation where she 'did not want to take care of [the children]. So I took care of them', with corresponding negative impact on his studies and on a close male friendship. The relationship finally ended when he met the woman who became his current girlfriend; a moment he described as 'it just was "bang"'.

At the time of our first interviews, six months into this new relationship, Kasper and his girlfriend were living together and he had returned to completing his upper secondary education. He gave an account of their joint domestic life, with photos of their home, and stories of shared cooking and cleaning. He spoke about his desire to be settled, and his fear of becoming like his mother, who moved home more than 20 times during his childhood. The significance of meeting his partner – that 'bang' moment – can be understood as a turning point, away from a precarious (inter)dependence that he felt 'tricked' into because of his lack of other support. In this context, it is striking that Kasper had not received any formal aftercare services, and although he had good relationships with some of his former foster carers, he did not highlight them as people he could turn to for help.

The experience of 28-year-old Lærke, from Denmark, also shows the importance of (formal and informal) scaffolding in navigating precarious times. At 21, she and her boyfriend were making plans to move together to a city and go to university. The breakdown of that relationship after he cheated on her changed those plans, and triggered a precarious period: she moved closer to her biological family, who made significant (including financial) demands. After a turbulent time with different boyfriends, she dropped out of her studies. Later, she applied (and was accepted) to a university in another city, far away from family, and moved into a small student flat. Lærke reflected on the experience of living by herself for the first time:

> This was the first place I liked to live. I felt very much at home. This was the first place, where I felt, I didn't have to lock my door. […] I can't really tell what it was, I was like ME. I didn't live

> there with any boyfriend. All my life, I have always had a boyfriend, changing one boyfriend with another, cause 'think, if I had to be alone – that would have been terrible!

From this moment, Lærke felt her life turned around. A year later, she met her partner, and by our final interview she was about to graduate and was expecting their second child. Like Kasper (and others in our sample) she still struggled with how much she should allow her birth family to be part of her life. This continuing tension highlights why the possibilities afforded by her move to the new town had been so important, as she explained:

> I'm not sure if it was because of [partner], or whether I had found some inner peace, but I got rid of all these bad types in my life. […] I got away from my family and that was probably always what I wanted.

In Lærke's experience, we see how her romantic break-up at the age of 21 pushed her to make choices which were destabilising. But flexibility in the Danish higher education system and the availability of student accommodation also provided structural scaffolding that allowed her to navigate her way to new freedoms. In her account the real turning point is her move to a new city, where she has the housing and financial security she needs to start afresh in her studies, to meet a new partner, to achieve some distance from difficult family relationships, and to continue and complete her course even when she becomes a parent.

Housing security was also a key stabilising factor for Cath, in Norway, in scaffolding her through a romantic break up. She was 26 at our first interview and had been living with her boyfriend for several years, but when interviewed a year later, the relationship had ended. She described this as emotionally difficult – and a bit scary at first – but said she had adjusted to her new situation, commenting that she had learned to use her social network, 'and understand that you have many good friends. […] You understand that you don't have to be dependent on having someone there in order to do well'. Cath had good support from her long-term foster carers, and she owned her apartment, so her living situation was unaffected by the break up. She also described herself as financially secure; while she had a student loan and a mortgage on her apartment, she said she had never needed any financial support from welfare services.

In England, 19 year-old Sophie provides a similar example of the importance of scaffolding through a period that she described 'a year where everything fell apart, to be honest'. Starting university, she moved out of her long-term foster home into a nearby city and university accommodation:

> it was really expensive and […] I ended up moving in with five other girls, which wasn't great because they were all so bitchy and like they all had like boyfriend troubles and one of them was really horrible and mean and like I was just having the worst year of my life.

Around that time Sophie broke up with her long-term boyfriend, and within a month she had moved in with a new boyfriend, triggering a further period of instability. She described this relationship as a 'mess', and, like Lærke, they broke up when she found out he had been unfaithful. They had very recently rented a flat together, and Sophie described her foster family playing a crucial role in helping her out of a complex and potentially costly situation:

> So I just said, 'Oh I'm walking away from it, like he's instigated the break-up, he caused like all of the hurt.' […] So I had like a little squad, like my little family, and my [foster] mum and dad and then [sister] and her fiancé, all come up in their cars to collect me and all my stuff …

Sophie's long-term foster placement was a 'special guardianship' arrangement, a measure which provides legal permanence under private law, but which – as she explained – removes entitlements to leaving care support:

> [it] actually took away a lot of the advantages that I could have, like a setting up home fund […] Yeah, which we didn't actually know because we thought it would all be kept the same and I'd get the same advantages as [foster siblings] which I haven't. So a lot of what I've had to do has had to be on my own.

After staying with her foster sister for a while, Sophie moved into a small flat nearby; in the absence of leaving care support, her foster sister acted as her legal guarantor, and her foster father helped decorate because 'it was disgusting. Because no one will take a student'. But by the time of our interviews, Sophie was evidently settled into the flat that she described as a stable 'little sanctuary to come back to', commuting to university in the city.

Financial in/security

Financial in/security emerged as a repeated concern for participants across all three countries, as for Christina in Denmark (above). But only in the English sample did we hear accounts of significant financial precarity for participants as they navigated 'normative' biographical transitions such as finishing university. In his third interview, 24 year-old Jack gave a vivid account of the uncertainty and complexity of the financial systems he had to navigate when beginning his Masters degree, including a postgraduate loan entitlements and support from his local authority as a care leaver (through the 'Virtual School', a key component of the English system designed to support education of young people in care and care leavers):

> So I thought, 'Okay, that's great, I'll have my rent paid and then I'll have the £5,000 through the Virtual School to use to live,' like from them. So it's quite complicated. So the rent would be paid and then of the £10,000 from the government £5,000 would go to uni and the Virtual School would pay the other £5,000, and then my £5,000 would be left to live for the year. So Virtual School's £5,000, my government grant £5,000. So that gives me £5,000 to live. So that was going to be the plan. […] So I got everything sorted out with the flat and they turned round and said they're not going to pay my rent. So I'd got into my Masters, I'd sorted out the flat and then Social said they can't pay my rent …

As a consequence, Jack was combining full-time study with two part-time jobs; this meant he sometimes missed university teaching, 'but I can't turn down money because … Well I need to live'.

Also in England, both Daniel and Karen gave examples of getting into problematic debt at key moments of early adulthood. Karen, who was 23, told her story in explaining a photo (Figure 1) of her online credit score, representing the significance of finally resolving a debt that arose when her phone was stolen just after she had started university:

> Someone stole it and ran up a £700 bill, I panicked and […] I cancelled my direct debit and I left it and basically forgot about it […] And it wasn't until a year-and-a-half ago that I had court letters […] And the bill had gone up to over two grand [£2000]; that was like debt collectors' fees.

Karen description of her fear at this moment – 'And then I thought, are they going to take all my stuff and throw me out my home?' – echoes Standing's (2011, 23) evocation of lives where 'one mistake or one piece of bad luck could tip the balance'.

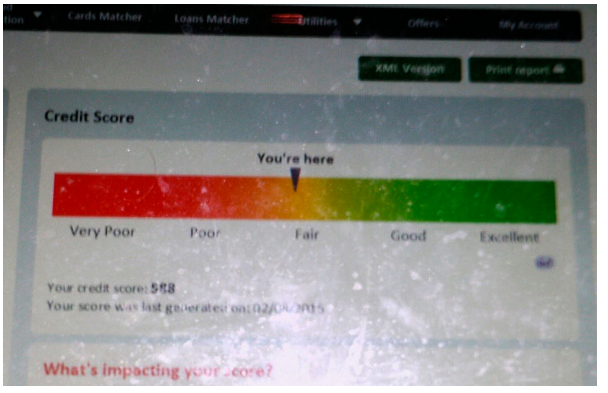


Figure 1. Karen's photograph of her online credit score (England).

For Daniel, financial insecurity arose when he moved into a flat (found with the support of the child welfare system) after finishing university. Living alone for the first time in his life at the age of 23, his part-time work did not cover his rent, and delayed benefit payments meant he could not pay his bills, so he took out high-interest online loans. He sought help from his social worker, but she 'just told me to cancel all of my direct debits and then she would see what she could do'. Increasingly worried, he did not feel able to follow her advice. Nor did he feel able to talk to his former foster carer, although they were very close, because she was going through a difficult period and he did not want to add to her worries. However, he spoke to a close friend, who has 'a really good job and she lives at home with her parents so she kind of lent me the money to just pay off all of my direct debits for the rest of last month', and another professional involved in leaving care support also eventually provided some additional funds. By the time of our third interview, he was still in debt but had a full-time job, and said he could envisage future financial stability again. Daniel's experience shows how the absence of scaffolding from child welfare systems during a key biographical transition intersects with the functioning of the wider welfare system, so that payday lending becomes a 'necessary evil' in a context where 'people are left to navigate the ever more complex mixed economy of welfare and mixed economy of credit' (Rowlingson, Appleyard, and Gardner 2016, 528).

Conclusions

Doing well in precarious times depends on resources for flexibility, in order to benefit from opportunities and navigate pathways through potentially destabilising experiences. Consequently, precarity – broadly defined – is rooted in interdependence, shaped through the possibilities afforded by intergenerational relations and formal welfare (including child welfare) systems. Majamaa (2011, 725) highlights the increasing importance of family resources for young adults in the context of a weakening welfare state, while observing that 'the Nordic social-democratic regime allows young adults to be financially less dependent on their parents'. While Denmark and Norway differ in state provisions, within the wider welfare state and in after-care provision, there are commonalities between these two Scandinavian cases in comparison to England. Concerns about security in finances

and in living situations emerged across national contexts, but cross-national differences between England and the two Scandinavian countries reflect wider population contexts and welfare entitlements. Universal benefit entitlements and key structures such as university fees shaped participants' experiences of financial insecurity and debt, as well as possibilities for flexibility and return in undergraduate education.

The analysis presented here has not focused on the people in our sample who have encountered the most precarity through their lives. Nor have we focused on precarities that are specific to the care system – such as disrupted placements – or to pre-care experiences of childhood instability or trauma. Attention to experiences that are common to the wider population of young adults enables recognition of our participants' experiences as young adults, navigating everyday lives in time, not *defined* by having been in care. But by focusing on precarious times that are *not* specific to being in care, the influence of child welfare systems – in their intersection with wider state provisions, and their enactment by professionals in relationship with participants – is rendered starkly visible. In line with international literature (e.g. Franzén and Vinnerlung 2006; Rebbe et al. 2017), the research also shows how pre-care, in-care and after-care experiences shape underlying risk of precarity, as young adults face ongoing challenges including complex family relationships, bereavement, and mental health needs arising from childhood trauma. Through interactions with child welfare and wider systems, those experiences shape the precarity they face – and the support that they receive – in navigating transitions through early adulthoods. Thus, our analysis resonates with Berlant's (2011, 192) depiction of a 'spreading precarity', rooted in dependence, and both structural and affective.

When state systems and entitlements provide security they act as resources for scaffolding, and young adults – such as Christina in Denmark or Cath in Norway – can successfully navigate precarious times of significant change. When systemic support is not available, some people are able to draw on friends and family to support them through precarious times. Arguably, access to informal resources may not be a matter of 'chance' – for example, Sophie's support from family through a terrible year is assumed by her special guardianship arrangements; equally, Daniel having a friend with money to lend could be seen to reflect the opportunities afforded by attending university. Nevertheless, such experiences demonstrate how precarity is engendered by the absence of formal frameworks for support, as articulated by Emil in his account of standing alone. And when these cases are considered alongside the experience of those for whom neither formal nor informal support was available in precarious times, the destabilising consequences that follow reveal the precarity of 'doing well'. This, an interdependent precarity, is starkly apparent in Fran, Lærke and Nicola's shared experiences of having to drop out of university. Their narratives offer a powerful reminder that the dependence of care leavers on formal systems – including, but not restricted to child welfare and after-care provision – arises precisely *because* these young adults cannot rely on family resources to scaffold them.

The research adds to a growing literature highlighting the ways in which mutual intergenerational interdependence shapes pathways through precarious times (e.g. Majamaa 2011; Nilsen and Brannen 2014). For people such as Christina in Denmark, concern for economic security is informed by responsibilities for other family members, highlighting the importance of recognising the mutual care inherent in interdependent family relationships (e.g. Skattebol 2011) and the distinctive complexities of 'family' for those who have

been in care (Boddy 2018). The analysis also shows how precarity can be heightened by the fragmentation of family resources through child welfare and wider state systems. English legislation uses the concept of the 'corporate parent' to evoke the upbringing responsibilities of the state (see Dixon et al. 2015), but, across countries, our findings point to the need to recognise how (the absence of) scaffolding from child welfare systems intersects with the functioning of the wider welfare system. It is not enough to improve one part of the system: for the state to fulfil its intergenerational responsibilities the system must function as a whole to scaffold care-experienced adults through precarious times. Inflexible, time-bounded entitlements (in after-care and in wider state systems) are unlikely to be adequate as care-experienced adults navigate the dynamic and unpredictable challenges in a historical moment when the life course is increasingly de-standardised and 'the boundaries of childhood, youth and adulthood are blurred, indistinct, porous and changing' (Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011, 361).

Notes

1. In England, work was conducted with ethics approval from the University of Sussex (ER/JMB55/2). The Norwegian project was approved by the National Centre for Research Data and in Denmark, the project followed the Helsinki Declaration and ethics standards specified by the Danish Council for Independent Research (as there is no institutional board for ethical approval of social science studies).
2. Details are not given to protect confidentiality.
3. We were unable to make contact with Fran to secure a follow-up interview after 12 months, however, we believe she may have been studying abroad.

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