

The Lived Experiences of Young Adults who Grew Up in Foster Care with Permanence: A Qualitative Study

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By
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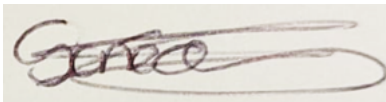
Declaration

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Sinéad Whiting', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sinéad Whiting

April 2023

For my Mommy, Roisin Whiting.

You have always stressed the importance of education for me and Matthew. You supported my education when I wanted to walk myself to playschool when I was four years old, you made sacrifices to support my education as a teenager and now in my forties you have supported my continuing education by helping with the numerous practicalities of childcare, dinners, washing and all the emotional supports of love and listening. Thank you for your constant love, support and belief. You are the best parent anyone could ask for.

You are my hero and I love you.

Summary

This qualitative doctoral study examines the current lives and lived experiences of a group of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. A key objective was to gain insights into whether or how, growing up in foster care with permanence has impacted their early adult lives, including their experiences of the transition to adulthood and the transition out of care. This is important because young people growing up in care may face additional challenges not faced by their non-care experienced peers (Gilligan, 2018; Storø, 2018; Stein, 2012) and securing permanence within foster care placements has been understood to help mitigate these challenges. Previously, permanence was understood to equate to a legal status such as adoption. However, within recent discourse conceptualisations of permanence have been expanding to encompass relational permanence, which can be defined as the presence of an “*enduring and supportive relationship between a young person and a caring adult*” (McSherry et al., 2018, p.124). This study contributes new knowledge about how key issues relating to permanence for young people in foster care, are understood and investigated. This was achieved by hearing directly from young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence and investigating their current lives and lived experiences in early adulthood. The study participants, when asked about their current lives, chose to also share narratives about, and to reflect on, their lived experiences while growing up in foster care. This allowed for an examination of the issues across time. In addition, the lens of youth transitions was utilised to gain insights into whether, or in what way, their lived experiences of permanence while in care have influenced their transitions out of care and to early adulthood. This is significant because this period of early adulthood, conceptualised as a phase of youth transitions (Cieslik and Sampson, 2013), can be challenging for care experienced young adults. These challenges have been attributed to the “*accelerated and compressed*” (Stein, 2004, p53) transition experiences of young people in care, often arising because they must leave care and enter adulthood with few safety nets, unlike their peers who grow up with the support of their family (Stott and Gustavsson, 2010). There is a lack of current literature that examines how experiences of permanence while in foster care impact experiences of youth transitions, including the transition out of care and this is a gap that this research addresses.

This study, undertaken in Ireland, was guided by the primary research question; *What are the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence?* The core aims were to: i) investigate the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence (either legal or relational); ii) examine the ways in which growing up with permanence in foster care impacts the young adults’ relationships with foster family, birth family and the world around them in early adulthood; iii) scrutinise the ways permanence (either legal or relational) within

foster care placements in childhood influence the young adults' transition to adulthood; iv) consider current conceptualisations of permanence for young people growing up in care; and v) establish the ways in which findings from this study can add to this knowledge base.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews, guided by key tenets of narrative inquiry were undertaken with twenty-two young adults aged between 20-30 years all of whom had grown up in foster care with permanence in Ireland. Across the sample, diverse pathways of permanence were represented, and experiences of both relational and legal permanence were included. Reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse the data.

There were four core findings about the lived experiences of this group of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. These findings are: i) permanence is co-created between the young person and their foster carers throughout their time in care; ii) permanence is re-negotiated during the transition out of care and the transition to early adulthood; iii) managing complex family ties is an important aspect of experiences of permanence in foster care, both during childhood and during the transition to early adulthood; iv) growing up with permanence in foster care has allowed the young adults to make choices about the stories they share about their lives, including their care identity and their family identities. Key contributions to knowledge include broadening how key issues, relating to permanence for young people in foster care, are understood and investigated. Implications of the study include that future research examining these issues should: i) hear directly from young adults who have lived experience of growing up in foster care with permanence; ii) include the lens of youth transitions which allows for valuable insights into the lived experience of permanence; iii) be mindful that birth family continues to be significant both in childhood and early adulthood for young people who have grown up in foster care with permanence; iv) view young people as agentic actors in the process of co-creating and re-negotiating permanence within their care placements.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Young people growing up in foster care face additional challenges not faced by their non-care experienced peers (Gilligan, 2018; Storø, 2018; Stein, 2012). These challenges have implications for life outcomes in areas such as; education (Brady & Gilligan, 2020) and housing (Palmer et al, 2022) and employment (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan, 2015). In addition, challenges also arise from; the stigma associated with growing up in care (Dansey et al., 2019), uncertainty about belonging (Biehal, 2014) and managing complex relationships with birth family (Havlicek, 2021). Supporting the establishment of permanence for young people in care has been understood to help mitigate these challenges (Neil and Beek, 2020; Pérez, 2017). However, in recent discourse conceptualisations of permanence within foster care have been expanding. Previously, permanence was understood to equate to legal ties between a young person and their carers. Securing legal permanence through adoption was a key policy within western jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and United States of America (Biehal, 2014; Tefre, 2015). In these circumstances adoption was aimed at supporting positive experiences and outcomes for young people growing up in long-term care (Rolock et al., 2018). However, within more recent debates, permanence is understood more broadly and is believed to be grounded within other factors beyond the establishing of legal connections. Issues such as the longevity of a placement and the development of strong and enduring ties between a young person and their carers, or another important adult, known as relational permanence, are also understood to be important (Ball et al., 2021; Moran et al., 2020; McSherry and Fargas-Malet, 2018). Increasingly research indicates that young people in care value relational permanence over legal permanence (Salazar et al., 2018; Pérez, 2017). However, little is known about how experiences of either relational or legal permanence while in care, manifest in early adulthood. Current research also indicates that the transition to adulthood is challenging for care experienced young adults and this has been attributed to them having an “*accelerated and compressed*” transitions experience (Stein, 2004, p.53). While there is much research discussing how best to support care leavers as they navigate both the transition out of care and the transition to early adulthood, there is a dearth of literature that examines the youth transitions experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. This study addresses this gap by examining the current lives and lived experiences of a group of young adults who grew up with permanence, either legal and/or relational, in long-term foster care in Ireland.

In this introductory chapter, the relevant policy context, and the background to this current study, including the rationale for the study, the aims and objectives and the research questions, are outlined. Completing this study was not a straightforward, linear journey; rather there were obstacles and challenges that arose along the way, including for example, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic amid

the data collection process. This challenge allowed for space and time to revisit the direction of the study and became a key moment of transition in the research, leading to important decisions being taken that improved and strengthened this study. This will be discussed in more detail below. The study was undertaken by a PhD student who has many years social work practice experience, working in the areas of adoption and foster care in Ireland. However, despite this practice experience the researcher was very much a novice researcher and throughout this journey she has experienced her own transitions. The researcher's background and experiences of the research process will be outlined in this chapter. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief outline of the dissertation.

1.2 Background and Context for this Current Study

1.2.1 Foster Care: The Irish Context

In Ireland and internationally, across western child protection and welfare systems, when children and young people cannot be cared for by their families due to issues of abuse or neglect, the state intervenes. This may include removing children from the care of their families and placing them into the care of the state, hereafter referred to in this dissertation as 'care'. In Ireland, Tusla, The Child and Family Agency (hereafter referred to as Tusla) is the primary agency that holds responsibility for issues relating to child protection and welfare in Ireland¹. Tusla was established in 2014 and the decision to form a new agency with dedicated focus on the needs of children and families was intended to *"give a sharper focus to the state's work"* in relation to child protection and welfare (Gilligan, 2019, p.222). At the launch of the report of the Task Force on the Child and Family Support Agency in 2012, the then minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Francis Fitzgerald, said that the new agency (Tusla) would bring *"a dedicated focus to child protection and family support for the first time in the history of the state"* and that with the formation of the new agency Ireland would move from *"a position where child and family welfare was barely a priority, to a position where it will be the sole focus of a single dedicated state agency"* (Fitzgerald, 2012).

Part of Tusla's remit relates to 'care', sometimes referred to by Tusla as 'alternative care', for young people who cannot be cared for by their families of origin. Care refers to foster care (made up of both general foster care and relative foster care) and residential care. On their website Tusla write,

"Children who require admission to care are accommodated through placement in foster care, placement with relatives or residential care...The Agency is committed to the principle that the family affords the best environment for raising children and the objective of external intervention should be to support families within the community. Policy is to place children in a family-based

¹ Tusla falls under the remit of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), who are responsible for operational standards and performance; policy and legislative developments relating to child welfare and protection; alternative care; and related issues of children's rights (www.gov.ie). Prior to the establishment of Tusla the Health Service Executive, was responsible for all issues relating to child protection and welfare in Ireland.

setting with over 92% of children in foster care placements.”

[\(Alternative Care Tusla - Child and Family Agency\)](#)

Historically, Ireland was heavily reliant upon residential or institutional care. The move towards a system that places the vast majority of children in the care of the state into family-based foster care placements, has occurred within the context of an international policy shift towards favouring family-based placements (Gilligan, 2019). It has been argued that this change in Ireland was supported by pragmatic factors, such as the lack of availability of care placements leading to an increased use of kinship care (Gilligan, 2019; Munro & Gilligan, 2013) as well as other factors including; improvements in foster care payments, the increased use of private foster care providers, an increase in public social work services, social worker preferences for family-based placement and a gradual reduction in the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and religious orders within the provision of care (Gilligan, 2019). Thus, over time the Irish child welfare system has been prioritising family-based care and current figures indicate that Tusla have been successful in pursuing high rates of foster care placements among young people in care in Ireland. Figures published by Tusla demonstrate that as of December 2022, 5810 children were in the care of the state of which 5171, or 89%, were placed in foster care. This includes both general foster care (71.4%) and relative foster care (28.6%) (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: CHILDREN IN CARE IN IRELAND AS OF SEPTEMBER 2022

FOSTER CARE	5,171	(89.0%)
<i>of which General Foster Care</i>	3,690	(71.4%)
<i>Relative Foster Care</i>	1,481	(28.6%)
RESIDENTIAL CARE	446	(7.7%)
OTHER	193	(3.3%)
TOTAL	5,810	

In research undertaken in Ireland by Tusla and The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA), with foster carers, social workers and social work managers, to investigate gaps within the Irish fostering system, fostering is described as “*caring for someone else’s child in your own home, who for one reason or another cannot live with his or her family, either on a short-term or a long-term basis*” (IFCA and Tusla, 2017, p.9). In addition, the report highlights that, children placed in foster care “*may be dealing with issues of neglect, abuse or abandonment*” and the foster carer’s role includes helping them to “*feel supported, loved and accepted unconditionally*” (IFCA and Tusla, 2017, p.10). Thus, it is acknowledged by Tusla that young people who are placed into foster care have often experienced adversity. As outlined earlier in this chapter, this is reflected in current academic

debates highlighting that young people growing up in foster care face challenges that are not faced by their non-care experienced peers (Gilligan, 2018; Mendes, 2011; Stein, 2012; Storø, 2017).

For some young people the challenges posed as a result of care experience continue beyond childhood and into adulthood. The transition to adulthood is acknowledged within academic discourse, as being particularly complex (Gilligan, 2018; Mendes, 2011; Stein, 2012; Storø, 2017). It is important to note, however, that it is not inevitable that young people who grow up in care face adversity and within research there is an increased focus on the positive experiences of care experienced adults (Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Hanrahan et al., 2020). Gilligan (2019, p.15) argues that discourse about the lives of care experienced young adults is dominated by what he terms “*narratives of failure*” when in reality many care experienced youth demonstrate great resilience and display “*narratives of success*”. As discussed above the provision of permanence for young people while they are in foster care is understood to be important in supporting the potential for positive outcomes during the transition out of care and the transition to adulthood (Hanna et al., 2011; McSherry et al., 2016; Rolock et al., 2018). However, within the Irish foster care system to date there has not been a primary focus on establishing permanence. The numbers of young people adopted from foster care are low. Moreover, there has been scant research undertaken with young people who grew up in long-term foster care, thus it is difficult to ascertain levels of relational permanence within the foster care system in Ireland. This will be discussed in the next section.

1.2.2 Permanence within Foster Care in Ireland

Tusla Service Performance and Activity Report (September 2022, p.43) records that 45% of young people aged between 18-22 years who are in receipt of Aftercare Services had remained living with their foster carers after leaving care. While this statistic suggests high levels of young people in foster care remaining with their foster carers after they have left state care, this number does not provide insights into other issues that would indicate whether these young people had relational permanence with their foster carers. For example, this statistic does not reveal how long the young people were in care before they reached 18 years, how long they remained with their foster carers after they left state care or the nature of their relationship with their foster carers. Therefore, this information provides little detail about the nature of relational permanence within these foster care placements.

While it is easier to capture legal permanence through statistics, adoption is not a significant feature of the Irish care system. There are very few adoptions from foster care in Ireland each year. Moreover, in recent years those young people that have been adopted from foster care have tended to be in their late teen years and they have been adopted by the same long-term family with whom they have lived for most of their time in care. In 2021 only 24 young people were adopted from foster care in Ireland ([Domestic Adoption Statistics 2017 2021.pdf \(aai.gov.ie\)](https://www.aai.gov.ie/publications/domestic-adoption-statistics-2017-2021.pdf)). This is approximately 0.4% of all young people in foster care that year. In 2020 there were 5882 children placed in the care

of the state. Of these 91%, or 5353, were in foster care (Tusla, 2020a). That year, 16 children were adopted from care of whom 11 were 17 years old at the time of their adoption, 3 were aged between 12 years and 16 years and 2 were aged between 6 years and 11 years, with none younger than 5 years old at the time of their adoption² (see Table 2). Therefore, the majority of adolescents adopted from care in Ireland are on the cusp of adulthood and are about to achieve legal independence, when they secure legal permanence through adoption. Moreover, these adoptions occur within the context of long-term foster care. This indicates that potentially the young person and their foster family have previously established relational permanence within their foster care placements, prior to securing legal permanence. To understand this unique Irish context, of low rates of adoption from care and a system that favors late teenage adoption within long term placements, it is important to examine the history of adoption in Ireland. Examining the history of adoption in Ireland aids understanding about how there was climate of secrecy and shame surrounding adoption in the past and contextualises recent legislative changes and the implications they may have for the use of adoption for children in care into the future.

TABLE 2: THE NUMBER OF ADOPTED FROM FOSTER CARE IN IRELAND IN 2020

Total number of children placed in the care of the state in 2020	5,882
of which the number of children in foster care	5,353 (91% of all children in care)
Number of children adopted from care in 2020	16
Those aged 17 years	11
Aged between 12-16	3
Aged between 6-11	2
Aged less than 5	0

1.2.3 Overview of the History of Adoption in Ireland

Adoption was first legislated for in Ireland in 1952, making it one of the last European countries to legislate for adoption (O’Halloran, 2010). However, this is not to suggest that informal, and in some cases illegal adoptions (McCaughren and McGregor, 2021) were not happening in Ireland prior to 1952. In their theoretical article discussing the potential for the increase in the use of adoption within the child welfare system in Ireland, in the context of new legislation, McCaughren and McGregor (2021) have argued that the delay in making legal provisions was due to cultural resistance to placing adoption on a legal footing.

² The Adoption Authority of Ireland no longer provide statistics for the ages of young people adopted from care. This is because the small numbers increased the potential of identifiability. However, in previous years these statistics were available. These 2020 statistics were provided to me in private correspondence with the Adoption Authority of Ireland and I have permission to use them in this PhD dissertation.

When adoption was legislated for in Ireland the Roman Catholic Church was influential within the state and condemned women who gave birth to children outside of marriage as “*sinners and their children as tainted*” (McNamara et al., 2021, p.140). In this context adoption was understood to provide a solution for both the mother, who would not have to live with the stigma of giving birth outside of marriage, and the child, who was protected from the shame of illegitimacy. It also served to benefit married couples who were unable to have children within their marriage (McCaughren and Lovett, 2014). Historically, adoption in Ireland relates to the adoption of infants by adults not previously known to them (stranger adoptions) and these adoptions were closed. A closed adoption means that once the adoption order had been issued there was no further contact between the child and their adoptive family and the birth parents. As a result, adoptions were often shrouded in secrecy and shame (McNamara et al., 2021). McCaughren and McGregor (2021, p.230) describe closed adoptions as being:

“Closed in the legal sense (all legal ties were severed perpetually) and in social terms (all social and emotional ties were severed), with the adoptive parents never having to worry about interference from the natural family”.

Building on this quote above, it is important to note that although in closed adoptions there is no physical contact between a child placed for adoption and their birth family, it does not automatically follow that emotional ties are severed. For many adoptees and birth parents the ongoing emotional impact of adoption in their lives has held serious emotional repercussions, even when the adoption is deemed closed (see McNamara et al., 2021; Lewis, 2023).

In the years since the 1952 Adoption Act the patterns of adoption in Ireland have been changing in the context of wider social changes within society. In the earliest days following the enactment of legislation most children born outside of marriage were placed for adoption. The peak came in 1967 when 97% of children born outside of marriage were adopted (Adoption Authority of Ireland, 2012). However, changes were noticed with the introduction of a social welfare payment for unmarried mothers in 1973, the abolition of the status of illegitimacy in 1987 (Michael Garrett, 2017) and a reduction in the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on state policy and laws (Wilson, Lordan and Mulender, 2004). These factors all led to a gradual decline of Irish born infants being placed for adoption and in 2020³ only two Adoption Orders were issued in relation to an infant domestic adoption⁴. Furthermore, in recent years there has been a trend to move away from the secrecy that

³ Most recent statistics available at time of writing

⁴ Alongside the decline in infant domestic adoptions Irish couples choosing to form families through adoption were adopting children from abroad, although it is of note that there has been a decline in the number of children being adopted from abroad in recent years. Statistics provided on the website of the Adoption Authority of Ireland show that in 2021 only 6 new entries were made into the Register of Intercounty Adoptions compared to a high of 488 in 2008.

has historically surrounded adoption in Ireland. This has occurred in response to a number of scandals that have emerged that have “*highlighted the dehumansing nature of the Irish adoption system*” (McNamara et al., 2021). Increasingly women have been speaking about their past experiences and there has been recognition of the need to create an adoption system that is less closed and secretive.

An alternative to closed adoptions has been open adoptions. In an open adoption the adopted child and their adoptive family maintain an agreed level of contact with some members of the birth family after the Adoption Order has been awarded. In the absence of legislation, adoption agencies work with the birth and adoptive families, negotiating and then facilitating contact, that can be either face-to-face meetings or contact via an exchange of letters and photographs. While there is no legal provision for open adoptions in Ireland, they have been occurring on an informal basis for several years and all open adoption agreements between birth and adoptive families in Ireland are based on goodwill (McCaughren and McGregor, 2021). It has been noted that contact within an open adoption, which occurs in the context of a birth family choosing to relinquish their child for adoption, is not the same as contact within a fostering context (Monck et al., 2015). The informal progression towards open adoptions in Ireland has not been matched with legal provisions and the most recent Adoption Act 2010, has not placed open adoption on a legal footing. When considering the issue of adoption from foster care in the context of open or closed adoptions, it is of note that for young people growing up in foster care, who have maintained contact with their birth family after their placement in care and who know the identity of their birth family, the capacity to maintain open contact after an adoption may be important.

Although the number of young people adopted from within the care system in Ireland remains low there have been recent significant changes in adoption legislation in Ireland that potentially allow for an increase in the use of adoption within the context of children in care. In 2012 a constitutional referendum on children’s rights was passed paving the way for changes in adoption legislation leading to the Adoption Amendment Act (2017). This act legislated for changes to the primary legislation, the Adoption Act (2010) including making provisions for children who were born to married parents to be adopted and making it possible for foster carers to apply to adopt a child who had been in their care for a minimum of three years⁵. An additional significant change was the insertion of Section 19 into the Act stating that “*the authority or the court, as the case may be, shall regard the best interests of the child as the paramount consideration in the resolution of such matters, application or proceedings*” (Section 19, Adoption Act 2010). This change meant that

⁵ Under previous legislation only children whose parents were not married could be placed for adoption unless it could be proven that the parents had abandoned their child for the 12 months prior to the application for an Adoption Order and that this abandonment was likely to continue until the child reached 18 years. These requirements made it more complex for children of married parents in foster care to be adopted.

children who were capable of forming their own views, must be given the opportunity to express these views to either the court, or the Adoption Authority⁶. There were also additional changes to adoption legislation arising as a result of a constitutional referendum on marriage which paved the way for couples of the same gender to marry, resulting in same sex couples being allowed to adopt children together.

While legislative changes created a legal framework which removed significant barriers to allow foster carers to adopt children in their care, to date this has not led to a noticeable increase in the use of adoption within the child protection services. In 2021 only 24 children were adopted from care, 0.45% of the total foster care population ([Domestic Adoption Statistics 2017 2021.pdf \(aai.gov.ie\)](#)). This suggests that a cultural shift was also necessary. Currently, permanence is not a policy aim in any documents or national standards issued by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. However, Tusla appear to have begun to develop their own policy around this issue with the publication of their Pathways to Permanency Handbook in 2020.

1.2.4 A Shift Towards Permanency Planning

Tusla's Pathways to Permanency Handbook (2020b) outlines the key components of the agency's permanency planning policy that should guide social work practitioners in relation to all children who require alternative care. Central to the permanency planning policy is concurrent planning, an approach that requires social workers to "*simultaneously pursue both family reunification and alternative options for permanence*" (Tusla, 2020b, P17). The handbook states that the first priority should be to return the child to the care of their birth family and when this is not possible social workers should explore all options available to them and chose that which is best suited to the child's identified needs. This may include adoption by their foster carers but alternative options such as guardianship and remaining in long-term foster care should also be considered. Moreover, this Tusla handbook (2020b, p.15) acknowledges that,

“Permanency is not just about the type of placement, it is also about the stability and continuity of care provided to children and ...where legal permanence may not be achieved, achieving relational permanence is key for the child in care”.

Even as Tusla begin to introduce policies that prioritise permanency planning it is clear that it is not their intention to focus on just one form of permanence. Both legal permanence and relational permanence are to be given due consideration. It is also of note that while there are permanence

⁶ Previous to the Children's referendum (2012) the Constitution placed the rights of the family above the rights of individual members of the family. The passing of the constitutional amendment shifted this balance of power and the individual rights of children were placed on an equal footing, or above, the rights of the family unit.

planning policies being rolled out, practices across social work services will need time to plan and adjust. As Ireland begins to plan how best to support young people in care to establish permanence within their foster care placements, it is timely that this study examines experiences of young adults in Ireland who grew up with either legal or relational permanence while in care. This study allows for insights into whether and how growing up with permanence impacts experiences in early adulthood. With policy relating to permanence in an early, developmental stage it is important to understand what supports are offered to young people who grow up in foster care in Ireland once they have reached 18 years of age and legally leave the care of the state. This will be outlined next.

1.2.5 Aftercare Provision in Ireland

It is widely accepted that the transition to adulthood is challenging for young people growing up in care and that most young people will require additional support as they navigate this transition because they are not yet ready to live independently at 18 years of age (Van Breda et al, 2020). In Ireland, aftercare services were legislated for with the Child Care Amendment Act (2015), which was enacted in 2017. Under this Act young people leave care at the age of 18 years and all young people are legally entitled to an aftercare plan that outlines their needs in relation to employment, education and housing. On their website Tusla state they provide aftercare services to “*all young people that are between 16-21 years old and have spent 12 months in the care of the state with either Tusla or the HSE, between the ages 13-18. Aftercare services will still be available for people up to 23 years old if they are engaged in accredited training or education*” ([What are aftercare services? Tusla - Child and Family Agency](#)). While there is current academic debate about the potential for extended care as an option to provide necessary support for young people as they manage the transition to adulthood from care (see Van Breda et al., 2020) extended care is not available in Ireland. However as noted earlier, Tusla report that 45% of young people aged between 18-22 years who grew up in foster care and who were in receipt of aftercare services had remained living with their foster carers after leaving care (Tusla Service Performance and Activity Report, September 2022, p.43). This statistic suggests that a significant proportion of young people growing up in foster care continue to live with their foster family as they begin their transition out of care and to early adulthood. However, it does not uncover how long these young people remain with their foster carers or the ongoing nature of their relationship with their foster carers when they do leave their home. There has been recent qualitative research with groups of young adults who grew up in care in Ireland examining specific aspects of their lives, for example, education (Brady and Gilligan, 2020a, 2020b) and housing (Palmer et al, 2022) and employment (Arun-Sabatés and Gilligan, 2015). These studies provide evidence of factors that both support and challenge young people as they navigate the transition out of care in Ireland. While some of these studies do draw attention to the benefit of ongoing support from significant adults, including foster carers, during the transition to adulthood, the benefit of ongoing contact with foster carers was not the focus of any of these studies. There is

no research that provides insights into how experiences of permanence in care influence experiences of the transition out of care. This current study fills this gap by examining the lived experiences of a group of care leavers who grew up in foster care with permanence. The details about how this study was conducted are outlined in the next section.

1.3 The Current Study

1.3.1 The Rationale for the Study

Current research evidence highlights that care experienced young adults encounter challenges in early adulthood, not faced by their non-care experienced peers. Establishing permanence and stability for young people in care is understood to help mitigate these challenges (Neil & Beek, 2020; Rolock et al. 2018; Rolock & White, 2016). Existing research debates acknowledge that permanence can be conceptualised in different ways and can be understood, for example, as being relational or legal (Pérez, 2017; McSherry and Fargas-Malet, 2018). However, little is understood about how experiences of permanence while in care influence progress in early adulthood for young people who are transitioning out of formal care. Importantly, research that examines a range of experiences of permanence, and whether or how permanence while in care impacts youth transitions, including the transition out of care, is rare. This study addresses this gap by examining the current lives and lived experiences of a group of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence. Using a qualitative methodology, stories were gathered from young adults who had grown up in long-term foster care with permanence, and who were either currently experiencing transitions or reflecting on recent experiences of transition, including the transition to adulthood and the transition out of care. Applying a lens of youth transitions revealed how experiences of permanence while in care may or may not influence experiences of youth transitions, including the transition out of care.

1.3.2 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The central aim of this study was to learn about the current lives and lived experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence. Examining these issues was guided by the following core objectives, which were to;

- Investigate the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care, with permanence (either legal or relational).
- Examine the ways in which growing up with permanence in foster care impacts the young adults' relationships with foster family, birth family and the world around them in early adulthood.
- Scrutinise the ways permanence (either legal or relational) within foster care placements in childhood influence the young adults' transition to adulthood.
- Consider current conceptualisations of permanence for young people growing up in care; and

- Establish the ways in which findings from this study can add to this knowledge base.

The central research questions guiding this study were as follows:

- What are the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence?
- What are the young adults' views about how their experiences of permanence with their foster carers have influenced their current lived experiences, including their relationships with their foster families, their birth families and the world around them?
- How do experiences of permanence while in care impact experiences of youth transitions, including the transition out of care?

1.3.3 Methodology

Central to this research was gaining insights into the lived experiences of a group of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence. Moreover, it was important to ensure that the research allowed for understandings of a diversity of experiences and for an opportunity to illuminate how experiences shifted and changed across time and contexts. For these reasons the research is grounded within a social constructionist orientation. A social constructionist framework adheres to the idea that knowledge is constructed by “*meaning making beings*” within social, historical and political contexts (Crotty, 1998, p.10). Importantly social constructionism “*explicitly tolerates diversity of social realities*” (Ungar, 2004, p.345) and therefore allows for diverse lived experiences to be examined. In keeping with social constructionism, a qualitative framework was adopted which allowed for research that investigates people’s lives and experiences (Hennink et al., 2020; Liamputtong, 2019). As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, Padgett (2019) argues that qualitative research is particularly appropriate for social work research because it allows for insights to be gathered into the complex world of research participants, while also acknowledging that there is no singular reality supporting the investigation of a diversity of experiences.

Having made the decisions described above, semi-structured qualitative interviews, guided by key principles of narrative inquiry, were selected to gather the data from the research participants. The role of the researcher lies in the retelling of the stories shared and importantly the development of themes from across that data that uncover meanings attached to the lived experiences of the research participants. Reflective Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was utilised in this study to draw out themes which both represent commonalities across the lived experiences as well as drawing out diversity. It was through making the decisions outlined here and discussed in detail in Chapter 3 that the aims of the research could be met and the key research questions addressed.

1.3.4 The Lens of Youth Transitions

An important contribution of this current research is the inclusion of the lens of youth transitions to gain insights into the lived experiences of the young adults. As described above, it is well documented throughout academic debate that young people in care experience particular challenges as they navigate youth transitions while simultaneously managing the transition out of care. The “*accelerated and compressed*” (Stein, 2004, p53) transition experiences of young people in care can be attributed to the fact that they must leave care and enter adulthood with few safety nets, unlike their peers who grow up with the support of their family (Stott and Gustavsson, 2010). However, it has been argued that care experienced youth can have positive experiences of the transition out of care if they are afforded adequate time and supports to prepare for these transitions (Storø, 2017). Of note is the lack of literature examining the impact of experiences of permanence in long-term foster care on both the transition out of care and other youth transition experiences. The lens of youth transitions was utilised in this current study to allow for an examination of the young adults’ experiences of the impact of permanence in care on their transitions out of care and also whether and/or how growing up with permanence in foster care impacted their other youth transitions experiences.

1.4 The Journey of this Research

At the beginning phase of this PhD study the original aim was to investigate the current lives and lived experiences of a group of young adults who had established legal permanence through adoption in their late teen years. A central feature of the young adults who were the target research population at that time, was that they would all have established relational permanence while in care and then have achieved legal permanence through adoption in their late teen years, as they were about to turn eighteen, achieve legal independence and leave care. Ethical approval was granted for a study with young adults who grew up in long-term foster care and who were adopted when they were in their late teenage years. A key objective was to gain insights into whether or how being adopted in their late teen years, by foster carers with whom they had established relational permanence, carried any meaning for the young people in early adulthood. Furthermore, it was a primary objective to utilise the lens of youth transitions to examine whether and how being adopted as an older teenager had any impact upon their experience of youth transitions, including the transition out of care. Recruitment for this study was always going to be complex given the low numbers of young people who are adopted from foster care in Ireland each year. Recruitment commenced in September 2019 and by February 2020 four interviews had been completed and two more interviews were scheduled to take place. In March 2020 Covid-19 and the resultant public health measures meant that for a period of time all research activity involving the interviewing of participants had to cease. While this enforced break in recruitment and interviewing was frustrating, it did provide an ideal opportunity to pause and reflect on the progress of the research to date and to undertake some additional reading of current literature. Reflecting on the growing body of literature relating to relational permanence for young

people in care, it became clear that there was an opportunity to use the unique Irish situation of small numbers of late adoption within a system that relied heavily on foster care, to examine the lived experiences of young adults who had grown up in foster care with a range pathways of permanence. Examining a range of experiences of permanence in foster care provided the opportunity to gain insights into how these experiences were impacting their transition out of care and the transition to adulthood and to add new knowledge about how permanence is conceptualised for young people in care. An application was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee within the School of Social Work and Social Policy⁷ in June 2020 proposing amendments to the original study. These amendments concerned the inclusion of young adults who had grown up in long-term foster care with relational permanence but had not been adopted, in addition to interviewing young adults who established relational permanence and had been adopted. Ethical approval was granted and in this way this study has been able to report on a variety of lived experiences of permanence in foster care providing a more rounded view than was initially envisaged.

1.5 The Relevance of Covid to this Study

1.5.1 Undertaking Research during Covid-19

This PhD research commenced, as a part time study in October 2016. As previously discussed, the recruitment and interviewing of participants was already underway when the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in widespread public health restrictions in 2020. The challenges of undertaking PhD research during the Covid-19 pandemic have been reported on by Donohue et al., (2021) in their research conducted between August and September 2020. For their study 235 PhD students from across the world completed online questionnaires about their experience of research during the pandemic and how the pandemic had impacted their research projects. These authors argued that although addressing challenges is an accepted part of any student's learning experience, the Covid-19 pandemic brought about sudden changes in the lives of PhD researchers, impacting the progress of their research in both positive and negative ways. Donohue et al. (2021) reported that the majority of participants believed that as a result of the pandemic there had been an impact on their timeframes, their study design and the location of their research. They also reported that the respondents to their survey who were working in universities in a teaching capacity described an increase in their teaching workload and a resultant detrimental impact on their PhD research. Moreover, the respondents with caring responsibilities for children or older relatives reported this also having a negative impact on their capacity to focus on their PhD research, as well a detrimental impact on their mental health. These experiences were reflected in other research undertaken (see Pyhälto et al., 2021; Jackman et al., 2022 for example). In the University of York, Lambrechts and Smith (2020) undertook research with 701 PhD students. The students answered a questionnaire about their

⁷ All ethical considerations are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation

experience of undertaking their PhD during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research took place earlier than the previous study, in April 2020, just one month after a national lockdown was announced in the UK. Lambrechts and Smith (2020) reported that for research students the Covid-19 pandemic brought challenges including implications for their finances, physical health and mental health and the researchers noted that they anticipated these challenges would continue beyond the easing of restrictions for PhD researchers.

Undertaking this current PhD study during the Covid-19 pandemic, while simultaneously working in an academic post in a university and holding caring responsibilities for children who were being educated from home during the pandemic, did undoubtedly impact the trajectory and timeline of this current research. It led to changes in the research design as discussed in Chapter 3 with the need to move to online data collection, and it also delayed the progress of data collection and ultimately of the writing up of the research as other demands on this researcher's time had to often take priority. However, as discussed above the pandemic also allowed time to revisit the primary focus of this PhD study. Ultimately the challenges faced became just an additional part of my PhD journey, and one I had in common with other doctoral students who were also parenting and working while undertaking their research during the pandemic.

1.5.2 Care leavers in Ireland during Covid-19

As outlined above, this current study had commenced when the Covid-19 pandemic began. The first four participants were interviewed in late 2019, the study was then paused between March 2020 and September 2020 and the remaining eighteen participants were interviewed between September-December 2020. Therefore, although Covid-19 was not discussed in interview, Covid-19 was part of the context of the lives of the participants. As the public health implications of the pandemic eased, researchers began investigating the impact of Covid-19 on specific populations. Internationally researchers began to consider the impact of Covid-19 on care leavers (Munro et al., 2022; Roberts et al, 2021; Kelly et al, 2021; Greeson et al, 2020) and in Ireland Gilligan, Brady and Cullen (2022) examined this issue. Internationally, the studies reported a range of findings but with similar themes highlighting the ways in which Covid-19 intensified other challenges already faced by care leavers (see for example Munro et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021). Gilligan et al., (2022) undertook qualitative research with sixteen young adult care leavers in Ireland, aged between 18-27 years, each with distinct lived experiences. Notably, the participants had grown up in a range of care placements, including both foster care and residential care, with a range of experiences of stability and permanence. Gilligan et al. (2022, p.19) identified three themes across the participants lived experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The themes related to the challenges the study participants experienced during Covid-19, supports that helped them to '*get through*' the pandemic and finally, the lessons learnt because of their experiences. While the researchers note that the participants demonstrated ingenuity and tenacity in facing the Covid-19 pandemic, they also

concluded that for this group of young adults, for whom the transition to adulthood is understood to be challenging, the Covid-19 pandemic was an additional challenge, or, as it is framed in the title of the study “*one more adversity*”. However, they conclude that there was no one pathway through the Covid-19 pandemic described by the participants. For some it was a negative experience while for others it offered an opportunity to identify strengths and supports within their personal networks. It is of note, in the context of this current research, that the participants in Gilligan et al.’s (2022) study faced challenges during Covid-19 that were often rooted in pre-Covid experiences. Furthermore, the authors noted the importance of “*building supportive connections within family and community systems for children in care and care leavers*” (Gilligan et al., 2022, p.48) all factors connected to permanence.

1.6 Introducing the Researcher and Reasons for Selecting this Research Topic

I came to the research process as an experienced social work practitioner who had not undertaken any formal studies since qualifying as a social worker fifteen years previously. The decision to undertake a PhD was in part fulfilling a long held personal ambition and was in part was driven by a wish to add to current research that could help inform me and my colleagues in practice. Undertaking a PhD relating to the lived experiences of young adults who grew up with permanence in foster care was directly related to my own social work practice experience. I qualified as a social worker in 2001 and from then until I left professional practice in 2019, I worked in a variety of services including with children at risk of coming into care, with children in care, with foster carers, with minority ethnic groups and most widely within the field of adoption, including adoption from foster care. In my role as a social worker in a state adoption service a key aspect of my practice was working with foster families and older teenagers, aged sixteen and seventeen years, who wanted to be adopted by their long-term foster carers. This work placed me in regular contact with young people who appeared to have relational permanence within their foster placements yet still wanted legal permanence at a point when they were about to achieve legal independence and leave care. Often there were other adolescents within the same foster family who also had relational permanence but did not express any wish to be adopted by their foster carers. Witnessing these diverse experiences of permanence led me to consider what impact, if any, the decisions these teenagers made about adoption would have on early adult lives. From this basis the current research was developed.

When I commenced this PhD research, I was a practitioner within the field where I was researching. In this regard I was an insider researcher. As such, special consideration needed to be given to certain ethical issues such as preserving confidentiality for participants and colleagues and managing the potential that my proximity to the practice area may impact my potential for proper *critical* engagement (Drake and Heath, 2010). As described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p.124) all “*qualitative researchers need to both see the view of the experiences and systems of others and at*

the same time be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand." Practitioner researchers have been described as needing to "*inhabit the hyphen*" (Drake and Health, 2010, p.25) and this should be achieved through the researcher's reflexivity. I engaged with this reflexivity primarily through supervision with my PhD supervisors and maintaining a reflective diary where I recorded my thoughts and highlighted potential conflicts between my previous practice-based assumptions and new knowledge gained through the research process. For example, during the first year of the research following a supervision session I wrote,

"I need to be careful that I do not convey [in the research] that I believe adoption is the natural outcome of a successful foster care arrangement. I have clearly been writing too many court reports that are focused on sharing adoption as a positive, I forget that other children who are not adopted are equally happy in their long-term foster families and not being adopted may be their choice and the best solution for them! I must remember that what I know from my day job may not always be correct! Keep reading."

The ways in which my own biases had the potential to influence my research were regularly discussed in supervision. My supervisor encouraged me to read widely about areas of practice debated across academic discourse but which I had not previously questioned. A prime example of this related to the issue of contact between young people in care and their birth families. During one supervision I expressed the belief that the young people I worked with had no contact with their birth families and that overall I thought that young people in long-term care with permanence had no birth family contact. I was encouraged by my supervisor to read more about this topic and to maintain an open mind when undertaking my interviews. In my reflective diary, having transcribed the first three interviews I wrote:

"From these early interviews I can see that the relationship with the birth family is indeed complex, more than I anticipated. [The participants] talk about having no contact but in some instances, they have also talked about attending large birth family events like funerals and weddings. This suggests some contact, as RG suggested- to discuss in supervision".

Being a practitioner researcher brought both advantages and challenges. I had a practitioner's knowledge of the child welfare system in Ireland, I understood the permanence policy as it related to young people growing up in foster care in Ireland and I had firsthand knowledge about how the adoption from foster care system operated. The use of reflective practice helped mitigate the challenges this insider status brought. However, I did not grow up in foster care and I am not adopted, therefore I had little knowledge about the lived experiences I was investigating. In this regard I was not an insider to this research.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis is laid out across seven chapters starting with this introductory chapter where the aims and rationale of this study have been outlined, as well as providing context for the research in Ireland. The researcher's background as a social work practitioner has been discussed and the decisions made about the direction of this current research were outlined.

In Chapter Two a review of current literature relevant to the key research question is presented. In this chapter the relevant literature reviewed for this study was disaggregated into three sections: challenges for young people growing up in care, debates about permanence for young people in care and the lens of youth transitions. Gaps in the literature were identified. The review of literature highlights the value of understanding more about the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence and the importance of investigating the impact of permanence in early adulthood for young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. Specifically, the usefulness of the lens of youth transitions was examined. The review of the literature highlighted that there is a lack of current literature examining the lived experiences of young adults who grew up with permanence in foster care, as they navigate the transition to adulthood and the transition out of care.

The third chapter outlines the methodological approach within this study. The decisions that were taken throughout the course of carrying out this research about the study design and methods are presented. The decision to frame the study within a social constructionist framework is discussed and the influence of narrative inquiry on the methods used is outlined. Ethical considerations that guided the research are reviewed. A reflection about the methods used is also included at the end of this chapter.

Chapter Four is the first of three chapters presenting findings from the research. In this chapter the stories shared by the young adults about the myriad of ways that they and their foster carers negotiated permanence while the young person was growing up in care are presented. The common themes that the young people discussed when describing these experiences are outlined and analysed. These findings point towards the shared role of the young person and their foster carers in negotiating permanence together. The differences as well as the commonalities across the range of experiences are examined.

Chapter Five is the second finding's chapter and relates to the descriptions the young adults provided about how they re-negotiated permanence as they navigated the transition out of care. The findings in this chapter illuminate that, although the young person and their foster carers had negotiated permanence while the young person was in care, the transition out of care was a phase when permanence needed to be re-negotiated. The stories shared by the young people about how they re-

negotiated permanence with their foster carers and the world around them are presented and examined.

Chapter Six is the final findings chapter. In this chapter the young adults' relationships and connections to with their birth family are illuminated. The findings outlined highlight how these relationships have shifted and changed across time, both while the young person was in care and as they transitioned out of care.

In Chapter Seven a summary of the findings presented across Chapters 4-6 is outlined. This is followed by a discussion about key themes that can be drawn from these findings. A diagram of the findings is presented and how these findings add to current academic debates and the implications for practice are considered. There is also a reflection about the research process and suggestions for future research on this topic.

Chapter 2. A Review of Literature Relevant to this Current Study

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter key literature and research insights, relevant to the main research question of the study, *What are the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence?* are debated. The primary purpose of this review of literature was to inform the research design, ensuring the research question could be answered. To this end the literature has been disaggregated into three areas that represent the primary concerns of this current research. These areas are; the challenges faced by young people growing up in care, debates surrounding permanence for young people in care and literature relating to the lens of youth transitions.

In the first section current debates and key research relating to the challenges associated with growing up in care are discussed. In this section particular attention is drawn to the common assertion in the literature that young people growing up in care face additional challenges not encountered by their non-care experienced peers. This research area is foundational to the current study as it provides a backdrop from which to understand the context and potential challenges in the lives of the young adults at the centre of this present research. In the second section, debates surrounding permanence for young people in care are interrogated, with a particular emphasis on shifting understandings of permanence. Research that seeks to conceptualise permanence by illuminating the meanings care experienced youth attach to their own experiences of permanence while in care, are examined. These debates underscore this current study because they relate to the lived experience of young adults who are transitioning out of care and who experienced permanence while in care. Finally, literature relating to experiences of youth transitions, with a particular focus on the youth transitions experiences of care leavers, is outlined. The usefulness of the lens of youth transitions when examining the lived experiences of care leavers is discussed.

This chapter concludes by summarising the current state of knowledge in the field of enquiry, highlighting critical gaps in that knowledge, and identifying how this present research responds to those gaps and makes its significant contribution to knowledge. Given that the study is concerned with gaining insights into lived experiences, existing research that has utilised qualitative methods and that focused on the lived experiences of young adults themselves, were prioritised. Although the material in this chapter is presented as a narrative review of the literature, the systematic methodology for conducting the review is outlined in Appendix 1.

2.2 Challenges Associated with Growing up in Care

2.2.1 Introduction

If permanence is about providing stability for those with care experience, it is useful to begin with an understanding of the distinct challenges those growing up in care can face. This study is concerned with understanding the lived experiences of a group of young adults who grew up in state care with

permanence, as they transition both out of care and into adulthood. The objective outcomes for the participants, in areas such as education, employment and housing are not a primary focus of this present research. However, as Harrison et al. (2020, p.1) argued *“life outcomes for people who spent time in the care of the state as children are known to be significantly lower, on average, than for the general population”*. For this reason, before considering current research relating to the subjective lived experiences of care leavers, it is worth briefly discussing some current, relevant research related to objective outcomes for adults who grew up in care. Therefore, in the first part of this section, the challenges relating to objective measures in areas such as education, housing, employment and early parenting will be considered. Attention will then turn to research relating to some subjective challenges of the lived experiences of care leavers. Understanding subjective wellbeing is important and it is *“considered to be an essential component within the broader concept of quality of life”* (Llosada-Gistau et al., 2017, p.737). Issues such as, managing stigma associated with being care experienced, uncertainty about belonging and negotiating relationships with birth family will be discussed.

2.2.2 Challenges within Objective Measures

Introduction

Growing up in care can lead to challenges in key areas of life that the non-care experienced population do not have to contend with. While the distinct literature relating to youth transitions and the youth transitions experiences of care leavers is discussed later in this chapter, it is worth highlighting here that the research evidence emphasises the poorer outcomes, during the transition to adulthood, for care experienced young adults, when compared to their non-care experienced peers (Gilligan, 2018; Stein, 2012; Storø, 2017). It has been noted that the transition to adulthood is a phase when the majority population rely upon family support, yet care leavers often do not have such supports available to them (Gypen et al., 2017). In the following sections the implications of this in relation to outcomes in the areas of education, housing, employment, early parenting and mental health will be discussed. It is of note that throughout the literature within this section, and in the later section discussing the youth transitions experiences of care experienced young adults, the capacity of the young adults to demonstrate agency and their ability to make agentic decisions are frequently referenced. Therefore, in advance of interrogating the main body of the literature, pertaining to these objective outcomes, literature relating to current understandings of agency will be outlined.

Understandings of Agency for Care Experienced Youth

In an editorial to a special edition of a journal focused on agency and human development in times of social change, Silbereisen et al (2007, p.74) describe agency as *“a complex concept”* that indicates action and can refer to *“ongoing social engagement guided by past experiences and future goals”*. These authors highlight that when people act agentially, they draw on their present circumstances

and contexts, and also on their aspirations for the future. In a paper reporting on findings from a study with thirty-five young adult migrants, using the lenses of precarity and agency, Johnson and Gilligan (2021) examine how young migrants and refugees growing up along the Thailand-Myanmar border navigate legal and social marginalisation. They argue that in the context of youth agency, the concept of ‘resourcefulness’ and the young person’s “*capacity to act positively in relation to surrounding structures*” (Johnson and Gilligan, 2021, p.146) are of significance. The authors examine literature that highlights how marginalised youth themselves emphasise their own agency, even in difficult circumstances. The findings from Johnson and Gilligan’s (2021) study draw attention to how the marginalised youth did not relinquish their agency, and although they demonstrate an awareness of the constraints imposed on them as a result of their precarious migrant status, they act agentially, actively managing these constraints. This suggests that even in the most difficult of circumstances young people have the capacity to act agentially, regardless of the structural forces around them.

Writing more specifically about agency in the context of youth transition experiences Aaltonen (2013) asserts that for young people agency refers to their ability and opportunity to control events within their own life and the direction their life will take. Aaltonen’s (2013) paper draws on biographical research with Finnish young people aged 15-17 years investigating the future opportunities marginalised young people considered likely for themselves. She argues that the young people in her study were aware that their agency was constrained by the institutions and structures that influenced their lives, concluding that acting agentially in this context involves emotional labour on the part of the young people as they both challenge these external forces and manage disappointments at not being able to assert agency. Aaltonen (2013) concludes that examining how the young people in her study asserted agency as they transitioned from one status to another outside of the usual transition points, revealed that this allowed them to better manage both their present and future life direction. This suggests that creating an environment that allows young people to act agentially at times of transition is important in supporting them both at that time and into the future.

Aaltonen (2013) grounded her study within the idea of bounded agency which is described in Evan’s (2007) paper on the findings of a series of mixed methods Anglo-German studies that examined how young adults control and exercise agency as they progress through periods of transition in work and education. Evans (2007) argues that findings from the studies indicate that agency can be understood as “*a process in which past habits and routines are contextualised and future possibilities envisaged in the contingencies of the present moment*” (Evans, 2007, p.88). She argues that the environment within which people live impacts their belief about their capacity for agency. Those living in structured environments believed that opportunities for agency were limited and when they cannot exercise agency they blame structural forces. Thus, the young adults with less opportunity for choice felt less able to act agentially, suggesting a relationship between structure and agency. Arising from

this research Evans (2007, p.93) developed the concept of bounded agency seeing people as having *“past and imagined future possibilities which guide and shape actions in the present together with subjective notions of the structures they have to navigate”*. Evans (2007, p.94) described bounded agency as *“socially situated agency influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalised frames of references as well as external actions”*. Building on this Brady and Gilligan’s (2020a) paper relating to the relevance of agency when discussing the educational journey of care experienced adults (discussed in detail later in this chapter) argues that agency is a prominent but contested concept within the social sciences. Drawing attention to definitions of agency that are relevant to life course research, they assert that individuals are not uninvolved actors on a predetermined course, instead people make choices, take actions and make decisions in their own life but that these all occur within systems and constraints (Brady and Gilligan, 2020a). Common throughout these understandings of agency is that they relate not only to people’s capacity to make decisions about their own lives, but attention is drawn to the link between the influences of structural forces surrounding the individual and the individual’s capacity to act agentially. In this context being agentic implies that the person sees themselves having an influence on their prospects, their future and their progress, rather than being powerless and lacking any sense of purpose, direction or motivation.

The relevance of agency for care experienced young people as they transition to adulthood and out of care is highlighted by Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen (2018). In their article reporting on findings from their Norwegian based study examining the role that child welfare services play in supporting care leavers in their transition to adulthood Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen (2018) noted that young adults with positive relationships with their care worker demonstrated greater capacity for agency, than those without such positive relationships. The authors asserted that findings from qualitative interviews with 16 Norwegian care leavers aged between 20-32 years and who were doing well, based on the objective measures of employment and continuing education, demonstrated that positive relationships with care workers facilitated the young adults’ capacity to make agentic choices. The authors extrapolate that this indicates that positive relationships for young people in care supports them to act agentially leading to better outcomes during the transition out of care. This in turn indicates that the capacity for agency among care leavers is influenced by their interaction with the structures of the state that are there to support them through their care experiences. Further adding to this evidence, Bengtsson et al. (2020) reported on findings from a Swedish longitudinal, qualitative study with 14 care leavers about how agency is reflected within the description of the transition out of care. The authors reported that for their participants there was a link between experiences of agency throughout the life course and a positive experience of the transition out of care. They concluded there were three patterns within the transition experiences of the participants in their study. These three transitional patterns were; from care to societal insiders,

from care to societal outsiders and from care to societal inbetweeners (Bengtsson et al., 2020, p3). Common among the three patterns was a connection between a stable transitions experience and the participants' capacity to act agentially through their life course, including at times of transition. These conclusions are further echoed by Gundersen (2021) in her paper reporting on findings from longitudinal qualitative interviews with 24 care experienced young adults in Norway. Gundersen (2021) specifically focused upon findings related to understanding how the participants developed agentic capacity. Further confirming findings in the literature previously presented, Gundersen (2021) concluded that positive relationships were a necessary component in supporting young people in care to develop agency. However, building on past research Gundersen (2021, p.692) argues:

“The ability for care experienced people to continuously develop their agentic capacity are (sic) interdependent and rest on mutual interaction with people they feel that they can trust and who continue to be there for them.”

The capacity to make agentic choices is understood to indicate an increased possibility of a positive outcome for care experienced young adults. However, not everyone has an equal opportunity to act with agency and there is a link between structural forces and an individual's capacity for agency. For care leavers this can relate to the ways in which child welfare systems encourage the development of relationships which support the young person's capacity to act agentially. Maintaining relationships that may support the capacity to exercise agency continues to be important beyond childhood into early adulthood.

Challenges in Education

Findings from an Irish based study relating to the educational journeys of care experienced adults, using the theoretical frame of the life course perspective are reported in Brady and Gilligan's (2020a and 2020b) papers. Eighteen adult care leavers, between the ages of 25-35 years, were interviewed about their experiences in education. The objective of the study was to illuminate the ways in which educational journeys of care experienced youth can be better understood. This was important because of the challenges care leavers face within education. Brady and Gilligan (2020a, p. 121) highlight this arguing, *“while some young people with care experience progress to later stages of education, lower numbers of care experienced people pursue higher education”*. There were two limitations to this study. Firstly, it is a small qualitative study and therefore it cannot deliver a fully representative sample. Secondly, most of the participants had in fact pursued higher education, thus they were not representative of the majority experience of care leavers. Fortunately, this provided the authors with an opportunity to understand factors that support higher educational attainment. This was of value as Harrison (2020), in his article discussing the challenges of accurately identifying the number of care experienced young adults who pursue higher education, highlights that across all datasets care experienced young adults have significantly lower than average likelihood of participation in higher

education. Moreover, Harrison (2020) highlights the need for education providers to offer a broader range of opportunities for care experienced young people to enter education, taking account of their potentially disrupted experiences of education. Brady and Gilligan (2020a) argued that while over time, both structural and contextual forces influenced the negative outcomes experienced by care leavers, the role of agentic actions by those with care experience was significant in understanding the ways in which care leavers addressed challenges they faced in relation to their educational journeys. In addition, Brady and Gilligan (2020b) argued that the idea of ‘linked lives’, an important concept within life course research, also helped illuminate the issues indicating that not only was it *“never too late to offer educational support to care leavers”* (p227) but that potentially there are a range of relevant resources that could be made available to care experienced young people throughout their life course. ‘Linked lives’ often references to the importance of family as a resource and of note for the participants reported on in Brady and Gilligan’s paper, this did not always refer to birth family. Instead, the participants in the study (Brady and Gilligan, 2020b), named both foster carers and residential staff as key supports indicating the importance of maintaining a broad view of what constitutes ‘family’ when talking to care experienced youth and young adults. Thus, while progression through education is a challenge faced by care leavers, Brady and Gilligan’s papers emphasise the potential for both agentic decision making and ongoing supports to improve opportunities for achievement in higher education. This is true even in the context where structural and contextual aspects of the care system can reinforce these challenges.

Challenges in Housing

Stability in housing is an additional challenge faced by care experienced youth. Gypen et al. (2017) highlighted that between 11% and 35% of care experienced young adults in the USA contend with homelessness, identifying this as an area of challenge for care leavers. Similarly, an Irish based study reported that 33% of care leavers in Ireland faced homelessness within six months of exiting care (Kelleher, Corbett and Kelleher, 2000). Another more recent Irish study, that collected longitudinal and qualitative data from sixteen young people who left care at eighteen years of age was reported on by Glynn and Mayock (2021). These authors highlighted that *“there is a well-documented association between histories of state care and housing instability”* (Glynn and Mayock, 2021, p.1). The participants in the study reported on by Glynn and Mayock (2021) grew up in a variety of care settings and the authors argued that they experienced a mix of stability and instability within their post-care housing experience. A key limitation of this study was that the participants were recruited via aftercare workers, indicating that all participants were in receipt of some state support. This means that the experiences of care leavers without this support were not represented. However, similar to Brady and Gilligan’s (2020a, 2020b) papers relating to education, Glynn and Mayock were provided with an opportunity to identify what had supported their participants to manage the challenges they faced in relation to transitions in housing. Given the ties between

housing insecurity and security in other areas such as employment (McKee et al. 2020) understanding how to mitigate these challenges is important. A key finding reported by Glynn and Mayock (2021) was that while there were changes within the housing situations of their participants across the timeframe of the study, those who had ongoing support from their foster care family and those who lived in accommodation provided by the state, experienced greater stability than those who did not have such supports. Glynn and Mayock (2021, p.13) argued that those with such supports had *“a liminal space where they could feel safe and gradually mature”*. Thus, the connection between structural and contextual issues as identified by Brady and Gilligan (2020a) were reiterated in Glynn and Mayock’s (2021) study leading them to conclude that young people leaving care should receive ongoing support to either remain in their placements or to live in secure housing.

Another recent Irish study carried out by Palmer et al. (2022), focused specifically on the experiences of a group of Irish care leavers who transitioned out of care to independent living within a specific social housing programme. Palmer and colleagues (2022) carried out semi-structured interviews with sixteen young adults, aged between 18-25 years, who were in receipt of housing from a specific programme, as well as interviews with professionals working with the young people. The researchers sought to better understand challenges, both practical and emotional, faced by the young adults as they transitioned to independent living. Some of Palmer et al.’s (2022) findings in relation to wider youth transition experiences will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, however, it is of note that a key finding of the study was that although the provision of housing support was important in assisting these young adults as they transitioned out of care, the housing needs could not be understood in isolation. Like previous studies discussed, challenges faced in relation to housing as young people transition out of care cannot be separated from other challenges faced by care leavers. Furthermore, addressing housing need alone is not sufficient in helping care leavers address the challenges they face as they leave care.

Challenges in Employment

The challenge of finding secure employment for care experienced young adults was addressed by Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan (2015) in their cross-national study, conducted in Catalonia and Ireland. They interviewed twenty-two participants aged between 23 and 33 years, all of whom had significant experience of employment since leaving care. Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan (2015) argue that it is important to understand the challenges care leavers face when entering employment because, *“there is evidence that work is associated with stability and social integration for young people who have left state care”* (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan, 2015, p.185). Their study aimed to examine the work trajectories of their participants, specifically their understanding of factors that contributed to their experience of work, either positive or negative. The authors did not identify a singular pathway into work, rather multiple routes were described by their study participants. However, the authors

concluded that common factors could be identified that had contributed to the care leavers experiences in gaining employment after they had left care. These included opportunities to engage in employment during adolescence, receiving ongoing support from carers, and the young adult's capacity to act agentically, which was apparent when they described the ways in which they sought out opportunities to find employment.

A larger scale study of 1010 participants by Harrison et al. (2020) examined the employment outcomes for care experienced, higher education graduates in the UK. They noted that graduates of higher education who identified as care leavers were often also members of other groups known to be disadvantaged in employment in terms of gender, ethnicity or identifying as having a disability. This points to the relevance of structural and contextual issues when considering outcomes for care experienced young adults and in particular the intersection between disadvantaged populations and their overrepresentation within the care population. This issue is beyond the scope of this current study, however, Harrison et al. (2020) identified that care leavers require additional supports given the challenges associated with growing up in care including, stigma, lack of emotional supports and limited social networks. A key limitation of Harrison et al.'s study was that it was quantitative in nature and as such the views of the participants were not sought beyond the outcomes survey they completed. In comparison to Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan's (2015) study, Harrison et al. (2020) did not collect data on the factors the participants themselves believe may have supported them in seeking employment following the completion of their higher education qualification. However, similar to the studies discussed above regarding education and housing, the interaction between structural and contextual issues are apparent and the value of support after leaving care is highlighted as important.

Challenges in Early Parenting

The high rates of early pregnancy among care leavers was a focus of Purtell et al. (2022) in their Australia based, qualitative study conducted with service providers working with young people who had transitioned out of care and experienced an early pregnancy. Defining early pregnancy as someone becoming pregnant before the age of 21 years, their study identified a number of risk factors arising from early pregnancy including, social isolation and lack of supports. They also highlight that this group face financial and practical disadvantage as a result of growing up in care. Purtell et al. (2022) further reported that young, care experienced, parents were under greater surveillance from child protection services, when compared to non-care experienced young parents. However, the service providers interviewed as part of this study also noted that for some of the young parents, having a child was an opportunity for them to make positive changes in their lives. They also considered the provision of ongoing support as essential to addressing issues such as social isolation and the lack of resources that many care leavers experience. A limitation of the study is that it does not collect data from the young parents themselves who would be best placed to identify the supports

that would benefit them as they manage the challenges of early parenting while transitioning out of care. However, the participating service providers did identify potential supports that could help young parents to mitigate risks, an important step in improving services available.

Up to this point in the chapter attention has focused upon the objective challenges care experienced young adults can face. In the following section attention will turn to the literature relating to subjective challenges that can arise as a result of care experience.

2.2.3 Challenges within Subjective Areas

Introduction

In the previous section the evidence base regarding the challenges in relation to objective measures of education, housing, employment and early parenting, for young adults as they transition out of care was selectively unpacked. However, Bakketeig et al (2020) argue that focusing solely on objective outcomes, provides insight into only one aspect of the issues that are important. They outline the value of understanding the experiences of young people by listening to how they define success and achievement within the context of their day-to day-lives. It is important, therefore, to understand how young people in care define their subjective experiences to gain insights into how these potentially influence measurable outcomes in areas such as those discussed above. Several studies discuss the ways in which care experience can lead to negative impacts by subjective measures (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Ball et al., 2021; Moran et al., 2020) and, therefore, studies with this focus will be discussed next. Three primary areas will be examined. These are stigmatisation of care, uncertainty about a sense of belonging and the complexity of birth family relationships. Selecting studies that focus on these subjective outcomes allows the prioritisation of research that privileges the experiences of young people themselves, which is in keeping with the social constructivist approach of this current study, as outlined in the opening chapter to this dissertation and which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Stigmatisation of Care

In his book discussing shame, stigma and poverty, Walker (2014) notes that historically, stigma was a sign that marked someone as being different and less than those around them. Goffman's (1963) classic text links stigma to social identity and he argues that by stigmatising someone people are perpetuating a belief that the person with the stigma is not only different but cannot be seen as human. Moreover, by virtue of this belief Goffman said, "*we exercise varieties of discrimination through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances*" (Goffman, 1963, p.14). As Walker (2014, p.50) summarised, Goffman makes stigma relational. Thus, in Goffman's view stigma is imposed on someone by others who consider them less. This leads to what Goffman (1963, p.1)

calls in the title of his work a “*spoiled identity*” and he purports that once someone experiences stigmatisation they are likely to also experience a sense of shame (Goffman, 1963, p17). Shame arises when the person views themselves through the lens of those who stigmatised them, believing that the trait that they are stigmatised for is inherently unacceptable, leading to an internalised negative self-perception.

Blythe et al. (2012) in their Australia based, qualitative study, examining the stigma associated with being a foster carer, contended that Goffman’s research continues to guide current thinking on stigma and despite efforts of other scholars to refine Goffman’s concept there is little agreement as to the defining aspects of stigma. They argue that there is agreement that, “*stigma is socially constructed phenomenon that is relationally and contextually specific and negatively affects those who are stigmatised*” (Blythe et al., 2012, p. 236). Walker (2014) argues that stigma can apply to both group-based identities and individual identities. Moreover, in circumstances where a group is stigmatised the individual members have less agency as they are viewed as part of the wider group. While group members can choose how they respond to the stigma, Walker (2014) argues that what they cannot resist is discrimination that occurs at, “*structural, individual and intrapersonal levels*” (p.51). Thus, when a group is stigmatised, this has implications beyond the individual because structural forces can become complicit in reinforcing the impact of stigmatisation. As Blythe et al. (2012, p.236) contend “*when people are labelled, stereotyped and socially distanced from society, they experience a loss of social status and discrimination that leads to unequal treatment and opportunities*”.

Existing research about the stigmatisation of care indicates that care experienced youth and young adults internalise negative perceptions of care and that this negatively impacts their sense of self. As discussed above, being stigmatised because of a particular life experience is not unique to those growing up in care. However, it is an outcome of care that is reported across several studies (Dansey et al., 2019; Kools, 1997; Rogers, 2017). For example, Michell (2015), herself a care leaver, carried out a review of historical writings by Australian care leavers about their reflections of being in care. In her paper, she reports being struck by the consistent theme of shame that permeates the writings from the 1920s up to modern day and notes that these resonate with her own sense of shame for having been in state care. She uses Kools (1997, p 67) definition of shame to explain the impact of stigma which leads to:

“The devaluation of one’s personal identity by others through biased assumptions, description or identification in negative, stereotypical terms, and behavioral expectations and treatment in accordance with these biases or labels”.

This definition suggests that the impact of stigma lies, not solely within the experience of being in care, but in people's response to knowing about someone's care experience and an internalisation of these issues by care experienced individuals.

An internalised negative view of oneself leads to a negative impact upon identity development, a task that does not begin in adolescence but is particularly challenging during this phase in the life course. Increasingly this task of identity development is viewed, not as a linear experience, as suggested by classic theorists such as Erikson (1968), but something that is multidimensional and disparate rather than coherent, and fluid rather than dynamic. Indeed, "*selves are not pre-existing and discovered rather they are formative and develop*" (Madigan et al., 2013, p. 390). Adolescence is a time when the influence of peers is of key importance and identity is developed through comparison to others. As McAdams suggests, during adolescence "*the person and the person's social world co-author identity*" (2001, p. 1116). Young people who feel marginalised can find this phase on the life course particularly difficult. Madigan et al (2013) discuss complexity of identity development in adolescence and state that marginalised and stereotyped adolescents can be distanced from their peers and this in turn has a negative impact upon their identity development. They highlight that young people who grow up in foster care can fall into this category. Thus, the negative impacts of stigma can lead to a negative impact upon identity development as the young people in care internalise the stigmatisation, potentially leading to secrecy and internalised shame. Supportive peer relationships can contribute to helping care experienced youth manage these feelings and in turn stable placements can provide a base from which peer relationships can be developed.

This echoes the findings of Rogers' (2017) qualitative research with ten young people, aged between twelve and fourteen years, in the United Kingdom, who were living in long-term foster care. Rogers argued that it is separation from birth family that is the root cause of stigmatisation for those with care experience, and a change in legal status will not impact the reality of this separation. Crucially, he argues that it is the stability of the placement which creates an environment within which stigma can be managed, concluding that the stability of a placement is potentially more important than the young person's legal status. These participating adolescents reported feeling devalued by their peers once their peers became aware of their care status, indicating that the stigma was grounded in the response of others, not in their own experience of being in care. Rogers' study highlighted that young people managed this stigma by being cautious about who they disclosed their care status to and often chose not to tell peers. However, the participants in Rogers' study also said that they gained support from positive relationships with peers, both those who were also in care, and non-care experienced peers who did not judge them for their care status. This illuminates the potential that being stigmatised is not an inevitable outcome of care experience. Rogers notes the potential dilemma for these young people whose efforts to maintain secrecy around their care status could close off supportive peer relationships, and yet supportive peer relationships are important in helping young

people manage the shame arising from the stigmatisation. He also highlights that this approach indicates the young people's capacity for agency as they make decisions about how to manage this situation. Rogers suggests that child welfare practitioners should prioritise placement stability rather than legal permanence, "*which would promote consistency in relationships, and enable young people to better cope with stigma*" (Rogers, 2017, p. 1092).

The findings in Rogers' (2017) research discussed above are echoed in finding in Dansey et al's (2019) qualitative study with fifteen young people in care in England. These authors argued that the themes of shame and stigma were prevalent amongst their study participants and that the young people managed stigma by maintaining a secrecy around their care status. The authors noted the internalisation of shame associated with the stigma of care, leading to a negative self-perception. Echoing Goffman's (1963) theory they wrote, "*the internalisation of negative judgement can be seen as an integral part of stigma and will strongly contribute to a child's developing sense of identity and self-esteem*" (Dansey et al., 2019, p. 36). Madigan et al (2013) undertook a qualitative study with nine, 12–16 year olds, all of whom were living in foster care in Scotland. Similar to findings in Dansey et al. (2019), these authors note that the young people in their study expressed concern that people around them would respond negatively to their care status and thus the negative impact upon their sense of self came, not from reactions experienced from those around them, but a presumption that such reactions would be negative. Understanding that young people, and adults, who grew up in care are concerned that those around them will react negatively to their care status provides insight into why maintaining secrecy about their care status is important for this group. It also suggests that supporting young people to make agentic decisions about who they want to reveal their care status to is important.

Uncertainty about Belonging

When a young person moves to live with a foster family, developing a sense of belonging within this new family unit is important. Developing a sense of belonging, however, is not a singular task rather it is an ongoing, dynamic process that involves the actions of multiple actors such as the child, foster carers and birth family. A sense of belonging is also not necessarily tied to place but also to subjective factors. As Yuval-Davis (2006,) describes in her theoretical article about the politics of belonging, "*belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home' and ...about feeling safe*" (p.197) or as May (2011, p.368) describes it "*a sense of ease with one's self and one's surrounding*". Both definitions describe internalised feelings or emotions, not a status attached to an event. As May (2011) notes belonging is not a state that is established and completed, rather it is dynamic and can change across time. This suggests that a permanent placement may support the development of a sense of belonging, but it is unlikely to be enough in and of itself. Developing a sense of belonging is a challenge for children placed in care as when children are moved into a new foster family they are moving into what Rees and Pithouse (2008, p.1) describe as, "*the intimate world of strangers*".

In this process the child needs to navigate new family practices (Mihalec-Adkins et al., 2022; Morgan, 2011) and to, “*navigate between different family settings and, in this, span new and old family relations and create senses of belonging*” (Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020, p. 107). Thus, as Bengtsson and Luckow (2020) infer, developing a sense of belonging in one family does not preclude maintaining a sense of belonging within another family.

The capacity to develop a sense of belonging in long-term foster care can be tied to how the young person navigates relationships with both birth and foster families. Christiansen et al.’s (2013) qualitative study in Norway with forty-three young people who had experienced stability in foster care, investigated if they had also experienced security and belonging within their birth family. They concluded that the young people and their foster carers did develop a sense of belonging but that the young people also had a sense of belonging to their birth families. The authors argued that foster carers should be facilitated to express their long-term commitment to their foster children, and simultaneously respect a child’s affiliation to their birth family. This suggests that it is through valuing both birth and foster family relationships, and understanding how these complex relationships can coexist, that children can be supported to develop a sense of belonging within foster families.

The importance of considering how children can develop a sense of belonging was noted by Biehal (2014). She argues that while there is much emphasis placed on legal and physical aspects of permanence for children in care, it is important to also consider subjective notions of permanence. This includes how young people create a sense of belonging, within birth and/or foster families. Biehal undertook a mixed methods study with 196 children from across England who had either lived within the same foster family for at least 3 years, or who had been adopted from foster care. She found that the participants within her study fell into four categories of belonging which she describes as: **as if** - where the young people viewed their foster carers ‘as if’ they were their birth parents (p959); **‘just like’**- these children identified their foster carers as being ‘just like’ another set of parents; **‘qualified belonging’** - this group had a greater sense of anger and ambivalence towards their birth family than the other two groups but still considered their foster family a family for life (p963) and; **‘provisional belonging’** - which refers to a sense of wanting to belong, but not certain that it is a ‘forever family’ (P964). A child’s sense of belonging within one of these categories was derived from a combination of factors. These included factors such as day-to-day family practices within the foster family, actions and commitments of the foster carers and the birth parents, children’s memories of the past and current experiences of family, and the value children placed upon blood or non-blood relationships (Biehal, 2014, p955). Biehal’s categories demonstrate the nuanced nature of “belonging” and indicate why this can be a complex challenge for children growing up in care. It also suggests that creating a sense of belonging is a shared task involving the child, foster carers and birth family and can be tied to the child negotiating permanence.

Bengtsson and Luckow (2020) suggest that belonging is an unconscious part of everyday life, and it is something that people only become aware of once they do not feel it. The researchers sought to understand how young people in foster care created a sense of belonging through data gathered in a qualitative study focused on adolescent experiences of growing up in foster care in Denmark. Analysis of the video diaries that two female participants kept for the study revealed diverse experiences of belonging and diverse experiences of creating belonging within their foster homes. Echoing Biehal's earlier study, this study highlights the dynamic nature of belonging. In addition, their findings indicated that for children in care, belonging is not presumed and that it is formed through conscious actions. Both participants in Bengtsson and Luckow's (2020) study created their own sense of belonging, albeit predicated upon different experiences. For one participant belonging was tied to an emotional attachment to her foster carers and a sense of being at home in her foster house. For the other participant, functional, practical parenting tasks carried out by her foster carers helped her to develop a sense of belonging to them. Bengtsson and Luckow (2020) note that when both participants reflected on being in care, they were aware of being different to their peers and that this created a tension for them and set them apart from their peers. This echoes the literature about stigma, suggesting the potential that the impact of struggling to develop a sense of belonging is similar to the impact of the stigma felt from being in care. In addition, it is not a challenge that non-care experienced young adults necessarily face.

Complexity in Birth Family Relationships:

Care experienced youth and young adults often continue to have contact with their birth family, both while in care and into early adulthood, after they have formally exited care. While there are divergent opinions as to the impact of birth family contact on young people in care, in the main, academic discourse indicates the importance of birth children maintaining contact with their birth family, even after they have been permanently removed from their care and in some cases are adopted (Neil et al., 2013). Neil et al (2013, p.6) in discussing outcomes from their longitudinal research examining post-adoption contact for children adopted from care in the UK, highlight that ongoing contact is important in helping the child to manage issues such as understanding why they were placed in care, development of their own identity and understanding their background. However, there is widespread recognition that managing relationships with birth family can be complex and create additional challenges for care experienced youth. The right to maintain links with birth family from whom a child has been separated is named in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Collings & Wright, 2022a, p. 1). Numerous systematic reviews have been carried out examining this issue and while they highlight the importance of ongoing contact, they also acknowledge the complexity that these relationships involve, both in childhood (Atwool, 2013; Boyle, 2017; Fuentes, MJ., Bernedo, IM., Salas MD., 2019; Luu et al., 2019; Maaskant et al., 2016;

McWey et al., 2010) and into early adulthood (Havlicek, 2021; Holland & Crowley, 2013; Lockwood et al., 2015).

Not all young people in care have a similar experience of birth family contact and the best predictor of positive outcomes is a collaborative approach between foster carers and birth family (Boyle, 2015; Neil et al., 2003; Neil and Beek, 2020). In her systematic literature review of UK literature including primarily qualitative, with some quantitative studies, Boyle (2017) reviewed eleven articles that discussed contact experiences of children in care. The studies reviewed related to both adopted children and children in long-term care. Boyle (2017) sought to gain insights into the capacity of birth family contact to help children in care resolve issues around attachment, loss and identity. The findings indicate that while contact helps some children, for others continuing a relationship with birth parents can have a negative impact on the child. Boyle was unable to comment about the impact of different forms of contact i.e., letter box contact, face-to-face visits or phone contact, on the outcomes, however, she did note that contact with different family members was often diverse, concluding, *“in nearly all cases, where contact between children and birth parents was problematic, contact with siblings and grandparents was positive”* (Boyle, 2017, p. 31). This illuminates that birth family contact does not have to be limited to birth parents and that different contexts can impact experiences of contact. Highlighting the importance of practitioners not adopting a blanket approach to contact and that each child’s individual circumstances should be considered, Boyle concluded her review by asserting, that contact was most likely to be positive when foster carers had a positive attitude to birth parents. While this small study did include the views of children within a variety of permanent care placements and it included studies that examined views of the child and foster carers, a clear limitation is the absence of empirical work that reflected the views of birth parents.

The role of foster carers in birth family contact was also discussed by Fuentes et al. (2019) who argue that contact can act as a support to foster placements. Their research was based in Spain and involved focus group interviews with nine foster carers and eight social workers examining their opinions about birth family contact for children in care. They concluded that both groups understood contact to be useful for young people in care because it allowed the young people in care to retain a realistic view of their birth family and that subsequently they were less likely to fantasize about reunification or have unrealistic expectations about the life they would lead if they were living with their birth family. Maintaining a positive relationship with birth family is also credited with supporting the development of a stronger bond with long-term foster carers. In his classic USA based study Poulin (1985), reporting on the impact of adjusting to a foster placement while managing birth family contact for eighty children in foster care, notes that in cases where children in long-term foster care had contact with their birth family, they were less likely to have divided loyalty between their birth and foster families. It is suggested that this is because the young people can use their foster families as a secure attachment base from which to explore their relationships with their birth family

(Atwool, 2013). These findings echo those of Neil et al (2011) who reported from their research with adoptive parents, long-term foster carers and birth parents in the United Kingdom, that for some adoptive parents, ongoing contact with birth family had a positive impact on their foster child's capacity to settle into their adoptive placement. While there are many positives associated with birth family contact, there are also concerns that at times it can be detrimental to a child's development and threaten the security of long-term foster placements. Some authors suggest that ongoing contact with birth family can lead to young people having a sense of divided loyalty. In this way, contact can threaten the stability and security of foster care placements (Leathers, 2003; Luu et al., 2019; Maaskant et al., 2016).

High levels of self-reported contact with birth family, after aging out of care, was found within research reviewed by Havlicek (2021). The sixteen articles she examined for a systematic literature review, were all about USA based research, and indicated that there were high reports of contact with birth mothers both during and after care. However, Havlicek (2021) concluded that little is known about the type of supports that birth family offers care experienced young adults. Furthermore, Havlicek points to a dearth of qualitative data discussing how young adults repair relationships with birth parents and manage potential risk to themselves once they have left care. Havlicek (2021) argues that in many instances the process of arranging contact is tied to policies around permanence for children-in-care and she cautions it is possible that in a system where there is a focus on legal permanence that pre-existing relationships with birth family may be undervalued or not considered. A clear limitation of Havlicek's study is the fact that it reflects the USA system where legal permanence for children in care is more strongly promoted than in Ireland, for example. It is noted that in many countries the level of birth family contact declines after long-term care orders are made (Neil et al., 2003). In their recent study in New South Wales (NSW) which included interviews with twelve birth parents and twenty-six permanent carers and focused on post-adoption contact, Collings & Wright (2020, p. 2) state,

“In reality, after long-term care orders, and especially within adoption, face-to-face communication between a child and family members tends to decline or terminate altogether”.

In NSW ongoing contact with birth family is mandatory after adoption-from-care and prospective adoptive parents must outline how they will ensure that contact is maintained between a child and their birth family after an adoption order has been granted (Collings, Neil & Wright, 2018; Collings & Wright, 2020). Collings and Wright (2020) found that not only did the adoptive parents in their study value safe and meaningful contact for their children, but the birth parents were also better able to adapt to their child's adoption when contact agreements were honoured. Thus, in this study there was no conflict between permanence and ongoing birth family contact being supported by the new

family. This study is important as it includes the views of birth parents. However, in the context of NSW it is mandatory for adoptive parents to agree to ongoing contact after an adoption order has been granted. A similar study in a different context could potentially result in different findings.

The importance of long-term foster carers and adoptive parents maintaining an open and empathetic view of birth family is a common theme within the literature. Research evidence indicates that this not only supports the child's relationship with the birth family but also supports the stability of the foster placement. The importance of foster carers maintaining an open attitude towards birth family was a significant theme in Saarnik's (2021) systematic literature review. Saarnik (2021) reviewed twenty-four articles, representing the views of either foster carers or children in care in relation to birth family contact. These articles were based upon a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies and across a range of jurisdictions, representing diverse child welfare systems including Canada, USA, UK, Australia and Sweden. In the articles reviewed from the perspective of the foster carers, a significant theme was the atmosphere in the foster family home, specifically the foster carers belief that they should talk openly to their child about their past and "*not bad mouth*" (p. 9) their birth family. This was echoed in the articles reviewed from the perspective of the children who emphasised the importance of remaining in contact with their birth parents and a desire that their foster carers should be inclusive and respectful of their birth parents. Saarnik (2021) highlights that this is a complex task and one for which foster carers and children will need support. While Saarnik's (2021) review offers insights into the factors that can support contact for children in care a key limitation is the variety of contexts and methodologies represented within the study. As has been shown through other research presented within this current chapter, the context within which the contact occurs can impact the experience of the contact for all involved.

Ongoing contact with birth family into adulthood is an emotionally complex issue yet much of the literature focuses on physical contact and does not examine the emotional nature of these relationships (Fargas-Malet & McSherry, 2021). Reporting findings from the longitudinal pathways study based within Northern Ireland, McSherry's 'Care Pathways and Outcomes' study is tracking placements, and measuring outcomes for 374 children who were in care in Northern Ireland and under the age of five years on the 31st March 2000. The young people were placed in a range of settings including kinship care, foster care, adoption and on a Residence Order ⁸. Reporting on findings from Phase 4 of the study when the young people were aged between 17-25 years, Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2021) argued that placement type did not determine how care experienced youth reacted to their birth family. The authors developed four categories to describe relationships between the young people in their study and their birth families. These categories are '**curiosity**' (p.

⁸A Residence Order is a court order that declares where a child should live. A Residence Order does not effect a child's legal relationship with their birth parents.

8), referring to the participants motivation to seek out information about their birth family when they lacked information. Participants in the second category **“indifference or lack of interest”** (p. 12) often had a strong attachment to their foster or adoptive family, with indifference toward their birth family strengthening over time. The third category of **“ambivalence or mixed/troubled feelings”** (p. 15) consisted of young people who struggled to come to terms with their birth family’s behaviour and they desired what they considered to be a “normal family”. **Contentment/satisfaction** (p. 20) describes the final category which includes young people who were content with their relationships with their birth family. Many of this group had a positive relationship with birth family and considered their family to consist of members of both their birth and foster/adoptive families. Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2021) note that some participants had different relationships with different family members and that placement type did not determine their emotional reaction to birth family. They also argue that the children and young people’s attitude to birth family changed over time and that young people should be supported to manage relationships with birth family throughout their life. The individuality of responses of care experienced youth to birth family relationships is evident within these categories and the role of foster or adoptive parents in reinforcing the importance of birth family connections is significant across the duration of a child’s placement and remains important into adulthood. Moreover, these connections are not simply about face-to-face contact, they are closely tied to the young person’s internalised view of what constitutes family and how they can reconcile being connected to two families.

Family should not be defined solely by legal ties. Evidence of shared family practices (Morgan, 1996; 2011) and family display (Finch, 2007) also contribute to creating family and point towards a shift towards seeing family as something people do (Fargas-Malet & McSherry, 2021). Morgan (1996) coined the term ‘family practices’ which referred to:

“Little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken for granted existence of practitioners. Their significance derives from their location in wider systems of meaning” (Morgan, 1996, p.190)

This concept provided a language about family that moved beyond relationships to encapsulate the ways in which family was changing and to differentiate between policy driven ideas of what a family was and the daily reality of living as family (Morgan, 2011, p.3). In addition, the concept of family practices allows for an approach that views ‘family’ as an adjective rather than as a verb (Morgan, 2011, p.5) and in this way people can describe ‘doing’ family rather than ‘being’ family. This indicates a shift away from traditional ideas of family to incorporate a more broad understanding of family life. Building upon Morgan’s idea of family practices, Finch (2007, p.77) proposed that the term ‘family display’ refer to *“the conveying of meanings through social interactions and the acknowledgement of this by relevant others”*. Finch (2007) further proposed that the tools of display

include items such as displaying photographs, giving of gifts that convey the meaning of a relationship as well as sharing stories or narratives about family which allow the narrator to demonstrate that they are talking about their family. Finch (2007) argues that ‘display’ is different to ‘practice’ as ‘display’ does not refer to everyday practices of family life. An example provided by Finch includes that of a father reading a bedtime story. For a father who is present in their child’s life every day this is understood as a family practice, however, if the father is a recent stepfather, for example, reading a bedtime story could be understood to be a family display. Thus Finch (2007) declares that *“display is an important part of the nurturing and development of relationships so that their ‘family-like’ qualities are ‘positively established”* (Finch, 2007, p.80).

While these fluid and dynamic understandings of family can provide insights into ways young people in care can develop a sense of belonging to a foster family, they also highlight the potential that belonging to birth family continues to be possible even in circumstances where young people have no face-to-face contact. Holland and Crowley (2013, p.61), who undertook qualitative research with 16 care experienced young adults aged between 17-25 years in Wales, describe birth family as maintaining an “emotional co-presence” in the lives of young people living in foster care. Similar to findings in other studies, they argue that a young person’s emotional tie to birth family is dynamic and changes over time. How relationships with birth family shift over time is presented in Skoglund et al.’s. (2019) longitudinal study with young people growing up in kinship care in Norway. These authors reported on qualitative findings regarding three participants in their study and the development of the relationships between young people growing up in kinship care and their birth parents over a fifteen year period. Their findings echo other studies reported on in this chapter, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of relationships. However, they also describe that the participants, reporting on relationships with their birth parents, as they got older:

“[They] ascribe meaning and content to their relationships with birth parents in relation to their life situations, their birth parents’ life situations and other relationships, in their interpretation of the past, the present and the future, in relation to contemporary understandings of what a parent is or should be”

(Skoglund et al., 2019, p. 948).

This suggests that young people’s relationships with birth family is tied to an understanding about how birth family should behave and act.

Accepting the significance of birth family within the emotional lives of care experienced youth and young adults requires creating a broad definition of family. Boddy (2019) argues that in part how the state frames family creates difficulties for young people in care as they negotiate relationships with birth family. She notes that the state can categorise a family as being either ‘bad’ or ‘good’, failing to consider the impact of issues such as poverty and social disadvantage on child welfare

cases, or allow for the fact that young people in care experience family differently to the majority population (p2240). She suggests that while accepting the complexity involved, policy makers should allow for multiple meanings of family, urging policy makers to think “beyond contact”. Boddy does not suggest that we should see care as, “*a reconfiguration of the child’s family*” (Boddy, 2019, p. 2247). Drawing on data from two cross national studies that she and colleagues undertook in a European context, Boddy concludes that when policy makers and service providers are considering meanings of ‘family’ and how ‘family’ relates to the best interests of the child, they should think beyond childhood and consider implications into adulthood. In addition, for young people who grow up in care policy makers should be mindful that “*relationships may be simultaneously experienced as positive and negative, supportive and concerning- and may feel more or less like family over time*” (Boddy, 2019, p2247). These points are relevant for any study considering the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence and who are navigating youth transitions, including the transition out of care, because, as Boddy has implied, birth family relationships continue to be significant beyond care and into adulthood.

Mental Health

Challenges relating to mental health have been identified within studies examining lived experiences of care leavers. Within current research it is noted that young people in care have greater mental health needs than their non-care experienced peers (Sims-Schouten and Hayden, 2017) and these needs are often exacerbated as they transition out of care (Butterworth et al., 2017; Dixon, 2016). The mental health and wellbeing of care leavers often intersect with their reasons for being in care and should be understood alongside the reported poor outcomes in areas such as unemployment, early parenthood, homelessness and education (Sims-Schouten and Hayden, 2017), all challenges that were discussed earlier in this chapter. In a qualitative study based in the United Kingdom, Butterworth et al (2017) examined the mental health needs of twelve care leavers, receiving support from mental health services as they were transitioning from Child and Adolescence Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS). These authors uncovered that for the young people in their study the transition to AMHS was a negative experience. This was because it coincided with the transition out of care. However, when you examine this finding more deeply it is the endings of relationships with CAMHS health providers that led to the study participants reporting the negative impact as they transitioned from CAMHS to adult services. These findings echo other literature discussed in this chapter highlighting that continuity of relationships from adolescence and into adulthood is important for care experienced youth.

Research aimed at understanding the needs of care leavers with mental health and/or intellectual disabilities was undertaken by Kelly and colleagues (2022) who surveyed 314 social workers in Northern Ireland. They highlight the over-representation of young people with mental health and/or intellectual disability needs within the care population, and they conclude that this cohort require

additional supports as they navigate the transition out of care. Sapiro and Ward (2020) within a review of recent international literature examined the mental health needs of a range of marginalised youth, including care leavers, focusing on the ways in which marginalised youth experience connections to others. They argued that forming connections can help marginalised youth because it fosters growth, and it helps the young people to develop relationships that support “*healthy interdependence as well as greater independence*” (Sapiro and Ward, 2020, p.354). They concluded that understanding how marginalised youth form connections with others should be an important consideration for practitioners and policy makers as it would contribute to supporting positive mental health. As with the other issues discussed within this section mental health cannot be viewed in isolation. Experiences for care experienced young adults can be better understood when examined in relation to other aspects of their life and as discussed throughout this chapter the significance of supportive relationships in helping care experienced youth cope with mental health, and other, challenges is of note.

2.2.4 Conclusion

Care experiences lead to many challenges in the lives of youth and young adults. This section of the literature review has highlighted that while these challenges are often viewed within objective measures of outcomes in areas such as housing, education, employment and early parenting, other literature highlights the importance of examining subjective experiences of care experienced youth and young adults. Failing to understand subjective experiences can result in a lack of understanding about the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the issues facing care experienced youth. Both objective and subjective challenges can be supported through the provision of stability, continuity of relationships and they both require an understanding of the individuality of young people’s care experiences.

2.3 Debates about Permanence and Stability within Foster Care

2.3.1 Introduction

In this section of the literature review the different meanings and understandings of permanence for care experienced youth and young adults will be examined. Broader conceptualisations of permanence have begun to emerge within recent academic discourse and therefore, the ways in which conceptualisations of permanence are evolving should be investigated. Emerging research has highlighted the significance of subjective experiences of permanence for young people in care, leading to a shift away from equating permanence with a legal status, such as adoption (Pérez, 2017; Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2018). In addition, conceptualisations of permanence vary across different contexts. Moreover, within current academic debate it is understood that permanence for young people in care cannot be guaranteed (Rolock et al., 2018). Finally, in the context of grounding permanence within relationships, rather than within a legal process, establishing permanence can be

understood to involve the young person as an active agent in a process of negotiation that continues into adulthood (Salazar et al., 2018).

In the following sections of this chapter debates surrounding the conceptualisation of permanence will be outlined, including the background to deliberations about the importance of permanence for those growing up in care, previous conceptualisations of permanence, and how discourse around these issues has begun to shift. It is of note that there is a lack of literature that examines the views of young adults who grew up in permanent foster care about their lived experiences of growing up with permanence in foster care and how this has impacted their lived experience of youth transitions, including the transition out of care.

2.3.2 Rationale for Permanence in Placements

Permanence planning has been the focus of child protection and welfare policy, particularly within the UK and USA, for many decades, described as “*the hallmark of child welfare policies and practices*” (Pérez, 2017, p. 179). A focus on permanence arose amidst ongoing and long-standing concerns about foster care drift (Neil & Beek, 2020), characterised as a “*lengthy placement away from the natural family without a clear goal to return the child or find some other permanent home*” (James, 2004, p. 1). The response to these concerns about drift was to focus on permanence planning for young people in care (Rolock et al. 2018; Rolock and White, 2016; Neil & Beek, 2020). This was predicated on the belief that it was placement instability and drift that negatively impacted the daily experiences of children in care. Furthermore, it was believed that permanent placements would minimise drift and provide the stability required to counteract this (Rolock & White, 2016). While these debates can be traced back over forty years, more recently Stott and Gustavsson (2010) wrote a conceptual article, critiquing permanence policies and debating the issues of balancing permanence and stability, within the USA child welfare system. Their article examined permanence from multiple perspectives, presented literature which related to youth aging out of care and considered conflicts that arose when there was a discrepancy between understandings of permanence as defined within the legal system, and the daily experiences of youth in care. They examined USA based research related to outcomes for youth who aged out of care which, in the context of the USA, referred to young people who reached eighteen years of age while still in care not having achieved legal permanence, either through reunification with birth family, adoption, or guardianship. Stott and Gustavsson (2010) highlight that older youth (a group that they do not define but their study focuses upon adolescents aged over 12 years of age) who age out of care are likely to have entered the care system as adolescents and to have experienced multiple placement moves. They describe the enormity of the impact of changes in placement on the lives of those in care saying:

“...not only do the youth experience changes in their microenvironments, but also the entire broader social environment changes with each change in

placement; and these changes occur often. This is an especially troubling state for youth who will age out of care and will be expected to be self-sufficient with scant safety nets” (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010, p. 622)

Thus, placement instability in adolescence has a bearing beyond this stage and can contribute to a lack of supports into adulthood, negatively impacting care leavers’ experience of the transition to adulthood. For Stott and Gustavsson (2010) it was the focus on achieving permanence within the USA child welfare system that led to this instability. They argued that those who enter care as adolescents did not want to be adopted due to a perceived loyalty conflict between their birth and potential adoptive families. In circumstances where the adolescent did not want to be adopted, the authors concluded that prioritising legal permanence within the child welfare system for older children in care could perversely lead to placement instability and reduce the potential that the young person will achieve relational permanence (Stott and Gustavsson, 2010). A limitation of this article is that it draws upon the USA context where, once it has been established that a child cannot return to live with birth family, achieving legal permanence, through adoption or guardianship, becomes the primary goal of the child welfare system. However, Stott and Gustavsson (2010) offer a critical reflection on this system and in illuminating the discrepancy between the aims of the USA child welfare system and the experiences of a group of adolescents in care, they draw attention to the value of including adolescence as active agents within the decision-making process about their own care experiences. They concluded:

“[Youth’s] view of service plans and placement changes should be documented in care files. Youth should be offered the opportunity to speak to the judge. While these may be small steps, they establish the concept that youth can be active players in the child welfare system and by extension have a sense of control over their destiny”. (Stott and Gustavsson, 2010, p. 623).

Thus, Stott and Gustavsson (2010) highlight the value of a broad conceptualisation of permanence ensuring that legal permanence is not the only option available for those in care. What these broader conceptualisations of permanence are will be considered in the following sections of this chapter.

2.3.3 Permanence Conceptualised as Adoption

Through the 1970s and 1980s research, almost all of which was conducted within the United Kingdom and United State of America, indicated that the legal status of ‘foster care’ created uncertainty and ambiguity of position for the young person in care. Foster care was believed to be, by definition, temporary and therefore could be ended at any time (Tresiliotis, 1983). Researchers argued that this ambiguity led to children having no sense of belonging within their foster families and thus contributed to placement breakdowns (Tresiliotis & Hill, 1990). Within several studies this insecurity was linked to care leavers having a poor sense of wellbeing and belonging that endured

into adulthood (Triseliotis,1983; Tizard,1977; Thoburn and Rowe,1988; Hill and Triseliotis,1989; Bohman and Sigvardsson,1990; Triseliotis & Hill, 1990). This finding was summarised by Triseliotis and Hill (1990) who drew on findings from two UK based studies. The first of these studies included 124 young adults who had been either adopted from care, raised in a foster care family or grew up in residential care. The second study included 52 children aged between nine and eighteen years who had recently moved from a foster care family to an adoptive family. Triseliotis and Hill (1990, p107) made a link between the wellbeing of those in care and foster care drift concluding that when compared to the young adults who grew up in foster or residential care, the young adults who had grown up in adoptive homes had a better sense of self and were managing their daily lives better in both social and economic matters. The policy response to these concerns was a shift towards social work practices, within child welfare systems, that focused on ensuring that children in care grew up within stable and secure placements with the aim of minimising drift and improving outcomes in adulthood (Koh & Testa, 2008; Testa, 2004). In the UK Triseliotis (1983, 1989,2002) was influential, arguing that it was the temporary nature of foster care that led to the issues described above. He argued that securing adoptions for young people who could not return home to their biological families would create more permanence in placements, leading to better outcomes in adulthood (Triseliotis, 1983 and 2002).

It was within this context that adoption became the primary policy pursued within the UK and USA. It was believed that adoption *“increased the possibility of creating stable family life for children, maximising their chance of developmental recovery [from pre-care experiences]”* (Quinton & Selwyn, 2009). This idea is expanded upon by Rolock et al (2018, p12) who state:

“The preference for a legal permanence status is predicated on the belief, the empirical evidence supports, that vulnerable children are best reared within the realm of a permanent family, where they feel a sense of security, belonging, bonding to caring adults, rather than the insecure and temporary environment that foster care provides”.

Thus, it is an underlying assumption that adoption, in and of itself, creates a permanence that cannot be replicated without such legal ties between the child and their family. This position was supported by research demonstrating that children who were adopted experienced better outcomes than those who remained in foster care or returned to live with their birth families. To this end, Bohman and Sigvardson’s (1990) classic study is worthy of scrutiny as it was one of the first studies undertaken in a jurisdiction where adoption was not a significant permanency policy. Their Swedish longitudinal study began in the mid-1950s and examined outcomes for children whose birth mother had originally considered placing them for adoption, and then subsequently the children were either raised in foster-care, adopted, or were raised with their biological families. Originally 624 children were identified

as meeting the study criteria and a variety of people were interviewed at different stages of the study including, but not limited to, foster carers, adoptive parents, birth parents, children and schoolteachers. The findings concluded that the children brought up in foster care, including placements described as de facto adoptions, had poorer outcomes than the other children brought up in adoptive homes or within biological families. This was validated on outcome measures including educational attainment, representation in the criminal justice system and mental health experiences. The authors argued that the foster carers may have been less prepared and not well supported, when compared to the adoptive parents, for the task of raising a child who was not born into their family. However, they also concluded that the poorer outcomes were potentially linked to placement insecurity which may have had a negative impact upon the relationships between the foster carers and the children.

However, even John Tresiliotis who was one of the foremost researchers in this field advocating permanence via adoption, began to reconsider the possibility that adoption was the only permanence option capable of providing the support those in care required. In a 2002 review of the UK literature at a time when permanence was very much accepted as equating to adoption, Tresiliotis concluded that adoption did offer more security, than long-term foster care, for children who could not be returned to their birth families. However, he acknowledged that within long-term foster care, it was intended that the placements would be permanent and that they would endure until the child was at least eighteen years old. He concluded that when considering permanent placements for those in care, practitioners should be aware of a multitude of factors. These included the child's age at time of placement, their relationship with their temporary foster carers, contact with their birth family and the child's own wishes. Thus, Tresiliotis (2002) understood that while adoption might be preferable in some circumstances, in other circumstances long-term foster care could provide stability and offer permanence, even in the absence of legal ties. Attention to each young person's individual circumstances was what was considered important in making the decision.

There are few studies that examine the views of young people themselves about their experiences of gaining legal permanence through adoption, having previously been in foster care. Dance and Rushton (2005) reported on the views of twenty-nine young people, in the United Kingdom, between the ages of five and eleven years who had been adopted from care or were placed in foster placements which eventually became adoptive placements. They concluded that while not all children who were adopted from care would have chosen this option, the majority saw adoption as a possibility for a new start. Hanna et al (2011:128) published what they claimed was the first study to explore the experiences of those adopted-from-care from the perspective of the adoptee. They investigated the experiences of thirty young adults in the United States, aged 18-25 years, who were moved from a foster family to an adoptive family after the age of eight. Their participants concurred that adoption was a suitable permanency option that gave them a second chance and a sense of belonging to a

family. However, in both of these studies the young people were discussing the move to an adoptive family from a foster family where a long-term placement was not the original intention. An important shift in conceptualisations of permanence away from adoption and legal permanence, towards subjective and relational aspects of permanence has illuminated how long-term placements that are intended to endure can potentially replicate the security found within adoptive placements. Studies that focus on these issues will be discussed in the next section.

2.3.4 Understandings of Permanence Shifting Beyond Adoption

As demonstrated in the previous section, a number of researchers have argued that adoptive placements are less likely to disrupt than long-term foster care placements. However, there are also studies that challenge this idea. In 1997 Gilligan argued that an over reliance on permanence within child welfare systems risked overlooking the myriad of complex issues that influence a child's progress. Moreover, when permanence is the primary focus there is a risk of failing to pay attention to the implications for those children who do not achieve permanence. Gilligan (1997) suggests a resilience framework may be needed to manage the challenges that care experiences bring. Gilligan (1997, p.15) outlines the building blocks of resilience as being a secure base, self-esteem and a sense of self efficacy and he argues that bringing these issues to the fore would ultimately ensure that care planning focused on all the factors that support a young person in care and may, where appropriate, include permanence planning.

Gilligan (1997) was not the only researcher to highlight the relevance of the concept of resilience when considering how to support young people to establish permanence within their placements. Before Gilligan (1997) published his research Rutter (1987, p.317) described resilience in his classic theoretical text that discussed the mechanisms that protect people who experience psychological adversity as "*the positive ability of people to refer to stress but also to hope and optimism in the face of adversity*". Reflecting on the ways 'resilience' is used within social sciences literature Olssen et al. (2015, p.2) describe the concept as being "*elusive*" although they assert that within recent research resilience is understood to relate to people's capacity to cope with stress "*or more precisely the return to some form of normal condition after a period of stress*" (Olssen et al., 2015, p.1). In a critical literature review focusing on resilience among social work students and social workers Collins (2017, p.1) asserts that resilience is relevant to social workers because the concept encourages a more positive orientation and rather than focusing on clients', "*deficits, passivity, vulnerability, risk and low expectations*" focusing on resilience leads to "*an increased emphasis on positives, assets, strengths, protective factors, agency and the potential to see adversity as an opportunity for growth*" (Collins, 2017, p.1). However, Collins (2017) also emphasises that this is not to suggest that people who demonstrate resilience cannot at other times experience negative emotions such as sadness, distress, anxiety and hopelessness.

Gilligan (2004) in his theoretical paper discussing the concept of resilience, maintains a specific focus upon its relevance to how social workers can build resilience within their clients by drawing, where possible, on certain natural qualities within children and their families. The definition Gilligan (2004, p.93) draws on comes from Luthar et al. (2000, p.543) and it describes resilience as being “*a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of adversity*”. Gilligan (2004) further asserts that resilience is not a fixed trait rather it is “a variable quality that arises in the context of repeated interactions between a person and favorable features of the surrounding context in a person’s life” (p.94). Therefore Gilligan (2004) argued the degree to which a person displays resilience is related to the extent to which relationships that nurture resilience are present within a person’s own context. He suggests that it is through the development of such positive relationships that the building blocks described above, of a secure base, self-esteem and a sense of self efficacy (Gilligan, 1997) can be nurtured and moreover, resilience can be fostered within clients once favorable contexts and relationships are present. In addition, he concludes that while some people may demonstrate resilience within some aspects of their life it does not follow that they will display similar levels of resilience across other domains of their life. This suggests that in order to create an environment through which resilience is nurtured attention should be given to the development of positive relationships across all contexts of someone’s life as this is key to the building of resilience within the lives of the people social workers work with, including care experienced youth and young adults.

Building on the importance of resilience in supporting the development of permanence in the lives of those in in care, two USA studies are worth mentioning here. The first by Rolock (2015) drew upon administrative data collected for 22,563 children who had been adopted or taken into legal guardianship in Illinois. The second by Rolock and colleagues (2016) drew upon administrative data that tracked 51,576 children over a ten-year period in the same state who exited foster care through adoption or guardianship. The authors in both studies sought to understand continuity, and discontinuity, within adoption, foster care and guardianship placements. Drawing conclusions from their findings they argued that adoption was no guarantee of permanence and while the intention that a placement would be long-term was important, these intentions do not always endure. They concluded that it is equally important that efforts are made to promote resilience and wellbeing, even after adoption. These studies indicated that legal status alone offers no guarantee of permanence. Therefore, focusing solely on permanence risks failing to provide other supports a child may need to adapt to life living away from their birth family. Although writing decades apart, and based in different jurisdictions, Gilligan (1997) and Rolock (2015) and Rolock et al. (2016) drew similar conclusions, that a singular focus upon permanence does not always lead to positive outcomes for care experienced youth and a wider focus upon resilience enhancing measures (including attention to issues of permanence and stability) may lead to better outcomes for the young person.

The risk that prioritising adoption could disadvantage older children in the foster care system was the concern at the centre of the previously discussed Stott and Gustavsson's (2010) research. As discussed, they argued that some older foster youth do not want to be adopted because they consider this a betrayal of their biological families and, echoing findings in other studies, they note that older foster youth can view adoption as creating a conflict between their foster and their biological families (Sanchez, 2004; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). However, adolescents can still derive benefits from stable and secure placements, where adoption is not the intended outcome. The issues for older adolescents highlight the complexity attached to achieving secure placements. Even in cases where older adolescents secure legal permanence, ongoing relational permanence into adulthood is not guaranteed. This was the finding of a qualitative study, conducted by Pérez (2017) in the USA, with thirty-one young adults, who had exited care in adolescence through adoption, guardianship, or kinship placement. Pérez (2017) wanted to understand whether legal permanence translated into relational permanence over time. He found that relationships between the young adults and their legal caretakers could be divided into four categories of "felt relational permanence" (Pérez, 2017 p.184). He called these categories; enduring, ambivalent, spurned and severed and he illustrated them using key exemplars from his study. **Enduring relational permanence** referred to the participants who were placed at a young age with their carers, and who described a sense of belonging and described feeling loved as well as an ongoing connection to birth parents. Pérez (2017, p.183) outlines that many of the participants in this group described "*an authoritative parenting style...signifying to the young adults that their caretakers were committed to them for the long-term*". Of note is the exemplar of James' case, provided by Pérez (2017, p.184) to illustrate this category. Pérez reported (2017, p.184) that James described having an active role in decisions related to his care which allowed him to both achieve legal permanence with his grandmother and maintain a relationship with his biological father. Thus, the establishing of enduring relational permanence incorporated both agentic decision making by the young person and allowed for the inclusion of birth parents in their life. **Ambivalent relational permanence** was illustrated by Pérez (2017, p.184) using the exemplar of Robert who was placed in care at birth, reported five foster care moves before his first adoption at the age of ten years, the breakdown of this placement when he was fourteen years old, and his subsequent adoption by a different couple when he was sixteen. Pérez (2017, p.185) reported that Robert believed that his new adoptive parents were an answer to his prayers, but he also conveyed mixed feelings towards this family, with a strong relationship with his adoptive mother but an ambivalent relationship with his adoptive father. Pérez (2017, p.185) reported that Robert described feeling separated from his adoptive father. Robert is described as being supported by his adoptive parents to maintain a close relationship with his biological family who became his primary support during his transition to adulthood, a situation that Pérez said caused Robert to fear he had damaged his relationship with his adoptive family and led to him distancing himself from them. Thus, in the case of Pérez's category of ambivalent relational permanence an ongoing

relationship with birth family was also supported but did not co-exist with an ongoing relationship with the adoptive family.

The third category of **spurned relational permanence** was described through the narrative of Dawn who Pérez (2017) reports entered the care system when she was nine years old and experienced thirteen placement moves before exiting care at fourteen years through legal guardianship. Pérez (2017) described Dawn as sharing a narrative describing her placement being unstable and close to disruption in adolescence. Dawn remained in this placement at the request of her guardian but when Dawn left home to go to college her guardian no longer wanted any contact with her although Dawn, *“continued to yearn for a relationship with her guardian”* (Pérez, 2017, p.185). Indicating that spurned relational permanence is characterised by the young adult desiring a relationship with their carer in adulthood but this not being reciprocated by the carer. Roxy was the exemplar for the final category of **severed relational permanence**. Pérez described Roxy as experiencing abuse in two foster homes and exited care when she was adopted, aged 17 years, by one of these foster mothers. Pérez (2017, p.186) described the participants in the group of severed relational permanence as believing that *“their care takers, regardless of relationship, used legal permanence to promote or protect their self-interest, rather than the interest of the youth in their care”*. Pérez (2017) reported that Roxy’s relationship with her foster mother deteriorated after her adoption, and this led to Roxy cutting ties with her adoptive mother. Thus, severed relational permanence is characterised by a relationship that ends when the child leaves care but that was potentially not grounded within a shared aim of establishing permanence when the placement commenced.

Drawing conclusions from his study Pérez (2017) reflected that the foster youth valued relational permanence over legal permanence but that the experiences of the young adults were diverse. While there were commonalities across some experiences, such as the importance of maintaining relationship with biological family, there were also differences in the ways these young people established permanence. Moreover, permanence for them changed over time with different factors being important at different times. Pérez (2017) suggested that this indicates the importance of examining the narratives of young people themselves and understanding how their subjective experiences of permanence change over time. A limitation of Pérez’s (2017) study is that it grounded within the context of the USA and therefore the findings may be less relevant in child welfare systems that do not prioritise legal permanence. In addition, the exemplars described within the study indicate a variation across a range of factors including, age at entering care, age at time of placement, age when achieving permanence and a range of different pre-permanence experiences. However, Pérez’s study (2017) does illuminate the shifting and dynamic nature of permanence, the value of gathering data from those with lived experience and the multifaceted nature of permanence for young people in care.

Other studies have found that the significant issue in relation to permanence is not the type of placement that a child is in, but it is the length of time that the placement endures that is important. The longitudinal study entitled “Care Pathways and Outcomes”, which has previously been discussed in this chapter, is ongoing in Northern Ireland. Dominic Mc Sherry and a team of researchers are tracking placements and measuring outcomes for children who were under the age of 5 years, and ‘in care’ in Northern Ireland, on 31st March 2000. The study entered its fourth phase between 2016-2022 and phase 3 findings of the study were reported in 2016 when the young people were aged 9-14 years. Phase 3 was an opportunity for the researchers to consider the impact of different placement types on the children included in the study. The children were in long-term foster care, kinship care, residence order, adopted from care or living with birth parents. At that point, the authors concluded that “*adoption was not the gold standard*” in terms of long-term placements (McSherry et al, 2016, p.56) and did not ensure better outcomes. Rather it was the longevity of the placement that had a positive impact on the well-being of the young people at the centre of the research. Long-term placements had “*enabled the formation of new and lasting attachments to their parents/carers, irrespective of the social or legal definition associated with the placement itself.*” (McSherry et al 2016, p.62). As these children grew older and the study continued there was an opportunity to understand how the young people had progressed in their placements. In 2018 the researchers reported on early-stage findings of Phase 4 which focused on the quality of the relationship between the young people and their carers rather than status of the placement. They noted that the adoptive placements were more likely to have endured and remained stable when compared to the foster placements. However, in interviews with the young adults who had been fostered, who were all aged over 18 years when interviewed, they found that they had all developed a sense of belonging to the family they had been placed with, even in instances where the placements had broken down. They attribute this to the placement being established at a crucial period for the formation of parental attachments, when the child was aged between 2 and 7 years (McSherry et al 2018, P132) This led McSherry and colleagues to conclude that:

“Even if these placements were to break down at some point before the age of 18 years, it is quite possible that the relationships would persist, suggesting potentially very high levels of relational permanence being provided for these foster children” (P132).

They define relational permanence as “*an enduring and supportive relationship between a young person and a caring adult*” (P124) and propose that placements should be considered in the context of relational permanence rather than legal status. Their findings suggest that young people in care can continue to have supportive relationships with carers even when the placement has disrupted. It is the willingness of all parties to remain committed to the relationship that supports the young person over time. Confirming the findings in other the studies, McSherry and colleagues asserted that

positive experiences in placement cannot be attributed to a singular issue, and a holistic approach to the needs of the young person is important and supports the young person in childhood and into their adult life.

2.3.5 Importance of Broadening Conceptualisations of Permanence to Include Relational Permanence

As shown above relational permanence is now an emerging viewpoint that is increasingly understood to be as significant as physical and legal permanence. A number of researchers are conceptualising permanence more broadly to better capture the range of experiences increasingly seen as influencing permanence for young people in care. Thoburn (2021), in her submission to the Care Review in the UK, highlights that permanence is more complex than legal status. She writes that the phrase:

“‘Permanence’ is frequently used for a complex set of aims and experiences. It, and terms such as ‘family life’, are ‘shorthand’ terms for a child’s need for stability, continuity, family membership, being loved and loving.”

This echoes the view of Boddy (2013, p1) who argues that a meaningful definition of permanence must recognise key qualities, *“of family relationships for children and adults across generations-including a sense of belonging and mutual connectedness and of continuity between past, present and future.”* This can be juxtaposed against earlier views of permanence, discussed above, that focused primarily on legal ties. Within this new context focusing upon lasting relationships, permanence is now believed to exist within strong and enduring emotional ties, understood as relational permanence (Ball et al., 2021; McSherry and Fargas-Malet, 2018; Moran et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2018; Jones and LaLiberte, 2013). This broader conceptualisation of permanence allows for understandings of the multiple pathways that exist to allow those in care to achieve permanence (Burge, 2022).

There is some evidence emerging that young people describing their care experiences prioritise relational aspect of permanency over legal aspects. They also describe their own permanence goals in terms of relational issues. In a USA based study by Salazar et al (2018) ninety-seven youths, still in care, aged between fourteen and twenty years, were asked how they described their permanency goals. The authors concluded *“when providing their own definitions of permanency, participant responses in the current study were overwhelmingly reflective of relational permanency rather [than] legal permanency”* (Salazar et al., 2018, p. 13). These findings echo Samuels’ study carried out nearly ten years earlier with twenty-nine young adults, aged 17-26 years, also in the USA, who had aged out of the care system without achieving permanence. These young adults described subjective experiences of permanence. Samuels argues that they had an *“ambiguous loss of home”* which they coped with by creating, *“self-defined permanence”* (p1232) and *‘building permanence after foster care’*. (Samuels, 2009 p1229). In this way, Samuels’ study illuminated the agentic

actions of the study participants and demonstrated the complexity involved in defining permanence. In her study the participants experienced permanence through relationships within their foster family and ongoing birth familial ties. Their understanding of 'family' was broader than state definitions and allowed them to experience a connection to both birth and foster family.

Awareness of individual experiences and the individual needs of those in care includes giving due consideration to the culture of the young person's birth family. Burge (2020) examined the experiences of the indigenous population in Canada placed in permanent placements with the support of a specific NGO. Burge (2020) argues that when seeking permanency for children, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds, permanency should be viewed not as a singular result such as adoption, but rather relational aspects should be considered, including children's connections within their community and family of origin. This study echoed conclusions from other research that indicates the importance of permanent families respecting the child's pre-care experiences and being open to discussing their past. However, while Burge's (2020) study is situated within the context of a particular population receiving support from a specific NGO, the ways in which foster families and young people in care, who do not have these additional supports, negotiate these issues is not widely represented in the literature but does form a part of this current study.

Findings from an Irish-based study carried out in the west of the country between 2015-2017 further highlights the importance of broadening conceptualisations of permanency (Moran et al, 2020). Moran and colleagues reported findings from their qualitative study which involved carrying out interviews with 10 young people aged between 12 years and 24 years, who were in placements considered to be long-term care (Moran et al, 2020). They conclude that there is a gap concerning how permanence and stability are conceptualised and identify the importance of subjective and relational permanence (P1124) noting the important role of relationships in how the young people they interviewed defined permanence and stability. They suggest that future research relating to experiences of permanence should incorporate a broader range of social theoretical concepts. Their study is valuable in highlighting the importance of further theorisation of permanence but does not go far enough in demonstrating insight from the young people as to how they understand the ways in which they negotiated permanence within their own placements and into adulthood.

Relational permanence is valued by young people in care and therefore, understanding how supportive relationships, leading to relational permanence, are developed and supported within the care system is important. In 2021 Ball et al. published an article outlining findings from their USA based, qualitative study that explored this further. They interviewed thirty young adults, aged between 18 and 33 years, who had lived experiences of foster care in order to gain insights into factors that supported the establishment of relational permanence. They concluded that there is no

evidence to suggest that developing long-term and meaningful relationships is the inevitable outcome of legal permanence:

“Once a child has achieved legal permanency, there is an assumption that they develop loving, lasting and supportive relationships that are essential for successfully navigating adulthood. However, extant research suggests that legal permanency does not equate to relational permanency, and little is known about the factors that help youth achieve it” (Ball et al, 2021, p1).

The authors assert that it is the quality of the relationships that young people experience while they are in care that is significant. Even in circumstances where these relationships are temporary, meaningful and supportive relationships can be formed. The findings from their study highlight the importance of subjective measure of permanence such as “*a sense of agency, genuine support and emotional connections*” (Ball et al. p.9) indicating that supporting the establishment of enduring, healthy relationships, is more significant than the legal status of the placement and that it is possible for young people in care to develop permanent relationships with their carers, regardless of the legal ties between them.

2.3.6 Conclusion

Through this review of the literature relating to conceptualisations of permanence within foster care, shifting understandings of permanence have been traced. The importance of permanent and stable placements that support young people in care, as they navigate challenges that arise within the context of growing up in care, continue to be highlighted within the literature. However, conceptualisations of permanence have developed over time and permanence is no longer understood solely in terms of legal ties between a young person and their foster family. Emerging understandings argue that permanence can also be relational in nature, tied to enduring and supportive relationships with significant people including long-term foster carers, birth family and friends. Furthermore, recent academic debate and research have demonstrated that permanence is not fixed and tangible and neither is it experienced in the same way for each young person in care. Establishing permanence is a dynamic process that is not completed rather it is continually *negotiated* by young people as they navigate relationships with foster carers and birth family. Negotiating permanence is tied to multiple factors including legal ties, relationships with birth and foster families, and physical stability and permanence of place and of note, the ending of a placement does not always lead to the end of relational permanence.

2.4 Youth Transitions:

2.4.1 Introduction

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a common experience amongst all young adults. However, not all young adults experience the transition to adulthood within the same context. It is

of note that experiences of youth transitions for care experienced young adults are widely accepted to include additional challenges that are not faced by the non-care experienced population (Gilligan, 2018; Storø, 2018; Stein, 2012; Mendes et al., (2011). These additional challenges arise as a result of what Stein (2004, p.53) has termed the “*compressed and accelerated*” transitions experiences of care leavers. Stein (2008) further cites the impact of instability within placements as increasing the potential for poor outcomes during the transition out of care. In this section of the literature review understandings of definitions of youth transitions will be examined and the relevance of this concept as a lens for examining the experiences of a group of young adult care leavers will be investigated. This will be followed by an examination of research relating to the experiences of youth transitions for care leavers. This discussion will examine research focusing on factors that potentially increase the likelihood of negative experiences and as well as research that illuminates factors that can act as a support, increasing the potential of positive experiences of the transition to adulthood for care leavers.

2.4.2 Defining Youth Transitions

It has been broadly accepted that the progression from childhood to adulthood has undergone a transformation since the last century (Furlong, 2009). This phase of the life course has been conceptualised as a phase of transitions, a term that draws attention to the lack of a clear demarcation between adolescence and adulthood. This phase of youth transitions is further recognised as being a fluid process rather than a linear experience (Coles, 2005) and during this period young people make multiple, individual decisions as they progress towards adulthood (Heinz, 2009). Theorising this phase of the life course as one of ‘youth transitions’ accurately captures the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the experience of moving from adolescence to adulthood. Coles (2005) in his theoretical book about social policy and youth argued that transitions occur in multiple aspects of a young person’s life but particularly occur in three main areas. These are; from school to work, from “family of origin to family of destination” and housing transition i.e. from living with family to living independently. While each of these are separate transitions, they are also connected and it can be understood that experiences in one area can influence outcomes and experiences in another area.

Valentine (2003, p.48) in her theoretical paper outlining a framework to better understand the processes through which young people make the transition from childhood to adulthood, in the context of children’s geography concluded:

“The distinction between the states of childhood and adulthood are not clear cut, neither are the transitions a one-off or a one-way process. Changes associated with growing up such as leaving home, getting a job, becoming a

parent may or may not be connected and may occur simultaneously, serially or not all”.

Valentine’s (2003, p.49) later reinforces the view that youth transitions should be examined within the context of individual experiences arguing that “*children/young people are not a universal category. Social differences such as race, class, gender, sexuality etc. can all play a part in defining the transitions we make*”. Thus, Valentine’s work furthers understandings of youth transitions as occurring in multiple areas of a young adult’s life and as being connected but not necessarily occurring simultaneously or in a linear way. Importantly Valentine (2003) draws attention to youth transitions experiences as being influenced by issues such as socio-economic status, gender and race and the benefit of understanding youth transitions experiences for such groups. Cielsik and Simpson (2013, p.6) in their later theoretical work examining key concepts within youth studies, concur with Valentine asserting that youth transitions are understood to be a phase within the life course of young adults characterised by:

“Multiple routes into adulthood in relation to key aspects of young people’s lives, such as education/training, employment, intimate relationships and friendships; housing and leisure”.

Cieslik and Simpson (2013) point towards understanding this gradual change from adolescence to adulthood in terms of “transitions” as important because it captures the complexity of the process and, as demonstrated in the quote above, they argued that transitions refer to *multiple routes* into adulthood across *key areas* within the life of the young adult. Similar to Valentine (2003) they caution that young adults’ lives are influenced by different factors such as race, gender and class and that these factors can potentially limit their prospective achievements during the transition to adulthood.

Bynner (2001), argues in his theoretical paper that understanding and studying experiences of youth transitions is important. Through a comprehensive discussion of the experiences of transitions for British youth Bynner (2001, p.20) highlighted the impact of issues such as cultural context, socio-economic background and gender on experiences of transitions. He argued that using a lens of youth transitions allows for ongoing investigations into:

“The processes of social change and how they are impacting young people’s situation, using comparative and longitudinal data to find out what and who are changing and who is staying locked into the now irrelevant arrangements of the past”

In this way Bynner suggested that not only is the concept of youth transitions relevant across cultures and across time but it is a useful lens through which the experiences of different groups of young

people could be examined across different domains. Using the lens of youth transitions the impacts, both positive and negative, of the different contexts highlighted by authors such as Valentine (2003) and Cieslik and Simpson (2013) can be illuminated.

The value of the lens of transitions in highlighting different experiences is reinforced by Buchmann and Kriesi (2011, p.481) in their article examining differences and similarities in Europe of experiences of youth transitions and they argue that:

“Each role and status change marks the entry into a new life domain thus requiring adaptation strategies by those who make the transitions. Transitions outcomes depend largely on the structural opportunities and constraints as well as individual resources”.

This, alongside other literature discussed in this section, indicates that while transitions experiences are common to all young adults, there is not a common experience of transitions for all youth across all populations. Moreover, through the literature there is evidence that while experiences of youth transitions are individual, structural forces are also relevant. This implies that some young adults, including those who grew up in care, will experience greater complexity as they negotiate their own transitions to adulthood. How a lens of youth transitions can help illuminate understandings of these issues within a qualitative study will be examined in the next section.

2.4.3 Youth Transitions as a Lens of Investigation in a Qualitative Study

The lens of youth transitions can be used to gain insights into commonalities and differences of experiences of youth transitions across different populations. In this way insight can be gained as to how best to support different groups within the population, including care experienced young adults, as they navigate the transition to adulthood. Increasingly, qualitative methods have been used to understand young people's individual experiences of transitions. Henderson et al (2007) in their UK study investigating the experiences of 118 young adults as they transitioned to adulthood, argued that hearing directly about the lived experiences of a specific group of young adults, allowed for an exploration of the role the young adults played in their own transitions. This further allowed for an investigation into how young people make sense of their lives “*within the dynamic processes of transition and change*” (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006, p.7). Henderson et al's. (2007) research pointed towards the significance of policies in areas such as education, employment, drugs and criminal justice in influencing the experiences of youth transitions. Their study illuminated the importance of understanding both the societal and personal contexts that influence youth transitions experiences. Moreover, any examination of a lived experience of youth transitions should reflect both of these perspectives. Henderson et al. (2007) caution that while examining the experiences of youth transitions for a group of young people can add to understandings about resources and opportunities available during this period of transition, it is not a predictor as to how their lives will

progress beyond that point. Thus, the lens of youth transitions, applied to young adults' own narratives of their lived experiences, allows for greater understanding of how young adults negotiate key transitions and the meanings they attach to their experiences within a specific context and at a particular time in their lives. In addition, using a lens of youth transitions when carrying out research with a group of young adults who have a shared experience, allows for the identification of patterns across the data collected.

2.4.4 A Competing Framework: Emerging Adulthood

An alternative framework proposed by JJ Arnett (1998) through which to understand this phase of the life course is that of emerging adulthood. It was proposed to progress understanding about how to characterise the phase of the life course between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett (1998, p.312) argued that:

“During emerging adulthood young people are in the process of developing capacities, skills and qualities of character deemed, by their culture, as necessary for completing the transition to adulthood”

For Arnett this period should be acknowledged as a distinct life stage and a young person can be said to have completed this phase of the life course, and attained adulthood, when they are self-sufficient and independent from others (Arnett, 1998). Arnett identifies the key characteristics of this developmental stage as the “*age of instability*”, “*age of identity exploration*”, “*age of focus on the self*”, “*age of in-between*” and “*age of possibility*” (Arnett, 2006a, pp. 7–14). These stages describe common patterns during this life phase, although Arnett accepted that there are diverse experiences across populations. Critics of Arnett’s conceptualisation of this phase of the life course as one of ‘emerging adulthood’ suggest that it does not capture the experience of a diverse range of young people and that ‘emerging adulthood’ only applies to young people who have the capacity to postpone attaining adulthood due to the financial and practical supports available to them that enable this delay. One such study that challenged the premise of Arnett’s emerging adulthood concept was conducted in Wales by Hendry et al. (2010). Interviews were conducted with thirty-eight young people aged between seventeen and twenty years who were either working or unemployed (Hendry, et al., 2010). These authors examined the extent to which emerging adulthood was universal across western societies. They concluded there was a flaw in viewing Arnett’s conceptualisation of emerging adulthood as a normative stage of development as it implied that those who did not fit this conceptualisation were “abnormal” (Hendry et al., 2010, p.177). The participants in Hendry et al.’s (2010) study had diverse experiences of this phase of the life course and the authors concluded their article arguing that when considering the experiences of young adults at this stage it is important to:

“Take into account the interactions of various elements such as self-agency, individual life experiences and health, relationships, economic and social

changes, structural forces, and a problematic labour market, to understand the diversity of human responses to extended periods of change, including the transitions to adulthood” (Hendry et al., 2010, p.178).

Thus, Hendry and colleagues’ research provided evidence that emerging adulthood does not allow the very comparison of diverse experiences across populations that the previous authors commend the theory of transitions for providing. Neither does the concept of emerging adulthood take account of both individual and structural forces at play in the lives of young adults as they navigate this phase of their life. Arnett (2000, p.469) himself has acknowledged that this stage of emerging adulthood “*can only exist when adult roles and responsibilities can be postponed and therefore it is not universal*”. Therefore, a weakness of Arnett’s concept is that it focuses on young people who have the capacity for individual agency and are living within a privileged socio-economic context. This is problematic because there are multiple factors, including structural forces, that influence the timing and experience of the transition to adulthood and, as demonstrated earlier, the lens of youth transitions allows these issues to be considered.

In the next section literature relating to the youth transitions experiences of care leavers will be presented.

2.4.5 Youth Transitions for Young People Leaving Care

The youth transitions experiences of young adults who grew up in care have received particular attention across many studies and within different jurisdictions. A sample of these studies include Stein (2004, 2006, 2012) who has focused upon research with care leavers in the UK while also adding to debates about different experiences of youth transitions for care leavers across international contexts (Stein and Munro, 2008). Gilligan (1997, 2008) has added to research about the youth transitions experiences of care leavers in Ireland including a particular focus on education (Brady and Gilligan, 2020a and 2020b). Youth transitions experiences in Norway, Denmark and England have been the focus of research with Bakketeig et al. (2020) and Boddy et al. (2020) and the USA context has been widely considered by Courtney and colleagues (2001). Across these studies a common theme is that care leavers begin their transition to adulthood within a different context when compared to the non-care experienced population and that young people leaving care face numerous challenges in their transitions to adulthood.

In his seminal work examining what works for young people leaving care in the UK, Stein (2004, p.53) argues that the challenges arise because care leavers experience a “*compressed and accelerated*” transition from adolescence to adulthood. When later reviewing international literature about young people leaving care Stein (2006) further expands on this assertion. He argues that a consistent finding across the research he reviewed was that young people leaving care move to independent living in their late teenage years while their non-care peers can anticipate staying at

home into their twenties. Furthermore, he concludes that in addition to moving to independent living at a younger age this phase often coincides with other significant changes in their lives including moving to a new area, leaving school, beginning further education, starting employment or becoming a parent. Drawing conclusions from the literature reviewed Stein (2006, p.4) asserts that care experienced young adults are:

“Denied the psychological opportunity and space to focus or deal with issues over time, which is how most young people cope with the challenges of transitions. In short, their journey to adulthood is both accelerated and compressed”.

Further drawing on this range of international research Stein (2006, 2012) described three categories of care leavers and their experiences of youth transitions, including both positive and negative experiences. The first category he called, ‘**moving on**’. This related to young people who had secure and stable experiences while in care, they were likely to be very resilient and willing to make use of any aftercare support offered. The second category is ‘**survivors**’. This group had significant instability and a lack of security throughout their time in care. However, they benefited from aftercare supports when available. The final category is ‘**strugglers**’. This group included those who had the most negative experiences prior to coming into care. Usually, these experiences could not be counteracted through aftercare supports. In identifying these three categories Stein acknowledged that negative experiences of the transition from care to adulthood are not to be assumed and in certain circumstances protective factors can support a successful transition to adulthood.

Further reviews of research from the UK and Scotland, relating to the transitions experiences of young people leaving care was carried out by Elsley et al. (2007). These authors concluded that young people leaving care are more likely to experience poor outcomes in areas such as; access to higher education, to be in low paid employment or unemployed, to experience difficulties with family relationships and to feel affected by stigma and experience prejudice. Other research relating to these difficulties has been outlined in the first section of this current Literature Review chapter, highlighting how outcomes in these areas are understood to be challenges disproportionately faced by care experienced young adults and Elsley et al. (2007) further reinforce those points. Echoing Stein’s research outlined above, Elsley et al. (2007) cite the “abrupt transition” that care leavers face into adulthood as being a significant factor in creating these difficulties. They conclude that the *Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum* advice provides the best solution to addressing this issue of accelerated transition. This advice quoted in Elsley et al (2007, p.14) states that:

“It is important for young people not to feel that they are being ‘pushed’ to leave too soon, for example, if a young person is in long-term foster care. It could be said that the development of life skills and preparation for adult living

should take place at a suitable pace, throughout a young person's time in care.

The provision and continuation of aftercare support should be based on an assessment of needs and pathway plans which are regularly reviewed”.

In highlighting this advice Elsley and colleagues illuminate ways to combat potentially negative outcomes arising as a result of the “accelerated and compressed” transition out of care. These include working with young people on an individual basis, while they are still in care, to prepare and plan for adult life, not requiring young people to leave care before they choose to and providing ongoing supports even after the young person has left care.

Within his review of selected literature relating to the transition to adulthood from state care, Storø (2017) notes that authors describe the experiences of youth transitions for care leavers using negative language suggesting that these transitions experiences are necessarily problematic and complex. Despite noting the common use of negative language, Storø (2017, p.3) argued that good transition processes are possible and are marked by:

“sufficient time, beneficial personal support, adequate planning and preparation, involvement and agreement by the young person in decision making process and a care experience which was marked by stability and continuity”.

These markers of a positive transition are in contrast to the abrupt and compressed experiences of youth transitions for care leavers noted within the previous literature. The presence of family providing a foundation of stability and care during the transition to adulthood is seen as an essential foundation for a successful transition (Valentine, 2003). However, for care leavers the ongoing presence of family is not a given and therefore the importance of ensuring that caring relationships are maintained throughout their adolescence and during the transitions to adulthood is significant for youth leaving care (Driscoll, 2019). Collins et al.'s (2010) USA study which drew from data collected from surveys completed with ninety-six care experienced young adults, offers evidence that concurs with Driscoll (2019). Collins and colleagues (2010) highlight the importance of care leavers having a stable presence in the midst of the change they have to manage and the participants in their study provided details as to who they sought support from during their transition to adulthood. Most of the young adults reported having one supportive adult in their lives during this phase and that they valued relationships that endured over time with someone who accepted them for who they were. Collins et al. (2010) highlight the benefit of young people retaining relationships developed while they were in care to support them during this phase of transitions and as a result of these ongoing supportive and stable relationships the young people described “*having a place to stay during critical times, receiving encouragement and guidance and the assurance that someone will be there during key moments such as graduation, marriage and the birth of a child*” (Singer et al.,

2013, p2111). Thus, in this case ongoing support refers to both practical and emotional support that continues beyond care and into adulthood.

Many young people do well after they have left care and can have a positive experience of youth transitions. Gilligan (2019, p.51) notes that what he terms “*narratives of failure*” are the primary messages within much of the discourse from the adults in the lives of care leavers when talking about the transitions’ experiences of care leavers. However, negative outcomes are not an inevitable outcome for all care leavers, moreover negative outcomes in one area of one's life does not suggest negative outcomes in other areas of life too. Gilligan (2019) argues that some care leavers can demonstrate resilience leading to them displaying positive progress, or “*narratives of success*” (Gilligan, 2019, p.51) within challenging circumstances. However, what is significant is Gilligan’s (2019) argument that it is the expectations of the adults in the lives of the care leavers that is essential, alongside the support they offer because “*support from trusted adults or peers is a crucial ingredient in displays of resilience*” (Gilligan, 2019, p.64). Adults can support the development of resilience by providing positive experiences of work and education, a positive sense of agency and support from significant adults and peers who have shared experiences. Gilligan (2019, p. 65) concludes,

“Concerned adults with a meaningful relationship to the young person can do two valuable things in promoting resilience in the young person transitioning from care: they can cultivate aspirations for the future in the young person; and they can provide support in the cause of realizing those aspirations”

While demonstrations of resilience may not be the majority experience of care leavers as they navigate the transition out of care, Gilligan’s argument that those supporting care leavers can act in ways that build resilience is an important one. Echoing Henderson et al. (2007), Gilligan (2019) argues that negative outcomes during youth transitions experiences should not be considered the end of the young adults’ stories. Instead, Gilligan (2019) concludes that it remains possible that resilience can be developed into adulthood if support is available from caring adults. In this way the potential exists that care experienced young adults can have positive experiences of transitions, overall, at any stage.

Identifying additional factors that support positive outcomes for care leavers during the transition to adulthood is the purpose of a study by Shpiegel et al., (2022). They carried out research using data from the National Youth in Transition Database and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System in USA. Through their research they identify factors that can be consistently associated with positive and resilient outcomes during the transition to adulthood for former foster youth. They concluded that resilient outcomes were common among their participants and that this was in line with previous research. They note that the resilience may have occurred periodically rather than being ongoing, however, they conclude that what this implies is that resilience should be

viewed as something that is dynamic, rather than static and both periodic and sustained resilience led to improved outcomes during the transition to adulthood. The researchers identify factors that contribute to periods of resilience, and these include the presence of adult mentors, placements within stable family environments for extended periods of time, and remaining in foster care beyond the age of 18 years (Shpiegel et al., 2020 p5). It is worth noting that each of these factors are also indicative of relational permanence. A limitation of that study is that Shpiegel and colleagues focused primarily upon structural issues and did not report on individual experiences or investigate the issues from the perspective of the young adults themselves, seeking insights into how their lived experience of youth transitions was shaped by these structural issues.

Glynn (2021) wrote a theoretical article that applied the lenses of precarity, recognition and liminality to construct a theoretical framework to study care leaving and the transition to adulthood. Her article draws on Irish, longitudinal, qualitative research with sixteen young adults, all aged 18 years, who had aged out of care. Glynn (2021) concludes that the young adults in her study had precarious living conditions that signalled to them that they were not accepted within wider society. They experienced a sense of misrecognition as a result of feeling disrespected by these experiences which led them to believe that they were not valued within society. The young adults desired a 'liminal space' which allowed for a gentle, rather than an abrupt, transition to adulthood. This liminal space was provided for a number of the study participants when they were supported to remain in their foster care placements or were in receipt of aftercare support. Glynn (2021) concludes however, that for some of the young adults in her study the provision of aftercare services that were perceived as conditional were experienced as indicating that only some, and not all, youth transitioning out of care were deserving of support. Glynn (2021, p.1) argued that *"some young people felt respected and cared for as youth in transition while others did not"*. Concluding the article Glynn (2021, p.9) argued the need for care leavers to be viewed as "youth in society". This would allow practitioners and policy makers to acknowledge the importance of attending to both the individual and structural aspects of the life of care leavers. Glynn's research illuminates the importance of considering the ways in which the experience of transitioning out of care interacts with other youth transitions experiences and that while care experienced youth may have different experiences within some aspects of their life they should not be viewed as entirely separate to non-care experienced young adults.

Additional research about the experience of youth transitions for Irish care leavers was carried out by Palmer et al. (2022). Palmer and colleagues (2022) reported on findings from a qualitative study with sixteen care leavers who were in receipt of social housing support at the time they were interviewed. The authors also drew on interviews with professionals working with the care leavers. The researchers sought to gain insights into the ways in which the participants were coping with competing pressures in their lives as they navigated the transition out of care. Within their research

they coined the phrase the “care cliff” (Palmer et al., 2022, p.2) to describe the “accelerated and compressed” (Stein, 2004, p.53) experience of the transition to adulthood. They note that the idea of a “care cliff” was referred to within their interviews with the young adults and repeatedly mentioned by the professionals interviewed when referring to the experience of having to leave care. They concluded that the provision of social housing for young people leaving care was important, but this issue alone did not address other emotional and practical problematic experiences these young adults described. Their conclusion echoes previous findings reported within this current literature review that, *“the cliff should be replaced with a gradual withdrawal of supports (a staircase to extend the analogy) which is tailored to meet the specific needs of each care leaver”* (Palmer et al., 2022, p.10). Furthermore, they assert that in providing more comprehensive aftercare supports care leavers would be enabled to “enjoy the benefits of the same extended adolescence and more gradual process of ‘adulthood; which have become the norm among most other members of their peer group in recent years’” (Palmer et al., 2022, p.10). Thus, Palmer and colleagues writing in 2022 continue to echo the conclusions of research of Stein from in 2004. Young adults who have spent time in the care of the state are more likely to experience the transition to adulthood without guarantees of the family supports that their non-care experienced peers can often rely upon. The provision of individualised supports that holistically address the needs of young adult care leavers would act as a buffer that could potentially allow them to experience a more gradual, and better supported, transition to adulthood such as their non-care experienced peers can anticipate.

2.4.6 Conclusion

The lens of youth transitions has been applied to the experiences of care leavers across numerous studies. Previous research has highlighted the impact of accelerated and sudden transitions to adulthood in contributing to poorer outcomes in early adulthood, for care experienced youth, when compared to the general population. Stability and security in placement have been identified as a protective factor in supporting care leavers to have positive experiences of the transitions to adulthood, demonstrating that a negative experience of youth transitions is not inevitable for care experienced young adults. In addition, research has reported that care leavers have identified their ongoing practical and emotional supports into adulthood as something they desire in order to support them during the transition to adulthood. All young adults experience the transition from adolescence to adulthood, however, different factors such as socio-economic status, gender, race and care experience have been shown to impact transitions experiences. Not all young adults can anticipate an experience of youth transitions that is positive across all domains. The lens of youth transitions within a qualitative study can help illuminate differences across youth transitions experiences even within populations that have a shared experience, such as growing up in care. Furthermore, the lens of youth transitions can be useful in identifying what factors can better equip young adults to have a positive experience of youth transitions.

2.5 Key Messages Across the Literature Reviewed:

The review of literature in this chapter interrogated current research across three broad areas, relevant to the lived experience of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. In the first section literature relating to the challenges faced by care experienced youth was discussed. An examination of the literature in this section illuminated key issues. Firstly, the lived experiences of young adult care leavers cannot be judged through an examination of objective measures and outcomes alone, in areas such as housing, education, and employment, for example. The impact of subjective issues, such as developing a sense of belonging and managing the stigma associated with growing up in care, is also important. This points towards the need for studies seeking to understand the lived experience of young people who grew up in foster care placements with permanence to maintain a focus on subjective experiences. This review of current literature highlights the dearth of studies that hear directly from care experienced young adults about their lived experiences in early adulthood following an experience of growing up in foster care with permanence.

In the second section understandings of permanence were illuminated. The changing conceptualisations of permanence in recent discourse was discussed and the emergence of relational permanence as a key issue was highlighted. The studies discussed bring attention to the fact that when young adults discuss their experiences of care, they appear to value relational permanence over legal permanence. However, while drawing attention to the significance care experienced youth place on relational permanence is common across much of the literature, there are few studies that examine how experiences of relational permanence while in care are manifest as the young person transitions out of care and transition to adulthood. As conceptualisations of permanence have broadened little research has been carried out to further understand how young people who have established either legal or relational permanence in foster care then describe the impact of this on their day-to-day lives in early adulthood. While some studies have focused on specific aspects of a young person's life such as their relationship with their birth family, for example, there were no studies identified that closely examine how young adults themselves describe whether and how experiences of growing up with permanence in foster care continue to impact their daily lives, across a range of areas, as they transition out of care.

Finally, the lens of youth transitions was introduced and examined and the usefulness of this lens to illuminate issues of young adults who transition out of care and into adulthood was explored. Literature relating to the lens of youth transitions highlights the fact that young adults make transitions across a number of domains in their life and that young adults can have different experiences across different domains. Moreover, the review of literature relating to youth transitions illuminated the significance of considering the impact of a young person's own context when examining their lived experience of youth transitions. Literature relating to the youth transition experiences of care experienced young adults draws attention to the potential for care leavers to

experience negative outcomes across a range of youth transitions when compared to the non-care experienced population. However, there is also research that highlights the potential for secure and stable placements to mitigate negative impacts often attributed to the youth transition experiences of care leavers. However, despite this narrative in the literature there are a dearth of studies that examine how growing up with permanence while in care then impacts experiences of youth transitions in early adulthood.

This chapter has illuminated current research as it pertains to the research questions. However, it has also identified gaps in this literature. This current study will contribute to closing some of these gaps and in the next chapter the methods utilised to do this are outlined.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the first chapter of this dissertation the aims, objectives and research questions that underpin this current study were presented. This study is an investigation into the current lives and lived experiences of a group of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence. In brief the study aims are to:

- Investigate the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care, with permanence (either legal or relational).
- Examine the ways in which growing up with permanence in foster care impacts the young adults' relationships with foster family, birth family and the world around them in early adulthood.
- Scrutinise the ways permanence (either legal or relational) within foster care placements in childhood influence the young people's transition to adulthood.
- Consider current conceptualisations of permanence for young people growing up in care; and
- Establish the ways in which findings from this study can add to this knowledge base.

The central research questions guiding this study were as follows:

- What are the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence?
- What are the young adults' views about how their experiences of permanence with their foster carers have influenced their current lived experiences, including their relationships with their foster families, their birth families and the world around them?
- How do experiences of permanence while in care impact experiences of youth transitions, including the transition out of care?

In the second chapter of this dissertation key literature pertaining to this study was examined. The challenges faced by young people growing up in foster care, current debates surrounding establishing permanence for young people in care and the usefulness of the lens of youth transitions to understand the issues were interrogated. The conclusions drawn from the literature review have provided a clear rationale for this current study. These conclusions include i) a clearly identified gap in current research relating to examining the lived experiences, across a range of domains, of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence; ii) recognition of the importance of capturing the subjective experiences of young people in care when seeking to illuminate the meanings young people attach to their lived experiences; iii) consensus that young people in care value relational permanence but little is understood about how experiences of permanence (either relational or legal) in foster care

manifest during the transition to adulthood; iv) agreement that context and time are important when considering young adults' experience of permanence; v) findings that the lens of youth transitions can uncover insights into the lived experiences of young adults and potentially illuminate the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence.

This chapter presents the methodology employed to address the research questions described above. The rationale for the selected methodology including the philosophical, theoretical and methodological framework that informed the research design will be outlined and justification for the qualitative approach and the methods and procedures utilised will be presented. At all times ethical considerations were key to the research process and these too will be discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the research process and a critique of the methodology used.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Introduction:

When developing the research design of any study it is important to situate it within a research paradigm that ensures that the research questions set out are addressed appropriately. The research paradigm or, philosophical framework, applied within any research project is important because this framework informs the methodological and interpretive decisions made (Hathcoat et al, 2019). A research design that supported an inductive approach and allowed the experiences of the research participants to be prioritised was a key consideration for this current study of the lived experience of a group of young adults who grew up in foster care placements with permanence. Equally important was situating this study within an epistemological and ontological stance that allowed for variability across the range of experiences and an understanding that there is not a singular truth but that individuals construct their own reality within their own experiences and contexts.

Research approaches can be broadly divided into quantitative and qualitative. Both approaches have elements in common but choosing one over the other points towards assumptions that underpin the research questions. Both paradigms support research that is systematic, grounded in evidence, ethical and aims to answer specific research questions (Mason 2017; Denzin, 2009). The primary difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches lies in the philosophical beliefs that inform the way the research is carried out, in the means chosen to collect the data to answer the research question and the methods used to analyse the data (Denzin, 2009). Braun and Clarke (2013) described the different approaches, arguing that in qualitative research words are understood to be data as opposed to quantitative research which counts numbers as data. Answering the research questions in this current study was accomplished through the use of qualitative research methods, allowing the researcher to hear directly from young adults who had grown up in long-term foster care with permanence about how, or if, their experiences of permanence in childhood impacted their lived experiences in early adulthood. When adopting a qualitative

approach, the researcher *“seeks to understand and interpret more local meanings and recognises data as gathered in a context”* (Braun and Clarke, 2013 p4). In the process of analysis, a qualitative researcher searches for patterns and *“explores difference and divergence within the data”* (Braun and Clarke, 2013 p. 5). In the following sections of this chapter, the philosophical positions that informed this study will be outlined and the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach will be examined.

3.2.2 Ontology and Epistemology

Both ontology and epistemology inform the research design of any study as they determine the theoretical perspective and decisions made throughout the research (Crotty, 2011). Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge or an understanding about *“what determines what counts as valid or accepted knowledge and also therefore how we go about obtaining or producing that knowledge”* (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p 330). Ontological positions on the other hand, relate to the nature of reality and specifically the relationship between the world and human interpretations and practice and *“what relationships exist between the world and our human understanding and interpretations of the world”* (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p 332). In this study a social constructionist approach informed both the ontological and epistemological approach. This will be discussed in the next section.

3.2.3 A Social Constructionist Orientation:

Social Constructionism is a *“theoretical orientation”* (Burr, 2015, p. 1) that recommends researchers should examine the world from a point of critical analysis, adopting a questioning stance towards commonly held beliefs about how the world works (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism suggests that meanings are constructed by individuals as they engage in the world they are interpreting, and according to Crotty (2011) it emphasises the belief that there is no singular true or valid interpretation of reality. Developing this point, Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 30) argue that an epistemological position of constructionism does not adhere to a belief that *“knowledge is just ‘made up’, and ‘anything goes’* instead constructionism purports that knowledge about how things are, develops the context of an individual’s understanding about their situation. Moreover, the process of knowledge production is still empirical in that *“it is grounded in data and understanding of some kind is sought”* (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 30).

As outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation, this current research study is not simply concerned with understanding the personal meanings young adults who experienced permanence within their foster care placement, attached to their lived experiences during early adulthood. A key objective of the research is to gain insights into the impact of time and context on the lived experiences of the young adults, as the research focuses on a particular phase, youth transitions, to understand whether or how growing up in permanent foster care has an impact on their lived experiences at that time. A

social constructionist orientation adheres to the idea that knowledge is constructed by “*meaning making beings*” within social, historical, and political contexts (Crotty, 2011, p. 10). Furthermore, research grounded within a social constructionist framework “*explicitly tolerates diversity of social realities*” (Ungar, 2004, p. 345) thus creating space for multiple and diverse experiences of individuals to be examined. Through this study it is intended to contextualise these experiences outlined by the young adults within wider social and policy contexts of conceptualisations of permanence for young people in care. The rationale for taking this stance was outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis as the review of the literature illuminated that young adults’ experiences can develop and change over time and that permanence is not established in a singular action, rather it is negotiated over time and across contexts. Within a social constructionist orientation, context is understood to be important, and reality is viewed as a social construct through which meaning is made within social, cultural and political contexts (Berger and Luckmann, 2016).

3.2.4 Qualitative Approach

Taking a social constructionist orientation, as outlined above, led to the development of a qualitative framework for this study. Qualitative research is grounded in a philosophical position that is understood to be primarily ‘interpretative’ because it is concerned with researching how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, or produced (Mason, 2017). There is no widely agreed definition of qualitative research, but in general terms it can be seen as a broad approach that allows a researcher to examine people’s lives and experiences (Hennink et al.,2020; Liamputtong, 2019; Lune & Berg, 2017; Patton, 2002). In discussing the emergence of qualitative approaches towards research in the discipline of psychology, Braun and Clarke (2013, p.8) assert that:

“Qualitative methods were touted as allowing access to people’s subjective worlds and meanings, and to groups marginalised...and often invisible within western psychology. They were seen as crucial for identifying and theorising different *constructed* versions of reality, and for the ways people are both constructed by, and constructors of reality”.

This quote highlights the relevance of a qualitative approach in this current study given the social constructionist underpinnings as outlined above. Writing specifically about social work engaging in qualitative methods when undertaking research, Padgett (2016, p.28), argued that,

“Qualitative studies seek to represent the complex world of respondents in a holistic, on-the-ground, manner. They emphasize subjective meanings and question the existence of a single objective reality. Furthermore, they assume dynamism, a state of flux that can only be captured via intensive engagement”.

Thus, in this way a qualitative study creates the space to consider the value young adults who grew up in long-term foster care placements with permanence, place on subjective experiences, as well as ensuring that multiple views of the study participants can be accommodated and are respected equally.

Moreover, in taking a qualitative approach, meaning is emphasised as being contextual, or situated, reality or realities are understood to be multiple and the researcher's subjectivity is understood to be, not just valid, but a resource (Braun et al, 2022). Qualitative studies by their very nature are inductive and seek to prioritise people's interpretations of their experiences. They are based upon flexible data collection methods and methods of analysis that search for meaning and understanding of complexity (Mason, 2017). By taking this bottom-up approach Braun et al (2022) argued that the researcher can look for the meanings that people have constructed through their experiences. Through this current research it is intended to illuminate the lived experiences of a group of young adults, who grew up with permanence in foster care, at a time of transition to adulthood. The meanings the young people attach to these experiences will be examined so that deeper understandings can be drawn about conceptualisations of permanence for young people growing up in care. A qualitative approach allows for such an exploration of both experiences and meanings. In the analysis of the data collected, a qualitative approach facilitates the researcher to seek patterns of meaning while also being able to accommodate differences across the data set. This results in multiple realities being reflected in the final analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Rubin and Rubin, 2011). In each of these ways, a qualitative approach will ensure that the research questions asked in this study can be effectively addressed.

3.2.5 Drawing upon Narrative Inquiry

To ensure that the views of young adults with direct lived experience of growing up in foster care with permanence were prioritised, it was important to apply an approach that allowed the young adults to tell their story from their own perspective. To this end this study is influenced by the key tenets of narrative enquiry. The suitability of narrative inquiry as a means to inform research within a social constructionist framework is widely acknowledged within the literature (Ntinda, 2019; Gergen, 2018; Chase, 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). It has been argued by Riessman (2008, p.13-14) that as a general approach narrative inquiry "*has a great deal to offer disciplines and professions that want to see how knowledge is constructed in the everyday world through an ordinary communicative act of storytelling*". Sparkes and Smith (2008) maintain that in the intersection between narrative and constructionist theory there is a wide and diverse field within which a variety of theories and ways of understanding, engaging with and shaping the world are advanced. They refer to authors who suggest that narrative is a form of social action (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006); a meaning making activity that helps people to make sense of their lives (Bruner, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988); a way to make experiences meaningful (Somers 1994); helps people to understand each other (Gergen and Gergen, 2008); and a means to construct selves (Nelson, 2003).

Ultimately, they purport that narrative has emerged as a *“way of telling about our lives and a method or means of knowing”* (Sparkes and Smith, 2008, p.297). It is in the context of telling about and knowing about lives that the narrative approach has influenced this current study.

While there are many definitions of narrative, they all capture a common theme of the researcher having an interest in using the stories that people tell to gain insights and understanding of a specific experience or experiences. Drawing on Polkinghorne’s definition of narrative to bring attention to the most basic key tenets of the approach, Creswell (2016, p.17) argues that, *“narrative is a particular form of qualitative inquiry with a particular focus on stories told by individuals”*. Sparkes and Smith (2008, p.5) adopt a broader definition, arguing that within social research, ‘narrative’ refers to *“a diversity of topics of study, methods of investigation and analysis, and theoretical orientation”*. Clandinin and Connolly (2004, p.20), who were among the early proponents of narrative inquiry, argued that narrative inquiry is about *“stories lived, and stories told”*. It has also been said that narrative inquiry allows for understanding and description within the frame of the storyteller’s experiences and it is through the story that one can make sense of the world (Clandinin and Connolly 2004; Ntinda, 2019). The ‘narrative turn’ has its roots within a desire by researchers to move away from positive, realist research to qualitative approaches with a constructionist framework, placing the participant at the centre of the research (Sparkes, 2008). In the development of their approach Clandinin and Connolly et al. (2016) sought to place people with lived experience at the centre of research inquiry while also ensuring that their voice was not lost in the translation of data into research during the write up process. Narrative inquiry as an approach, has many forms, but Creswell (2016, p. 70) maintains that primarily it begins with the *“experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals”*(Creswell, 2016, p. 70). In narrative inquiry, stories are viewed as the means through which people make sense of their lives. Chase (2013, p.56) argues that narrative inquiry revolves around *“an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them”*. Moreover, Riessman (2008) argues that in this process, the researcher is viewed not as someone who discovers a narrative but rather as someone who co-creates the stories told.

Czarnaiwska (2004) more clearly identifies key ingredients of narrative inquiry, declaring that not all need to be present in each narrative project. She highlights that those following a narrative inquiry approach collect stories about individuals and their lived experiences. These stories may shed light on the interviewee's identity and in telling their story, the participant may talk about their past, present or future. Czarnaiwska (2004) asserts that narrative stories can occur in specific places or situations and the context is important for the researchers as they gain insights into the story. In taking a narrative approach, the researcher is positing that the stories that people tell are fundamental to their experiences and understandings of these experiences. Through hearing and telling stories, researchers can gain understanding and make sense of lived experiences (Riessman, 2008; Josselson, 2011). Researchers guided by an interest in narrative inquiry work with individuals and use in-depth

interviews to gather stories. In retelling the story the researcher constructs meaningful selves, identities and realities (Chase, 2013). Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 202) concludes that “*identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)*”.

In narrative inquiry the researcher both gathers the stories and shapes the stories through analysis. It is in this process of both interviewing and analysing that the researcher shapes the narrative. Clandinin (2006) suggests two options for narrative analysis. The first involves the researcher organising the data to create a “*narrative with a plot that unifies the data*” (Clandinin, 2006, p. xiv). The second option, which was chosen for this research, involves the stories being collected and the “*narrative data is analysed for common themes, metaphors, plotlines and so on to identify general themes or concepts*” (Clandinin, 2006 p. xiv). How reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) is utilised to do this in this current study is outlined in the section below. For this current study, hearing the stories of young adults with a shared experience was central to achieving the aims of the research. Relying upon the key tenets of narrative inquiry these stories could be gathered adhering to the social constructionist orientation of the research, where the research participants were telling the story of their lived experience from their perspective, in a particular context and at a particular time in their life. The researcher’s responsibility was to then re-tell these stories and uncover meanings attached by searching for common themes and patterns within the data.

In addition to ensuring that the study was situated within a framework that allowed the aims and objectives of the study to be met, it was equally important to ensure that the appropriate methods for data collection and data analysis were chosen and that these aligned with the qualitative approach of this study. In the following sections I will outline the variety of decisions that were taken in this regard.

3.2.6 Sampling

The sampling of research participants has been described by Mason (2017, p83) as being the:

“Principles and procedures used to identify, choose and gain access to relevant units which will be used for data generation, by any method. These units will belong to or relate to a relevant wider population.”

As already discussed, a qualitative approach was selected for this research and the key tenets of narrative inquiry informed this study. In line with these choices, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were the method chosen to gather the stories of individual participants. Sampling is important in ensuring the appropriate selection of research participants and is “*essential for accurate representation of the population of interest*” (Manohar et al., 2018 p72). According to Rubin and Rubin (2011 p3) when selecting participants for a qualitative interview, the researcher should “*talk*

to those who have knowledge of, or experience of the problem of interest". To this end purposive sampling was the approach used to identify suitable research participants for this current study.

Purposive sampling is an approach whereby the selection of participants is based upon specific criteria and researchers use their knowledge about the wider group to select a representative cohort of participants (Lune & Berg, 2017). Members of the sample are *purposively* chosen because they represent key criteria identified as essential to assist in answering the research questions. However, this does not mean that the research participants are alike in all aspects. Purposive sampling allows for diversity which in turn allows for the impact of certain characteristics to be explored (Mason, 2017; Patton, 2002).

In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used. This term denotes the practice of securing additional study participants via the introductions and recommendations of those previously interviewed (Robinson 2014). Snowball sampling can be particularly useful in reaching hard to access populations. By utilising this method, it was hoped that more men could be recruited in the current study, however, ultimately, only one additional participant was recruited for this current study in this way. Throughout the recruitment and interview process, the imbalance between female and male participants was obvious. Targeted sampling was used to try and rectify this imbalance. Targeted sampling is primarily used to recruit specific types of participants and it can be useful when variability across the sample is desired (Mason, 2017). Contact was made with the gatekeeper organisations asking them for assistance to identify more male participants. All gatekeepers agreed to help with this but ultimately no additional males were recruited. When participants who had completed an interview offered to share information about the study they were asked to specifically share with male friends, however this too was not successful in recruiting more males. Ultimately, targeted sampling was not successful as it did not yield any additional male recruits and when the recruitment phase was completed, there were 22 participants in total; 18 females and 4 males.

3.2.7 Participant Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The process of recruitment is described in more detail below but the sampling criteria, and the rationale for each, is outlined here. The following were the inclusion criteria for the study:

- 1) Participants must have grown up in long-term foster care in Ireland, have lived with the same family for at least 5 consecutive years before their 18th birthday and have an ongoing relationship with their foster carers into adulthood.

Rationale: Having experienced permanence and stability while in foster care was a key criterion for inclusion in this study. As previously outlined in Chapter One, the definition of relational permanence used was "*an enduring and supportive relationship with one's carers*" (McSherry & Fargas Malet, 2018, p. 124). The requirement that participants had lived for at least five years with their foster carers before their 18th birthday was to establish that the participants had a relationship

that had endured over a significant period, prior to them taking part in the study. The requirement to have an ongoing relationship into adulthood was to provide evidence of the enduring nature of the relationship with their foster carers.

- 2) Participants can reflect a variety of permanence experiences, and they may have been adopted by their foster carers

Rationale: As discussed in Chapter Two, the review of the literature illuminated that permanence for children in care can be conceptualised as being either legal, for example adoption; or relational, defined by the ongoing presence of strong committed relationships. Given this finding in the literature review, inclusion of a range of experiences of permanence was important in this current study to ensure a range of lived experiences was examined.

- 3) Participants must have been between 20 – 30 years of age.

Rationale: A key aim of this current study was to investigate the lived experiences of young adults who had grown up in long-term foster care with permanence, at a time of transition to adulthood. Investigating the views of young adults over the age of 20 years ensured that there was some distance between their experience of leaving care and participation in this study. This facilitated reflection about the ways that growing up in foster care with permanence had potentially influenced their lived experiences during their transition to adulthood. During the early phase of the study, it was planned to have a sample of young adults aged 20-24 years. This was then extended to include young people aged up to 30 years. The early recruits, who were between 20-24 years of age, were still primarily living at home and in fulltime education and it was hoped to capture a broader range of youth transition experiences and to include some young people who had moved out of home, had completed their education, and who had potentially become parents. Broadening the age range of the sample captured this wider range of experiences. Within the literature reviewed, the usefulness of using the lens of youth transitions to investigate the lived experiences of young adults was examined. Moreover, that literature review also illuminated that while there is much written about the challenges young adult care leavers face there is little that examines how growing up in long-term foster care with permanence impacts their lived experience of this phase of transition.

The study participation criteria were outlined clearly on all recruitment material (see Appendices 4, 5 and 7). The recruitment process is described in detail below but in brief, participants initially contacted the researcher via email, Twitter, WhatsApp, or Instagram to express their interest in the study and to request more detailed information. At that stage the suitability of the potential participant, in terms of meeting the recruitment criteria, was clarified. Some young adults who made contact were either the wrong age, had not experienced permanence in care or grew up in a child welfare system other than Ireland. The researcher explained to these participants that they did not meet the recruitment criteria, thanked them for their interest in the research and their willingness to

participate and offered to keep their details on file so that, if they were interested, they could be informed of the findings from the study.

3.2.8 Recruitment and Working with Gatekeepers

It was anticipated that recruitment for this study would be complex, and that the recruitment process would require planning and preparation. Finding agencies to work with, who could support recruitment was of importance. The process of engaging and working with gatekeepers is outlined below.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency⁹:

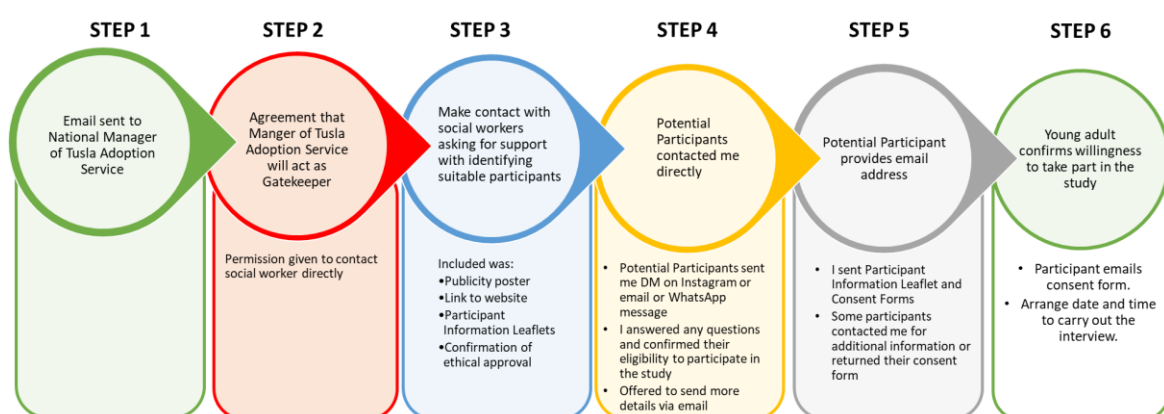
Potential participants targeted for recruitment were all young adults who had been in the care of the state in Ireland. To this end, working closely with Tusla Social Workers was an important aspect of the recruitment plan and ethical approval was sought from and granted by the Tusla Research Ethics Committee (Appendix 3). The process of making this application is outlined in the section below discussing ethical considerations of the study. The National Manager of Tusla Adoption Services¹⁰ agreed to act as the named gatekeeper. She was sent the Gatekeeper Information Leaflet and Consent Forms (Appendices 7 and 8). Social workers and social work managers within both adoption and fostering services in Tusla were sent emails providing them with information about the study and asking them to support recruitment by identifying, and where possible forwarding recruitment information, to suitable potential participants. Several social workers made contact indicating their support for the study. However, limitations arising as a result to GDPR legislation meant that Tusla social workers could only make direct contact with foster carers and adoptive parents who still had an open case with Tusla. They could not contact young adults who they had previously worked with but who were no longer in receipt of a social work service from Tusla. This meant that the potential participants that Tusla social workers could contact about the study was limited. Where possible, social workers sent the study information to foster and adoptive parents of young adults, who they believed met the study criteria, asking them to pass the information on to their adult child. This did prove an effective means of recruitment, particularly in relation to families who had adopted their foster child from care. Recruiting young adults who had legal permanence was particularly complex because as outlined in Chapter 1, there are very few young people adopted from foster care in Ireland

⁹As described in Chapter 1 of this dissertation Tusla, The Child and Family Agency was established in 2014 and it the state agency with responsibility for child protection and welfare issues in Ireland.

¹⁰It was a requirement of Tusla's Research Ethics Committee that a national manager act as gatekeeper for any study requesting ethical approval. At the time the researcher was working for Tusla Adoption Service and the manager was aware of the study and for this reason she was approached and agreed to act as the gatekeeper.

each year. A potential downside to this process was that the foster carers or adoptive parents acted as gatekeepers and in some cases, they decided not to pass the recruitment information on to their adult child as they did not think that it was appropriate. However, approximately one third of the study participants were recruited with support from Tusla social workers.

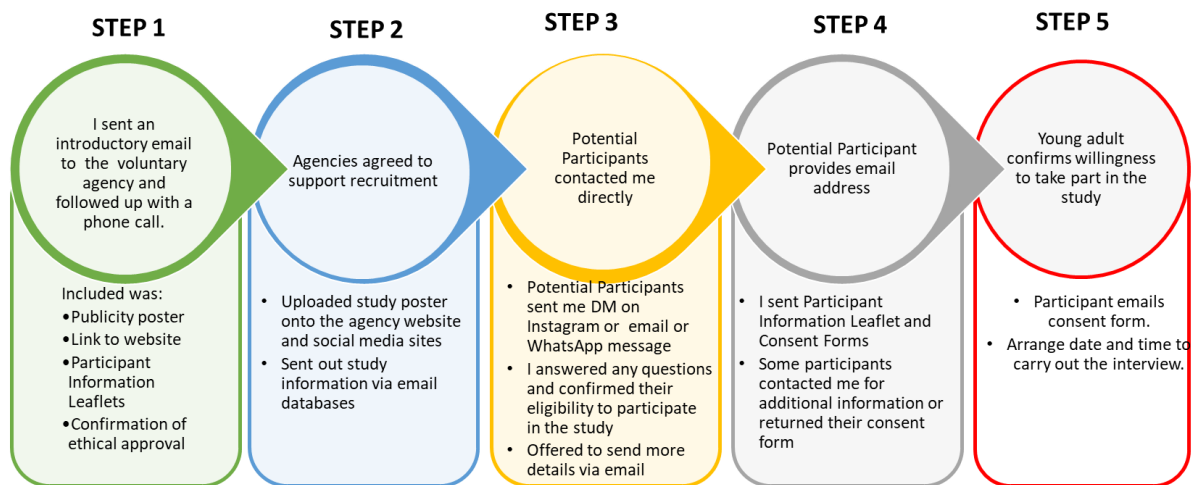
Diagram for working with Tusla:



Voluntary agencies:

Voluntary agencies working with care experienced young adults and foster carers also proved to be a valuable source of support. In each of these instances an identified person within the agency was contacted and sent information about the study. Research Officers and Information Officers in relevant agencies agreed to disseminate information about the study via their mailing lists and social media pages. The young adults who were interested in taking part in the research, subsequently made direct contact with the researcher. This was a successful means of recruiting participants for the study. Working with these voluntary agencies ensured the recruitment of a different group of young adults than those recruited through engagement with Tusla widening the experiences reflected in the data collected.

Diagram for working with voluntary agencies:



3.2.9 The Recruitment Processes

In addition to working with gatekeepers, developing clear and accessible recruitment material was important, as was ensuring that potential participants who met the study criteria, could access the study information and had an accessible means to make contact with the researcher so that they could ask questions about the study. How these recruitment issues were addressed is outlined below.

Use of social media and digital platforms:

The use of social media proved to be an important element of the recruitment campaign. The study was advertised on the researcher's personal social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) and in addition, the gatekeeper voluntary agencies also advertised the study on their social media accounts. To supplement this and in order to provide detailed study information that was readily accessible online, a website was developed by the researcher.¹¹ Included on this website was a pre-recorded video¹² of the researcher outlining; the study aims and objectives, her own background, the reason she was undertaking the study and what would be involved for anyone who agreed to participate in an interview. Visitors to the site could download a copy of the 'Participant Information Leaflet' (Appendix 5) and 'Consent Forms' (Appendix 6). While this website alone did not directly garner any recruits, it was a helpful resource for gatekeepers and potential participants

¹¹ The website is still live but currently when someone logs onto the website a notice comes up saying that recruitment has now closed for the study. The link to the website is here: <https://sineadwhiting.wordpress.com/>

¹² This video is still accessible on my website: <https://sineadwhiting.wordpress.com/my-study/>

who wanted more information about the study, about the researcher or detailed information about what would be involved for participants who chose to take part in an interview.

On the recruitment material, the option to contact the researcher via Instagram was included and this proved to be an effective means for potential participants to enquire about the study. Typically, potential participants saw the recruitment poster on a social media site and sent a direct message to the researcher on Instagram asking for more information about the study. The researcher then engaged in a brief exchange via direct messaging on Instagram, typically providing more information about the study and asking for an email address to send the ‘Participant Information Leaflet’ (Appendix 5) and ‘Participant Consent Form’ (Appendix 6) to.

3.2.10 Final Sample of Participants:

The final sample was made up of twenty-two participants aged 20-30. Across the sample there were a range of experiences of permanence. Two of the participants were biological siblings, one having been given the study information by the other. These related participants were interviewed separately, three weeks apart. Below is both a Table with pictorial representation of the sample and a Table with more detailed information.

TABLE 3: PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

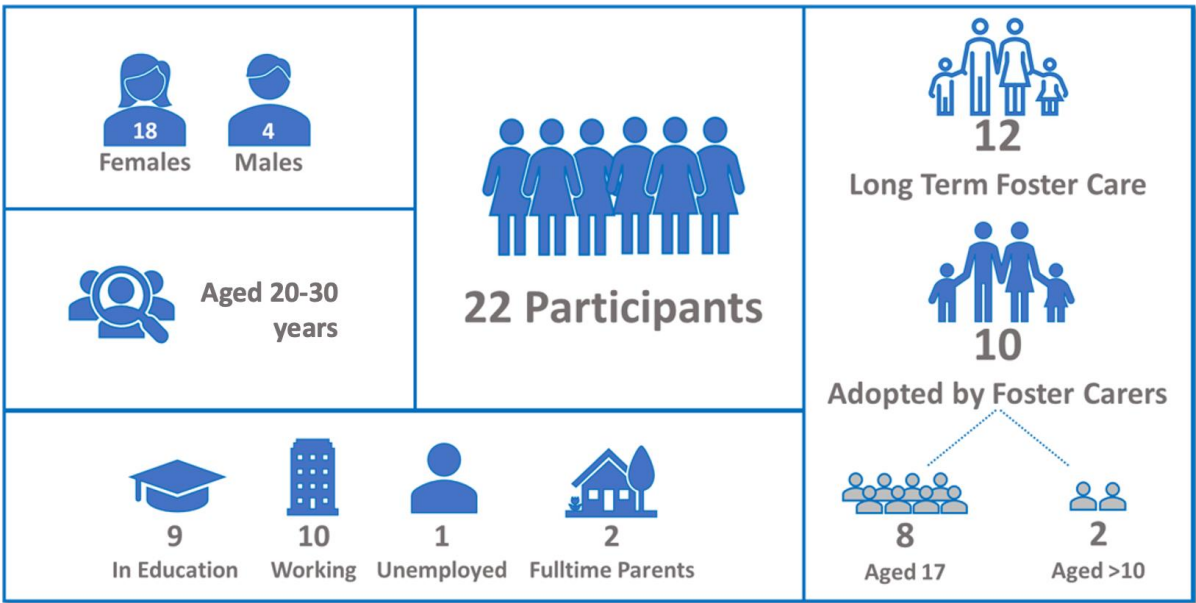


TABLE 4: FINAL SAMPLE OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants	Gender	Age at time of participation in the study Range 20-30 years	Age moved to live with foster carers	If adopted age when adopted by foster carers
1.	Female	21 years	2 years old	17 years old
2.	Female	23 years	3 years old	17 years old
3.	Female	20 years	4 years old	17 years old
4.	Female	23 years	From birth	17 years old
5.	Female	20 years	From birth	17 years old
6.	Female	24 years	7 years old	17 years old
7.	Female	23 years	13 months old	11 years old
8.	Female	23 years	From birth	13 years old
9.	Male	20 years	Under 2 years	17 years old
10.	Female	21 years	From birth	n/a
11.	Female	25 years	10 years old	n/a
12.	Female	30 years	1 year old	n/a
13.	Female	25 years	7 years old	n/a
14.	Female	24 years	6 months old	n/a
15.	Male	22 years	7 years old	n/a
16.	Male	22 years	6 years old	n/a
17.	Female	20 years	From birth	n/a
18.	Male	24 years	8 years old	n/a
19.	Female	20 years	3 years old	n/a
20.	Female	23 years	9 years old	n/a
21.	Female	24 years	7 years old	n/a
22.	Female	21 years	5 years old	n/a

3.2.11 Data collection through qualitative interviewing:

Qualitative in-depth interviews were the method chosen to collect the stories from the research participants. Rubin and Rubin (2011, p. 2-3) write:

“if what you need to find out cannot be answered simply or briefly, if you anticipate that you may need to ask people to explain their answers or give examples or describe their experiences then you rely on in-depth interviews”

Qualitative interviews are a method that allow a researcher to explore deeply personal issues, to seek understanding on both a factual and a meaning level, to gather descriptions about the life and the world of the interviewee and to broaden their understanding of a specific experience or situation (Silverman, 2020; Brinkman and Kvale, 2018). Qualitative interviews also allow us to “*see that*

which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012 p. xv). Moreover, Padgett (2016, p. 165) asserted that they are the “*linchpin for successful qualitative studies*”. This approach, in keeping with the social constructionist framework of this study, supports the collection of data that is understood to be subjective and bound by context rather than understood as truth (Nathan et al, 2019).

Qualitative interviews can be either structured, semi structured or unstructured and of these, semi-structured interviews are the primary form used in qualitative studies (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection for this current research. Padgett (2016, p. 173) aptly described semi-structured interviews as being “*minimally structured, but they are not full improvisation*”. Thus, when conducting a semi-structured interview, the researcher plans a limited number of questions in advance of the interview and then asks follow-up and probing questions throughout the interview. This allows for more in-depth information to be gathered (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Fielding & Thomas, 2008). When discussing probing questions Padgett (2016) argued that they are the source of the most valuable information gathered during a qualitative interview because they allow the researcher to get beyond a rehearsed and frequently told story by encouraging spontaneous discussion. Overall, a key advantage of semi-structured interviews is that the format encourages the participant to discuss a range of topics while simultaneously allowing the interviewer to remain in control of the direction of the interview. Nathan et al (2019) asserted that this provides a balance between the interests of the researcher and the research participant.

Responsive Qualitative Interviewing

Rubin and Rubin (2011) designed an approach called responsive interviewing which grounds in-depth, semi-structured interviews within three phases. These three phases involve the interviewer asking three types of questions: 1) main questions, 2) probing questions 3) follow up questions. In responsive interviewing, the researcher’s role is to listen to people who are knowledgeable about a topic, to hear what they are saying and then to ask questions based on the answers they provide. Rubin and Rubin (2011, p. 7) argued that following this process means that the interviewer can:

“Gather narratives, descriptions and interpretations from an array of conversational partners and put them together in a reasoned way that re-creates a culture or describes a process or set of events in a way that participants would recognise as real”

The process of responsive interviewing is “*flexible but not haphazard*” (Rubin and Rubin, 2011 p. 10). The order in which questions are asked can change from one interview to the next. However, questions asked should revolve around the responses given by the interviewee and should be guided by the specific topics of interest to the researcher. Key elements of semi-structured, responsive interviewing were utilised in this current research study in that there were key topics that all

participants were asked to talk about. However, it was also important that the participants had the opportunity to share stories about their individual experiences and to have the opportunity to talk about topics that were important to them.

Interviewing for this Current Study

Prior to each of the interviews, the participant was sent a copy of the Participant Consent Form which they signed and either returned by email (for online interviews) or brought to the interview (for the in-person interviews). This signalled their consent to participate in the interview. At the beginning of each interview participants were asked to confirm that they had read the 'Participant Information Leaflet' and the researcher and participant read through the 'Participant Consent Form' together. The participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study and although they had previously signed a consent form, they were asked to provide verbal consent to participate in the study. Each interview began with the interviewer asking the participants to talk about themselves and their current life. Follow up questions were then asked, guided by the Interview Topic Guide (Appendix 10). The participants were also asked about the foster family they grew up with and their current relationship with them. This question was intended to gain an overview of the participants' current relationship with their foster family prior to beginning to ask more in-depth questions about other aspects of their current lives. It was of note that for each of the participants, when asked to talk about their current relationship with their foster carers, they chose to go back and start their story talking about their childhood and to trace the development of their relationship over time. Although not the original intention, this did provide an opportunity to learn more about how these young adults understood how they negotiated permanence within their foster care family throughout their time in care, and it became a reference point from which the development of these relationships could be traced over time. Findings relating to this issue are examined in detail in the chapters presenting the findings of this research. It was also of note that most of the study participants also chose to talk about their relationships with their birth family alongside their descriptions of their relationships with their foster carers. This provided valuable insights into the ways in which relationships with birth family interacted with permanence in childhood and how relationships with birth family developed and shifted during early adulthood following their experience of growing up in foster care with permanence.

Throughout the interviews, probing questions were used as appropriate, allowing for more in-depth knowledge to be gained about the topics the participants raised. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed the freedom to ask probing question, while referencing the topic guide ensured that there was some consistency with certain topics being raised across all interviews. It is worth noting that not all participants discussed each topic with similar levels of detail. The topics that all participants were asked about included; their current relationships with their foster family; current relationships and connections with birth family; current life including education, work, living

circumstances and friendships; experiences of permanence while growing up in care; talking to friends in adulthood about growing up in care; thoughts about the future and reflections on past experiences. Following the guiding principles of responsive interviewing ensured that the interviews were flexible and allowed the participants to raise issues that were relevant to their story, while also ensuring that the interview was then redirected towards areas identified as relevant to the research questions.

Distress Protocols

The Participant Information Leaflet included a section advising the potential participants that they may find talking about their experience of care upsetting. Every participant was sent a leaflet outlining the support agencies they could contact should they need any support after the interview (Appendix 10). Once the interview had commenced the researcher again outlined the potential that the participant may become upset during the interview. The protocol outlined that if this happened the interview would be paused and the participant could then decide if they wanted to restart the interview, reschedule the interview for another day or chose to not participate in the interview. In addition to being provided with contact details of relevant support agencies, each participant was also provided with the researcher's phone number and encouraged to contact her should they wish to after the interview. In the early stage of data collection while the researcher was still working as practicing social worker, it was particularly important that the researcher remained aware that her role in the interview was one of researcher and not social worker and therefore having agencies the participants could contact for support was important.

During the interviews some participants did get upset while talking about specific incidents in their lives. It is also true that several of the research participants commented at the end of the interview that they had enjoyed thinking about their experiences and had found participating in the interview a positive experience. One participant requested a follow up phone call the day after her interview. During this follow up call she said that it had been emotional for her to talk about her experiences of care as she had not thought about this in detail for several years. However, she also said that it had been a positive experience and that she used it as an opportunity to talk to her boyfriend about her care experience, her current relationship with her birth family and how important her foster family are to her at this stage in her life.

Data Collection in an On-line Context

The data collection phase of this study began in September 2019. By February 2020 four interviews had been completed and an additional two interviews had been scheduled for March 2020. On the 12th of March 2020 the implementation of public health restrictions in response to the Covid-19 public health pandemic interrupted this data collection process and all research interviewing had to temporarily cease. Ultimately it meant that face-to-face interviews were no longer an option for this

current study and the ongoing nature of the public health crisis meant that a pivot to online data collection methods was essential. In June 2020 ethical approval was granted to restart data collection for this current study using the video conferencing software MS Teams, the university approved online platform.

The use of face-to-face interviewing in qualitative data collection has been widely discussed and features prominently across the literature. It is often seen as the gold standard of data collection (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006; O'Connor et al, 2013). However, online data collection was not novel in 2020 and there is literature to support its use as an accepted means of collecting data (O'Connor et al, 2013). Discussions about online data collection highlight the positives including increased flexibility, reduced costs, opportunities to access a wider sample of participants and that some participants may find an online interview easier and more convenient than an in-person interview (Deakin & Weakfield, 2014; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, O'Connor et al, 2017). Conversely, Couper (2011) argues that relying solely upon online data collection methods can lead to a self-selecting sample of people who have access to broadband and electronic devices so relying on this alone is not always advisable. O'Connor et al. (2017) asserts that when undertaking online data collection, it is important that the researcher is confident that remote methods will work for their sample, will not lead to bias and not discourage full participation by participants. Heath et al. (2018) caution that the onus is on the researchers to ensure that the technology selected is one they are familiar with, and that the researcher is responsible for ensuring that the research participants have an optimal experience and are protected from undue stress.

In the context of Covid-19, the use of MS Teams to carry out interviews ensured this current research could continue. When the pivot to MS Teams for data collection was necessary, this researcher was already familiar with the platform and used it regularly. It was also the platform supported by the university, with technical support available should it be required. In addition, video calling across a range of platforms was being more widely used at that time (June 2020-September 2020) as people found ways to remain in contact while being socially isolated. With this current research there was only one occasion when an interview was interrupted due to poor internet connection and this interview resumed immediately when the participant reconnected. There were no other technical issues that impacted the undertaking of the interviews.

Reflections about the Interview Process

Reflecting on the process of interviewing, consideration is given to the researcher's own extensive experience of interviewing in a social work context prior to undertaking this PhD research. Prior experience carrying out adoption and fostering assessments means that potentially the researcher was already in the habit of using a chronological life course order and this may have influenced the early interviews undertaken. This was noted when early transcripts were reviewed by the researcher

and so in response, a more concerted effort was made to allow the participants to tell their story in any order they chose. However, as the interviews progressed, the participants continued to choose to tell their stories chronologically starting with childhood, telling the story as to how their relationships with foster carers, birth family and friends developed during childhood and progressed across time.

3.2.12 Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) as originally developed by Braun and Clarke in their seminal 2006 study and in their more recent iteration ‘Reflexive Thematic Analysis’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022), was the process chosen for the analysis of the qualitative interviews gathered for this study. Terry and Hayfield (2020 p3) describe thematic analysis as;

“A flexible analytical method that enables the researcher to construct themes - meaning-based patterns - to report their interpretation of a qualitative data set”.

Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that while it is a method that is theoretically flexible, it is not atheoretical and researchers using thematic analysis should make the philosophical underpinnings of their research clear. When using thematic analysis, the researcher is searching for patterns within the data that allows them to identify themes. When taking an inductive approach to thematic analysis, the researcher is linking the themes to the data rather than searching for themes that are driven by the researcher’s theoretical interests or assumptions. Braun and Clarke (2022 p5) explain that they added the term “reflexive” in order to indicate the importance of *“valuing a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a reflexive researcher is a fundamental characteristic of TA for [us] and a differentiating factor across versions of TA”*. When adopting a reflexive thematic analysis approach, the researcher brings critical reflexivity to their role as a researcher and the process of the research. Braun and Clarke believe that this is something that is inherent within the values of a qualitative approach to research.

In the development of their TA approach, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) outline six phases of thematic analysis. These phases and the research processes involved are outlined in Table 5 below and were followed for this study. The first phase of familiarising oneself with the data carries great importance as it is the phase when the researcher begins to immerse themselves in the data. In this phase of this study, this researcher personally transcribed each of the interviews verbatim and then reviewed the transcriptions to ensure accuracy against the recorded interview. The transcripts were re-read making notes of early thoughts and ideas about how the data related to current literature and the research questions. At this point the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo, a data analysis software that was used to support data management for this current research. In the second phase of generating codes, each transcript was coded line by line. Open, largely descriptive, codes were generated, with some sections of text placed into multiple codes. Once all transcripts had been coded, a review was undertaken to ensure that data excerpts placed under each code were an accurate

reflection of the code. During the third phase, commonalities were identified across the data set and the codes were refined. Early themes were identified that related to common issues and unifying concepts across the data set. As themes were created, relevant data was collated under each theme. At this point the transcripts were re-read by the researcher so that appropriate excerpts could be placed into the candidate themes. At the end of this phase four broad themes were identified as follows; i) The young adults' relationships with their foster family ii) The young adults' relationships within the world around them as they transition to adulthood iii) The young adults' connection with their birth family as they transition out of care iv) The young adults' sense of self/ identity during the transition to adulthood. A summary of each of these themes and a map showing how they connected to the research questions was compiled (Appendix 11).

In the fourth phase these themes were reviewed. Level One of this phase included re-reading the transcripts to ensure that the themes identified were an accurate reflection of the stories shared by the participants and that they were applicable across the dataset. At this point any relevant data that had been missed in earlier stages was coded. In Level Two of this phase, a more detailed thematic map of the themes was developed (Appendix 12). In the fifth phase the themes were reviewed, searching for organising concepts that would create cohesion through the analysis of the data. These were refined and sub-themes identified, demonstrating diversity across the participants stories within each theme. Themes were clearly defined and named at this stage and concepts that united the themes and tell the story of the data were identified. In the final phase the findings chapters and discussion chapter of this dissertation were written ensuring the inclusion of relevant and interesting extracts to provide compelling evidence under each theme, all the while relating the analysis back to the literature and the research questions.

TABLE 5: OUTLINE OF THE SIX PHASES OF THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS PROCESS
(ADAPTED FROM BRAUN AND CLARKE, 2016)

Phase	Researcher Steps
1. Familiarising yourself with the data	• Transcribing of the interviews and uploading into NVivo, the software used to manage the data. • Note taking following transcription • Reading and re-reading of the interviews • Note taking following re-reading of interviews
2. Generating Initial Codes	• Systematic coding of each transcript, this includes multiple coding of some excerpts where relevant • Coding at this phase is exploratory with all ideas considered • Collate data as relevant to each code

3. Searching for Themes (Appendix 11)	• Review initial codes for potential themes that are common across the entire dataset • Identify broad topics as potential themes • Collate all data relevant to potential themes identified • Retain a code for miscellaneous themes • Phase ends with a collection of candidate themes and sub themes
4. Reviewing Themes (Appendix 12)	Refining of candidate themes Level 1: • Review coded excerpts to ensure they work with the candidate themes • Review data and recode any missed data. • Check that themes are applicable across the dataset. Level 2: • Generate a thematic map of analysis • Recheck themes identified in map ensuring it reflects dataset as a whole
5. Defining and Naming Themes	• Review all themes to identify unifying /organising concept • Gather data for each theme • Write a summary of each theme checking it matches with the data collated. • Name the themes
6. Producing the Report	• Write a report that tells the story of your data while ensuring the complexity and nuance are incorporated and reflected. • Ensure that you have robust evidence for your themes that supports your final analysis as presented in the written report.

3.3 Ethical Considerations:

3.3.1 Introduction

All of the participants in this current study had grown up in State care. It was likely that these participants experienced loss, neglect and trauma in early childhood. The interviews were focused on their current adult lives, however, it was inevitable that the interviews would also touch on issues from childhood. It was essential that robust measures were put in place to ensure that the research methods were ethically sound and that the research participants were able to provide informed consent and knew how they could access support after the interview should this be necessary. Core

ethical issues such as receiving ethical approval for the study, obtaining informed consent, preserving confidentiality and anonymity and data management will be discussed below.

3.3.2 Research Ethics Committee Approval

Ethical approval for this study was received from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin prior to recruitment and data collection. Once approval had been granted from the university it was then also applied for and granted by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) in Tusla. The application to the REC in Tusla was considered in line with their guidance which stated that REC review was required when there were “*potential research participants identified from, or because of their past or present use of services provided by the Agency*” ([Guidelines on the functioning of Tusla’s Research Ethics Committee Tusla - Child and Family Agency](#)). In addition, at the time of commencing the research the researcher was an employee of Tusla, which also required study review by Tusla REC. When the initial application was submitted to Tusla REC, it had been intended that Tusla social workers would act as gatekeepers and assist with recruitment by making direct contact with young adults they knew who had grown up in foster care with permanence, including a cohort who had been adopted by their foster carers. However, as stated earlier, due to GDPR constraints, the REC was only able to grant approval for social workers to contact foster carers who still had a file that was open to the agency.

Ethical approval was initially granted in 2019, with two subsequent amendments submitted. The first was to request to increase the age of participants in the study and to be able to collect the data using online video calling (June 2020). The second amendment was in September 2020 when the focus of the study shifted to incorporate both relational and legal permanence, as described in the first chapter of this dissertation. Both Research Ethics Committees; Trinity College Dublin and Tusla, approved these changes (Appendices 2 and 3)

3.3.3 Obtaining Informed Consent

Obtaining informed consent is a core ethical requirement of any research project (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Informed consent implies not just that the participant is agreeing to participate in the research but also that they understand what is being asked of them; including that the researcher has disclosed their identity, the implications of taking part in the study have been explained, how data will be stored and used is outlined and the participant understands that taking part in the research is voluntary (Padgett, 2019).

To obtain informed consent for this study a number of steps were followed. When a potential research participant initially contacted the researcher, they were sent a ‘Participant Information Leaflet’ and a ‘Participant Consent Form’ via email (Appendices 5 and 6). Participants were given 2-3 weeks to consider if they wanted to take part in the study and they had the opportunity to contact the researcher and ask any questions, either via email, via Instagram direct messaging, via WhatsApp

or on a telephone call. All participants had to complete a consent form and all participants were asked again for verbal consent at the start of the interview. They were also told that they had two weeks after the date of the interview to withdraw their consent at which point the recording of their interview would be deleted. All of the participants were over the age of eighteen years and had the capacity to provide consent.

3.3.4 Preserving Confidentiality and Anonymity

Throughout the research process, full confidentiality was maintained, and the participants' identities were protected. Other than the researcher, the only person who had access to the participants given names was the initial supervisor, Professor Robbie Gilligan. However, even in early drafts of findings and during the early stages of thematic analysis, pseudonyms were used when referring to the study participants. The 'Participant Information leaflet' and the 'Participant Consent Form' included detailed information about the ways in which confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study, including the use of pseudonym and the removal of any identifying information.

3.3.5 Data Management

In line with the research ethics approval, all data gathered throughout the research process was kept safely and securely. All data was stored and processed in accordance with GDPR legislation. Interviews that were recorded on a digital voice recorder and those recorded via MS teams, were uploaded to the researcher's college, password protected, OneDrive account. The researcher is the only person that has access to this account. All recordings and videos will be deleted once the PhD study has been completed and the degree has been awarded. Anonymised transcription will be retained on OneDrive for 7 years after the submission of the PhD thesis at which point, they will be deleted. These details were all provided in the 'Participant Information Leaflet'.

3.4 Recalling Difficult Life Experiences:

As described earlier in this chapter, a distress protocol was established should the participants become upset either during their interview or in the days following the interview as a result of talking about their experiences both while in care and during the transition out of care. The Participant Information Leaflet included a section advising the potential participants that they may find talking about their experience of care upsetting. A leaflet was provided to all participants outlining the support agencies they could contact should they need any support after the interview. They were given a contact mobile phone number for the researcher, and they were advised that they could contact her, should they wish to after their interview. At the start of each interview when discussing the content of the Participant Information Leaflet the participants were provided with a copy of the leaflet containing details of services that could be contacted for support (Appendix 10).

3.5 Trustworthiness of this Research

Quantitative research is commonly measured according to issues such as validity and reliability. Bryman (2012, p.390) asserts, that when discussing qualitative research alternative criteria to validity and reliability should be considered because these principles, *“presuppose that a single, absolute account of social reality is feasible”*. In qualitative research issues of reliability and validity are framed as trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 2013). Four separate aspects to trustworthiness have been identified by Lincoln and Guba (2013). These are; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. How these four issues apply to this current research will be outlined below.

Credibility

Ensuring credibility is one of the most significant factors in establishing the trustworthiness of any qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Credibility refers to ensuring that the research is undertaken in accordance with good research practice (Lincoln and Guba, 2013) and it can be assured with the use of a variety of techniques (Byrne, 2001). Such techniques include the researcher articulating their position in relation to the research, making certain that established research methods are utilised, that the researcher is familiar with the social world of the research participants and that a random sample of suitable participants is sought (Shenton, 2004). The use of peer debriefers at the point of data analysis is also recommended to improve credibility, as this brings a fresh perspective to the research (Byrne, 2001). These issues are addressed in this dissertation; the literature review outlines the understanding the researcher gained of the relevant issues prior to commencing the research, the researcher's position as an “insider researcher” and the decision to utilise a social constructionist framework are all outlined in this current chapter, alongside the methods used when recruiting a representative sample. Peer debriefer were not used, however, the frequent discussions with the two PhD supervisors brought fresh perspectives, outside of the researchers own thoughts, to the data analysis process.

Transferability

In qualitative research transferability refers to thick descriptions of the phenomenon being examined (Geertz, 1973, Shenton, 2004). The provision of thick descriptions provides contextual information and *“allows the reader to compare when other instances of the phenomenon are reported”* (Shenton, 2004, p.70). In this dissertation in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 detailed descriptions of various aspects of the participants stories pertaining to each theme are provided as evidence of such ‘thick descriptions.’

Dependability

Research reliability, also referred to as dependability relates to the researcher's methods of data collection and analysis (Leung, 2015). In this current study reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was utilised to analyse the narratives shared by participants during the semi-structured interviews that were conducted. Braun and Clarke (2020, p.7-8) argue that when referring to

reliability during the use of thematic analysis the researcher should not be arguing a lack of bias because:

“Meaning and knowledge are understood as situated and contextual and the research subjectivity is conceptualised as a resource for knowledge production which inevitably sculpt the knowledge produced, rather than must-be-contained threat to credibility”

This indicates that in qualitative research it should be anticipated that a researcher will influence their research and the interpretation of data collected. However, what is important are the tools employed to manage this. This current researcher’s insider status as a researcher with practice experience related to the field of study was outlined in this chapter and the methods used to manage this; regular use of supervision, frequent reading of current literature and maintaining a reflexive research journal were all outlined. In conducting the analysis of the data, the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) were followed which include frequent re-reading of the data to continually check that the themes identified can be reliably described within the data collected.

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved through the researchers audit trail (Byrne, 2001). Such an audit trail allows readers of the research to track the decisions made by the researcher and includes documentation such as the researchers journal, transcripts and recordings of interviews and a record of data analysis decisions throughout the process (Lincoln and Guba, 2013; Byrne, 2001). This chapter outlines each of these processes that were taken within this current research.

3.6 Reflecting on the Research Process

Researchers who have some prior knowledge of the community they are researching, have experience or insight into the research issue, either due to personal or professional experience, can be considered to be an ‘insider researcher’ (Drake and Health, 2010, Hellowell, 2006). Such researchers are at a potential disadvantage including the possibility that they will make assumptions about the research participants’ experiences, that their perceptions will be clouded by their previous personal experience and that these factors will lead to them carrying out interviews that are shaped and guided by the core aspects of the researcher’s experience and not the experience of the participant (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Researchers who have either personal or professional experience of their research problem live in a liminal space, this creates complexity and tension, and the insider researcher needs to learn how to manage this tension (Shaw, 2005; Acker, 2000). Such researchers need to ensure that they take an “eyes wide open” approach to gathering data, assuming they know nothing about the topic at hand (Asselin, 2003). Insider researchers also have advantages in that their prior knowledge of the community and of the issue being researched can assist with rapport building

during data collection, access to research participants and knowledge of areas of legislation and practice that new researchers might have to learn in advance.

I made a transition from social work practitioner to fulltime academic during the years I was undertaking my PhD study. However, in the early stages of planning my research study, I was deeply embedded in the practitioner camp. As outlined in Chapter One of this dissertation, from 1999-2002 I worked in the areas of child protection and fostering and from 2002-2019 in the area of adoption, including adoption-from-care. While I left professional practice in 2019 to take up a role in a university, this transition alone did not mitigate the potential that my practice experience could influence the research process. Therefore, maintaining an awareness of this potential was important. Throughout the PhD process, measures were in place to assist with moderating my insider practitioner researcher status. These included keeping a reflexive journal and tracking thoughts and the developments of my ideas throughout the process. PhD supervision was a space to gain insights into these issues and both supervisors were ideally placed to offer guidance and advice ensuring that the research remained research led rather than relying upon practice knowledge. For example, early in the research design process when potential topics that participants in the study might discuss were considered, the PhD supervisor suggested that it would be useful to know about the participants connections to their birth family in adulthood. However, it was my social work practice experience that young people in permanent foster care and young people who had been adopted from care, did not have an ongoing connection to, or contact with, their birth family. However, once the interviews began it was apparent that the young adults' birth families did play a role in their lives as they transitioned to early adulthood. Maintaining an awareness of the potential to be influenced by practice experience, grounding ideas in the literature, being informed by the expert research knowledge of the supervisors and maintaining a focus on the stories shared by the participants all helped to ensure that this researcher's previous status as a social work practitioner did not unduly influence the study.

3.7 Critique of the Methodology Chosen

The methods and methodology employed by this study have yielded the information that was needed to answer the research questions posed. The philosophical approach and methods described above have ensured that the lived experiences of this group of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence, has been the primary focus of the study. However, there were some limitations to this study.

Firstly, the sample was relatively small, and it could not be described as balanced as the majority of the sample were female and white and Irish. While some ethnic diversity was present in the sample this could not be discussed within the study as the low numbers meant that it would potentially identify those participants.

Secondly, most interviews were carried out while Ireland was under a lockdown as a result of public health measures which were aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19. This meant that the lives of the participants when interviewed were restricted. They were not meeting family, friends or engaging in their usual social activities and this potentially had an impact upon how they discussed their current lives. However, an argument could also be made that those same the public health restrictions contributed to participants being available to take part in research as their lives were less scheduled than was usual for many young adults and undertaking the interviews online obviated the need for the researcher or participants to travel for the interviews.

3.8 Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the lived experiences of a group of young adults who grew up in foster care, with permanence, at a time of transition to early adulthood. Through thematic analysis, patterns within the data were identified that provide insights and uncover meanings the young adults attach to their lived experiences. The methods utilised in undertaking this research have ensured that the study is underpinned by a coherent philosophical framework that lends itself to the qualitative approach used. The use of responsive semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to tell their story about their current lives. The use of thematic analysis ensured a robust process of analysis of the data which has led to the identification of patterns and themes within the data. Above all the methods chosen have effectively addressed the research questions resulting in research that uncovers the current lives of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence and illuminated meanings attached to their lived experiences.

The findings from this research will now be presented across the next three chapters.

Chapter 4. Negotiating Permanence in Long-Term Foster Care

4.1 Introduction

This research is concerned with investigating the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term foster care with permanence. The primary aim was to gain insights into the current lives of these young adults as they transitioned out of care and transitioned to adulthood. This research project will add to developing understandings about the ways in which permanence is conceptualised for young adults who grow up in foster care with permanence. To address the research questions, interviews were carried out with twenty-two young adults who experienced permanence, either legal, relational or both, within their long-term, foster care placements. This chapter is the first of three chapters within which the findings from these interviews will be presented. In this current chapter, the findings relating to the ways in which the young adults described how they negotiated permanence while they were growing up in foster care are discussed. In the two chapters that follow, the young adults' descriptions and narratives about their current lives, including how they have re-negotiated permanence as they transition out of care and transition to adulthood are presented.

The participants in this current study reported a variety of experiences of both legal and relational permanence, within their long-term foster care placements. When asked to discuss their current lives, with a focus on their current relationships with their foster carers, their birth family and world around them, the young adults often began by recalling experiences from their earlier life, sharing narratives about how they negotiated permanence within their foster care placements throughout their time in care. This indicates that for these young adults, their current lived experiences in early adulthood, are tied to their past experiences of negotiating permanence while in care. In this chapter, the ways in which these young adults describe the negotiation of permanence while they were in foster care will be outlined. There are common themes within the narratives and the themes discussed are aggregated under three primary headings; *negotiating permanence through subjective experiences*, *negotiating permanence through legal status* and *negotiating permanence through inclusion of birth family*. Through these narratives the varied ways in which the participants drew meanings from their daily lived experiences while in care, and how these experiences contributed to their belief that they had permanence within their foster care placements, are uncovered.

4.2 Negotiating Permanence through Subjective Experiences

4.2.1 Introduction

Permanence has been the cornerstone of child protection and welfare practice since the 1960s (Moran et al.,2020; Neil & Beek,2020; Pérez, 2017; Biehal, 2014). However, in recent times our understandings of permanence for young people growing up in state care have evolved. Permanence is no longer understood to be solely grounded within a legal status such as adoption. Broader understandings of permanence, including the concept of relational permanence, established within the context of strong and enduring emotional ties are emerging as being important (McSherry &

Fargas-Malet,2018). As highlighted within recent academic discourse including Ball et al., (2021) and Moran et al., (2020) investigating the subjective experiences of young people growing up in permanent care is now understood to be an essential way to gain insights into how permanence is negotiated within foster care placements. In this section of the chapter the participants' narratives about their subjective experiences will be examined. The themes discussed include the ways in which the participants narrated how they negotiated permanence *through a sense of belonging, through navigating challenging experiences while in care and through their day-to-day lives* as well as navigating *disruptions to negotiating permanence and negotiating permanence while managing the stigma of care.*

4.2.2 Negotiating Permanence through a Sense of Belonging

Of note, most of the participants in this research could not identify a moment or an event that signified to them that they had permanence within their placement. For example, Hannah found it very difficult to explain how, or when, she knew her placement was permanent. This is important considering Hannah had experienced several foster placements before moving to her current foster family aged seven and being adopted by them aged 17. While Hannah described her adoption day "*as the best day of my life*", she did not however, view this as the moment when she understood that she had permanence within her placement. Rather, as the next quote from her explains, she traces her sense of belonging within her foster family back to the day she arrived in their home:

“I knew from the minute I came to them that they were going to be my stable family and that I wanted to be with them for a long time...the other families I lived with weren't stable...but I knew with my [foster] mam and dad that I wanted them to adopt me forever”.

This recollection, grounding Hannah's initial sense of permanence within a feeling of belonging that she had, was not uncommon amongst the participants. Many of them said that they could recall just knowing from the beginning that their placement would be permanent. In this next quote Ben indicates, like Hannah, that he felt like he belonged in his foster family, although it took him longer than Hannah to establish that feeling. He also reflects in this next quote that being separated from his birth mother was difficult for him at the beginning of his placement:

“I never felt I was out of place with [the foster family] ...course not getting to see my mam all the time was a bit different at first, but I'd say after a year or two it just felt like home. There wasn't any sense that this isn't where I am supposed to be”

Ben's quote draws attention to the ongoing significance that birth families can still hold for young people even after they have been removed from the care of their birth family. In this quote the

sentiment echoed by Ben appears to affirm Rogers (2017) point that it is often separation from birth family that leads to young people in care feeling a sense of stigma. However, building on this, Ben indicates that developing a sense of belonging within his foster care family helped him adjust to his new situation and led him to feel like his foster home was the best placement for him.

Rosie also spoke about the ongoing significance of her birth mother in her life and this next quote shows that her sense of belonging within the family was strengthened by her foster mother's acknowledgment of the role of her birth family in her life:

“My foster mum would always sit me down and she would be like, ‘look, I know I’m not your mum, you know your mum will always be your mum, but I am your family, and I will always be here to support you’. ...they always, made sure that I was loved, like constantly...I never went to bed without a kiss goodnight, like it was always ‘love you’, like it was never, I was never invalidated”.

Ben and Rosie's quotes are reminiscent of what Holland and Crowley (2013) refer to as the emotional co-presence of the birth family for children in care, and yet this had no negative impact upon their capacity to develop a sense of belonging within their foster family. This is also in keeping with findings of Maaskant et al. (2016) who reported that when care experienced youth develop a strong attachment to their foster carers this did not have a negative impact upon their relationships with their birth family. In fact, Rosie's quote indicates that the significant role of her birth mother in her life was encouraged and supported by her foster mother and this was something that Rosie valued and appreciated. Monica, on the other hand, talks about face-to-face- contact with her birth family and indicates that this physical contact with them did not diminish her sense of belonging within her foster home. This next quote describes how Monica reflected on the grounding of her sense of permanence as lying within the longevity of her placement, as she was living with her foster family from birth. Describing how she came to believe that she had permanence within her placement, she said,

“There was never a single thing, like a single moment, that you know, kind of felt like ‘oh now I am their daughter’. I have just always felt like part of the family. I suppose because I was so young arriving...I grew up in the same house for my entire life...even access with my biological family didn't take anything away from me or make me feel I am not a part of my [foster] family. I don't even know how to describe it...I suppose I just felt that I was like all of the other kids in school ...I was born to this family and stayed with them my whole life. I mean I arrived from hospital, and I never lived anywhere else”.

Monica, like other participants with similar accounts, fits into Biehal's (2014) "as if" category of belonging, saying that she viewed her foster carers "as if" they were her birth family. However, the participants in Biehal's study who were in the 'as if' category had no ongoing contact with their birth family. Conversely, Monica continues to have a relationship with her birth family but this did not threaten her sense of her foster parents as being "as if" they were her birth parents. Moreover, Monica did not perceive there to be a potential conflict between contact with her birth family and her sense of belonging within her foster family. Monica's story suggests that she gains her sense of permanence from the longevity of the placement. This is a more objective measure than Hannah's and Ben's subjective feelings of belonging. However, in these quotes from Monica we can see glimpses of the complexity that she and the other participants also had to navigate. Monica, Hannah and Ben raise issues that other participants also discussed, such as contact with birth family and stigma associated with growing up in care, issues that are discussed later in this chapter.

Valuing the subjective experience of a having sense of belonging is important when understanding experiences of children in care, because as Bengtsson and Luckow (2020 p.115) argue, "*for children in foster care placements, belonging is not just an unconscious everyday way of being*" and that developing a sense of belonging within a foster family is not simply about feeling at home, but it is *also "conditioned by the social context of foster care as a professional intervention"*. The findings in this current study mirror those in Bengtsson and Luckow's research which concluded that for children in foster care, a sense of belonging can take on different meanings and nuances, and can be grounded in "*emotional, physical or functional attachments*" (p.116). However, unlike the participants in that study, for the participants within this current study, their sense of belonging also contributed to their sense that they had permanence within their placement, and even ongoing contact with birth family did not disrupt this. Despite developing a sense of belonging within their foster care families some of the young people also experienced challenges during their time in care and the ways in which the foster carers supported them through these times further contributed to the negotiation of permanence. These narratives will be outlined in the next section.

4.2.3 Negotiating Permanence through Challenging Experiences

Descriptions of challenges during adolescence were commonly recounted by the study participants, with the support provided by their foster carers demonstrating their commitment to them. Ben described a difficult adolescent phase including periods of being suspended from school, which culminated in him being threatened with expulsion when he was fifteen. He recalled that his foster mother always imposed appropriate punishments and discipline at home to ensure that he knew that his behaviour was not acceptable to her. Reflecting on this phase in his life as a difficult period for everyone, he stated:

“I was constantly in trouble, arguing with [foster carers] and they would be hard on me and I knew that it was for a good reason...[foster mother] was never too hard on me...she always knew how I would react in certain situations ...that is what made me feel like, ‘yeah, I should be here’”.

This echoes the group that Pérez (2017 p.183) describes as having “*enduring relational permanence*”. The participants in this group in Pérez’s (2017, p.183) study described their legal carers as having “*authoritative parenting style*”. However, Ben’s narrative adds to this as he connects the fact that he avoided expulsion from school to this strong parenting, but he places greater emphasis on the sense of self-worth that his foster carers cultivated in him: “*they always reiterated the message that I was better than that, that I was more capable and had more cop on...they made me believe in myself*”. This is in contrast to findings in Maaskant et al. (2016) who concluded that adolescents in care in their study felt worse about themselves when they lived with foster carers they perceived to be restrictive and imposing rules and expectations. Potentially, it is the element of reflection which allowed Ben to view this period in his life positively during interview. However, he did not indicate that as a child he developed a negative view of his foster carers as a result of these rules, in contrast he believes that they helped his sense of permanence. Ingrid’s story echoes the story told by Ben. She also reported that she went through a tumultuous period during her late teenage years which placed a strain on her relationship with her foster carers. She described her foster carers’ strict parenting style but in addition it is of note that she reported:

“They never gave up on me, even though I felt like giving up on myself ...they gave me the confidence saying, ‘you can do it’ ...they accepted me for who I was, and as a part of the family”.

The capacity of foster carers to respond to challenging times within the young person’s life, combined with a willingness to address inappropriate behaviour, was reported by several participants as being instrumental in helping them feel that they belonged and were loved by their foster carers. Helen noted that that her foster carers understood that she needed boundaries and rules to help her settle into her placement. However, she said that in the early stages of her placement, living in a family with rules such as sitting down to eat dinner, was a new experience for her as she had not done that in her pre-care life. As she explains in this next quote, her foster carers were able to help her to adapt and this in turn helped her feel safe and able to form a strong relationship with them:

“From the beginning they were like ‘these are the rules, we are a family and this is how it goes’, but the reason I felt comfortable was because they went with my flow, ‘cause like we are not normal kids, like we have trauma...they never made me feel different and that is what made me think ‘ok these parents are here for the long-term’”.

Connor's development of relational permanence was also supported by his sense that his foster carers understood his needs and that they did not have any unrealistic expectations of him. He said that his foster carers made him feel comfortable from the time he first moved into their home and had they not responded to his needs, he would not have wanted to stay. In this next quote, Connor describes his recollections of moving to his foster home:

“They said to me ‘take your time settling into the house and relaxing...they weren’t putting any pressure on me or anything just giving me the space I needed ...that was the best thing because if I was put under pressure I would have asked my social worker to move me...I like my own space and I’m still like that now”

Foster carers imposing appropriate discipline, putting boundaries in place and accepting and understanding the individual needs of the child emerged as instrumental in helping this group of young people negotiate permanence. The narratives provided demonstrate how these actions by their foster carers helped these study participants to feel accepted and understood by their foster carers, creating a strong foundation for a relationship the young people understood to be permanent. However, it was not only during difficult and challenging times that foster carers' actions supported the negotiation of permanence, actions within day-to-day life were also understood as significant and these will be discussed in the next section.

4.2.4 Negotiating Permanence through Foster Carers Actions in the Day-to-Day

Describing the everyday activities and processes of family life was a significant way that the study participants articulated how they negotiated permanence within their foster family. These descriptions closely align to Finch's (2007) concept of family display and Morgan's (1996, 2011) account of family practices. Joanne's account of explaining her home life to someone in school provides a good exemplar of these stories. This next quote describes what Joanne said she told a classmate who suggested that Joanne's foster father was not her dad:

“I told them, they’re not strangers, they do the exact same things as your mom and dad, they are looking after me, keeping a roof over my head, they are just like your mom and dad but have the title of foster mom and foster dad”.

This is reflective also of how other participants described their relationships with their foster carers. The next quote from Doreen is a further example of this:

“They were caring for me...they were providing a home, they were there at weekends and if I had a run in with a teacher in school...and all the little, small things”.

Gillian, Helen and Connor all spoke about different ongoing medical conditions that they had and the fact that they regularly attended hospital appointments with their foster carers when they were children. This quote from Gillian demonstrates how they valued this role and indicates that her foster mother's attendance at hospital appointments was a manifestation of the love she had for Gillian: *"my [foster] mam went with me to all of my hospital appointments ...she was the one the consultant spoke to, it wasn't anyone else, always her"*.

Echoing Morgan's (2011) identification of family celebrations as an important part of family practice, Gillian and Joanne similarly recalled Christmas and birthday celebrations, making a particular point of explaining that their foster carers treated them the same way they treated their biological children in terms of buying gifts, for example. Joanne had a particular memory of family gatherings because it was something that she had not experienced in her pre-care life. In this next quote she recalls both big events and the ways in which the daily practice of eating dinner was different:

"[in the foster family] we celebrated Christmas, birthdays and big events like communions, we had dinner together all the time...I wasn't used to dinner...I wasn't used to vegetables... I had to keep asking my [foster] dad what is this and he was like 'a carrot' or 'broccoli'...normal stuff".

Related to this, Eve placed a value on the fact that her foster carers encouraged her to be involved in her local GAA club and to attend foster sibling matches and club events with the family. In line with research indicating the value of engagement with social activities for children in care (Gilligan 2000; Daly & Gilligan, 2005) this was described by Eve as instrumental in making her feel like a part of her family and her local community, as she explains:

"They did everything for me and treated me like their own child...even with sports...they used to bring me to matches and we'd stay in the juvenile room with our friends...they gave me pocket money and we had to do chores around the house ...and every day [foster mother] had a cooked dinner for us".

In these next quotes, Doreen recalls two significant moments when her foster carers' actions within daily family life contributed to her sense of permanence within the family. When talking about her foster sister's First Communion celebration, Doreen recalled that she and another foster sibling, who was also not a biological child, watched the foster family take photographs together. She recounted how their foster carers called them over and asked them to be in the family photos:

"I remember for one of the communions...they had a professional photographer there and they were going to take a photo, and I remember we were standing back but they were like 'no come on , get in' and we all got in

and to this day that picture is still hanging in their kitchen...like it's a big massive picture ...they were like 'absolutely you have to get in' ...like the fact that they weren't even ashamed to hide us..."

The physical presence of the photo on the wall was a clear manifestation for Doreen that the foster family saw her as a part of their family and that placing it on the wall was a further indication that this was not a glib invite from them but a recognition that she was a part of that family. A second example of the way in which her foster carers' actions contributed to her feeling that they viewed her as a part of their family is provided in the following quote, where Doreen describes a specific moment when her foster father threw his arm over her in the car when he had to break suddenly in traffic. This was a particularly significant moment for Doreen as before this she said that she believed that her relationship with her foster father was not a strong one:

"I think there was one particular turning point... We're coming down to the school junction, and sometimes that junction is deadly, and like he had to break suddenly and he just like, I was the only one in the car, and he just pulled his arm over like that [*does an action of flinging her arm out*] and I was like, I don't know what kicked in my head, I was like 'Oh yeah he actually cares about me, he doesn't want me to get into an accident'".

This powerful memory meant so much to her that she returned to it as the interview was ending, reflecting:

"Just to go back to that thing with [foster father] in the car. It was so significant for me. That might sound so silly but for me it was such a significant thing and just remembering it is unlocking so many memories for me".

This memory for Doreen, that she is concerned sounds '*silly*', echoes what could be described as a display of family (Finch, 2007), although on a more powerful level than some of the day to day displays of family Finch talks about, such as eating dinner or attending events together. As Finch (2007) describes, when taken in the context of family relationships that do not meet the traditional view of a family, such as foster father and foster daughter, displays of family are more powerful forms of 'family practices' (Finch, 2007, p.80) as they are an attempt to establish that the connection between the people involved is 'family like'. In the context of Doreen's foster father's actions that day, they provided substantial proof to Doreen that he cared about her. Through this act, and the others described by the participants in the current study, the young people described the ways that their foster families' actions acted as evidence that they accepted them as part of their family. This solidified the young person's sense of belonging and contributed to their negotiation of permanence.

As Leah summed it up *“I had the same commitments as their biological children. If you are part of the family, you do chores. That is part of what family is about”*.

In addition to the foster carers acting in ways that indicated they were involved in the negotiation of permanence most of the young people clearly labeled their foster carers as their parents by calling them “mum” and “dad” within their day-to-day lives and referred to them as their “parents” throughout their interviews. This ties with the study from Biehal (2014) who refers to the use of such labels as being a form of family display. Biehal (2014, p965) describes using these terms for the young people in her study as being *“of considerable symbolic significance to the children, as this represented both their membership of the foster family and the ‘normality’ of their relationships with this family”*. Conor said in interview that he only ever called his foster carers by their first name but proceeded to refer to them as ‘mum’, ‘dad’ and ‘my parents’ throughout the interview for this study. Even those who called them by their first names said that was not necessarily an indication that they did not see their foster carers as parental figures. Ben said that he always called his foster parents by their first name, but he qualified this by explaining how he felt about his foster father and his biological father. Describing to me that he does not have a good relationship with his birth father and does not call him “dad”, Ben stated:

“At the end of the day he is my biological father but a father is someone who raises their children, my [foster carer] he has been my dad, he has always been my dad, I don’t call him that but that is what he is”.

This sentiment was echoed by other participants indicating that they held an emotional, relational connection to their foster carers that placed them in the realm of parents. As Helen said *“in our house we say you have to raise your child to be a mother or father...they raised us so that is their title”*. Thus, the use of these terms is a significant way in which the young people indicate to their foster carers and the wider world that their place within the foster family was a permanent one.

Through these everyday displays of family and engagement in family practices, the participants experienced negotiating permanence within the family. However, there were also narratives provided by the participants that impinged upon the participants sense of permanence within their foster families. Despite these disruptions to the negotiation of permanence the young adults described ways in which they continued to negotiate permanence through these challenges and this will be discussed in the next section.

4.2.5 Disruptors to Negotiating Permanence

There were also times within the day-to-day activities of family life that factors outside of the foster carers’ control were described as impacting on the young person’s sense of permanence within the family. There is much written about the impact of not looking like one’s adoptive family on adoptees’

development of identity. Grotevant et al. (2000), for example, discuss the challenges faced by adopted adolescents who have different physical characteristics to their adoptive family. They argue that such differences, which could be explained as being hereditary in non-adopted youth, can make an adoption “visible” to those outside of the family and this can lead to struggles in adolescence, a phase when young people are developing their personal identity. However, little is written about the impact of these issues for young people as they negotiate permanence within long-term foster care families. In this current study an example of this issue was discussed by Fiona when she described the emotional impact for her of not looking like anyone in her foster family:

I would always get jealous, I still do sometimes, when I see people that look exactly like their siblings, like they look ‘dead-on’, like, my [foster] mother, she has seven siblings, and they all have, their kids - all of them, have blue eyes, like every single one of them besides me. I have green eyes. But like I remember being at family reunions and stuff, and I’d be like the only one there [without blue eyes] and maybe I would pick up on it...no one else noticed, like we shouldn’t be looking at that sort of thing, it’s just something I think as a child I noticed, they all have these bright blue eyes”.

This physical difference was not something that Fiona spoke about anyone pointing out to her, but the account she shares of how it impacted her suggests that at times, it contributed to her feeling less a part of her foster family, potentially threatening her negotiation of permanence.

For other participants in this study, the threat to their sense of permanence within the foster family came when they were travelling abroad. In particular, the need to bring their passport with them revealed that they had a different name to their foster carers. In the following quote, Mary, who had not told her school friends that she was in foster care, and used her foster carer’s surname in school, describes going away with her school and being worried that her school friends would see her passport which contained her birth surname. She did not want her friends to ask her questions about this so her foster mother came up with a solution, as she describes below:

“I went on a trip with school and [my passport name] was a big thing, but my [foster] mom spoke to the teacher, and they agreed I would just give the passport to my teacher privately and the teacher said I was not to worry about it and that was it sorted...but it was still a pain that I had to keep it to myself”.

This story from Mary echoes sentiments of the shame and stigma that young people in care often manage by maintaining secrecy among their friends. Dansey et al. (2019) highlight how the participants in their study, similar to Mary, kept silent about their foster care status because of the perceived threat of shame and stigma should those around them become aware of this personal detail

about their lives. In the case of Mary, her foster mother and teachers supported her in maintaining this secret, although, as the quote indicates, maintaining the secrecy was difficult for Mary even if it was what she wanted to do, at that time.

This ongoing support of foster carers, as described in this section was significant in supporting the participants to negotiate permanence throughout their time in care although, as in the case of Mary's foster mother, it was often a quiet support that only the child was aware of. In addition to these disruptors to the negotiation of permanence the young people also managed issues around stigma (Dansey et al., 2019) that commonly arise for young people in care. How the participants in this current study negotiated permanence while managing these issues will be discussed in the next section.

4.2.6 Negotiating Permanence while Managing the Stigma of Care

Many of the participants reflected on moments when their foster care status impacted negatively upon their day-to-day lives. Joanne clearly saw her foster carers as her parents and considered them her family. However, she said that there were times when she was reminded that she was not one of their birth children. In the following quote Joanne recalls wanting to have unplanned sleepovers with her friends but this was not possible as she was told a social worker was not available to provide the required permission: *"my friends were allowed to stay for dinner but then they had to go back home because a social worker wouldn't be available at short notice"*. Helen remembered being in school and other children being afraid to talk about their parents in front of her in case she became upset, explaining, *"I'd have to say to them I do have a family too"*.

While they may have viewed themselves as a part of the foster family, others were aware of their foster care status. This ties to the findings by Michell (2015) that the stigma associated with being in care can rest within a sense of being different to one's peers and as Dansey et al (2019) reported, young people in care often managed these internalised feelings of shame and stigma by maintaining a secrecy around their care status. However, for the young people in this study, their attempts to maintain secrecy was at times thwarted by issues such as those described in the quotes above. This is also evidenced in the following story told by Gillian, who like many of the participants in this study used her foster carers surname in her daily life when possible, in order to conceal her foster care status. In this next quote, Gillian describes the impact when the teachers in her secondary school did not permit her to use a surname that was different to the one that was on her birth certificate:

"I was bullied because of my surname, because it was different to my mam and dad...I was so ashamed of the fact I was in care and I didn't care if the school thought it would lead to complications, I don't want that stigma, and so they eventually let me use my foster name".

Gillian's foster carers were willing to let her use their surname to help her to feel included and to help her manage the feelings of stigma she felt as a result of being in foster care. This echoes Rogers (2017) conclusion that young people who are in care seek to manage the stigma by being cautious about who they disclosed their care status to, which he notes indicates the young people's capacity for agency. However, Gillian's capacity to control who knew about her care status was removed from her when the school required her to use her birth surname in school. While this issue impacted how Gillian felt about herself and how she was able to manage her feelings of shame about being in care, it did not appear to have a negative impact upon her capacity to negotiate permanence within her foster family, because as she perceived it, her foster carers were willing to work with what she needed, and it was the school that overruled that decision.

The stories the young adults told about of the impact of day-to-day experiences while in care, including stories about their foster carers treating them as if they were born into the family, the names they use to refer to their foster parents, their ability to choose what surname they used in their daily life and their ability to control who they disclosed their care status to, provide insights into the multiple ways that the subjective experiences of these young people impacted how they negotiated permanence while growing up in foster care. The participants in this study shared their stories about how they felt and managed issues that arose. However, woven into these stories were their recollections about the supportive actions of their foster carers and the ways in which these actions, combined with the young person's response to these actions to help them develop a sense of permanence. This suggests that the process of negotiating permanence involved both the young person and their foster carers engaging in actions, both separately and together.

In this section the subjective experiences that the young adults described as being significant as they negotiated permanence throughout their time growing up in permanent care were outlined. In addition to these experiences the young adults also discussed the ways in which their legal status did, or did not, impact the negotiation of permanence while they were growing up. This issue will be examined in the next section.

4.3 Relevance of Legal Status when Negotiating Permanence

4.3.1 Introduction

The participants in this study had self-declared that they had grown up in long-term, stable, foster care and had maintained a relationship with their foster carers into adulthood. In addition, they all said that they met the key criterion of having lived with their foster carers for at least five years prior to turning eighteen years of age, the age at which young people in Ireland exit state care. Of the twenty-two participants, nine had been adopted by their long-term foster carers. The remaining thirteen participants exited care without being adopted. Of the nine adoptees, seven were adopted when they were seventeen years old, most when they were within a month of their eighteenth

birthday. In other words, they were adopted, following a period of relational permanence and close to the time when they were due to exit care and reach the age of legal independence. The remaining two adoptees were adopted during their early adolescence, and both had lived with their foster carers since early childhood, having moved to live with their foster carers before their third birthday. Within current literature studies such as Pérez (2017) and McSherry and Fargas-Malet (2018) highlight the value that young people in care place upon relational permanence, valuing it above legal permanence within foster care placements. Within this current study the young adults described a range of beliefs about the impact of either being, or not being adopted by their long-term foster carers, upon their negotiation of permanence. For some, being adopted was understood to have been essential in helping them to negotiate permanence within their long-term foster care placement. There were also other participants, who had not been adopted, who expressed the belief that being adopted may have helped them to manage some of the complex issues they faced as a result of being in foster care. Across the group of participants many of them, including those who were not adopted, expressed the view that the term ‘adoption’ provided a more accurate reflection of the strength of their relationship with their foster carers, as it suggests a permanence that is not inherent in the term “foster care”. Importantly, none of the participants in this study believed that being adopted was essential to maintain relational permanence with their foster carers. In this next section the participants’ narratives relating to either being or not being adopted will be outlined and examined with a focus on the impact their legal status did, or did not, have upon how they negotiated permanence while growing up in long-term foster care.

4.3.2 Adoption as Important to Support the Negotiation of Permanence

Historically, permanence has been associated with the provision of legal ties and in some jurisdictions, for example the USA, establishing permanence through adoption remains a key policy aim within child protection and welfare services (Rolock, 2018). However, existing evidence across numerous studies suggests that legal permanence does not always equate to relational permanence and that it does not always guarantee that the child and their carers will establish an ongoing meaningful relationship that endures into adulthood (Ball et al., 2021; Rolock et al., 2018; McSherry et al, 2016). This current study provided an opportunity to gain insights into the meanings attached to being adopted by a group of young people who gained legal permanence following a period of relational permanence, a topic that has received very little attention to date. Overwhelmingly, the adoptees in this study asserted that they always felt a part of their foster family and being adopted just formalised that. Andrea’s comment represents this view: *“I always felt a part of the family and being adopted just solidified it”*. However, when this finding is unpacked, it is possible to see that for the majority of the adoptees, being adopted was more than a formal process and it did in fact carry deeper meaning.

Mary, for example, placed a very high value on being adopted because of the legal ties to her foster family, particularly when it came to official paperwork. Placed with her foster family as an infant and adopted by this family within a month of her 18th birthday, Mary reflected that growing up she always viewed her foster family as her family, but she did not like being in foster care. Always knowing that she had two sets of parents used to upset her, as she explains: *“it used to torment me because I didn’t want two mummies and two daddies”*. Infrequent access with her birth family was experienced by her as a disruption, as she explains, *“Like, usually I just had my family and then suddenly a visit with my birth family would come around and I’d be like ‘right here we go’*.”

For the rest of the year she said, *“it was never a constant in my head that I was fostered, never...it was just I have this other family”*. While Mary associated her contact with birth family as being a disrupter and one that was only relevant when she had visits scheduled, when asked more about this in interview she said, *“like I grew up knowing this and it was just in the back of my head, but I’d have to hide it and I was uncomfortable being around people who didn’t know”*, thus indicating that it was something that she thought about frequently and that, echoing findings in Dansey et al. (2016), she concealed her care status as a means of managing the shame she felt. She said that she didn’t tell anyone that she was adopted and never talked about it in school. As described earlier in this chapter, prior to her adoption Mary had gone on a school trip with a passport using her birth surname. When talking about a positive impact of her adoption, she reflected back to that experience and compared it to when she travelled on holiday with friends after she had completed her Leaving Certificate¹³. She said that trip *“was the first time I got to use my new passport and it didn’t matter. I was like anybody can see my passport. It was no longer a thing I have to keep to myself”*. For Mary, her adoption granted her the legal right to change her name, and this helped her to manage the shame she felt about being in care. Mary returned to this topic later in our conversation, speaking again about her feelings when she was given a passport with her adopted surname on it. As this next quote demonstrates, Mary was keen for me to understand the enormity of the emotional impact that this seemingly ‘trivial’ issue of ‘name’ had on her life: *“these were small things in a sense but like once I got my name changed, and stuff, they were big things”*. While Mary asserted that she never struggled with not feeling like a part of her foster family during her daily life, the status of being in foster care however, carried a stigma for Mary and being adopted helped her to manage this. Summing up what being adopted means to her, Mary said *“it gives me peace of mind...it was like a weight had been lifted off me...everything just became easier for me”*.

Speaking about the positive impact of being able to legally change their surname following their adoption was commonly discussed among the group of adopted participants in this study. Alan was

¹³ The Leaving Certificate is the final state exam undertaken by secondary school students in Ireland.

adopted by his foster carers within a month of his eighteenth birthday, having moved to live with them in early childhood prior to starting school. When asked what he would say to someone who was in foster care and was thinking about being adopted, Alan said:

“I’d say do you look at them as your family or not? And if they do, they might as well get adopted and have their name changed. It will save them a whole lot of hassle in the future...so it would depend on how they feel about having a different name. They might not mind having to explain it to people”.

Like Mary, Alan views having a different surname as a public manifestation that he is a foster child within the family, and this was not something he wanted to talk to people about. This next quote from Alan reveals how closely he perceives the tie between his surname and his sense of identity as a member of his foster family:

“Your name is your identity...it allows you to match with all your family, cousins and everything...if you have a different name, it is almost like you are separate from the rest of the family, you need it to be recognised by your clan members, your family...and like in school I didn’t want people knowing me as Alan [birth surname] and others as Alan [foster surname] because if the two of them got together there was a real risk of them knowing all your business and asking questions”.

This quote shows that Alan was talking about not only his foster carers and foster siblings but also his extended foster care family. Changing his name following his adoption allowed him to have a stronger sense of belonging to both his immediate and his extended foster family, while simultaneously protecting his privacy about his foster care status.

It was not just passports that signified membership of the adoptive family for the participants. Leah described how she had always felt a part of her foster family and that her extended family never differentiated between her and their biological nieces, nephews or grandchildren. However, in the story she reflects on a moving moment with her [foster] grandfather after her adoption. Leah explained that her grandfather had a family tree and while her name was on that family tree there was a dotted line joining her to the rest of the family. She recalled after her adoption her grandfather sat down with her and asked her to watch while he made that line a solid one. Leah poignantly recalled:

“He made me watch as he did it and he said that this was now the new family tree and it would be sent to everyone...it meant that it was official, there was no more, I didn’t belong, even though I wasn’t treated like I didn’t belong, but

when I was adopted it was on paper, on the family tree...that I was a part of the family”.

Previous literature has emphasised the importance of young people in care developing a sense of belonging within their foster care families (Biehals, 2014; Christiansen et al., 2013). Within the literature, for example in Bengtsson and Luckow (2020), the subjective nature of belonging is discussed. However, for Alan and other participants in this study ‘belonging’, within both his foster care family and his extended foster care family, was tied to the objective measure of his legal status. Mary and Alan and Leah all asserted that before their adoption they felt like a part of her foster families. However, these accounts suggest that despite having relational permanence before being adopted, their adoption held an emotional, and potentially symbolic, meaning that was important to them and their negotiation of permanence within their foster family.

Fiona was in early adolescence when she was adopted. She describing the impact being adopted had for her in terms of her sense of security within her foster family. She emphasised, similar to other participants, that she already felt a part of her foster family before she was adopted:

“You feel the same because you have always been a part of the family but it's like the legal aspect means that no one is going to come and take you away, no authority can remove you from your home because this is your home, this is your family”.

However, she follows this up with comments revealing the significant emotional impact being adopted had for her in terms of managing the stigma she associated with being in care. She said that as a teenager it was easier to explain to friends that she was adopted because people understand what adoption means and it carries less stigma than being in foster care, asserting *“at least if you are adopted it means that someone wants you, I mean they went to a lot of hassle to make sure they could keep me”*. Fiona feared that the sense of belonging that she felt within her foster family was not captured with the term “being in care”. For Fiona, being adopted more accurately reflected the emotional depth of her relationship with her foster carers and ensured that none of her friends or birth family would then question her position within the foster family.

This group of adoptees all indicated that they experienced relational permanence prior to their adoptions. Prior research suggests that care experienced youth place a greater value on experiences of relational permanence than they do on legal permanence (Pérez, 2017). However, the findings in this current research indicate that for some of the young adults who grew up in long-term foster care, regardless of their experiences of relational permanence, being adopted was an important aspect of their process in negotiating permanence within their long-term foster care placement. Being adopted provided them with both emotional and legal security that solidified their own feelings of belonging

within their family and helped them to manage the stigma they felt was associated with being in foster care.

4.3.3 Not Adopted but Adoption could have Supported the Negotiating of Permanence

While nine of the participants were adopted and, as described above, each of them valued being adopted, the remaining thirteen participants stated in interview that they were not adopted prior to reaching eighteen years of age. Some of this cohort of participants spoke about how as a child they had considered potentially being adopted. In addition, this group of participants described ways in which adoption could have supported their negotiation of permanence. Gillian's story provides such an example as she believed that her life would have been less complicated if she had been adopted by her long-term foster carers. Recalling in this next quote, how people used to ask her if she was adopted, she asserted that she would try and explain to people that she was in foster care, but that this only confused people further:

“They would ask ‘Oh are you adopted’ and I’d say ‘no I am not but it’s almost adoption’ ...trying to explain that was hard, no one seemed to understand...no one seemed to know what foster care was but they know what adoption is...they know foster care as ‘there was a case in the paper of a kid who grew up in care and he has killed somebody, and he had a terrible life because he was in foster care’...they don’t know the ‘oh they are not your mam and dad but you call them mam and dad’ side of things”.

For Gillian, being adopted may have helped her to manage the stigma she believed other children associated with foster care, but she did not report that it would have had an impact on her daily experience of family life with her long-term foster parents. Although, this next quote suggests that for her the status of foster care was regularly on her mind: *“it always felt like home, I always felt like I was theirs. But it is there [that you are in foster care] in the back of your mind, it doesn’t go away”*. As Gillian reflected further, she considered the actions of her foster carers, tied to acts of family display (Finch, 2007), that helped to counteract these doubts:

“They [foster carers] didn’t treat me any different to their biological children, I still got cards with ‘daughter’ on them...I was still rushed to hospital if I was sick, they still went to parent teacher meetings...they didn’t treat me any differently to their biological children”.

Gillian describes feeling like she belonged, and the actions of her foster carers contributed to her experience of negotiating permanence. Bengsston and Luckow (2020) suggest that belonging is an unconscious part of everyday life that people only become aware of when they do not feel it and that for children in care belonging is established through conscious acts. Building on this, Gillian's

description of her own experience indicates that she believes that the act of being adopted would have had a positive emotional impact on her as she negotiated permanence within her foster care family.

Monica's story echoes Gillian's. She describes feeling a sense of stigma from being in foster care and thinking being adopted would be a solution to this. Yet even without being adopted she had a strong sense of relational permanence to her foster parents. Monica described that she asked her foster carers to adopt her and they explained that they would not adopt her because it was not what her birth mother wanted. She said:

“I remember asking my [foster] mom in my late teens why they wouldn't adopt me, and she said that my birth mother did not want it...I thought that was nice that they were respecting my biological's mothers wishes”.

Biehal (2014) highlights that for the participants in her study developing a sense of belonging was a combination of factors and there was no conflict between belonging within foster care families and connection to birth family. Monica's narrative reflects this sentiment. She said that, while she appreciated her foster carers' commitment to her birth family, she could see an advantage to being adopted. As she describes in this next quote, while she had a strong connection to her birth heritage, including her surname, at times she felt that other people did not understand the depth of the connection that she felt to her foster family:

“I felt like the odd one out, people would comment that I had a different surname to my [foster] parents...I grew up in a small town so everyone knew I was in foster care. I have memories of being out and people identifying me as my parent's foster child and that had an effect on me because I felt more of a connection to my foster family than I did to my biological family...but I suppose it was just people not understanding”.

This quote above is reflective of Bengsston's and Luckow's (2020) conclusion that the impact of not having a sense of belonging was similar to managing the impact of stigma of being in care. When asked about how a sense of permanence was created in her foster placement without an adoption, Monica described her experience when she was seven years old and her classmates were due to make their First Communion. She had not been baptised prior to being admitted into care and so the priest had said that she could not be included in the First Communion ceremony. Monica recounted that her foster carers sought permission for her to be baptized and then to make her First Communion with her classmates. Monica viewed this as them including her in an important family tradition of theirs, with this next quote illustrating how she considered it a form of official welcome into their family:

“I was baptized at 7 and then made my communion the following year...I was very grateful to [foster carers] for that... The kids in school knew I was in foster care and I was different in so many ways, this was one less thing that set me apart and I think that it really did give me a stronger connection to my foster family. It was something that was important to them, and I felt honored that they wanted to include me in something that was big for their family, and I was their family, I am their family”.

As previously discussed in relation to Doreen’s foster father placing his arm over her when he had to break suddenly, ‘family display’ (Finch, 2007) often emulates family practices (Morgan, 1996, 2011) but carries deeper meaning due to the context within which these displays take place. Thus, while a communion celebration could be seen to be a family practice, in the context of Monica’s foster care status within her family it became a display of family that Monica understood to be a demonstration that she was a part of their family. This is reflective of Biehal (2014) finding that family displays as described by Finch (2007) were an important aspect of developing a sense of belonging. Monica’s feelings of relational permanence were cemented by this official process that she associated with family membership. This was sufficient for her to feel a legal tie to her foster family. Simultaneously, by not legally adopting her, her foster carers indicated that they were adhering to her birth mother’s wishes, thus not breaking Monica’s tie to her birth family.

There were other participants who also said that they made decisions around adoption based upon the potential negative impact on their relationships with their birth parents. Helen said that she could not be adopted as her birth parents would have been very upset. She considered her foster family to be her permanent family, but she said that she knew her birth parents would not want her to be adopted, reflecting: *“I know I was never going back to live with them[birth parents], but I didn’t want to upset them...that was a big thing for me”*. This was echoed by Ben who said that while he never really considered adoption, he knew that being adopted would have hurt his birth mother. He said *“it never really came up but I always knew I was their [foster carer’s] son. We didn’t need anything legal...and it would have killed my [birth] mam if I had been adopted”*.

An interrogation of the narratives shared indicate that legal permanence was an important aspect of the negotiation of permanence for the nine participants who were adopted, providing them with a stronger sense of connection to their foster family. This arose from practical implications such as the ability to change their surname as well as an emotional impact that is evident from the interviews. For both non-adopted and adopted participants, the term ‘adoption’ was considered a better description of the connection they felt to their foster family. However, there were also deeper issues to consider such as the impact upon their connection to their birth family. Testa (2004) notes in circumstances where terminating parental rights through adoption is not a feasible option, allowing

children to establish permanence through other means is important. Echoing Testa's assertion, for some participants in this research, adoption was a concept that helped them explain their connection to their foster family to the outside world, and in many cases had a positive impact upon their emotional wellbeing and sense of self. For others, the negative impact upon their connection to birth family carried greater importance than their need for a legal tie, through adoption to their foster family. This capacity to respond to the individual need in each young person's situation was important in allowing the young person to decide if being adopted was important to them.

In addition to legal status, it is noted within current literature (Bengsston and Luckow, 2020; Biehal, 2014) that the role of the birth family is also significant for young people in care and the narratives shared by the participants in this current study about the significance of their birth family as they negotiated permanence while in care, will be discussed in the next section.

4.4 Relevance of Birth Family when Negotiating Permanence

As previously alluded to in this chapter, dealing with membership of two families was a key issue for young people in this study. This echoes findings in previous research which indicates that a key task for child welfare professionals and policy makers is to understand that relationships for children in care can be *"simultaneously experienced as positive and negative, supportive and concerning, and may feel, more or less, like family over time"* (Boddy, 2019 p.2247). This was no different for the twenty-two young adults who took part in this current study. They had a variety of levels of contact with birth parents throughout their childhood and they describe different depths of feelings about their birth families. What was common across the interview cohort, was the foster carers' ability to support the young person to navigate these relationships, creating space for the birth family connections without it diminishing the level of relational permanence the young person experienced within the foster care family. Neil et al (2013) note in their study that it is common for children in care to maintain contact with their birth family even after they have been permanently removed from their care. In that regard the findings of this study confirm that research. Moreover, as indicated by Monica's narrative shared earlier in this chapter, even when face-to-face contact is not possible the young adults described valuing the retention of a connection to their birth family in childhood. Monica outlines her appreciation that her foster carers were honoring her birth mother's wishes by not adopting her, and this is a demonstration of the complexity involved in supporting a child to maintain links with birth family, while simultaneously establishing relational permanence in the foster home. Monica did not appear to view her foster carers choosing to not adopt her as an indication that they did not have a strong relationship with her, instead, she saw it as an opportunity to maintain links with her birth heritage and birth family and she was grateful to her foster carers for this.

Beyond the issue of adoption, the level of commitment the young people reported that foster families demonstrated in supporting ongoing contact with birth families throughout childhood was notable, and these stories were reported as evidence of the foster family's acceptance of the birth family into their life. Within current research such as that by Neil and Beek (2020) it has been argued that a collaborative approach between foster carers and birth parents is a strong indicator that a placement will succeed. A majority of the participants in this study described the ways in which their foster carers supported the ongoing contact with their birth families. However, at times this contact with birth family was challenging for the young people in care. Many of the participants recalled having a code word or signal they agreed with their foster carers that they could use during access so that their foster carers would know that they wanted access to end. In taking responsibility for this the foster carers allowed the birth parents to think it was them, and not the child, who was making this decision, thus preserving the relationship between the child and their birth parent. The following quote from Olivia is an example of this. Olivia asserted that when she was first placed in care her access visits were supervised by the social workers, however, as she got older, they were no longer supervised. She said that her foster parents gave her a mobile phone telling her that she could call them if she felt uncomfortable or unsafe and wanted to leave the access visit and this helped her manage some of the challenges she faced while on access visits:

“It was very subtle, and it was lovely because my biological parents didn't realise...if I wanted to leave I would go to the toilet and call my parents and they would come early to collect me...it was nice because as a child you don't have much control over these situations, and it was nice to feel I can just call and I can just leave”.

Doreen also appreciated her foster carers allowing her to take control of her access visits with her parents. She said that her foster carers always stayed close by and if she wanted to leave access early, she would text her foster carers who would call to her birth parent's house and say that they needed to collect her, but equally if the visit was going well she could text them and ask them to come later to collect her. She recalled that her birth mother would complain to her about her foster carers doing this but she was very appreciative that her mother had no idea it was her choice to leave the access visits and this helped her in maintaining this relationship.

Other ways foster carers showed their acceptance of the child's biological family was by including them in significant events and inviting them to their home for celebrations. Joanne recalled her First Communion celebration when her birth parents and her foster parents sat together “*chatting away no bother*”. She said that her foster mother always reminded her to call her birth mother on birthdays and Mother's Day and other significant events. For Doreen, her biological parents did not attend events in the foster home but she recalled her foster mother giving her photograph frames so she

could have photos of her biological family in her room. This, she believed, was her foster mother's way of saying *"you have moved into this home, but we know you have another family and we are not going to ask you to leave them at the door now that you are living with us"*. In this way the foster carers were supporting Doreen to navigate her membership of two families without placing any barriers on including her birth mother in her life.

Nora's birth mother was not always able to attend significant events due to illness. While there is ample literature discussing the importance of ongoing contact between children in care and their birth parents including Fuentes (2019), who argued that ongoing contact with birth family acts as a support to the foster placement, there is little about the significance of including birth family in significant life events, or times when the foster family is engaged in a display of family with their foster child. In this study this issue was raised by Nora when she discussed her First Communion. Nora's birth mother had been due to attend Nora's communion, including the party in the foster home but she became ill the day before the event. Nora recalled having to go and visit her in hospital on the day of her First Communion. She recalled that at the time she was upset at having to leave her friends to go and see her birth mother, however, now as an adult looking back, she explains that she can see that her foster parents did the right thing, *"I am so glad now that I went, it wasn't nice for [birth mother] she was in hospital and imagine not seeing your child on their communion day"*, indicating that the First Communion was a valuable opportunity to link both birth and foster families in this display of family.

Ben's foster carers also encouraged him to maintain contact with his birth mother even when he had ambivalent feelings about it, as he explains:

"I would often fall out with my mam and my foster carers would be like 'at the end of the day she is your mother so you should go and see her' they were very encouraging in that sense".

When Ben had arguments with his birth mother, it was his foster carer that he said he spoke to about it. This capacity to talk to foster carers about access visits and their relationship with their birth family was reported by several participants. Doreen recalls that her foster carers always collected her from access without any other children in the car so she could talk about the access visit. She also remembered that if the access had been difficult, her foster mother would create space for her to talk, as the following quote illuminates:

"[Foster mother] would go out of her way to bring me a cup of tea and a hot water bottle and she would ask 'How are your parents?'...she would also ask how my extended family were...she wouldn't just come looking for problems she would also say she was happy when my parents were doing well".

The foster carer's capacity to create space for the young people to include their birth family in their life and to talk about their birth family was uncovered within the data as being instrumental in supporting them as they navigated their dual identity as a member of both their birth and their foster family.

While the participants all reported foster carers who were open to their birth families, their own feelings towards their birth families were more complex. Similar to Rosie's narrative told above, of not wanting to call her foster carers "mum and dad", Helen was also careful of the language she used around her birth parents. While she expressed love for her biological parents, she also knew that she could not live with them and was confident that her foster carers were her permanent family. However, she did not tell her biological father this for fear of hurting him, as she explains:

"I always felt very guilty...when I was around my dad, I would never say my cousins and aunts and uncles I would always say [foster carer's] nieces and nephews and grandparents, even though I was very close to them all and saw them as my family".

The reported experiences of these young people align with research evidence indicating that relationships with birth family are complex for young people in permanent care (Luu et al., 2019; Neil et al., 2003). In research reported on by Neil et al. (2013) relating to contact after an adoption from care, the authors reported that for some young people who are adopted from care, ongoing contact with birth family was of benefit while for others contact was unsettling and disruptive. However, they reported that these complexities could be mitigated by providing support for adoptive parents to manage these issues while also establishing their adoptive family unit. Evidence within the data of this current study demonstrates that the participants' relationships with birth families were fraught with complex emotions and their foster families created a space that allowed them to navigate these issues. None of the participants reported that inclusion of their birth family had a negative impact upon their relationship with their foster carers. Conversely, they asserted that the openness of their foster carers to their birth family only served to strengthen the ties between them and their foster carers.

4.5 Chapter Summary

The findings presented in this chapter have demonstrated how these twenty-two young adults negotiated permanence throughout their time in long-term foster care. These findings echo previous research evidence that highlights the importance of both subjective and objective factors when considering how young people in care negotiate permanence (Fargas Malet & McSherry, 2018; Pérez, 2017; Salazar et al., 2018b; Samuels, 2009). These previous studies have highlighted the value in considering relational permanence for young people in care (Fargas Malet & McSherry, 2018; Pérez, 2017) and noted the importance of foster families being inclusive of birth parents in the lives

of the children in their care (Collings, Wrights and Conley, 2022a). However, this current study builds on these findings offering supporting evidence that these issues are important, but further illuminates that permanence is established through a variety of actions undertaken by both the young person and their foster carers.

While the experiences described by the study participants did include some differences, for example, the value placed on being adopted or the importance of calling their foster carers ‘mum’ and ‘dad’, or not, the evidence across the data points towards common issues as relevant in the negotiation of permanence within their foster care placements. These include descriptions of actions undertaken by the foster carers, such as, supporting them through tumultuous teenage years, understanding the young person’s need to use the foster carer’s surname to help manage their sense of stigma for being in care, being cared for when sick, allowing photos of their birth family in their room or including birth family at significant events. All of these indicated to the young people that their foster carers accepted them for who they were, and in turn this helped to build the young person’s connection to their foster family and promoted their sense of permanence. The foster carers were described as demonstrating their acceptance of the young person for who they were, responding to their individual needs, acknowledging them as members of the foster family unit and supporting them to maintain a connection to birth family. In response, the young people’s narratives reflected the development of a sense of belonging within the foster family unit, an understanding that their foster carers were their parents while simultaneously maintaining a sense of themselves as a part of their birth family. In this way, patterns within the data create a potent sense of how the foster carers and the young people negotiated permanence together within these long-term foster care relationships.

The ways in which young people in care understand experiences of permanence can “*change over time in response to a lived life*” (Moran et al, 2020 p1115). This chapter has described the study participants’ reflections on permanence over their ‘lived life’ while growing up in foster care. In the next two chapters the focus will shift to their lived experiences during early adulthood as they navigate a range of youth transitions, including the transition out of care.

Chapter 5. Re-negotiating Permanence within the Foster Family and within the Wider World

5.1 Introduction

This chapter interrogates the myriad of ways the young adults who participated in this study reported re-negotiating permanence in early adulthood within their relationships with their foster carers and those in the world around them. As explained in Chapter Two, early adulthood has been described as a period in the life course when young adults experience transitions within multiple areas of their lives, including education, housing, intimate relationships, and friendships (Cielsik and Simpson, 2013, p.6). For care experienced young adults this includes the transition out of care. During this phase of youth transitions all young adults make multiple, individual decisions (Heinz, 2009) as they progress towards becoming adults, however, experiences of transitions do not occur within an equal context. Young adults make choices within their individual, personal circumstances and as Buchmann and Kriesi (2011) argue transitions experiences vary and outcomes can be dependent upon both individual resources and structural opportunities and constraints.

The ongoing presence of family is understood to provide a foundation of stability and care during these transitions to adulthood and is considered essential for successful transitions processes (Valentine, 2003). However, the vast majority of the young adults in this study, despite having negotiated permanence within their foster family during their time in care, did not express certainty that they would continue to experience permanence within these relationships after they had left care and during their transition to adulthood. Thus, permanence had to be re-negotiated within the context of the transition to adulthood and the transition out of care. In this chapter how the young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence describe re-negotiating permanence within their individual lives is presented. Findings indicate that this process of re-negotiation continues to involve both the young adults and their foster carers. Examining these issues through the lens of youth transitions, provides an opportunity to better understand how the young adults in this study re-negotiated permanence within their daily lives during a phase of transition, and highlights how experiences of permanence in foster care interact with other experiences of transitions in early adulthood. Examining and unpacking these questions will provide new and important understandings of the meanings young adults continue to attach to experiences of permanence in foster care as they reach early adulthood. To this end, insights are gained into the ways in which permanence is conceptualised for young people who grow up in long-term foster care.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section the ways in which the young adults re-negotiated permanence within their foster families are outlined. The section draws on the young adults' narratives to highlight their understanding that the permanence they established while in care, needed to be re-negotiated during this phase of transition. Unpacking this narrative elucidates the

ways in which they re-negotiated permanence, within their day-to day-activities, as well as within significant life events or transitions such as getting married or becoming a parent. This section concludes with a focus on how those participants that experienced a placement disruption while in foster care, re-negotiated permanence with their foster families during this phase of transition. The second section of the chapter focuses upon how the young adults experienced re-negotiating permanence within their wider world as they navigated key transitions in areas such as education, accommodation, friendships and intimate relationships. The chapter ends with a summary of the key issues raised.

In adulthood, the process of re-negotiating permanence for the young adults in this study, was not one that was completed, rather it continues to be a dynamic and a shared experience that involved input from both the young adults and their foster carers and as they interacted with the world around them.

5.2 Re-Negotiating Permanence within the Long-Term Foster Care Family

In this section the narratives the young people shared about the ways in which they re-negotiated permanence within their foster family will be outlined. This includes establishing how the young adults identified that they needed to re-negotiate permanence, how they re-negotiated permanence during day-to-day interactions and during significant life events. For some participants, this also included re-negotiating permanence following a period of placement disruption.

5.2.1 Establishing the need to Re-negotiate Permanence in Early Adulthood

Ongoing support and stability into early adulthood are understood to be important for care experienced young adults (Pérez, 2017). As established in the previous chapter the young adults in this study negotiated permanence within their long-term foster care placements while growing up in foster care. However, as Helen illuminates in this next quote, despite her foster carers' reassurance that permanence would continue after she turned eighteen years, she harboured doubts about this as she explains:

“It was always said [to me] that [the placement] was long-term and that I was not going to have to go anywhere, even when I was eighteen. But that is a big thing for us [care leavers], when we turn eighteen, where do we go? My foster carers were always saying ‘we are your parents, a normal family wouldn’t kick their eighteen-year-old out of the house and we are not going to do that...you are going to go to college, and you are going to be living here and when you are ready you can move out, you can live here until you are forty, if you want”.

The existing research suggests that when young people establish relational permanence while in care, this can continue into their adult lives (Ball et al., 2021; Pérez, 2017; McSherry et al 2018). However,

this present study found that for some young adults, even in circumstances where permanence was co-created while growing up in foster care, the participants did not take the continuation of permanence, and the ongoing support of their foster carers, for granted. Helen's account of her lived experience continues with her explaining that, despite reassurance of continued permanence, she still had doubts:

“In the back of my head, it was always there, even though I knew [the placement] was long-term...but like none of the social workers said; ‘this is your house, [your foster carers] are not going to ask you to leave’”.

Helen was only reassured that permanence would continue, as she navigated transitions to adulthood, when her foster mother offered her concrete evidence of her ongoing commitment to her and her foster siblings. As Helen asserted:

“When I turned eighteen and my [foster carers] realised how worried I was [that permanence would end] they wrote it in their will that this house is ours [hers and foster siblings] and, like any other family, if anything was to happen, we can still live here and it's not a thing of ‘okay you have to leave now’”.

Building on Biehal's (2014) category of “as if”, used to describe young people in care who felt that their foster carers were “as if” they were birth parents, Helen's quote illuminates that she, as a young adult, appreciated the reassurance that her continued experiences in adulthood would be “as if” she was a birth child. However, she did require both verbal reassurances and a concrete act to support her in re-negotiating her permanence within the family during this phase of transition.

Joanne's story includes an account of her transition out of care while she simultaneously transitioned in accommodation, moving out of her foster family home. In this next quote Joanne describes how she spoke with her foster carers about the implications for her once she had transitioned out of the home:

“I sat them down and I said to them ‘okay, have I moved out full time or what?’ and my [foster] mam and [foster] dad said to me ‘no,’ and, there was always a bedroom for me in their house and I could go home at weekends, holidays, whenever I wanted”.

Refaeili's (2020) assertion that young adults have the lowest level of support just before they leave care as they begin to question the permanent nature of their placements into adulthood, was also reflected in this current study. Participants such as Helen and Joanne did begin to question the permanent nature of their placements as they were transitioning out of care, but both verbal

reassurances, and concrete actions by their foster carers helped them to re-negotiate permanence together with their foster carers, in the new context of their young adult lives in transition.

In contrast to the stories presented above, Cian asserted that he did not have any doubts about the permanence of his foster care status as he transitioned out of care. However, in the following quote he describes that his foster carers were aware that this stage of transition had the potential to create uncertainty: *“It was just said to me ‘you know you can stay here after [turning eighteen]’, like it was much more heart-warming that that but that was the jist of it”*. At the time of interview, Cian said that he had moved out of home but throughout this transition into new accommodation he remained certain about his permanence within the foster family. In these next two quotes Cian provides examples of how his ongoing permanence was re-negotiated. Firstly, he spoke about the support his foster mother provided to him: *“if I need anything I just call home and I’m like ‘please help me’ and [foster mother] happily tells me what I need to know”*. Later he spoke about moving home during the first Covid lockdown period, noting that his bedroom in the foster home had remained unchanged: *“whenever I moved back, it was all normal, [foster carers] hadn’t really touched my room at all”*. Cian appears to fit into Pérez’s (2017, p.183) category of “enduring relational permanence”, suggesting that he had confidence that the permanence established while he was in care, continued to be present as he transitioned out of care. However, the quotes provided do indicate that Cian’s sense of ongoing permanence was grounded within acts by his foster carers indicating that they reaffirmed that his status within the family continued to be permanent.

Reflective also of Pérez’s (2017, p.183) category of “enduring relational permanence”, Gillian asserted that her experiences in childhood led her to expect that her relational permanence would endure. However, as she explains in this next quote, she also reported that these feeling were undermined when her aftercare worker began to talk to her about the transition out of care, including a transition to independent living:

“I never expected my foster carers to kick me out when I turned eighteen. It was more of a shock that the aftercare worker suggested it, I asked her ‘do I have to leave? Who said I have to leave?’ ...but my [foster] mam and dad were like ‘we are not kicking her out, we are going to let her stay here’”.

Gillian’s story resonates with tensions inherent across the stories told by the participants in this study, between permanence being understood as an established state of being *and* a process of continuous re-negotiation. While Gillian’s narrative reflects McSherry and Fargas-Malet’s (2018) research finding that relational permanence established in childhood does translate into enduring relational permanence, her story also indicates that this was not a ‘taken-for-granted’ outcome during the transition to adulthood. This was also true of other participants and those working with them. It was

within this context that permanence was described as being re-negotiated by the young adults and their foster carers.

There is a dearth of research undertaken with young adults who were adopted in their late teenage years, following a period of relational permanence in foster care. Hanna et al's (2011) study somewhat addresses these issues, presenting the views of young adults who were adopted by their long-term foster carers after the age of eight years. However, that study focuses on the adopted identity of the young adults interviewed and does not consider whether the young adults continued to view their adoptive placement as permanent into early adulthood. In contrast within this current study, the participants who were adopted did provide a narrative asserting that they did not question their entitlement to remain with their foster carers after they turned eighteen years of age. As the next quote indicates, they contended that this was not related to being adopted, rather it was grounded within their strong relationship with their foster carers. Andrea's quote illuminates this further: *"I never thought that I had to leave, I would have just stayed living here, even without being adopted"*. Hannah similarly asserted: *"at the end of the day, if I had not been adopted, they were still going to be my family, I wasn't going to be moving house or anything"*.

A potentially significant difference for Andrea and Hannah, and reflecting the experience of other adoptees interviewed for this current study, was that their late adoption coincided with their transitions to adulthood and their transition out of care. As described earlier in this chapter, Gillian said that having an aftercare worker talk to her about transitioning to independent living led to uncertainty about whether permanence would continue in her foster family during this phase of transition. In contrast Andrea and Hannah were able to choose to not engage with an aftercare worker and thus did not have a similar experience to Gillian. Andrea asserted she was not allocated an aftercare worker and Hannah reported, *"I didn't want any aftercare. I just wanted to get away from the system, I had been with it for long enough to be honest"*. This builds on previous literature (Pérez, 2017; McSherry and Fargas-Malet, 2018) that asserts that young people value relational permanence over legal permanence and suggests that when they contemplate the re-negotiation of permanence during the transition to adulthood, it was the strength of their relationships with their foster family rather than the legal status that they considered important. However, as this next section demonstrates securing legal permanence was important to some of the participants.

For another participant, Alan, his adoption a month before his eighteenth birthday, ensured that both he and his foster carers became certain that his placement would remain permanent into adulthood, as he explains:

"When I was fostered my [foster] parents might not have been sure I would be here always...when I was adopted that was a goal achieved for all of us and now, we have no doubts about me leaving the family".

However, although being adopted did help these young adults gain certainty that their relationships with their foster care families would continue to be legally permanent after their transition out of care, as Beth's next quote indicates she still had to re-negotiate permanence with the world around her:

“If I hadn't been adopted I wouldn't have felt comfortable as an adult, even if people were okay with my foster care story, I wouldn't have had the confidence to go to a party, I would have made up a story to say I wasn't well rather than go...but now I am adopted and I can [go to a party] I tell them I am my [adoptive] parents' child”.

Research evidence, as presented in Rolock & White (2017) for example, has indicated that legal permanence in childhood does not guarantee the establishment of enduring permanence into adulthood. However, for the adoptees in this current study, achieving legal permanence as they transitioned out of care and began the youth transitions phase of their life, did aid them in creating certainty that permanence with their foster families would continue. As will be discussed later in this chapter, it also formed part of their process of re-negotiating permanence as they navigated transitions within the wider world.

The narratives provided by the majority of participants in this study indicate that even when foster care is grounded within strong relational ties, the young adults may still harbor doubts about permanence continuing during the transition out of care and the transitions to adulthood. For those who were adopted these doubts were assuaged to some extent by their late adoption which they viewed as securing their permanent status with their foster family. However, as will be seen later in this chapter, all participants, regardless of their status, described re-negotiating permanence during this phase of transitions through their interactions within the wider world, including when making new friends within new contexts. The ways in which permanence was re-negotiated by the participants in this study within their day-to-day life with their foster carers and the world around them will be presented in the remaining sections of this chapter.

5.2.2 Re-negotiating Permanence within the Day-to-Day

It has been suggested that belonging is an unconscious part of everyday life and as Bengtsson & Luckow (2020) have argued, belonging is something that people only become aware of once they do not feel it anymore. As discussed above, the majority of the young adults in this study described the need to re-negotiate permanence in their lives during their transition out of care, and their transition to adulthood. As presented in the previous chapter, the young adults recounted the ways in which they had co-created and negotiated permanence, including developing a sense of belonging during their time in care. The narratives of the young adults similarly reflect the need to re-negotiate permanence and finding ways to re-negotiate their sense of belonging within their foster care family

during the transition to adulthood. One of the ways they described doing this was through actions in their everyday lives. Some of these descriptions will be presented in this section.

In the previous chapter evidence was presented about the significance of how the young people referred to their foster carers in their daily life. Using terms such as “mum” and “dad” were described by them as a way to indicate the ‘felt’ nature of their relationship with their foster carers to their friends, peers and teachers, for example. Using these terms also aligned their relationship with their foster carers with the relationships their non-care experienced peers had with their parents. The narratives indicated that in childhood, the terminology used caused anxiety for some participants as they grappled with the reactions of their birth parents in these circumstances. In adulthood, using the terms “mum” and “dad” continued to be a way to indicate that their relationship with their foster carers was equivalent to that of son or daughter. There were some participants like Helen who said that while she called her foster carers by their first names in her day-to-day interactions with them, if someone asked her who they were, she would answer *‘oh, that’s my mum and dad’, because that is who they are, that is undisputed*”. Cian similarly described doing this, saying that if his foster mother called him on the telephone, he will say, *“oh it’s my mum on the phone”*, even though he said that he ordinarily uses her first name when talking to her. He explained his reason for doing this saying, *“calling her ‘mum is handier, easier to explain”*. This echoes the previous literature on the stigma often felt by those in care that was presented Chapter 2 of this thesis, including findings by authors such as Rogers (2017) indicating that stigmatisation for those in care is grounded within fear of a negative response from other people to their circumstances, not by the young person’s own experiences of being in care. Adding to this research, the findings in this present study indicate that the views of other people continue to be important into adulthood. It is within this context that the current study participants sought to align their lived experiences to the experiences of the non-care experienced population.

The narratives of the young adults’ support Valentine’s (2003) assertion that the ongoing presence of family offers stability during this phase of youth transitions. Building on this, the young people in this study emphasised the value they placed upon both the practical and emotional benefits of the ongoing presence of their foster families. Earlier in this chapter Joanne described how her foster carers reassured her that they would continue to be present for her after she had moved out of home. Later in interview she described a more recent occasion when she needed help to fix something in her apartment, recalling *“I was like, ‘dad will you come out’ and he came, like with a toolbox and everything, like that my [foster] dad always says if you are stuck, just call, day or night”*. In addition to this practical support, this next quote indicates that Joanne also received emotional support from her foster carers:

“Even if I wouldn’t say anything my [foster] mother will know that there is something off. She will say ‘you know you can talk to me’. My [foster] mother always says, ‘a problem shared is a problem halved’ and she would always know that something is off.”

This reported recollection indicates that Joanne’s relationship with her foster carers during her transition out of care is grounded in both the practical and emotional support provided. Furthermore, Joanne’s foster carers’ actions are an integral part of this process. They are described as proactively offering this support, echoing Collins et al’s (2010) finding of the importance of this support for young people as they transition to adulthood.

This next quote from Olivia again emphasises how this process of re-negotiating permanence is grounded within accessing the support foster carers continued to offer:

“I can text my [foster] dad asking like, ‘how do you work something?’ or anything at all and he will always be there...that is real support, knowing that somebody is always there, no matter if you drive them up the wall or not, it’s real good”.

That care leavers are not often sufficiently prepared to navigate the transitions to adulthood was highlighted by Elsley et al. (2007) as contributing to care leavers poor experiences of youth transitions. In contrast, in this next quote Ciara, who was still living in her foster home at the time of interview, asserts that she would have been able for the transition out of home at eighteen because her foster carers had prepared her for adult life:

“I think, actually, that even if I had been put out at eighteen, they did like, give me the right skills to manage on my own...in adolescence they taught me how to run a house essentially, or what you need to do, even like simple things , money management skills...like my [foster] dad taught me how to manage money and how like you have to prioritise your money and your bills, like they showed me what it is like to be an adult before I got to the stage of having to be one”.

In this next quote Ciara demonstrates her belief that her foster carers would not have considered their parental duty completed even if she had left home at eighteen, “*they would have been there for me afterwards, had I needed to move out, even though they gave me those skill to manage on my own*”. This illuminates that even if she was successfully managing the practical aspects of life, her close, caring relationship with her foster carers would be maintained providing her with additional emotional support. This echoes previous research by Driscoll (2019) that emphasises the significance of the continuation of relationships that support care leavers during the transition to adulthood.

While much of the narrative provided by the young adults within this study related to their relationships with their foster carers, there were also descriptions of ongoing relationships with their extended foster family that align with Finch's (2007) displays of family or to indicate what MacDonald (2016) described as 'enacted permanence'. This next quote from Gillian is an example of this, "*we have a WhatsApp group, we chat to arrange things, like our [foster] parents anniversary party, just like normal families do*".

In this next quote from Fiona, she explains how her experience re-negotiating permanence is grounded in the physical place of her foster home:

"I love the smell of my [foster] home. I love my [foster] mom's cooking, like at Christmas, all those traditions that we do together, that is the best thing, that is what keeps me grounded, it is a beautiful place, I love coming back, it is what keeps me grounded and it reminds me of good memories".

Fiona's recollections of enacted permanence (MacDonald, 2016) and displays of family (Finch, 2007) were grounded in the physical place of home and sensory aspects that evoked happy memories. Returning to these memories and physically being in her foster home supported her re-negotiation of permanence, suggesting that the ways in which the foster care families and the young adults negotiated permanence in childhood continue to be important into adulthood. While the descriptions in this section centered on interactions within daily life, the study participants also discussed more significant life events and how these contributed to their ongoing re-negotiation of permanence. These narratives will be the focus in the next section.

5.2.3 Re-negotiating Permanence throughout Transitions in Significant Life Events

"Having a place to stay during critical times, receiving encouragement and guidance and the assurance that someone will be there during key moments such as graduation, marriage and the birth of a child" (Singer et al., 2013, p2111)

Echoing Singer et al.'s (2013) assertion above the narratives shared, by the study participants, about the ways in which permanence was re-negotiated within their foster families extended beyond daily practices and included descriptions of re-negotiating permanence throughout transitions in romantic relationships and the transition to parenthood. These events were significant for the young adults at this time of transitions illuminating the importance of care leavers having ongoing support at that time.

Many of the participants discussed past and future weddings. In these narratives the foster carers were cast as playing significant and symbolic roles, including making speeches, sitting at the 'top

table' and walking the bride down the aisle. These acts of public displays of family are powerful indicators of the re-negotiation of permanence between the young adults and their foster carers. For example, Joanne described going wedding dress shopping with her foster mother and foster sisters, her foster father making a 'father of the bride' speech during their celebration meal and her foster siblings doing readings in the church. In this narrative Joanne's foster carers are fulfilling roles usually fulfilled by parents at these significant family events. Joanne's birth mother is deceased, and she explained "*we had a candle of remembrance at the altar to remember my mom and others that are not here anymore*". The ongoing emotional presence of birth parents, already highlighted in research by Andersson (2018) and Holland and Crowley (2013), is clearly reflected in Joanne's quote above as well as in other narratives shared by the participants in this current study. Re-negotiating permanence within relationships with birth family will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6, however, it is worth noting here that for Joanne, including a remembrance of her birth mother during her wedding, did not undermine the re-negotiation of permanence with her foster parents.

Gillian also recalled planning her wedding, including reporting that she had to make decisions about whether to include her birth family. Like other participants in the current study, Gillian said that she resolved this issue by choosing to get married abroad. She explains here why she made that choice:

"I really didn't want to invite my biological parents, but if I had a traditional Irish wedding, I would have felt I had to, it's like catholic guilt, I'd have to invite them, but I didn't want them there...I thought I would have to invite them...and running away was the better option".

Gillian did however use her wedding as an opportunity to re-negotiate permanence with her foster mother and foster sisters when she went wedding dress shopping with them. This next quote illuminates what Gillian said this act of dress shopping represented for her:

"It was nice to have this bit of normalcy. All of my friends had done this, gone shopping for wedding dresses with their mams, gone to big shops and tried on a million dresses and all this jazz. They had all done it with their mams and grannies and so it was nice to have that one thing that everyone else has".

Ciara asserted that she and her partner were considering getting married but when she thought about the logistics of the day she concluded, "*we are not getting married because [it's too complicated]. We plan to run away somewhere and bring no one*". In this next quote Ciara unpacked the complications associated with this event for her, suggesting that the inclusion of her birth family was a significant issue:

I have always said that I would want my [foster] mom and [foster] dad there, and all my brothers and sisters, and you couldn't not invite [birth mother] but I

don't want her there...my loyalties lie with my [foster] parents and I don't blame [birth mother] for being in care, there were circumstances beyond her control, but she could still have avoided those circumstances and been there for me when I needed her".

In the next chapter the ongoing connection to birth family for young adults, as they renegotiate permanence during their transition to adulthood will be discussed in more detail. However, some of the complexity is captured within these quotes, indicating that for these participants, the renegotiation of permanence during a time of transition to marriage involved the young adults navigating relationships with both their foster carers and their birth families.

Becoming a parent was a second significant life event that some of the young adult participants discussed during their interviews. The transition to parenthood has been identified as an area where young adults also transitioning out of care, experience poor outcomes. Research evidence suggests that this can be attributed to social isolation and a lack of resources (Purtell et al, 2021). In contrast, this was not the experience of the small number of the participants in this study who were already parents at the time of interview. These participants said that they had become pregnant during their late teens or early adulthood and while not describing their pregnancy as unplanned, they did all comment that their pregnancies were unexpected. One participant recalled telling her foster carers about her pregnancy, recounting the support and reassurance they offered, as she explains: *"when I told my foster mum, she just gave me a hug, she didn't give out to me and she said 'you can do this'."* Her foster mother's support apparently continued throughout her pregnancy as she said *"my foster mother was there when he was born and even got to cut the cord"*. This participant and her child, who was a toddler at the time of interview, were still living in the foster care home and she reflected on the positive impact this situation has on her son:

"If I'd stayed living at home with my biological mum I'd be struggling...I'd probably be homeless...I think that growing up with healthy habits is a good thing for my child as well...if I grew up in an unhealthy environment and I brought that on my child because I thought it was normal, it wouldn't be good for him".

A second participant who had lived with her foster carers for the first year of her child's life, similarly identified the positive impact this situation has had on her daughter. This next quote from her indicates that her own experiences of growing up with stability and permanence in foster care allowed her to better understand how to create a family life for her child:

"If I had not grown up in my foster family, I would not have any stable relationships. But we lived with my [foster] mother and [foster] father for over

a year when [child] was born and now my daughter can really see what family is ...she calls my [foster] dad granddad and my [foster] mom is nana and all my older siblings are her aunts and uncles...when she gets older I want to explain to her how lucky I am to have all of these relationships I have because if I didn't have a stable family growing up I would have had no stable relationships to pass on to my daughter”.

Through these acts of seeking and providing both practical and emotional support, the foster parents and the young adults re-negotiated permanence during this phase of transition in the young adult's life. Echoing Collins et al's (2010) finding that emotional support during the transition to adulthood, including the transition to parenthood, was essential to the young adults' wellbeing, the participants in this study demonstrated that they valued this support and that these acts of practical and emotional support contributed to the re-negotiation of permanence during this phase of youth transition.

Re-negotiating permanence was not a simple task for all of the participants. There was a small number of participants who experienced a disruption to their placement during the transition out of care. For these participants permanence had to be re-negotiated within this context. These issues will be the focus of the next section of this current chapter.

5.2.4 Re-negotiating Permanence Following a Placement Disruption

Ingrid's story mirrors findings in McSherry et al (2018) , that a disruption in placement does not mean that relational permanence will not endure. Ingrid was living with her partner at the time of interview, and she asserted that her placement with her long-term foster carers ended abruptly when she was eighteen years old. However, she described how she and her foster carers together, re-negotiated permanence in this context during her transition to adulthood. In the following quote Ingrid reflects upon the circumstances that led to the placement disrupting and Ingrid moving out of the foster family home:

“With the placement breaking down, it was not [foster mother's] fault. I blame myself for most of it. I chose to drop out of college, I was a difficult teenager, I didn't listen to her...I was afraid I would fail...but ultimately, I disrespected her, she was only supporting me and trying to help me, and I basically told her to pee off”.

In this moment of reflection, Ingrid takes responsibility for the placement disruption. She also asserted that her foster carers continued to be committed to her and this was reflected for her in the fact that they kept her bedroom in their home. In addition, re-negotiating permanence was aided by the fact that, as reported by Ingrid, her biological brother continued to live with her foster carers.

When describing the steps, she and her foster carers took to repair their relationship, Ingrid commented:

“It took a lot of time for me and [foster carers] to build trust back up. Before I left it was a bad environment with me and my foster mother fighting all the time. It wasn’t fair on my younger brother...When we did start talking again it did feel strange to be back in the house, it did feel like it wasn’t home anymore and it felt like we were strangers starting our journey again, I never thought in my heart that this placement could go so badly wrong but now we are one hundred per cent back together, we have little chats and we are there for each other. It is good to be back to normal”.

Ingrid’s reflection above indicates that prior to the placement disruption, she had a sense of belonging within her foster care family. Echoing the findings in McSherry et al (2018) that where relational permanence has been established, including the child having a sense of belonging, these relationships can endure, even if the placement disrupts. For Ingrid, these relationships have endured but they have had to be re-negotiated. In this context Ingrid’s relationship with her foster carers has been re-negotiated as one that Ingrid believes will offer her permanence into the future, as she explains:

“If something happened between me and my partner, like say we broke up tomorrow, I am one hundred percent certain it would be my [foster carers] that I would go back to. I know that they would one hundred per cent support me and that they would welcome me into their home”.

Similar to Ingrid, Eve experienced placement disruption, leaving her foster carers’ home when she was nineteen years old, following a row with her foster mother. Moving between a residential unit and her birth family home, Eve described that for several months she had no contact with her foster parents, but that she remained in touch with foster siblings. Eve also reported that she knew that her foster mother was calling her biological father to check that Eve was well. When Eve was twenty-one years old her biological father became terminally ill and Eve was tasked with making decisions about his care. As Eve explains in this next quote, it was in this context that Eve’s foster mother called her and offered to help her:

“[My foster mother] and I made up because my dad was very sick. He was sick for a few years before he passed away. He was in and out of hospital and [foster mother] called me and said to me ‘you can’t be looking after him Eve, it’s a big responsibility for you’. So together we decided to put him in independent living, then me and [foster mother] became very close again, we used to speak to the doctors together, she was really supportive of me, she

organised his funeral and sorted out the will and everything with me, it took a lot of stress from me, we are still really close”.

This experience described by Eve echoes Ball et al.’s (2021) findings that young people who feel empowered by their experiences while in care, and experience both support and a strong connection to their foster carers are more likely to describe relationships in adulthood that are emotionally connected, stable and supportive. For Eve and her foster carers, permanence appeared to have been severed with the ending of the relationship when Eve was nineteen but was later re-negotiated. Describing the circumstances that led to her leaving the foster home, Eve reflected that she now believes that her foster mother was acting toward her out of concern:

“You know she was only doing the things that upset me because she wanted what was best for me. She used to say to me ‘you’ll thank me for this one day’, and you know when I look back on it, it was the best thing that she was so strict, she is the first person I’d go to now if I needed anything”.

This indicates that reflecting back Eve has insight into how her experiences while in care have benefitted her into her adult life. The findings in the current study indicate permanence can be re-negotiated following a period of disruption when the young adult feels supported, both emotionally and practically, allowing them to re-connect with their foster carers in a meaningful way. This context can provide a foundation for re-negotiating permanence following a placement disruption.

Not all the participants in this present study who experienced a placement disruption, re-established strong, permanent ties to their foster carers. Doreen reported leaving her foster home after she had completed her Leaving Certificate, when her biological siblings invited her to live with them. While Doreen reflected that this was a difficult decision, her pull to her biological siblings was strong, as she explains: *“I do see [foster family] as a part of me but my brother and sister are my family, they are my life, [foster family] are more like extended family”*. Sibling relationships can be empowering as siblings have shared experiences of adversity and challenges and act as a source of support (White and Hughes, 2017). While her foster carers attempted to maintain their relationship with Doreen, this was not a priority for Doreen, whose focus was on the relationship with her biological siblings. Doreen asserted when describing who she would call if she had good news to share, *“[foster carers] wouldn’t be the first people I would call, I’d call my sister, then my brother and then my favourite aunt, but they would definitely be up there after that”*. Doreen’s view of her foster family as ‘extended family’ was reflected in her account of how regular and physical contact gradually declined in the initial period following her moving out and eventually petered out to just social media contact, as she describes: *“I don’t live near them anymore, but I know I could go in for a cup of tea, I’d breeze in, no bother, I wouldn’t need to bring buns or anything”*. Doreen’s placement ended, not due to a row as in the cases of Ingrid and Eve, rather it was her own conscious choice. However,

this disruption has not been fully repaired and during the transition to adulthood, it is within her biological family relationships that Doreen has now re-negotiated permanence.

To this point the focus in this chapter has been upon the ways that young adults who grew up in long-term foster care, have re-negotiated permanence within their foster family relationships during the transition to adulthood and the transition out of care. In the second half of the chapter the focus will shift to the ways in which the young adults re-negotiated permanence within their relationships in the wider world around them. During this phase of youth transitions, the young adults are navigating multiple transitions across areas such as education, accommodation, and intimate relationships, and in so doing they are meeting and forming new relationships with people who potentially have no prior knowledge of their foster care background. How the participants in this current study described how they have re-negotiated permanence within these contexts will be discussed below.

5.3 Re-negotiating Permanence within the Wider World

5.3.1 Concerns about the Reaction of People within the Wider World

Through their descriptions of daily interactions with their foster carers, the participating young adults in this study outlined the practical and emotional ways that permanence was renegotiated within their foster families. However, as the young adults moved out into the wider world, they gave examples of additional ways that permanence was re-negotiated in their lives. The participating young adults viewed this time of transition as an opportunity to make choices about how they defined themselves and their family identities in the context of meeting people who, potentially, had no knowledge of their past.

Nora, for example, viewed her move away from home as an opportunity for a ‘fresh start’. She asserted that when she moved away from her foster home to go to college, *“it was like a new beginning, I could literally start from the beginning and be completely happy with who I am.”* It was her perception that when she was living in her hometown, everyone knew she had grown up in foster care. In contrast when she met new people during this time of transition in accommodation and education, she was able to make choices about who to disclose her care experience to and what information she wanted people to know. This position aligns with that reported by Madigan et al. (2013), where the young people in their study expressed concern that people in the world around them would respond negatively once made aware of their care experience. A key way the study participants managed this was to maintain secrecy about their care status, only confiding in people they deem trustworthy. Developing this further, the participants in this current study were all young adults, suggesting that similar concerns continue beyond childhood into early adulthood. Nora for

example, reported that she has only told three or four friends in college because, *“it is just so hard to explain it to people...it's a weird topic to talk about”*.

Nora was not the only study participant who reported being guarded about disclosing their care experience and, like Nora, their rationale was grounded in a fear that people would not understand. This view is articulated by Helen in this next quote, where she explains why she is careful about disclosing her care status in new situations:

“There is such a stigma around being in foster care and if someone knows you grew up care it's like, she's been moved around multiple times, she doesn't have parents, [they ask] ‘is that her real brother?’...and that really annoys me”

As highlighted above, current literature reports that this internalised shame relates to the fear of a negative reaction. The findings of this current study contribute to this knowledge. While their fear of disclosure is grounded within concern about other people's reactions, it is more specifically tied to a concern that they will not understand that their foster care placement is grounded within permanence, and their foster family is their family. As this next quote from Nora demonstrates, *“I tell them [people who ask] they are my real parents, I call them ‘mom’ and ‘dad’, I love them like real parents, and they love me like a real daughter”*.

Ciara shared a story about a negative reaction to telling people that she grew up in care during her first week in college:

“A boy in my class said he had grown up in care and I said to him, on the side like after class, that I was in care, and he said ‘no you weren't’, and I asked ‘what do you mean, no I wasn't in care? He said that I didn't look like a distressed child in care. I looked too happy”

While Ciara continued this narrative explaining that after this experience she became more cautious about who she talked to her about foster care experience.

Other participants like Ben however, indicated that they had no difficulty discussing their care status. Ben said:

“I openly tell people I was in foster care. It wouldn't be an issue with me because at the end of the day I was very fortunate with my circumstances. I know people who are in foster care who don't speak about it, but I was just living with [my foster carers] that is as much as it was foster care...now if people asked why I was in care I wouldn't answer that one”

In the final sentence of the quote above Ben indicates that he too did experience a sense of shame, potentially because of the reasons he came into care. Rogers (2017) argued that establishing

permanent placements for young people in care could be a significant way to help them manage the shame they felt. While this was partially true for Ben, this next quote from Mary, who was adopted within days of her eighteenth birthday, aligns with this view of Rogers. Although Mary does not emphasise the stable nature of her placement, she chooses to focus on the fact that her placement was legally permanent because she was adopted:

“I just tell people I am adopted...it was never a normal foster care experience to begin with, when you say you grew up in foster care people immediately assume you must have moved around so I just say I am adopted and to be fair my situation is more like being adopted from a baby”.

Alan described a positive experience of telling a friend about his foster care background. This quote from Alan illuminates how he viewed his transition in education as an opportunity to talk about his care experiences, without fearing negative repercussions:

“Coming to university was like a clean slate, people are more open minded and we are all over eighteen and we are mature, it’s not like in school where people were childish and their curiosity makes them ask you stupid questions”.

This next quote illuminates how, in fact, Alan, who was adopted when he was seventeen, did not object when a new friend he trusted ask him about his background, having seen Alan’s foster carers, who have very different physical characteristics to Alan:

“He just mentioned that I look different to my family so I just explained to him, ‘cause you know I thought I might as well as we are all adults anyway. I just told him me and my siblings are all adopted, even though my brothers aren’t, they might as well be. And anyway, he will probably be over in the house at some stage and end up seeing my whole family, so I thought I would just get the ambiguity out of the way”.

Alan is demonstrating agency, which Rogers (2017) considers an important aspect of supporting young people to manage feelings of stigma, in controlling who he talks to and how he presents his personal information. Cian also talked about a time when he made an agentic decision to tell someone about the fact he grew up in foster care after he moved away from home to go to college. He describes in this next quote that he was initially cautious in talking about his background:

“When I meet people for the first time, I just say I live with my mum and dad because I know if I say something else they will go on and on and questions will be asked. I just get to the stage where I don’t want to talk about it anymore”

However, in this next quote he describes choosing to tell someone he had met on a night out:

“She said that she was fostered, and like it’s so weird meeting someone out like that and talking about it, and next thing I was talking to her about it, and it was all good.”

As this section has illuminated, the young adults in this study grappled with a variety of emotions as they made new friends and moved to live away from home. A fear of shame grounded within a concern about how people would respond to knowing that they grew up in care was managed by the young people through the making of agentic decisions about who to disclose their care experience to and how to describe their early lives. In the next section the ways in which they re-negotiated permanence through the choices they made when talking about their families, and describing who was in their family, will be outlined.

5.3.2 Discussing Family and Extended Family

Within the sections above it was highlighted that the participants articulated that they used the terms “mom” and “dad” when talking about their foster carers with people they met. They did not refer to them as ‘foster’ parents and this allowed the young adults to indicate, to friends and acquaintances, the permanent nature of their relationship with their foster carers. Similarly, when the participants discussed how they describe extended family relationships, particularly when discussing siblings, the young adults overwhelmingly chose to use the terms ‘sister’ and ‘brother’, rather than “foster sister” or ‘foster brother’, with the aim of conveying that they acknowledged both foster and biological siblings as members of their family.

Existing research highlights the importance of sibling relationships continuing to be significant for care experienced youth into adulthood (Wade 2008). This point is illuminated through Ciara’s story, which is reflective of similar stories told by other participants. Ciara is the youngest child within her foster family and the oldest child within her biological family. Her biological siblings grew up in a different home to Ciara, but she attends sibling contact visits when she can. Reflecting on when she is asked by new friends or colleagues about her family, Ciara asserted: *“I just name them all, [foster and biological], and then someone will say ‘oh that’s a big family’ and I just say ‘yeah, very big’”*. Ciara’s narrative provides an example of how these young adults strive to simultaneously maintain their privacy but also to ensure both their birth and foster siblings are given recognition in their family descriptions.

Further reminiscent of previously discussed research by Rogers (2017) highlighting the value of agency as a way for care experienced young people to manage shame, other participants chose to only acknowledge their foster siblings when asked about family. The participants in this group described a concern that to include their biological siblings could result in them having to provide

details about their life that they did not want to share. Leah said that despite her frequent contact with her biological siblings, when asked about brothers and sisters she only talks about her foster siblings; *“it is all so complicated I just name my foster siblings”*. This is echoed by Alan who went a step further indicating that he did not even think about including his biological siblings; *“my [biological siblings] wouldn’t pop into my head, I know they are there, but for simplicity’s sake I just say my foster siblings”*. Alan described a conversation with someone who had seen a photo of Alan’s younger brother who is ethnically different to Alan, *“the photo raised questions, she said “your brother looks a bit different to you.”*. Earlier in this chapter a quote from Alan indicated that at times he was willing to talk about his care experience but later he asserted that he preferred to only sometimes discuss his foster care experience and this desire for privacy is reflected in how he thinks about his family: *“I just keep it simple, in my head I am just with my family and I’d nearly be complicating things by telling loads of people I am adopted...and that is not how I look at it myself”*. He reflected about why he would choose to tell some people but not others:

“People would think that there might be less of a connection, or they might think there is a chance there is less of a connection and think that me and my brothers and sisters might not have been a family since we were young...and they wouldn’t think we had a family bond”.

Alan’s narrative reflects the depth of complexity described by Boddy (2019) as “the troubling meanings of family”. Alan seemingly wants his experience of family to be accepted and understood by those in the world around him. In this next quote he describes his belief that the wider world understand that they are a family simply by observing an everyday interaction:

“Say like in a shopping centre...and I am with my [family] ...people will just piece it together, they will probably just assume we are a family...they wouldn’t think we are just friends, or that my brother is just a friend, once they saw me and my family walking around for a few minutes they will understand that we are a family”.

Alan is confident that their presentation as a family unit, or their display of family (Finch, 2007) is easily recognised by other people despite there being ethnic diversity amongst the foster children. He believes that their actions and interactions create the impression of permanence and to describe his family as being tied through foster care or adoption would detract from this image.

Boddy (2019) suggests that diverse understandings of family form part of young adults’ relational identities as they transition out of care to adulthood. In this current study, the young adults are forming their family relational identities in the context of concern that their foster family will not be considered equivalent to a biologically connected family. Thus, in this context, the young adults have

re-negotiated permanence by making agentic decisions about how to describe their family membership, grounding their decisions within their own views about whether or not they want to disclose their care history to the people they meet within the world around them.

5.4 Confidence that Permanence will Continue

In the examples outlined above, the study participants demonstrated how they and their foster carers were re-negotiating permanence at a point of youth transitions, including the transition out of care. It is of note that during the interviews, as the participants described the ways they were re-negotiating permanence during their early adult lives, they also discussed their belief that they would continue to re-negotiate permanence into the future, having previously described how they had negotiated permanence in the past.

Already illuminated are the ways in which the young adults ascribed a future role to their foster parents in significant events such as grandparenting, the roles they would hold on their wedding day and in the day-to-day acts of family, as the young adults describe returning home for Christmas celebrations, family meals and, should the need arise, returning to live in the foster family home. Connor described his intention to move to Australia with his partner. He said; *“when I get home, I will probably come back to live [in foster home] again, or at least I know I can always come back here”*. Similarly, Fiona talked about feeling “secure” when she thinks about her future asserting:

“Because I have my [foster family] I don’t feel like there is anything I can’t fall back on. Can you imagine being truly by yourself? I have a family that keeps me truly supported and I know that I will always have them to fall back on”.

Leah was equally confident that her family would remain supportive of her, as she described, *“if I am ever struggling with something they will find another way so that I can overcome whatever it is...they’d take down the moon for me if they could”*. In these quotes the young adults describe their sense of ongoing connection to their foster family and their capacity to depend upon them over time, indicating that part of re-negotiating permanence during this period of youth transitions includes asserting that permanence will continue to be re-negotiated into the future.

5.5 Chapter Summary:

In this chapter the ways in which the young adults described how they have re-negotiated permanence within their foster families and with the wider world around them was outlined. MacDonald (2016) described the ways young people in care, and their foster carers, enacted permanence within their foster care placements. The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates how young adults who grew up in long-term foster care continue to enact permanence through engagement in displays of family (Finch, 2007) as they re-negotiate permanence within their foster care family and the within the wider world. Through descriptions of their lived experiences of re-

negotiating permanence during a phase of youth transition, including the transition out of care, the young adults offered a variety of narratives, however common themes could be identified. The young adults described the significance of the ongoing practical and emotional support provided by their foster carers, the roles their foster carers played during times of significant transitions and their capacity to make choices about how to present their family when forming new relationships within the wider world.

It is widely agreed that the process of transition from adolescence to adulthood has become protracted and prolonged with young adults remaining dependent upon parental or familial support into their twenties (Boddy et al., 2020). For care leavers this process of youth transitions is particularly complex, with young people in care facing numerous challenges as they transition to adulthood (Gilligan, 2019; Storø, 2017; Mendes et al., 2011). These complexities are attributed to the “*compressed and accelerated*” transition faced by care experienced youth (Stein, 2004, p.53). Strong relationships while in foster care, that continue into adulthood, are considered to offer support to care leavers and buffer against the negative outcomes associated with early adulthood for care experienced youth (Shpiegel et al 2021; McSherry et al, 2018, Storø, 2017). For the participants in this current study the strong relationships established within their foster care families did translate into meaningful relationships in adulthood that supported them through their processes of youth transitions, and this was significant as they re-negotiated permanence at this time.

McSherry et al’s (2018) study indicates that relational permanence in childhood translates into relational permanence in early adulthood. However, the stories of the young adults in this present study allows us to look beyond enduring permanence as an outcome and instead to consider it as an active process that the young adult and their foster carers must continually engage in together. The accounts the young adults shared combine to provide an overview of the key processes through which the young adults re-negotiate permanence with their foster families in early adulthood. Acts of family display (Finch, 2007) or family practices (Morgan, 2011), continuing daily acts of enacted permanence (MacDonald, 2016) and the variety of ways the young adults describe their family relationships and experiences combine to create both objective and subjective permanence for these young adults. The stories recounted by these participants indicate that the re-negotiation of permanence continues to be a shared process. Both the young adults and the foster carers work in tandem to initiate and respond in ways that allows for the re-negotiation of permanence during the transition to adulthood.

When the young adults talked about the re-negotiation of permanence during a period of youth transitions, they overwhelmingly spoke about re-negotiating their relationships with their birth family. The ways that they did this will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 6. Re-negotiating Permanence within Birth Family Connections

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter the narratives provided by the study participants relating to their relationships and connections to their birth family, during the transition to adulthood, will be interrogated. Specifically, narratives shared by the young adults describing the shifting nature of these relationships as they navigate the transition out of care will be examined. It was not unanticipated that the young adults would discuss their relationships with their birth family as they described their lived experiences in early adulthood. What was unanticipated by the researcher in this current study, was the high level of ongoing contact with birth family in the context of a group of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. This researchers' assumptions were grounded in direct experience of professional practice (as discussed in Chapter's 1 and 3 of this dissertation). However, the findings of this current study align with Fargas-Malet and McSherry's (2021) research that concluded that placement type was not influential in determining the young adult's emotional response to their birth family in adulthood. The emotional responses of the participants in this current study toward their birth family, will be unpacked in this chapter through an examination of the participants' narratives relating to their relationships with their birth family during their transition to early adulthood. Firstly, the theme of re-negotiating permanence with birth family by maintaining a relationship or connection developed in childhood will be discussed. Secondly, narratives about the shifting connections of birth family relationships during the transition to adulthood will be examined, followed by narratives from participants who chose to have no contact with birth family at the time of interview. Finally, the narrative from one participant who described a closer connection in adulthood, to her birth family than her foster carers is discussed.

6.2 Maintaining Birth Family Connections Established During Time in Care

6.2.1 Introduction

As described earlier in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, some of the young adults in this current study recalled having regular face-to-face contact with birth family during childhood, while for others contact was described as less consistent. In this chapter, the participants describe the ways they maintained relationships and connections that had been developed with birth family during their time in care. Moreover, these participants chose to maintain a connection to birth family during their transition to adulthood alongside the re-negotiation of permanence with their foster carers. As highlighted above, Fargas-Malet and McSherry's (2021) study concluded that the placement type experienced by the young people during their time in care had no bearing on the nature of their relationship with birth family as they transitioned out of care. This was also found to be true in this current study as both adopted and non-adopted young adults described choosing to maintain connections with their birth family during their transition to adulthood, although the foster families,

where they had experienced permanence, continued to be their primary source of practical and emotional support.

6.2.2 Narratives of Continuing Face-to-Face Contact

The narratives examined in Chapter 4 provide insights into the contact that some of the young adults recall with their birth family during childhood. As these young adults transitioned out of care, they were able to make agentic decisions about ongoing contact with their birth family at that point in their lives. As discussed in Chapter 2 there is evidence within the literature of the benefits of young people in care maintaining contact with their birth family. This included Fuentes et al.'s (2019) assertion that ongoing contact helps the young person come to terms with their care status and Neil et al.'s (2011) conclusion that contact can help young people settle into their foster care families. Adding to this, Olivia's narrative demonstrates that ongoing contact with birth family normalises these relationships during childhood and then supports them to continue into adulthood. Olivia reflected that growing up visiting her birth parents "*just became normal*" and it was "*natural*" that following her adoption by her long-term foster carers in early adolescence, the visits continued. Olivia spoke about her decision to continue direct face-to-face contact as well as phone contact with her father during her early adult life, which seemed to her to be an expected progression from her contact with him in childhood. The narrative throughout her interview provides an example of a shifting pattern of contact over time. Olivia recalled that while her childhood visits with her birth parents were initially supervised face-to-face visits, as she got older these visits were unsupervised and as a young adult she chose to maintain a relationship with her birth father that primarily involved face-to-face meetings. As this next quote demonstrates she described this ongoing contact as having a positive impact on her life:

"I feel lucky that I have extra people...as selfish as it is it is a huge ego boost. Like if you met my birth dad he is amazing, the drink has destroyed half his brain but... like I am lucky to have someone who...is vocal about how much he loves me and it is cringey but like [he tells me] I have changed his life and that he is sober because of me...so yeah I am so lucky".

However, despite identifying this positive impact of ongoing contact Olivia's narrative also echoes Havlicek's (2021, p.10) assertion that maintaining relationships with birth family creates emotional complexity for care experienced young adults as it relates to "*complex child rearing histories and unresolved losses*". As Olivia reflected on her contact with her birth father she said:

"Now I am older, myself and [birth father] have conversations about how much he hates social workers, and that they had no right to stick their noses into his business and I should never have been taken into care...he gets upset that he

wasn't given the chance to "win" me back and he tells me that he could have made it work".

In this quote, the anger Olivia perceives her birth father to have is clear. However, Olivia does not necessarily agree that growing up in the care of her birth father would have afforded her the opportunities she had as a result of growing up with her foster carers, as she reflected:

"He often says to me he wonders what things would be like now if [I hadn't been taken into care] ...he is an amazing person, but it would not have been a healthy upbringing [for me], I wouldn't have gone to college"

Olivia's narrative builds on current research by Fuentes and colleagues (2019) who argue that one of the benefits of maintaining a relationship with birth family in childhood is that it supports the young person to have a realistic view of their birth family while growing up in care. For Olivia maintaining this relationship with her birth father into adulthood has allowed her to continue to see benefits in the fact that she grew up in foster care as she navigates experiences of youth transitions. This has not weakened her re-negotiation of permanence within her foster family, rather it has strengthened it as it reinforces for her the benefit of growing up in permanent foster care while simultaneously allowing her to maintain a positive relationship with her birth father.

There are similarities between Olivia's narrative and that provided by Ingrid who also said that she had maintained face-to-face contact with her birth mother into adulthood. Ingrid recollected that during her childhood both face-to-face and telephone contact with her birth mother was supervised. As the next quote illuminates, Ingrid reported that during adolescence she had unsupervised phone contact without anyone knowing:

"My mam wasn't allowed to know where I lived or anything and even for me to speak to my mam had to go through the social workers, but once I was old enough to have my own phone I would call her and speak to her whenever I wanted, but the social workers found out and then everything had to go through them again"

As Ingrid's narrative continued, she explained that her permanent foster carers and her social workers had expected that she would choose to live with her birth mother once she was eighteen and had transitioned out of care. However, like Olivia, Ingrid said that she knew that living with her birth mother would not be good for her. She said that she never considered going to live with her and when her foster placement disrupted when she was eighteen years old, Ingrid chose to move in with her boyfriend's family. Mirroring sentiments shared by Olivia, Ingrid reflected:

“I can see my mam now whenever I want but [foster carers] is where I call home, like if it had been up to me, I would have gone into care sooner. The way my mother was, the things that I experienced were not good, to be honest foster care saved me”.

Ingrid’s narrative echoes Atwood’s (2013) conclusion that foster placements can be a secure base from which to explore birth family relationships. Ingrid reported that restrictions were placed around her birth family contact in childhood, which she tried to circumnavigate, but even in adulthood she described continuing to value the security her foster carers provide as she maintains face-to-face contact with her birth mother. Moreover, and similar to Olivia, there is no conflict expressed by Ingrid between her continued relationship with her birth mother and growing up in foster care with permanence.

Nora’s narrative further illuminates this capacity for the young adults to maintain a positive relationship with birth family without a negative impact on relationships within the foster family. As this next quote demonstrates, Nora recounted a positive relationship with her birth father throughout her childhood saying, “*he is the loveliest man and we were always in touch, he is a great father to me*”. As Nora described her current relationship with her birth father, she reflected that maintaining a relationship with him has helped her to come to terms with her care experience:

“[Birth father] is an old grandad man...he was always too much of a bachelor to look after me, so when I was born [and was being taken into care] he gave the decision to be like ‘okay, yeah just put her in care’ and so that is why I have been with this foster family since then, but I have always seen him.”

Nora’s re-negotiation of permanence with her birth father during the transition to adulthood is grounded in her reported understanding that he could not care for her. The quote above indicates that she considered him a good father, grounding this not in her experience of receiving day-to-day parenting from him, but within his capacity to maintain contact with her. Havlicek (2020) concluded her systematic literature review asserting that while there is evidence of what can be understood within Holland and Crowley’s (2013, p.60) phrase of “continuing emotional connection”, what is lacking in the literature are details about the practical supports that birth parents offer. Findings from this current study suggest that in re-negotiating permanence, many of the young people did not expect to receive practical support from their birth parents. Instead, ongoing contact was sufficient to support their re-negotiation of permanence with birth family as they transitioned out of care and transitioned on to early adulthood.

In contrast to the examples shared above, Ciara’s relationship with her birth family appeared to be grounded in her desire to be a source of support to her birth siblings. Echoing previous research that

highlights the emotional complexity that can underpin relationships between birth parents and young adult children who were raised in foster care (Havlicek, 2021; Holland and Crowley, 2013), Ciara articulated this complexity as being due to her own sense of divided loyalties that arise because of her care experience:

“I am very much between my two families. My loyalties lie with my [foster] parents. I don’t blame my birth mother for the circumstances [of coming into care] but she still hasn’t grown up and I can’t take myself out of that situation. I don’t even feel obligated to her, but I do feel obligated to my brothers and sisters, especially at family events...If I miss an event, a confirmation or a communion, I know that they are all raging at me”.

Within the literature there are conflicting views expressed about the potential of ongoing contact with birth family to result in feelings of divided loyalty, between foster and birth families, for care experienced youth and young adults. Luu et al. (2019) asserted that ongoing contact with birth family for children in care, was problematic, leading to the young person having feelings of divided loyalty between their birth and foster family. However, conversely Poulin (1986) argued that ongoing contact with birth family in childhood reduced the potential for divided loyalty. Ciara’s narrative indicates that for her this sense of divided loyalty is an internal conflict and is not fuelled by her foster carers and she reflected that her foster carers encourage her to maintain a connection to her birth family, “*But I don’t miss events, I haven’t missed anything. My foster parents always push me saying I should go even if it’s just for the sake of the other kids*”. This suggested that even in adulthood the foster carers have a significant role to play in supporting young adults to maintain a connection to their birth family. This point is reiterated by Cian who spoke in interview about being nervous as an adult before meeting his birth family and recalled, “*my foster mam was like, ah go on, you know it will be fun, and it was like*”. For Nora and Cian, support from their foster carers forms an important part of the re-negotiation of permanence with birth family without threatening the re-negotiation of permanence within the foster care family.

6.2.3 Maintaining Contact but not Face-to-Face

Ongoing face-to-face meetings were not the only ways the young people in this study maintained a connection to birth family. This reflected in this next quote from Alan who spoke about his contact with his birth grandparents and birth siblings saying, “*I haven’t seen them in a while, they send me cards and presents for birthdays and Christmas, and I always call to say, ‘thank you’*”. Alan’s narrative was littered with comments that demonstrated that while he acknowledges his birth family, it is his foster family that he considers to be his family. This contact with his birth grandparents could be understood to place him in Fargas-Malet and McSherry’s (2021) category of “contentment/satisfaction” because he does not express any dissatisfaction with the nature of this relationship with

his birth grandparents saying, *“I just have the mentality that my [foster] family is my normal family so seeing my biological family makes no sense to me”*. His narrative surrounding his birth sibling and his birth mother indicates that he is also in the category of “indifference or lack of interest”. Talking about his birth sibling Alan said that he had no contact with them. They were older than him and living in different foster homes. However, Alan expands upon this further when talking about his older brother suggesting that he believes that it is his brother’s responsibility to initiate contact now that they are older, and that Alan would engage in contact if his brother requested it:

“I kind of know that if he really did want to emm you know kind of further our relationship he would’ve you know picked up the phone and the...the fact that he hasn’t done that kinda you know might infer from that that he is probably content, the way I am, with the family he is living with...and I wouldn’t you know cut contact with him you know but I wouldn’t emm, I feel no kinda major need to have him in me everyday life okay and to kind of be seeing him.”

Alan, similar to participants in Fargas-Malet and McSherry’s (2020) study appears to have different relationships with different member of his birth family. While Alan can be placed into some of the categories those authors suggested, his narrative adds to this and further illuminates the complexity that underlies the young people’s relationships with their birth family into adulthood. Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2020) argue that the type of placement the young people in their study were in, did not impact the contact they had with birth family in adulthood. Instead, ties to birth family were determined by the young adult’s capacity to reconcile membership of both their birth and foster families. Alan’s strong emotional and physical tie to his foster care family was clear throughout his interview, and when he was talking about his birth family, he appeared to want to convey the idea that his willingness to maintain a connection to his birth family was not an indication of a weakening of his connection to his foster carers. As discussed in an earlier chapter Alan’s sense of permanence was strongly tied to his adoption by his long-term foster carers. However, at this time of transition Alan is potentially still trying to reconcile his permanent tie to his foster carers and his capacity to have an ongoing connection to his birth siblings. As he reflected *“it’s just that [they] have [their] families and I have my family”*.

The use of social media or online methods to maintain contact was recounted by a number of participants within this study, particularly in relation to contact with a birth sibling. These next examples from Katie and Beth, which epitomise narratives provided by other participants, are potentially indicative of O’Driscoll’s (2019) assertion that relationships with siblings were important to young people in care, but that maintaining these relationships was often complicated due to family histories prior to them being placed in care. Katie said; *“I WhatsApp my brother back and forth all the time”* while Beth commented *“I text [sister], we chat about things that happen”*. However, it is

of note that when asked, during the interview, neither Katie nor Beth were able to provide details about the current life of their sibling such as the name of their girlfriend/boyfriend or the course they were studying in college, indicating perhaps that the ongoing contact may be frequent but is potentially superficial in its nature. Like Alan, Katie and Beth reported maintaining contact with birth siblings but their permanent tie to their foster carers had resulted in them viewing themselves as being in a different family to their birth sibling. As Beth reflected when she was told that her sister had been adopted by her foster carers, *“I was happy that my sister had a family of her own, people who would look out for her”*. However, while she saw her sister as being a part of a different family this did not end her wish to have an ongoing connection. As this next quote shows, it did allow her to pursue this contact at a pace that she was happy with: *“Now I can continue my connection to [birth sister] at my own timing, I don’t have to be forced by social workers to meet her at a certain time, in a certain place”*

Katie and Alan, and the other participants who provided similar narratives, demonstrated that they were using this time of transition out of care and to early adulthood to make choices about the nature of the ongoing contact they wanted to maintain with their birth family. This echoes findings in Holland and Crowely (2013) who found that accounts of agency were significant among the young adults within their study who spoke about ongoing contact with birth family. Making agentic decisions, the young adult participants in this current study were able to keep lines of communication open with their birth family, maintaining contact at a level of their choosing without having to commit to frequent and ongoing face-to-face meetings.

6.3 Shifting connections to Birth Family in Adulthood

6.3.1 Introduction

For some of the young adults in this current study the transition out of care and the transition to early adulthood was an opportunity to make changes to the connection they had with their birth family during childhood. That relationships within families should change over time is not unusual, and as Morgan (2011) notes relationships within all families are understood to be dynamic and likely to change over time. Within the context of young adults who grew up in care, previous studies have noted that relationships with birth families and emotional reactions to birth family can change across time (Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2021; Boddy, 2019). The young people within this category of shifting connections to birth family in adulthood, recounted narratives about; choosing to end contact with some birth family members; choosing to re-open a connection that had not been maintained during childhood; and choosing to form new connections in early adulthood with birth family members they had no contact with while they were in care.

6.3.2 Face-to-face Contact ends but on Ongoing Connection is Retained

Andrea's narrative included accounts of a complex ongoing relationship with her birth mother throughout her childhood where, for example, her mother had at times refused to sign consent forms that were required to allow Andrea to go on trips with her school or sleepovers with friends. Andrea described her understandings of this as being, "*it was like she never wanted me back but also there was a piece of her not wanting to really let me go*". In contrast her relationship with her birth father throughout her childhood consisted of less frequent face-to-face visits but he consistently attended significant events such as her Holy Communion, Confirmation and school graduation, going to both the event and the celebratory party in her foster home. In adulthood, Andrea described how her relationship with each of her parents has shifted. In this next quote Andrea describes a birthday party that her birth mother hosted for her a month after Andrea was adopted by her foster carers, just after her eighteenth birthday:

"There were nine million cousins there and it was overwhelming because I had never met any of them, and officially I had been made not a part of their family. It was really weird. I was drawing out a family tree being like 'who are you?' and 'who is that?' and they all knew me...to be honest a part of me was looking at them thinking 'and why didn't any of you take me [when I went into care]?'".

This strong emotional reaction aligns with Havlicek's research (2019, p.10) which argued that relationships with birth families for care experienced youth are tied to the complexities of "*child rearing histories and unresolved losses*". Building on Havlicek's assertions, Andrea's narrative indicates that achieving permanence in long-term foster care is not a means to resolve these issues. In addition, the feelings outlined by Andrea align with Fargas-Malet and McSherry's (2021, p.15) "*ambivalence and mixed or troubled feelings*" category of contact with birth family. These authors write that this category was mostly problematic for the participants in their study, describing it as "*comprising of mutually contradictory feelings towards their family members*" (Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2020, p. 15). Andrea's earlier quote indicates that she was simultaneously interested in understanding her relationship to those attending her party and managing feelings of upset and frustration about her own care experience. It is of note that Andrea's permanent relationship with her foster carers was not impacted as she struggled with these feelings about her birth mother and maternal birth family. While Andrea reflected on why no one in her birth family offered to care for her, this was not however, an indication that she would have preferred this over growing up in her foster care family where she had an ongoing permanence. As she asserted, "*my [foster] family, are my family and they always have been, since I arrived*".

Echoing findings in previous studies (Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2021; Boyle, 2015) which highlighted that young people in care often have different relationships with different family members, Andrea described a different relationship with her birth father and some of her birth siblings when compared to that of her mother. Andrea explained that in her late teen years she had no contact with her birth father, despite having what she described as a positive relationship with him while growing up. Reconnecting with him, and with one of her birth siblings who had grown up in the care of their birth father, Andrea described the nature of her current relationship with her birth father, explaining, “*he sends me books in the post, which is nice*”. Her narrative indicates that she has more direct contact with her sibling, “*we speak on the phone all of the time, we have things in common, he is studying the same subjects I studied in college and so we are on the same page*”. This indicates that during this phase of youth transitions, the relationship with her sibling is the easiest for her to maintain. Andrea’s story illuminates the shifting and dynamic nature of birth family relationships for the young adults who participated in this study. Relationship patterns established in childhood were re-negotiated during this phase of transition and for some participants these were still in flux at the time of interview, indicating that this re-negotiation would continue into the future.

In the narrative provided by Nora there is an example of a re-negotiation of birth family relationships that involved shifting the focus from a birth parent to extended family. At the time of interview Nora said that she was not having contact with her birth mother due to her birth mother’s chronic mental health condition. Throughout her narrative it was possible to see that Nora’s lack of contact with her birth mother did not obviate her desire for a connection to that part of her birth family. Nora’s narrative includes a description of her foster mother helping her to contact her maternal extended family who are living in another country. Nora reflected on her contact with this part of her birth family, “*I can feel the connection to my biological family, I just know that they are family*”. Nora’s narrative about this contact indicates the combination of emotional and practical benefits of these newly formed relationships, alongside the complexity in forming these relationships as a young adult:

“...I kinda wish I knew more about them and about their backgrounds. I am always asking for photos of my mother growing up and my aunt gives them to me, we look very alike, it is strange, but I wish I had more [information], like I would love to know the history of us and all that sort of thing but there is only a certain amount that I can find out”.

Boddy (2019, p.2247) highlights the complexity of birth family relationships for care experienced youth and young adults saying that these relationships may “*feel more or less like family over time*”. Nora’s narrative provides an example of how she is navigating these complex feelings and re-

negotiating her relationship with her birth mother through her extended family during early adulthood.

Another participant, Leah, described her belief that the shift in contact with her birth family was connected to her adoption by her long-term foster family, which took place when she was seventeen years old. Leah's narrative suggests that while she viewed herself as being a member of both her adoptive and her birth families, her birth family did not have a similar broad view of the concept of family. Leah described having consistent and frequent contact visits with her birth parents and birth siblings when she was growing up. However, in this next quote she recalled a specific event during a contact visit, suggesting that this was an emotionally complex experience for her:

“I remember that I actually organised to have an access with my biological family when I made my Confirmation, and you know they didn't even acknowledge it at all. I didn't get a card, and yet when their own kids made their confirmations there was a huge party and photos and expensive stuff.”

Wilson et al. (2012, p.111) argue that the emotional meaning of family can be grounded within *“family practiced”*. Leah's previous quote demonstrates her wish to engage her birth family in this family practice of celebrating her confirmation, a wish that she says her birth family did not reciprocate. In this next quote Leah reflected that her adoption by her long-term foster carers caused the relationship with her birth family to deteriorate. She specifically identified her birth family's inability to reconcile her legal membership of her foster family with her ongoing membership of her biological family:

“I think they [birth family] thought that I would go home to them when I was eighteen and that we would be one big happy family again. But then when my adoption came through, they knew I wouldn't be going home, and I had no contact with them at all for two or three years. Even now I am only friends with them on social media, they still don't wish me a happy birthday or anything. I might message my brother or sister and then they don't reply for ages.”

This quote above from Leah illuminates her wish to continue to ground her relationship with her birth family within family practices such as birthday celebrations. However, Leah's continued narrative echoes Holland and Crowley's (2013) conclusion that birth family continue to be present within the emotional world of those who grow up in care (Holland and Crowley, 2013). She reflected that she continues to pursue these relationships with her birth family, despite their lack of engagement, *“because my birth mother has loads of health issues and the only way I will know if she is sick or dies is if one of them posted something”*. Leah asserts some control over these relationships by retaining contact via social media, emphasising the ongoing wish for a connection

to birth family expressed by a significant majority of the participants in this study. It is of note that, similar to Andrea and Nora, even when birth family are not providing the support that the participants wanted, the participants still strove to find ways to retain a connection to birth family, leaving open the possibility that they can continue to pursue these relationships into the future.

6.3.3 New Connections to Birth Family during this Phase of Transitions

Several of the participants in this current study described either initiating or receiving contact with some birth family members for the first time during this phase of youth transitions. This was not unexpected as Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2021, p.8) had identified the category of “curiosity” to describe some of the relationships between care experienced young adults in their study and their birth family. Eve, for example, located and began to have contact with some birth siblings after she had left care, having had no contact with her birth mother during her childhood. Eve recalled occasions in her life when she missed the presence of her birth mother and it was this that initially drove her to try and make contact with her birth mother, *“when I was eighteen there was my debs and it was a big milestone in my life and so I was like you know what I do want to know about my birth mother”*. Finding out from her aftercare worker that her birth mother had other children who had also been raised in foster care, Eve decided to initiate contact with these siblings and she reflected that this has been positive for her, *“we all have close relationships now. We stay in touch online, we talk on the telephone, and we meet up all of the time”*. In this next quote Eve recounted that she and her siblings decided to phone their birth mother using information one of them had been given by their birth father:

“My sister rang her and asked her “why did you leave me...I have grown up without a mother’, like she was very calm on the phone...but my mother didn’t ask about me or my other siblings...to this day I don’t think she knows that we have all met each other which is like, I don’t know, it’s kind of sad in a way, but people have their problems and she doesn’t want to be a part of my life , that’s the way I look at it , so you know that’s it.”

Eve’s recollection is reflective of Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2021) study where some of their participants expressed painful feelings about birth family in the past that shifted to indifference as they got older. Eve’s acceptance that she will not have a relationship with her birth mother at this time has not impacted her capacity to maintain a relationship with her siblings. As White and Hughes (2017) note, often relationships with siblings are supportive due to shared experiences of adversity. Eve may not have been raised with her birth siblings, but they still had a shared experience of care and a shared experience of the complex relationship with their birth mother.

In this next quote Ingrid expresses her uncertainty about her future relationship with her birth father, who she only began to have contact with after she turned eighteen years:

“My dad only came into my life when I was eighteen. He knew I was in care but there was a lot between him and my mom so I went to my mom’s side...we started talking when I was eighteen but then we stopped for a couple of years and then last year he contacted me again on social media and we messaged each other but we haven’t met yet and I don’t know when we will meet up”.

In this quote Ingrid describes how she is making agentic decisions, controlling the contact with her birth father, maintaining an ongoing connection while simultaneously trying to consider how she wants this relationship to progress. Similar to the other participants’ narratives presented in this section, Ingrid’s ongoing relationship with her birth father during the transition to adulthood was not fully decided or grounded in certainty. Frequently these relationships were only beginning to be re-negotiated and they led to emotionally complex reflections by the young adults as they grappled with how to reconcile past experiences and re-negotiate these relationships as they transitioned out of care and transitioned to adulthood.

6.3.4 Revisiting Relationships during the Transition to Adulthood that had Waned during Childhood

Within the group of participants in the current study there was a sample who reported that they had stopped contact with some of their birth family while they were in care but were beginning to revisit these relationships during the transition to adulthood. Reminiscent of findings within Skoglund et al. (2019) that changing relationships with birth family across time is not unusual for care experienced youth and young adults. Cian’s narrative described how his relationship with his siblings shifted over time. He reported that he had lived with all his birth siblings during the early part of his childhood, he moved into a foster home away from his birth siblings in adolescence and had little contact with his siblings at that time. As this next quote illuminates, during his transition out of care and into adulthood he began to have increased contact with his birth siblings:

“I used to rarely speak with my [birth] family but it has gotten better over Covid actually. My brother and I started talking again and then my whole family set up online calls ... I went to a party with them all and with my girlfriend. I was really nervous but actually it turned out better than expected and now I am thinking that when I get married, I might actually invite them all”.

This reflection suggests that the opportunity to reconnect with his birth family during early adulthood has helped Cian to re-evaluate the potential for an ongoing relationship with his birth siblings into adulthood. Connor shared a similar account about reconnecting with birth family but as this next

quote demonstrates, the complexity outlined through the narratives provided by other participants earlier in this chapter, is also present for Conor:

“I didn’t see my mam for five years. I think she felt bad about putting us up for adoption and all, but I see my mam now, and my brother and sister, I am an uncle, so like I go and see the baby...my brother and my sister grew up with my mam and to me the questions is still there ‘why were they not put up for adoption?’ I don’t know why my mam won’t tell me, I think she is ashamed that she gave us up”.

As he describes his efforts to re-negotiate these relationships with his birth family, Conor’s narrative echoes “*complex child rearing histories and unresolved losses*” (Havlicek, 2021, p.10) that other participants in this study also allude to. As the young adults in this chapter are re-negotiating relationships with birth family, they often described building on positive relationships developed during childhood. However, as they re-negotiate these relationships in early adulthood, previous positive relationships with birth family while in care have not allowed them to fully dismiss their pre-care history and events that resulted in them being placed into care.

6.3.5 Shifting contact due to the Death of a Birth Parent

There were several participants who reported that at least one of their birth parents was deceased at the time of interview. For these participants, the death of their parent led to a changed dynamic within their birth family relationships. Anderson (2018) reported in her study that the participants continued to have a problematic relationship with birth parents, even after the birth parent had died. It is of note that the participants in Anderson’s study were not reported to have experienced relational permanence with their foster carers, unlike the participants in this current study, who in opposition to Andersson’s findings, did report having a positive view of their deceased birth parents and maintained an ongoing connection to them. However, the death of their parent was reported to have had an impact on their relationships with the other members of their birth family. Monica for example who reported that her birth mother died while she was still a child, indicated that she continued to strongly identify with her birth mother, and that this was something that her foster carers supported and encouraged. As this next quote demonstrates, when the foster carers told Monica that their decision not to adopt her was grounded within their desire to respect her birth mother’s wish for her to not be adopted, Monica appreciated this, stating “*I thought that it was respecting my [birth], mother’s memory...I thought it was nice*”. As presented in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, this decision did not prevent Monica having a sense of permanence within her foster care family. However, Monica reported that the death of her birth mother did lead to her losing contact with her maternal birth family, “*my aunt on my mother’s side would have been a huge part of my life growing up...now*

contact is quite infrequent...we meet maybe once a year". As a teenager Monica said that she decided to search for some information about her birth mother's relatives. Similar to some of the participants in Fargas-Malet and McSherry's (2021) study, this was driven by curiosity as this next quote illustrates, *"I really just wanted to find out more about my background...my [foster] sister then found all of this information online for me and she put it in a folder for me to keep"*. While Monica said that she currently has no contact with any of her birth relatives, this next quote demonstrates her intention to maintain a connection to her birth family, including ensuring any children she has will know about her birth family: *"if I have children they will call [birth sister] aunt and I will show them photos of her so that they would recognise her, even if we never see her"*. Monica further retained a connection to her birth mother by keeping her surname, something which she says her foster carers encouraged: *"I feel like my only connection to my biological family is my surname, apart from that pretty much the person I am today is because of my [foster] family"*. Similar to other participants, Monica's narrative echoes Holland and Crowley's (2013) finding relating to the significance of the ongoing emotional co-presence of birth family for care experienced young people. After the death of her mother, and despite a lack of contact, Monica continued to feel connected to her birth mother. Moreover, the ongoing support of her foster carers was described as crucial to maintain this emotional co-presence and to grounding her sense of self within a combined birth and foster family identities.

Helen shared a similar narrative to Monica describing how the death of a birth parent strengthened her connection to her foster family. In interview Helen said that her birth father had died while she was an older teenager. She described having a close relationship with him throughout her life with consistent face-to-face contact with both her birth father and his extended family. Following his death Helen said that her relationship with her extended family shifted:

"I do see my nanny every now and again, but I do find it very hard because I am not close with my dad's brothers and sisters, and they are around a lot. I just feel like it's an intrusion when I go in and I don't see them as, you know, aunts and uncles, so that causes a little bit of tension".

As Helen reflected on this change in dynamic within her extended birth family, she noted that it had been her birth father who had driven her relationships with his family, and it was his absence that caused the change:

"I feel like I am still attached to them, like I share a name and, yes, I am blood related, but I am not related in the sense of I do not know them...they are not my family at the end of the day and that is it, I do not want to be connected to them anymore".

This is reflective of Bengtsson and Luckow's (2020) assertion that belonging is only something people are aware of when they do not feel it. While Bengtsson and Luckow (2020) were referring to a sense of belonging within the foster family, for Helen this was relevant within her birth family. Moreover, this sense of being an outsider within her birth family was in contrast to how Helen described her relationship with her extended foster family' "*at the core of my family are my [foster] family, cousins and close friends, the people I grew up around, it's like me and my extended [foster] family we have the same views on things*". Helen's reflections appear to demonstrate a shifting awareness that her ties are to her foster family and that her connection to her birth family lay within her relationship to her birth father. Furthermore, as she became aware of her sense of disconnection within her birth family, following the death of her birth father, Helen became more aware of the strength of connection within her foster family. Joanne's narrative also indicated that the death of her birth mother helped to strengthen her connection to her long-term foster care family and led to reduced contact with her birth family. Joanne described having regular contact with both of her birth parents growing up and said that they were regularly invited to her foster home for significant life events and supervised contact visits. Joanne described how when she was eighteen years old, she was able to visit her birth parents anytime she liked, and she used to visit them regularly. When Joanne was in her early twenties her birth mother died and Joanne then reduced the frequency of her visits to her birth father saying, "*I was never really close with him, not like I was with my mom*". When Joanne got married, she said that she had a candle lit in the church in memory of her birth mother. This act could be understood as a way of inviting her birth mother to be present at her wedding and to demonstrate a form of 'family display' (Finch, 2007), ensuring that those at her wedding understood that her birth mother continued to be important to her.

6.4 Choosing no Contact with Birth Family during the Transition to Adulthood

A third group within the participants in this current study were those who said that they had decided to have no further contact with their birth family as they transitioned out of care. While some of the participants in this group could be said to fit into Fargas-Malet and McSherry's (2021) category of "indifference or mixed feelings", referring to their strong relationships with their foster family and a sense of indifference towards their birth family, others are more closely aligned to the category of "ambivalence or mixed/troubled feelings", struggling to come to terms with their birth family's behaviour and wanting to be seen as part of a 'normal' family. Aligning to the latter category, Beth said that she had had very little contact with her birth mother throughout her childhood and that her last meeting with her birth mother was on the day that she was adopted by her long-term foster carers, when she was seventeen years old. In this next quote Beth describes conflicting emotions of anger and sympathy when she was told that her birth mother had not consented to her adoption:

“I literally got really angry because this was something that I really wanted, but I could understand why she said ‘no’, because she was basically signing her daughter away to someone else”.

Beth described in interview how her birth mother ultimately did consent to the adoption and that she met with her after the adoption hearing had taken place. However, as this next quote demonstrates, this meeting left Beth with conflicting emotions:

“I went in to see her, but you know she was trying to be a mother, and I was thinking, ‘for so long you didn’t provide for me’, and then I just couldn’t even be in the same room as her, it made me too uncomfortable. She was trying to give me a hug and I was like ‘you can’t do that, I won’t let you think of yourself as a hero and that you are saving the day by agreeing to the adoption’. I got really upset because at the end of the day she is my mum, and so I left, I went into another room and just cried”.

In addition, the feelings of anger described by Beth do not appear to be linked to her adoption, or the legalising of her permanent adoption status. Rather, as with the narratives provided by other participants in this study, Beth’s narrative further echoes narratives shared elsewhere in this chapter that also align with Havlicek’s (2021) findings that birth family relationships after care remain tied to complex childrearing histories. In this next quote, Beth said that she had not seen her birth mother after the incident described above, asserting that she had no intention of seeing her again:

“I am more connected to being adopted now than I am to being from my birth family. I don’t think ‘oh, I had a mum before’ but I know that I have siblings and I will always have siblings, but my mom is in my past, she is gone.”

This quote indicates that Beth has the capacity to view family as encompassing both her birth and foster family and, therefore, her choice not to see her birth mother again is not grounded in a belief that her adoption negates these previous birth family relationships, but it is more likely connected to her anger with her birth mother. As is noted within recent literature (Boyle, 2015), when children in care have poor relationships with their birth parents, they often have positive relationships with other members of their birth family and Beth’s narrative provides a demonstration as to how this continues to be true for her into adulthood.

Alan’s narrative indicates that he has a similar attitude towards his birth mother and siblings during his transition to adulthood. As described earlier in this current chapter, Alan explained that in adulthood he has letter and phone contact with his grandparents, and he was open to future ongoing contact with his siblings. The development of his relationship with his birth mother was different. He described having no contact with his birth mother growing up and then after his eighteenth

birthday he said that he was told that his birth mother would like to meet with him. As this next quote demonstrates he chose not to see her: *“I had the opportunity to see my mam, but it would have made no sense to me as I had this mentality that my foster family was like my normal family”*. Unlike Beth, Alan makes a specific link between choosing to have no contact with his birth mother and his ongoing permanent connection to his foster carers.

Both Beth and Alan said that they were choosing to have no contact with their birth mothers and they clearly iterated that they did not want contact into the future. However, in both cases while they had no significant current contact with birth siblings, they remained open to developing contact with birth siblings.

Hannah’s narrative about contact with birth family during her transition to adulthood indicated that she had proactively told her birth siblings that she did not want ongoing contact when they asked to see her. Hannah reported having regular face-to-face contact with her siblings when she was growing up but her descriptions of these visits indicate that they were not a positive experience for her. As this next quote shows she stopped attending these visits during her late adolescence, a decision she made because her birth family were not supporting her wish to be adopted by her foster carers:

“When I was fifteen or sixteen, I just stopped going to the visits. I suppose ‘cause they knew that I wanted to be adopted and they didn’t want me to be adopted so I stopped visiting them and cut off contact. The day I was in the adoption place, to be adopted, my birth mother sent me a message to see how it went but I just ignored her”.

In this narrative Hannah indicates that it was not past negative experiences of contact with her birth family that acted as the catalyst to her decision to end contact, rather it was her birth family’s failure to recognise her wish to be adopted. This implies that, similar to Leah above, Hannah was able to consider herself simultaneously a member of her birth and foster families, embracing what Boddy (2019) characterises as diverse forms of family, but her birth family were not able to embrace this complexity. Later in interview Hannah described how, during her transition to third level education she moved out of home and discovered that her new house was close to one of her biological sisters:

“I was always seeing her in the town, I would just wave but then she would come up and ask me questions and I felt it wasn’t the right place and I didn’t feel comfortable so eventually I blocked them all off social media”.

Hannah’s reluctance to continue this relationship appears to be grounded within a concern that contact with her birth sister was opening her to the potential that people around her would become aware of her foster care experience. This in turn threatened her privacy and her capacity to choose

who to disclose her care status to, a key tool used by care experienced young adults as they manage fears around stigmatisation (Dansey et al., 2019).

Mary also described choosing to limit her contact with her birth siblings when they sought contact with her during her transition to adulthood. Mary's narrative included descriptions about her contact with her birth father, and sometimes her siblings, throughout her childhood. As described in Chapter 4, Mary discussed her discomfort as a child when she thought about the fact that she had both a birth and a foster family saying that thinking about this, *"used to torment me"*. As she transitioned to adulthood and transitioned out of care, she said that her birth father *"is always trying to keep up contact"*. This was in contrast to her birth mother who Mary said, *"understands that this is my life, and she doesn't want to interfere with it"*. During interview Mary described that she was choosing to have no further contact with her birth family now that she is over eighteen years old and in a position to make her own decisions about contact. In this next quote Mary's response to a message via social media from her sister is described:

"One of my birth sisters, who is two or three years older than me, contacted me when I was in the middle of my exams...I don't think she realised obviously, but I just said it was not really a great time 'cause I was stressed and that was it. She was respectful, she just said that she didn't want to push the fact that she was related to me and just said if I ever wanted to meet her the option was there and it was very respectful of my own life, I appreciated that...now I follow her on social media and that would be it".

Mary does not appear to see a conflict between her permanent status within her foster family and ongoing contact with her birth family. Her narrative is reflective of Atwool's (2013) assertion that foster families can provide a secure base from which to make decisions about her relationship with her birth family. Mary appreciates her birth family respecting her capacity to make agentic decisions about contact at this stage of her early adult life, and her response suggests that while face-to-face contact is not something she wishes to engage in at this stage, she has left the option open by maintaining a connection via social media.

Fiona's narrative differed from that provided by other research participants because her lack of contact with her birth family related to the fact that she said that she has no information about them. It is of note that Fiona is the only participant in this current study who had no information about her birth family. She reported that the only information she has is her birth mother's name and a letter that was on her social work file that she described as, *"a very brief letter, very brief, an account of medical history, [birth mother's] allergies and stuff like that"*. In this next quote Fiona described her foster mother helping her to find some information about her birth family, but ultimately Fiona decided to stop looking:

“I could never find any leads, then my [foster] mom offered to help me when I was eighteen, but I decided that I did not want to bother...I am no longer interested to be honest, but I do know that if I want to, I can go and talk to my [foster] mom about it any time”.

Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2021) describe a category of participants in their study who display an indifference or a lack of interest in gaining information about their birth family. In addition, those authors argue that in their study participants in that category “*often had a strong sense of belonging to their alternative family*” (Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2021, p. 12). While on the surface Fiona appears to have no interest in searching for her birth family her decision appears to be grounded in her lack of information rather than a lack of interest at this time. Also of note, and as with the other participants in this current study, her sense of permanence within her foster care family was not a driving factor in her decision to maintain contact with birth family. In fact, as with other participants, Fiona describes her foster mother offering support in her attempt to maintain a link with her birth family. This indicates that developing permanence within a long-term foster family does impact the young adults’ capacity to incorporate their birth family into their early adult life as they transition out of care and transition to adulthood.

6.5 Tie to Birth Family Stronger than Tie to Long-Term Foster Family

One of the participants in this current study described re-negotiating a relationship with her birth family during her transition to adulthood that was stronger than her tie to her foster family. Doreen, who grew up in the same long-term foster family as her birth siblings, described one of her siblings as having a tumultuous relationship with their foster carers during their late teen years. In her interview Doreen spoke about feeling like she had to make a choice between her siblings and her foster carers when she reached eighteen years of age, and Doreen chose to move out of her foster home and move in with her siblings. As this next quote shows this was a complicated decision for Doreen:

“I was really sad to be leaving them [foster family] but I was not willing to not live with my siblings and to stay with the foster family. I was completely torn, I wanted to be with my siblings...and there was the worry that I would be missing out on like parental support but I had such a close relationship with [siblings] and they had like gone to college and all and they could advise me about all that, my foster carers hadn’t [gone to college]...so there was that”.

Aligning with findings from Skoglund et al (2019) Doreen’s narrative highlights the importance of care experienced young people and care experienced adults being able to make agentic decisions about their relationships with their birth family, even as these relationships change over time. Doreen was the only participant across the twenty-two young adults who participated in this study, for whom

relational permanence, when re-negotiated in early adulthood, resulted in her grounding her sense of permanence with her birth family rather than her foster carers. Havlicek (2021) argues that in the literature that she reviewed there was little evidence as to the types of supports that birth parents provided for care experienced young adults. However, Doreen's narrative suggests that while her birth parents were not significantly involved in her life part of her justification in choosing to live with her siblings lay in their capacity to offer her practical supports about her future life choices as she transitioned in education.

6.6 Discussion

All of the participants in this study were making choices about their future relationship with their birth family as they re-negotiated permanence during their transition out of care and their transition to adulthood. The literature reviewed suggested that birth family relationships continue to carry emotional meaning for care experienced young adults (Holland and Crowley, 2013) and that these relationships are tied to complex child rearing histories (Havlicek, 2021). Both of these findings were frequently uncovered within the findings presented in this current chapter. In addition, current research indicates that during the transition to adulthood, care experienced young adults can re-negotiate different relationships with different family members (Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2020) and that relationships with birth siblings can continue to be significant as the shared experiences of complex upbringings remain important. These findings were also reflected in this current study.

For the majority of participants in this study, the establishment of permanence within their long-term foster care placement did not impact their capacity to make choices about their future relationships with their birth families. Foster carers provided both practical and emotional support as relationships with birth family were re-negotiated. However, it is of note that re-negotiating permanence within their foster care family did not negate the negative experiences of childhood or rectify the complex relationships with birth family. The narratives provided by the study participants demonstrate their capacity to find ways to incorporate ongoing connections to their birth family into their daily lives in early adulthood. There was no uniform response across the cohort of participants, rather each participant described ways that allowed them to re-negotiate these relationships in a way that was right for them within their personal circumstances. This included both face-to-face contact, online contact, reducing contact or having no contact. Previous research suggests that there is potential that these relationships will change as the participants progress through different stages of their lives (Refaeli, 2020; Andersson, 2019). In addition, the re-negotiation of family relationships is a key aspect of the transition to adulthood for all young adults and their parents (Cushings, Samuels and Kerman, 2014). Across the narratives the young adults' capacity to make agentic decisions was outlined. The ongoing emotional co-presence of birth family (Holland and Crowley, 2013) continued into early adulthood. However, while this was true it is also of note that in re-negotiating relationships with birth family, relationships with foster carers were not considered to be placed

under any threat. It was only in one instance that a participant chose to re-negotiate permanence within their birth family rather than their foster family. Thus, as was true in childhood so too during the transition to early adulthood, permanence within long-term foster care does not equate to a lack of contact or connection with birth family.

Across the last three chapters the findings from the qualitative interviews have been presented. These findings chapters have examined the narratives the participants provided about their current lives and lived experiences. Particularly the findings have focused on how these young adults negotiated permanence with their foster carers in childhood, re-negotiated permanence within their long-term foster care family and re-negotiated permanence within the relationship with their birth family during the transition to adulthood. In the next and final chapter of this dissertation the three findings' chapters will be summarised, and these findings will be discussed, conclusions from this study will be presented and the contribution to knowledge will be outlined.

Chapter 7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The central aim of this study was to examine the current lives and lived experiences of a group of young adults who had grown up in foster care with permanence. A key objective was to gain insights into whether or how, growing up in foster care with permanence has impacted their early adult lives, including their experiences of the transition to adulthood and the transition out of care. These lived experiences were investigated through the analysis of narratives shared by a group of care experienced young adults who had grown up in foster care with, either relational and/or legal, permanence. In interview the young adults discussed their lived experiences, talking about their current relationships within their foster families, their birth families, and the world around them, as they navigated a range of youth transitions, including the transition out of care. The study participants, when asked about their current lives, chose to also share narratives about, and to reflect on, their lived experiences while growing up in foster care. This allowed for an examination of the issues across time. The findings support the development of new theoretical debates about the conceptualisation of permanence for young adults growing up in foster care with permanence. Using a qualitative methodology, the stories the young adults shared about their lived experiences were the primary source of evidence within the research. Using a lens of youth transitions, these issues were examined while the young adults were at a point of transition in their lives and were making decisions about their future. The findings from this study make a substantive contribution to current academic debates and contribute to understandings within the realm of theoretical knowledge.

This final chapter of the dissertation begins with a review of the central aims and objectives of this research study. The key findings from Chapter 2, the literature review, are then revisited as a reminder of the research context within which this study was designed and undertaken. This is followed by a discussion on the key findings of this current study and the key themes arising from the research are discussed and examined. The usefulness of the lens of youth transitions as a framework within which to examine the issues is considered. The contribution to knowledge is clearly outlined, as well as recommendations for future research, policy and practice. Strengths and limitations of the study are considered, and the chapter ends with a reflection by the researcher on the research process and some concluding comments.

7.2 Reviewing the Aims and Objective of the Study

The central aim of this study was to investigate the current lives and lived experiences of a group of young adults who had grown up in long-term foster care with permanence. An important goal was to ensure that the research reflected a range of experiences of permanence. For this reason, the lived experiences of young people who had established legal permanence while growing up in care *and* young people who grew up with relational permanence but had not established legal permanence, were included in the study. The key objective was to illuminate the ways in which growing up in

foster care with permanence did or did not impact the current lives and lived experiences of these young adults, across a range of domains in their lives, as they transitioned out of care and to adulthood. Using a qualitative approach, the young adults' accounts of their lived experiences were the focus of the research. Through an interrogation of the narratives shared by the participants a primary aim was to illuminate the ways in which permanence can be conceptualised for young people growing up in long-term foster care. In this way this research study progresses current debates about permanence for young people growing up in foster care.

7.3 Review of Key Messages and Gaps Identified within the Literature

A review of current academic debates relating to key issues of relevance to this study provided a foundation from which to identify gaps in the current literature and to develop the study design. The literature reviewed was disaggregated into three primary areas: i) challenges faced by young people growing up in care; ii) current debates surrounding permanence for young people growing up in care and; iii) literature relating to the youth transitions of care experienced young people. From this review of the literature, it was possible to ascertain the current state of knowledge, to identify gaps in the literature and design a research study that would address some of these gaps.

Debates within the current literature highlight that young people growing up in care face many challenges throughout their lives and that these challenges can be understood in terms of both objective and subjective measures (Harrison et al., 2020; Llosada-Gistau et al., 2017). Much of the current literature points towards the importance of understanding the subjective experiences of young people in care, by making their lived experiences the focus of research (Ball et al., 2021; Bakketeig et al., 2020; Moran et al., 2020). Establishing permanence for young people while they are in care is understood to help mitigate the challenges care experience brings (Rolock and White, 2016). However, across time debates about permanence for young people in care have shifted. Overtime, the concept of permanence has broadened and is now understood to include relational permanence, referring to the establishment of strong and meaningful relationships that endure over time, between young people and their carers (McSherry et al., 2018). Within the context of broadening the conceptualisation of permanence, debates arose about the deficits in conceptualisations of 'family' within public policy. A key argument is that public policies often do not reflect ways in which young people in care experience 'family' (Boddy, 2019). In addition, research indicates that many care experienced young people maintain relationships with both their birth and their foster families and establishing permanence does not always result in an ending of face-to-face relationships, or emotional connections, between a young person and their birth family (Havlicek, 2021; Boyle, 2015; Holland and Crowley, 2013). This has led to some authors suggesting that conceptualisations of family should be broadened to incorporate both birth and foster family relationships and reflect the experiences of young people who grow up in care (Boddy, 2019; Morgan, 2011; Finch, 2007).

Within the literature relating to the experience of youth in general and care experienced youth in particular, the lens of youth transitions was identified as a valuable resource with the potential to illuminate important issues for care experienced young adults, as they transition out of care and to adulthood (Storø, 2016; Stein, 2012, Henderson et al., 2007). For young people in care, this time of transition coincides with the removal of significant supports as the young person achieves legal independence and is no longer in the care of the state. Key literature indicates that across objective measures, care experienced youth do not achieve as much success at this stage in their life as non-care experienced youth (Gilligan, 2018; Storø, 2018; Stein, 2012; Mendes, 2011). The lens of youth transitions can help illuminate key supports and challenges for young people at this point of transition, making it a valuable lens for this current study investigating the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence.

Having reviewed key debates within the current literature it was possible to identify gaps that this study aimed to fill. The primary gap identified was the lack of research relating to the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. In particular, there was a dearth of research that examines these issues at a time of youth transitions, including the transition out of care. There were no studies identified that examined the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence across a range of domains in their lives, that also aimed to understand whether or how permanence continued to be relevant in their lives during early adulthood. For example, there are a lack of studies that examine how care experienced young adults' relationships with their permanent foster carers progress and develop after the young person has left care. There were no studies identified that examine the impact of growing up in foster care with permanence on relationships with new friends and people in the world around them, as young adults navigate a range of youth transition experiences. Moreover, while there were some studies that examined the relationship between care experienced young adults and their birth families, there were few studies that examined how relationships with birth family were re-negotiated in early adulthood by young adults who had grown up in foster care with permanence.

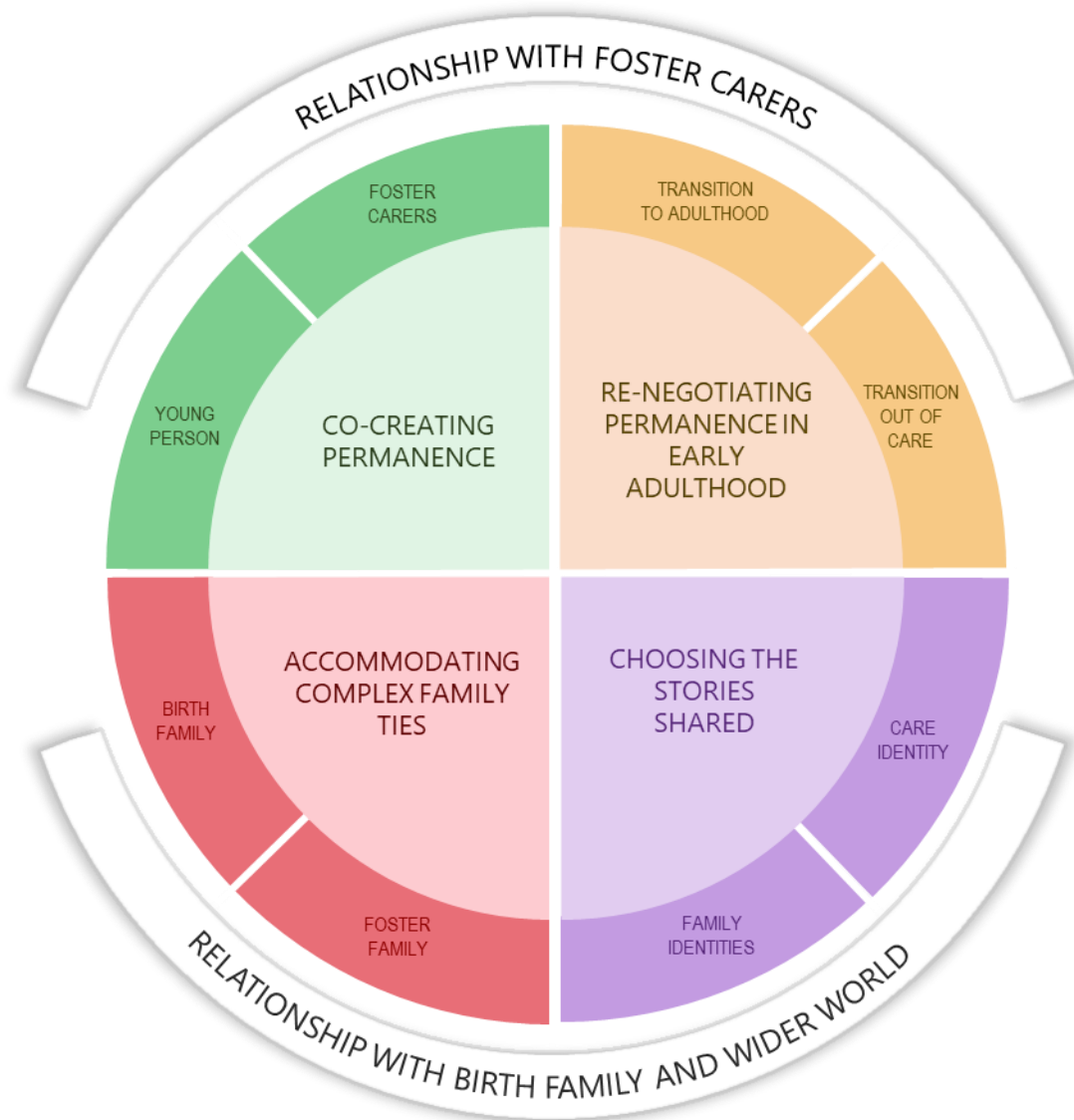
This study began to address these gaps by selecting a study design that ensured that the lived experiences of young people who had grown up in foster care with permanence were the focus of the data collected. This led to the selection of a qualitative framework, underpinned by a social constructionist perspective, in undertaking this research. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty-two young adults who had grown up with permanence in long-term foster care placements. Their narratives were investigated and examined through a process of reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The findings were presented across three chapters in this dissertation. A brief overview of these findings' chapters will be presented below, followed by a detailed discussion of the key themes arising, that contribute towards a newly developed understanding about the conceptualisation of permanence for young people growing up in care.

7.4 Summary of Findings' Chapters:

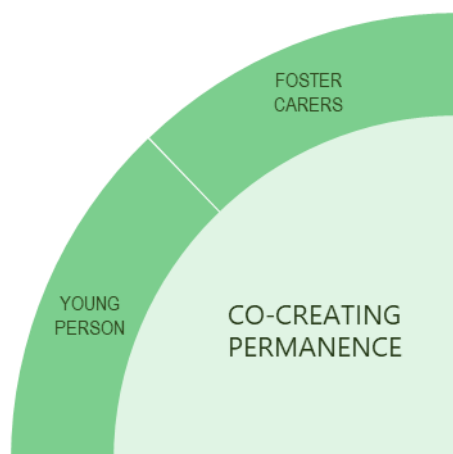
The key findings from this study were presented across three chapters in this dissertation. In each chapter a key aspect of the young adults' descriptions of their current lived experiences were presented and discussed. In the first of the findings' chapters, Chapter 4, the reflections and recollections of the young people about their lived experiences of growing up with permanence in their foster care placements, including descriptions about the ways in which the young person and their foster carers negotiated permanence together while they were growing up, were examined. In the second findings' chapter, Chapter 5, the young peoples' narratives relating to their lived experiences in their current lives were discussed. In this chapter there was a specific focus on the young adults' descriptions about how their relationships with their foster carers and the world around them, have shifted and changed as they navigate a range of youth transitions. In Chapter 6, the last of the chapters presenting findings, the young adults' descriptions about their current relationships with their birth family were discussed. Across these three chapters there were common themes identified that both help progress and develop current research as well as providing a contribution to new knowledge. The contribution to knowledge arising from this current study is discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

7.5 The Lived Experience of Permanence for Young Adults who Grew Up in Foster Care with Permanence: Discussion of Findings and Contribution to Knowledge

In this section the primary findings from this study will be discussed, including highlighting how these findings contribute to current debates. The diagram below has been developed as a visual aid, representing key elements of the findings and conclusions from this study. Within the diagram there are four primary segments, each representing a key aspect of the lived experience of permanence for the young adults participating in this study. The upper two quadrants refer to the young adults' lived experiences in relation to the development of their relationship with their foster carers across time; in childhood and early adulthood. The lower two segments refer to the young adults' relationships with their birth family and the wider world around them and the development of these relationships over time. Each of the four segments is discussed in detail below.



7.5.1 Co-Creating Permanence: The Shared Role of the Young Person and their Foster Carers



A significant finding arising from this research is that young people and their foster carers “co-create permanence”. Moreover, this process of co-creation is ongoing, and occurs within the many actions of both the young person and their foster carers throughout their time in care. Central to revealing this finding of co-creation, was gaining a deeper understanding of the study participants’ experience of relational permanence within their long-term foster families. An analysis of the narratives shared by the participants in this current

study not only highlight the value these young adult’s place on experiences of relational permanence,

but also illuminates the ways in which relational permanence was established within their long-term foster care families. Insights about how relational permanence is established are a further contribution that this PhD makes to current debates about permanence in foster care. In this section the new concept of ‘permanence display’ is introduced. ‘Permanence Display’ refers to the many actions that the young person and their foster carers undertake to demonstrate to the outside world, and to each other, that their relationship is grounded in permanence. These findings are represented in the green quadrant of the diagram. The inner section draws attention to the significance of co-creation of permanence and the outer sections highlight the shared role of the young person and their foster carers in this process across time.

Co-Creation of Permanence: What it is and Why it is Important

As discussed previously, understanding the current lives and lived experiences of the young adults in this study was a primary objective of the research. However, in the process of discussing their current lives, these young adults also reflected on their time in care to contextualise their lived experiences in early adulthood. These reflections, shared as the young adults were at a stage of youth transitions, allowed insights into their lived experience of establishing permanence within their long-term foster care placements. There was no singular description about what permanence looked like in each of their lives, but each of the descriptions included ways that the young people and their foster carers co-created permanence throughout the young person’s time in care. This was a significant finding that arose as a result of the analysis of the narratives shared by the participants in the study. Bringing forth this finding reveals that permanence is not something that is bestowed onto the young person and their foster carers through, for example, a legal agreement such as the granting of an Adoption Order or a Long-Term Care Order; rather it is something that is developed across time with both the young person and the foster carers as active participants. It relates to actions taken by the foster carers, for example, engaging with the young person’s needs by allowing them time and space to adapt to the foster family when they first move in, referring to the young person as their child when describing their family, attending parent teacher meetings at the young person’s school, knowing who their friends are and supporting the young person as they navigate complex relationships with birth family. It also refers to actions taken by the young person, for example, calling their foster carers “mum and dad”, responding positively to their foster carers’ efforts to provide support throughout challenging times, acknowledging an emotional connection to their foster carers and developing a sense of belonging within the foster family. In addition, the findings from this study indicate that on some occasions co-creating permanence also refers to the young person and their foster carers choosing to apply for an Adoption Order, making their relationship legally permanent, even if this occurs during the young person’s late teenage years. Importantly, this PhD conceptualises that permanence is co-created across time, whilst highlighting the agentic actions

of the young person and their foster carers in this process as they each make decisions and take actions that lead to the co-creation of permanence.

Central to illuminating permanence as a process of co-creation, was developing a deeper understanding about the role relational permanence played within the care experiences of the young people in this study. Specifically, the study uncovered how relational permanence was established within these long-term foster care relationships. Strong relationships built on trust and an emotional connection between the young person and their foster carers were central to the descriptions the participants shared about their experience of permanence while in care. This finding builds on recent debates about permanence, highlighting the importance of relational permanence to young people in care. McSherry et al. (2018, p.132) define relational permanence as “*an enduring and supportive relationship between a young person and a caring adult*” and drew attention to the higher value young people in care place on relational permanence over legal permanence. However, within current research there is little written about **how** relational permanence is established within foster care placements. This study helps to close this gap by bringing forth findings about the co-creation of permanence.

Research undertaken by Pérez (2017) examined whether legal permanence automatically translates to relational permanence. He concluded that it did not but that experiences of relational permanence could be placed into one of four categories; enduring relational permanence, ambivalent relational permanence, spurned relational permanence and severed relational permanence. While Pérez (2017) categorises relational permanence and describes features of each category, for example the young people with enduring relational permanence being placed at a young age and having a sense of belonging within their foster families, he does not provide any discussion about *how* relational permanence is established for the young people in his study. Pérez (2017) argued that more research is needed about how relational permanence is established and he identified hearing directly from young people with this lived experience as a suitable way to gather this data. This is one of the gaps that this study has clearly addressed by gathering the stories of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence and analysing the narratives shared. In Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, the young adults describe relational permanence as they talk about their close and loving relationships with their foster carers, their sense of being loved and cared for, and their belief that their foster carer’s commitment will endure into the future. However, unpacking these descriptions illuminates that these close and enduring ties of relational permanence have been co-created by the young person and their foster carers across time. In this way this current research extends our knowledge about how relational permanence is established for, and by, young people in care.

How this Study adds to Current Literature: Evidence in the Data of Co-Creating Permanence

This current research is one of the first studies to claim that permanence within foster care placements arises out of a process of co-creation between the young person and their foster carers, across the duration of the placement. In this current study, this co-creation was described within seemingly small actions as well as more significant events that took place throughout the young person's time in care. For example, there were stories about the young person choosing to call their foster carers "mum" and "dad" and the foster carers referring to their foster child as their son or daughter. It was also seen in the young adults' narratives describing the meanings that they attached to being included in family photos that are then displayed in the foster home. In this action the foster carers invite the young person into the photo, and the young person responds and engages emotionally, accepting this as a sign of permanence. The process of co-creation extends beyond the relationship with the foster parents and includes the wider foster family. The powerful and emotional narrative Leah shared about her foster grandfather adding her name to the family tree following her adoption, provides an example of extended family also engaging in the co-creation of permanence. Leah's grandfather made the powerful gesture of asking Leah to watch him as he added her name. Having her name on the family tree carries little weight if Leah does not also acknowledge that she is a part of the family and so her emotional engagement in this forms part of the co-creation of permanence. There were also more significant moments of co-creation, for example when Monica's foster carers supported Monica to be baptised and to make her First Communion. This was not a tradition that was part of the religion of Monica's birth family, but Monica viewed this as her foster carers bringing her into their family and she chose to participate freely in this, and analysis of her reflections identify it as a turning point in the co-creation of permanence for her and her foster family.

Current literature, for example Salazar et al. (2018), has argued that young people in care define their permanence goals in terms of relational permanence rather than legal permanence. However, the analysis of findings in this current study revealed that for some of the participants, securing legal permanence through adoption was an important part of their process of co-creating permanence, despite having described strong and enduring bonds to their foster carers. This was most clearly seen for the young adults who described achieving legal permanence in their late teen years, as they were on the cusp of leaving care and attaining legal independence. In Chapter 4, Alan emphasised how important it was to him that he was adopted before he left foster care at the age of eighteen years. Describing the benefit he derived from being able to change his surname to that of his foster carers, of knowing that his foster carers were legally his mother and father because of his adoption, allowed him to have a strong sense of continued belonging to his foster carers into early adulthood. Both Alan and his foster carers chose to enter an adoption process as he was nearing eighteen years of age, an act of co-creating permanence that carried emotional importance for Alan and was an important aspect of his lived experience of permanence. Current literature highlights the importance

of relational permanence, with policy makers and practitioners encouraged to focus on this aspect of permanence (Ball et al.,2021; Salazar et al.,2018; McSherry et al.,2018). However, this current study has shown that minimising the significance of legal permanence could have negative repercussions for some young people in care, where achieving legal permanence is an important aspect of co-creating permanence for some young people. Ball et al. (2021) argue that legally permanent foster care placements do not automatically lead to relational permanence between the young person and their foster carers. They highlighted that little is understood about how relational permanence is established. Findings from this current study suggest that while legal permanence is not an essential aspect of relational permanence, for some young people in care establishing legal permanence, even if it is at a time when they are due to transition out of care, can be a significant aspect of co-creating permanence.

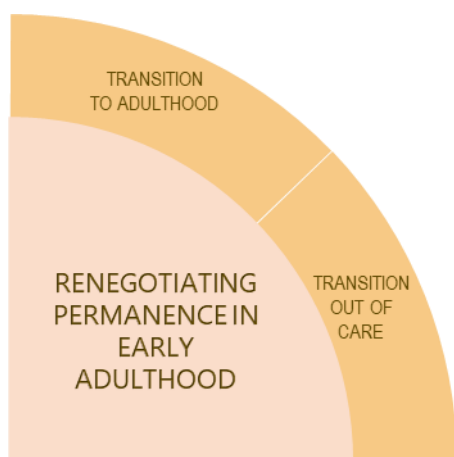
As discussed above, the analysis of the stories shared by the participants in this PhD study demonstrates the importance of the shared role of the young person and the foster carers in co-creating permanence across time. In examining this process of co-creation, it is possible to identify specific ways that the foster carers and the young person demonstrate to each other and to the outside world that they were co-creating permanence. Building on Finch's (2011, p.65) concept of displaying family and MacDonald's (2016) idea of enacted permanence, several of the actions the young people and their foster carers took can be understood by a new term being introduced here: **"Permanence Display"**. This can be defined as the myriad of actions the young adults and their foster carers undertook together to demonstrate to the outside world, and to each other, that their relationship is grounded in permanence. For example, calling their foster carers 'mum' and 'dad' when talking about them to friends, even if this was not the term they used when talking to their foster carers. Similarly, participants described their foster carers counting them among their birth children when describing how many children they had, and this was particularly poignant for Gillian who described her foster mother buying her a birthday card with "Dear Daughter" written on it. 'Permanence Display' was also present in actions such as a foster father walking his foster daughter down the aisle on her wedding day, or the young person turning to their foster carers for emotional support as they struggled with issues in school or in managing relationships with birth family (which will be discussed in more details below). Continuing to reinforce the theme of co-creation, in each of these examples of 'Permanence Display,' both the young person and the foster family engage in the display of permanence, reinforcing to the outside world and each other that they are co-creating permanence.

Understanding permanence as a process of co-creation and considering 'permanence display' emphasises the proactive role young people take in establishing permanence within their foster families. It could be argued that current literature discusses permanence for young people in care in terms of decisions made by policy makers, practitioners and carers on behalf of the child. For example, Burge (2020) encourages practitioners to take the young person's cultural heritage and

ethnicity into consideration when planning for permanence. That author does not, however, articulate the ways in which young people themselves could contribute to establishing permanence in their placements. As described above for Monica, co-creating permanence involved her choosing to include her foster carers' cultural and religious heritage into her life, something her foster carers invited her to do. Moran et al. (2020), in their small, Irish based study, highlight the disconnect between how young people understand permanence and how permanence is understood by practitioners and policy makers, but they do not attribute any active role to the young people in establishing permanence. In this current study, the participants repeatedly describe ways that they are actively involved in co-creating permanence and displaying permanence alongside their foster care families, highlighting the link between co-creating permanence and the agentic actions of the young person. The young people described making choices and taking agentic actions as they reflected on their experience of co-creating permanence. The agentic role of the young people was clearly seen in their narratives about co-creating permanence during challenging times. For example, Ben described a turbulent adolescence. He described his foster carer's roles in providing him with support and encouragement throughout this time. However, in his narrative he engaged in this co-creation of permanence by choosing to change his negative behaviours, choosing to remain in school and choosing to engage in his education. In his recollection he had agency and he made choices to control how his life would progress at that time. Moreover, his agentic choices to change his behaviour combined with the practical and emotional support offered by his foster carers, resulted in a phase of co-creating permanence.

In summary, the young adults' descriptions of relational permanence have been examined and analysed. The analysis asserts that for this group of young people, permanence was co-created by their foster carers and the young person throughout their time in care. In addition, signs of 'permanence display' are used to demonstrate that the foster care relationships are grounded in permanence. Moreover, it is through multiple agentic actions that the young people and their foster carers co-created permanence. Although each of the participants described co-creating permanence, they did not all describe permanence in the same terms. Significantly for some, establishing legal permanence was another part of the co-creation of permanence while for others, inclusion in foster family traditions were more important. However, the analysis confirms the active role that young people themselves play in co-creating permanence within their foster care families.

7.5.2 Re-negotiating Permanence in Early Adulthood



As examined above, the young people in this current study described how they co-created permanence with their foster carers throughout their time in care. As these young adults reached eighteen years of age (the age of leaving care in Ireland), they were embarking on a phase of youth transitions, including the transition out of care. Analysis of their narratives revealed that they were re-negotiating permanence with their foster carers. How they described this process of “**re-negotiating**

permanence in early adulthood” is the focus of the orange quadrant in the diagram. This is also the second section of the diagram that represents the young adults’ lived experience as it pertains to their relationship with their foster carers. The young adults carried their experience of having co-created permanence while in care into early adulthood, but despite having permanence while in care, the participants described how they were re-negotiating permanence with their foster carers at this time of transition. The re-negotiation of permanence occurred alongside the young adults **transition out of care** and their **transition to adulthood**, as represented in the outer sections of this quadrant. Early adulthood is a time in the life course when many changes and transitions take place for young people across a range of domains including education, housing, relationships, and for those in care, the transition out of care (Coles, 1995). The lens of youth transitions was utilised across this study to illuminate the narratives shared. This included elucidating the ways the young people re-negotiated their relationship with their foster carers and how this experience interacted with other experiences of youth transitions.

Re-Negotiating Permanence with Foster Carers: What it is and Why it is Important

As discussed above, the young people in this current study described close and loving bonds with their foster carers and the ways that they continually co-created permanence within their foster families. However, despite descriptions of a lived experience of permanence while in care, the young people described a process of re-negotiating permanence as they transitioned out of care and to early adulthood. Re-negotiating permanence refers to the myriad of ways that the young adults and their foster carers continued to co-create permanence, within the context of the young person’s transition out of care and other transitions during early adulthood. The process of re-negotiating permanence included the young adult and their foster family engaging in acts of ‘permanence display’ to demonstrate to each other and the world around them that permanence experienced in childhood had continued beyond the transition out of care. Analysis of the narratives describing the re-negotiating of permanence also illuminated the continued agentic actions of the young adults and their foster

carers as they chose to re-negotiate permanence within the new context of the transitions to early adulthood, including the transition out of care.

There are few studies that have focused on the care leaving transitions and youth transitions experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. Choosing to include this aspect in this current study is a significant way that this study contributes innovatively to existing literature. Within current debates, there is literature regarding the lived experience of care leavers in general terms, however, the research rarely addresses the lived experiences of young people who grew up in foster care with permanence, after they have reached eighteen years of age. There is research evidence focusing on factors that support young people as they transition out of care and on to adulthood (Shpiegel et al., 2021) and other studies that examine lived experiences of young adults in Ireland as they transition out of care (Glynn, 2021). However, these studies do not report on the experiences of young adults who had permanence in foster care. Thus, this current study contributes to current debates by bringing forth the lived experiences of the transition to early adulthood and the transition out of care for a group of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. This includes the finding that the young people described an experience of re-negotiating permanence during this phase of transition.

How this study adds to Current literature: Evidence in the Data of the Participants of Re-Negotiating Permanence

As described above the young adults in this current study shared narratives that evidence how they re-negotiated permanence as they navigated a range of youth transitions, including the transition out of care. They described re-negotiating permanence in early adulthood, despite having described negotiating and co-creating permanence with their foster carers during their time in care. The participants each described having had a close relationship with their foster carers throughout childhood and a belief that this would continue beyond care, reflective of Pérez's (2017, p184) category of "enduring relational permanence". The transition out of care was of particular importance to the young adults in this study. Helen described the significance of this time when she discussed her worries about turning eighteen, a time she said when she believed all care leavers are wondering where they will go after they have left care. Thus, once the young person reaches eighteen years and has to transition out of care, even those who believe that their relationships with their foster carers will continue into adulthood, re-negotiate permanence in their foster families at that stage.

There were many examples describing this experience, illuminating that co-creating permanence in childhood is followed by the re-negotiation of permanence in early adulthood. For example, when Joanne moved out of her foster home to go to college, she expressed concern that her status in the foster home would change. Her re-negotiation of permanence included the foster carers reassuring Joanne that she could return and Joanne choosing to seek emotional and practical support from her

foster carers. Deciding to include the lens of youth transitions in the analysis of the data gathered allowed for insights into the impact of other youth transitions experiences on the permanence experiences of the young people in this study. Several participants described seeking support from their foster carers with practical issues in their new homes such as help with cooking, DIY tasks and seeking emotional support at times of stress, including the experience of an unexpected pregnancy. Two of the participants described re-negotiating permanence following a disruption to permanence while they were in care. Both young adults described restarting relationships with their foster carers in early adulthood, after their transition out of care. In both instances the young adults reflected that the ending of the relationship during their time in care was related to their own behaviour and acknowledging this and discussing it with their foster carers was a key aspect of their re-negotiation of permanence in early adulthood.

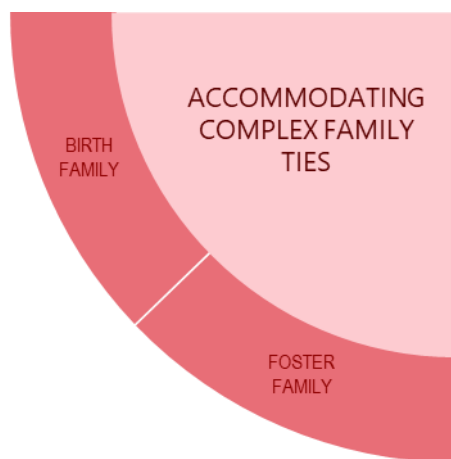
Descriptions of re-negotiating permanence also included further examples of ‘permanence display’. For the participants who had children at the time of interview, they considered their foster carers to be grandparents to their child and ascribed the names of ‘grandmother’ and ‘grandfather’ to them and the foster carers counted the children among their grandchildren. Permanence display was also revealed as the young adults described the choices they made as they moved away from home, including returning to the foster family home for Sunday lunch each week, foster fathers walking foster daughters down the aisle and making speeches at the wedding reception or foster mothers going wedding dress shopping with their foster daughters. Embedded within these actions are indicators that as they are re-negotiating permanence, the young adults are making agentic choices to engage in these relationships within their new context of early adulthood. For one participant, the re-negotiation of permanence involved her choosing to reduce her connection to her foster carers and strengthen her connection to some of her birth family. She made this choice even though she knew that her foster carers continued to be available to provide her with ongoing support, should she want to avail of this. The transition to adulthood is a time when all young adults are entering a new phase of their life and they must make choices about how they will adapt to their new context (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2021); and for the participants in this study, this included re-negotiating permanence.

Research to date highlights that young people who grow up in care experience greater challenges during the transition to adulthood than their non-care experienced peers (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Stein, 2016; Gilligan, 2008). It has been reported within the literature that care leavers can experience a “*compressed and accelerated*” transition (Stein, 2004, p.53) and that they face additional challenges during this phase of their life course, when compared to non-care experienced youth (Gilligan, 2018; Stein, 2012, Mendes, 2011). Within current debates, various factors are identified as supporting young people as they transition out of care, including having supportive adults who provide experiences that encourage the development of resilience (Gilligan, 2019), provision of comprehensive after-care supports for young people as they leave care (Palmer et al, 2022) or

placements within stable family units (Shpiegel et al., 2021), for example. These are all supports that the young adults in this current study describe being available to them within their foster care placement. This PhD study reaffirms findings in the literature that stability in care is a supportive factor during the transition out of care. The participants in this current study described a range of experiences of co-creating and re-negotiating permanence. However, common throughout was the emphasis they placed on having a belief in the ongoing support they would continue to receive from their foster carers at this time of transition. For example, participants spoke of knowing that they could return to live in their foster care home should a relationship end, or if they chose to leave college early or be unable to cope with living independently. For one participant whose placement had disrupted, when her birth father was seriously ill it was her foster mother who supported her as she made arrangements for his ongoing care, and for participants who experienced an unexpected pregnancy, they continued to live with and to receive both practical and emotional support from their foster carers. This supports current research that emphasises the benefit of growing up with permanence in care to mitigate the likelihood of experiencing a “*compressed and accelerated*” transition to adulthood (Stein, 2004, p.53).

The participants in this current study described experiences of permanence in care and of having continued support from their foster family during the transition out of care. Like all young adults, the participants in this current study were making choices about their early adult life as they navigated a range of youth transitions, including how to re-negotiate permanence with their foster carers. There are no previous studies identified that bring the lens of youth transitions to examine the lived experience of the transition from foster care with permanence to early adulthood. Within the literature, the lens of youth transitions is identified as a useful tool to aid understanding of the lived experiences of young adult care leavers (Gilligan, 2018; Storø, 2018; Stein, 2012). This period of transition from adolescence to early adulthood has been identified as a particular time when the lived experience of care leavers diverges from the lived experience of the non-care experienced population. For the participants in this current study, leaving care did not equate to leaving their carers. This did not mean that these young adults did not face challenges as they navigated the transition out of care and the transition to adulthood, and some of these challenges are discussed in the following sections of this current chapter. However, the benefit of this ongoing support was noted across the narratives analysed as these young adults re-negotiated permanence in early adulthood.

7.5.3 Accommodating Complex Family Ties



The lower half of the diagram represents findings regarding the young adults' lived experiences as they relate to their birth family and the world around them. The pink quadrant refers to their relationships and connections with their birth family. Analysis of the narratives sheds light on the fact that for these participants who grew up with permanence in foster care, “**accommodating complex family ties**” was a significant aspect of their lived experience. This finding was revealed through the analysis of the young adults’

descriptions of their shifting connections to their birth family, both while in care and in early adulthood. Moreover, they were navigating connections to their birth family while simultaneously co-creating and re-negotiating permanence with their foster carers. The outer layer of this quadrant draws attention to the ties the young adults described having to both their **foster family** and their **birth family**. Like the descriptions of co-creating permanence and re-negotiating permanence, there was a diverse range of experiences reported by the young adults. However, the capacity to accommodate these complex family ties was a key aspect of their lived experience of growing up in foster care with permanence.

Accommodating Complex Family Ties: What it is and Why it is Important

Accommodating complex family ties refers to the lived experience of the young people as they navigate complex relationships with their birth family while simultaneously co-creating and re-negotiating permanence with their foster carers. Current research indicates that even when young people experience permanence while in foster care, their birth family continues to play an important role in their life (Neil et al., 2013). However, managing these relationships can be complicated, both in childhood and in early adulthood (Havlicek, 2021; Boyle, 2015; Atwool, 2013; Holland and Crowley, 2013;). This complexity was apparent when the narratives shared by the study participants were analysed. Examination of these stories revealed that the young adults described relationships and connections with birth family that were shifting and changing across time. For some participants, they had regular contact with birth family throughout their childhood and chose to continue this into adulthood; for others they chose to continue contact with birth family during their transition to adulthood, but they no longer had face-to-face meetings and instead managed their contact via social media or text messaging. For others, the transition to adulthood was an opportunity to make new connections with their birth family, and for some, it was a time when they choose to end contact with their birth family.

A common narrative uncovered through analysis of the data, was of foster carers providing practical and emotional support as the young people navigated these changing relationships. Moreover, navigating relationships and connections with birth family did not impact the young people's sense of permanence in their foster family. This is reflective of the literature that suggests that the best predictor of a positive outcome for a child's ongoing relationship with their birth family is when foster carers support this (Boyle, 2015). In this current study the evidence indicates that having foster carer's support in managing birth family relationships continued to be true as the young people transitioned out of care and to early adulthood.

How this Study adds to Current Literature: Evidence in the Data of the Participants Accommodating Complex Family Ties

It was revealed within the narratives gathered for this study that an aspect of the lived experience of the participants was that they were navigating complex family ties. Descriptions of navigating birth family contact throughout childhood highlighted that for this cohort, alongside their permanent relationships with their foster carers, there was an ongoing "*emotional co-presence*" (Holland and Crowley, 2013, p.61) between the young person and their birth family. One way this emotional co-presence was evident was in narratives describing how the young adults were cautious about referring to their foster carers as "mum" and "dad" in front of their birth family because they did not want to upset their birth family. Further evidence was provided within descriptions about decisions the young people made in childhood and adulthood about seeing birth family on special occasions such as birthdays, Christmas, First Communion or Weddings. Moreover, how they chose to describe to friends and the world outside their foster family, who is in their family, or deciding how to respond to birth family requests for contact on social media also demonstrated these complex family ties. These narratives were accompanied by reflections about the ways permanence within their foster families accommodated these complex family ties and included stories shared about the role of foster carers. The narratives shared by the young people in this current study included stories of foster carers encouraging contact even when the child was reticent or foster carers agreeing with the young person a way to discreetly end a contact visit if the child felt unsafe or stressed. Both of these actions supported the young person to continue contact with their birth family. In early adulthood, foster carers continued to support the young person as they navigated these changing relationships, encouraging them to attend large birth family events, invite birth family to weddings or make contact with birth family members that they had not seen for some time. There is some literature that suggests that young people in care who maintain relationships with birth family can have a sense of divided loyalty, which can threaten the stability of the foster care relationships (Luu et al., 2019; Maaskant et al., 2016). In this current study some of the young people said that they did not wish to upset their birth family by revealing to them their close relationship with their foster carers. However, none of the young people indicated that permanence with their foster carers had a negative impact on their

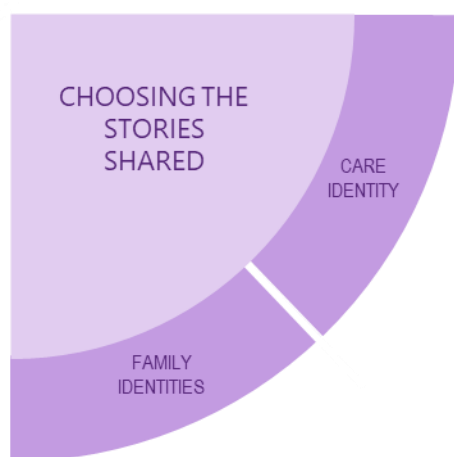
ongoing connection to their birth family. Conversely, the findings affirm current literature that argues that the support of foster carers helps young people to manage relationships with birth family and is central to a positive fostering experience (Neil et al., 2011). The descriptions shared by the participants in this current study of foster carers supporting them to manage complex birth family connections, served to build and strengthen relationships with their foster carers and were perceived by the young adults as a part of the co-creation of permanence.

As discussed above, the lens of youth transitions in this current study has allowed for an examination of these issues during the transitions out of care and to adulthood. While there is much written about relationships between young people in care, including those with permanence in care, and their birth family during childhood and adolescence, what is missing from the current literature is evidence of the ways in which young adults who grew up in permanent care navigate birth family connections during the transition to adulthood. Havlicek (2021) has examined the issue of relationships with birth family for young adult care leavers, but she does not illuminate the experiences of those in foster care with permanence because her systematic literature review focuses on literature relating to young adults ageing out of care, without establishing permanence, in the USA. This current study addresses this evidence deficit as the young adults discussed their current and past relationships with their birth families and their foster carers. Skoglund et al. (2019) examined the lived experience of birth family contact across time, although it is of note that the young people in their study were in kinship foster care, not foster care with permanence. They concluded that young people in care should be supported to make agentic decisions regarding relationships with birth family across time and that these relationships will shift across time. This capacity to make agentic decisions about relationships with birth family was reflected in the experiences of the young adults in this current study. This study also found that this included not only re-negotiating permanence with foster carers, as discussed above, but also re-negotiating relationships with birth family. It is of note that not all participants described similar levels of relationship or connection with birth family. As discussed above, some young adults chose to discontinue their face-to-face contact with birth family in adulthood but continued to maintain online or social media contact. Other participants continued with face-to-face meetings while others described locating and meeting new family members that they had not previously had a relationship with, and others shared stories about their decision to stop contact with their birth family. This broad range of experiences is reflective of Boddy's (2019) assertion that birth family relationships continue to be significant beyond care and into adulthood. Similar to other findings in this current study, the young adults' capacity to make agentic choices was a common thread in these narratives.

A finding arising from this study is that the young adults' contact with birth family shifted across time. However, in all cases apart from one, the relationship with the foster carers remained the primary source of emotional and practical support for the young adult. Throughout their narratives,

the young adults reported having different expectations from their birth families than they had from their foster families. In interview they reflected that as they transitioned out of care, they anticipated that their foster family would continue to provide both practical and emotional support. However, the vast majority of the young people had different expectations as to what their birth family would provide. The young adults described valuing ongoing contact with their birth family because it helped them to maintain a connection to their past or helped them to connect to a particular aspect of their identity. Other young adults described relationships with birth family that were grounded in love and others maintained contact out of a sense of duty. For one young adult, ongoing contact with her birth family was her primary connection in early adulthood and that participant described maintaining only superficial contact with their foster carers, further emphasising that each participant's experience was unique to themselves. Havlicek (2021), in her systematic literature review, notes that the articles she examined offer little insight into the practical supports that birth family offer. The analysis of the findings within this current study indicates that while many of the young adults continued to maintain an ongoing emotional connection to their birth family in early adulthood, they had little expectation of receiving practical support from them. However, while not seeking ongoing practical support from birth parents, these young adults still maintained a connection to them and it was their lived experience of permanence that these complex family ties could be accommodated.

7.5.4 Choosing the Stories they Share



The purple segment relates to the young adults' lived experience of interacting with the wider world. Analysis of the findings illuminate that the young people are “**choosing the stories they share**” with people they met. Specifically, they were making choices about if or how they disclose their **care identity** and how they choose to describe their **family identities** to people they met in the world around them. The narratives shared illuminated that the participants believed that their experience of permanence in foster care gave them choices about these

issues. Aligned with findings presented in other sections of this chapter, the young people acted with agency as they made these choices. Furthermore, different participants described making different choices in relation to each of these issues, affirming findings outlined in earlier sections of this chapter that each participants' lived experience of permanence was unique to them.

Choosing the Stories they Share: What it is and Why it is Important

The transition to adulthood is a time when young people make multiple, individual choices (Heinz, 2009). However, not all young adults make these individual choices within the same contexts

(Henderson et al., 2007). The lived experience of permanence for the young adult participants in this current study has been interrogated using the lens of youth transitions to gain insights into how the transition out of foster care placements with permanence interacts with other experiences of youth transitions. Navigating the transition out of care is part of the youth transitions experience of care leavers and includes making choices about whether they wish to share their care story with people they meet at this stage. As discovered through analysing the stories shared by the participants, these young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence were making choices about if, when and how they wanted to disclose their care identity to people they met outside of their foster and birth families. This included discussing their family identities as the young people were making choices about if and how to talk about their birth siblings, foster siblings and their foster and birth parents when asked about their family. They managed this issue in a range of ways with the majority being cautious about who they spoke to about this topic. In addition, those who were happy to tell people they grew up in care, remained cautious about what aspects of their story they would share. Interrogation of the narratives revealed that despite growing up with permanence in foster care, the young adults still held concerns about being judged negatively or being stigmatised because of their care experience. This aligns with the experiences reported in the current literature (Rogers, 2017; Dansey et al. 2019). However, deeper analysis of the narratives revealed that the young people believed that their experience of permanence in care had resulted in them being able to choose whether and how to discuss their care identity and family identities. In turn, this was a way they protected themselves from the stigma they believed was associated with being care experienced.

How this Study adds to Current Literature: Evidence of Participants Choosing the Stories they Share, in the Data

Similar to many of the participants in this current study, Nora described viewing her transition in areas such as the transition out of home or the transition in education as an opportunity for a “fresh start”. Nora said that people she grew up with, knew she grew up in care, but the new people she met as she moved out of home and went to college did not have this information until she chose to share it. Like others in the study, Nora approached this issue by choosing to only share her care story with people she trusted and knew well. Other participants spoke of freely disclosing their care experience in new contexts with mixed reactions. Some participants experienced a negative reaction while others reported that it was received with interest but without negativity. Making choices about how to choose to share information about care identity aligns with findings in Madigan et al. (2013). When the narratives shared by participants about why they were reticent about sharing details about their care identity were interrogated, it revealed that participants feared being judged negatively. This is closely tied to findings in Dansey et al’s (2019) research who highlight fear of stigmatisation as the reason why the young people in their study did not want to disclose their care identity.

Deeper interrogation of the narratives shared by the participants reveals that they believed that it was unfair that they were judged negatively for being in care as they did not have the same experience as other care leavers. Many of the young people described believing that, because they had grown up with permanence, the stigmatisation was misplaced. The narratives shared by the participants included stories about them wanting friends, both in childhood and adulthood, to understand that their experience of family mirrored the experiences of their non-care experienced peers. This was evident in Joanne's narrative about explaining to her school friends that her foster carers carried out the same day-to-day tasks as their birth parents did. This reveals that not only had these young adult care leavers internalised care as a negative experience but that they believed that experiencing permanence should protect them from this stigma.

Many of the participants shared narratives that reveal that for them, growing up in a permanent placement did act as a support when making choices about disclosing their care identity to new people. For example, Alan said that when he meets people for the first time, he just says that he lives with his parents because he believes that to mention his care experience will elicit questions that he would not want to answer. Other participants tell people they are adopted as this is how they view their permanent family, and they believe that adoption carries less stigma than foster care. Rogers (2017) argues that managing this issue is easier for young people who grow up in permanent, stable care. The participants in this current study did grow up in foster care with permanence, yet interrogating their narratives uncovers that their decisions about disclosing their care identity to people as they transitioned to adulthood was an emotional and complex issue. However, the diversity of narratives shared about how the young adults were managing this issue suggests that they each believed that they could make choices about who to tell, and what they would tell, about their care identity.

Another way that the young adults in this study described choosing the stories they shared relates to how they presented their family identities. It was of note that a significant number of the participants chose to only discuss their foster parents when talking about 'parents', but when discussing their siblings, they commonly referred to both birth and foster siblings as being a part of their family. The ongoing importance of sibling relationships for young people in care is discussed in the current literature (Herrick et al., 2015; Wade, 2008) and this was reflected in the way that many of the participants in this current study chose to present their family life to the outside world. Alongside these narratives were other narratives describing how some of the young adults chose to name only their foster siblings as they feared that to include birth siblings would result in people asking them questions about their family and discovering their care identity. This further demonstrates that despite research evidence indicating that permanence while in care supports young adults to manage these issues, these issues prove complex and emotional to negotiate for young people who grow up with permanence in foster care, both in childhood and in early adulthood. However, the findings

suggest that one advantage is that they have the capacity to make choices about how they want to describe these issues as they continue to experience a permanent and stable family after leaving care, an experience that more closely mirrors the majority population as compared to other care leavers.

In this section the core findings from this research have been outlined and discussed. In the next section the contribution to knowledge arising from this research will be outlined.

7.6 Further Contribution to Knowledge: Expanding how understandings of permanence are discussed and examined

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation the gaps within the current literature and research were identified. These included a lack research with young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. Specifically, there was a lack of research examining whether, or in what way, experiences of permanence while in care impact lived experiences during the transition to adulthood and the transition out of care. In addition, there was a dearth of research examining how experiences of permanence while in care, impact youth transition experiences in early adulthood across domains, such as education, accommodation, parenting and intimate relationships. This current study has begun to address these gaps and confirm and extend existing knowledge about the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. Key findings of this current study have been discussed in detail above and contributions to knowledge have been outlined. Moving beyond these findings it is possible to identify additional significant contributions to knowledge that will help inform future research in this area.

This study has demonstrated the value and importance of hearing directly from young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence about their lived experiences. Although there has been previous research that has examined lived experiences of care leavers in specific domains such as education (Brady and Gilligan, 2020) and housing (Palmer et al., 2022) and employment (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan, 2015), there were no studies identified that examined the lived experiences of young adults who grew up with permanence across a range of domains. Hearing directly from young adults provided insights into the shifting nature of permanence across time for these participants. Moreover, this study included experiences of both relational and legal permanence, allowing for new knowledge about how these different pathways to permanence have influenced the young adults' lived experiences in early adulthood. Using this approach allowed for findings that illuminate the varied and diverse experiences of permanence both in childhood and in early adulthood for the twenty-two young adults in this current study. Moreover, a lens of youth transitions was used to examine the lived experiences of the young adults in this current study. Using the lens of youth transitions to investigate the key issues is a significant contribution of this study to the current knowledge base. The lens of youth transitions allows for findings contributing new knowledge about the significance of periods of transition in the process of co-creating and re-negotiating permanence.

It has been discussed in the existing literature that the establishment of permanence for young people in care can help mitigate the challenges that care experience brings. However, this study adds to this, demonstrating that the transition out of care is a time when permanence is re-negotiated but also that the re-negotiation of permanence helps mitigate the challenges that care experienced youth often face across a range of domains during the phase of youth transitions, including the transition out of care.

As outlined in section 7.5 above the analysis of the lived experiences of the participants in this current study has broadened perceptions about the agentic capacity of young people in care and care experienced young adults in navigating their own permanence pathways. Previous research focuses on examining the decision-making processes of social work agencies and foster carers (for example; Stott and Gustavsson, 2010; Rolock et al., 2018). However, this study progresses current thinking about permanence and see young people as agentic actors in defining their own pathway to permanence. It does this by bringing forth the young adults' own views about how they believe permanence was co-created in childhood and the ways in which they chose to re-negotiate permanence as they transitioned to adulthood. Therefore, future research examining issues related to permanence for young people in care would benefit from viewing young people as agentic actors and seek to investigate how the actions of the young people themselves influence their experiences of permanence both in foster care and into early adulthood.

The findings of this current study confirm findings about the important role of foster carers in supporting young people in foster care to navigate relationships with birth family (Fuentes et al., 2019; Christiansen et al., 2013; Neil et al., 2013). However, this current study builds on this by adding new knowledge about how these young adults are navigating relationships with birth family as they transitioned out of care. This stretches understandings of the ongoing connection young adults maintain to birth family, while simultaneously valuing their foster carers ongoing support to manage these relationships. While the young adults in this study told stories about varied levels of contact with birth family, the findings suggest that further research on this issue should include a focus on how young adults who grow up in foster care with permanence continue to navigate relationships with birth family as they transition out of care.

In Section 7.5 and Section 7.6, the findings from this qualitative study into the lived experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence have been discussed. The conclusions that can be drawn about the lived experiences of the participants have been clearly outlined and how this study confirms current research and extends current knowledge about how we understand, discuss and examine issues relating to permanence for young people growing up in care have been outlined. The findings of this study indicate implications for policy and practice and suggest areas for further research. These will be outlined below.

7.7 Implications for Policy and Practice and Areas for Further Study

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study indicate that, at least for the participants in this research, there is no singular pathway to permanence and therefore any policy or practice aimed at the establishment of permanence for young people in care should allow for a diversity of pathways to permanence. Moreover, permanence is co-created by the young person and their foster carers through a variety of agentic actions, and this suggests that when planning for permanence, the young person and their foster carers should always be actively involved and included in the decision-making process. While the young people and their foster carers value relational permanence, adoption continues to be an important part of the co-creation of permanence for some young people in care and their foster carers, even when relational permanence has been established. Therefore, practitioners and policy makers should continue to include adoption as a permanence option, even for older children in foster care with relational permanence.

While permanence is co-created in childhood, times of transition, including the transitions out of care and to adulthood, are phases when permanence needs to be re-negotiated. Discussions with young people transitioning out of care and their foster carers about how permanence will be re-negotiated should be included as part of the planning and the supports offered during the transition out of care, even where permanence, either legal or relational, has been co-created.

Areas for Future Research

The findings of this current study add new knowledge to current debates, illuminating key areas but also point to areas where further investigation and study is warranted.

This current study examined the lived experience of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. A key finding was that the young adults and their foster carers together co-created permanence in childhood and re-negotiated permanence during the transition to adulthood. As this study reflected the lived experiences of the young adults, further research with foster carers to gain their perspective could shed additional light on this process of co-creation and re-negotiation.

This research highlights that permanence is an unfolding phenomenon that shifts and changes across time and contexts. While this study examined the lived experiences of young adults as they transition to early adulthood and out of care, further investigation of the issues as the young adults become older and experience additional transitions into their thirties and beyond would add to our understanding about how permanence continues to shift across time.

Finally, as discussed in Chapter Three, when recruiting for this study, the target group were young adults who grew up in permanent foster care and who continued to have a close relationship to their foster carers. A study that focused on the lived experiences of young adults who co-created permanence with their foster carers in childhood but did not re-negotiate permanence with their foster

carers into early adulthood would allow for further understanding of the issues that hinder the re-negotiation of permanence in early adulthood.

7.8 Reflections of the Strengths and Limitations of the Study

There are a number of strengths and limitations in this study. This study is unique in its gathering of narratives from young adults about their experiences of co-creating and re-negotiating permanence across time. The sample size was relatively small, in keeping with acceptable numbers within a qualitative study and this allowed for an examination of the issues in depth. However, the sample was a self-selecting sample, which accounts for some variation of experiences, but also potentially explains why accounts provided by the young people describe successful lives. However, it is also probable that a successful transition out of care is a likely outcome following an experience of permanence while in care and ongoing permanence in early adulthood.

This research took place during a period of Covid-19 restrictions. This forced the use of online interviews. A strength of this was that the use of video calling allowed for easy access to participants across Ireland. Due to the extensive use of video conferencing software during Covid, both the participants and researcher were familiar with the video conferencing software. However, the impact of Covid meant that the young adults' lives were curtailed, and they were experiencing less of the world due to the public health restrictions in place. Although conversely this also meant that many of the young people had less demands on their lives making them potentially more freely available for interview than they might have been in normal circumstances.

7.9 Reflections on the Research Process

As a part-time PhD student who is also a parent and someone who works outside of the home, I experienced a range of both high points and low points, some of which have been outlined in Chapter 1. When I started this study, I was a qualified social worker with considerable experience in professional social work practice. I came to the research process with a wealth of practice knowledge. However, at the time of commencing this research it had been fifteen years since I had undertaken any formal education. While initially my research was driven by my role as a practitioner, as the research process progressed, I underwent my own transition from working in social work practice to working in an academic role in a university. I also underwent a transition as I gained more skill and competence as a researcher. I developed skills in research design and planning, my capacity to critically review literature grew and my competence at academic writing progressed. Through attending and presenting at academic conferences, my skills in designing academic posters and presentations and showcasing aspects of the research also improved. I began this journey as a practitioner who believed my research could help inform some of my own practice. However, I am ending this PhD journey as a social work academic even more strongly committed to an understanding that quality research is essential in order to ensure quality social work practice and

that neither practice nor research should exist in a vacuum. Moreover, undertaking research about a time of transition while simultaneously experiencing my own transitions was poignant and informative. It reminded me of the uncertainty that arises when one's life is in flux and that times of transitions are times choices are being made in new contexts and this is both exciting and daunting.

Listening to the stories shared by the participants was at times an emotional experience. Many of the young adults shared stories about their pre-care life and the trauma they experienced before they were taken into care. Hearing these stories as a researcher rather than a social worker was an experience that was at times both freeing and limiting. There were several stories that had a particularly strong impact upon me, left me disappointed in the way these young adults reported being treated by the care system in Ireland but also left me astounded as to the levels of resilience demonstrated by the young adults and the compassion and practical parenting of their foster carers. As a social worker, my role would have been to proactively try and support the young adult to come to terms with these experiences and I would have been representing the agency that was involved in their care. As a researcher my role was to hear their stories, offer support as it was needed and to empathise and it made me want to ensure that I faithfully reflected the stories shared by the participants in this thesis.

Working as a social worker I had the capacity to work with adults and young people at times of trauma and stress in their lives. My work was guided by frameworks for practice and theoretical knowledge as well as legislation and agency policy and when possible current research. One of the biggest frustrations I experienced as a social worker was the lack of empirical knowledge that I could draw on to inform my practice. Through this study I have added to the body of research that social workers will be able to refer to when supporting young people in care as they negotiate permanence. Despite the challenges faced on a personal level throughout this PhD as I transitioned in my career, worked throughout a difficult international pandemic and attempted to continue to be present in my personal and family life, I am very grateful that I have been able to do this, and it is my wish that social work practitioners will benefit from this research.

7.10 Concluding Comments

This research makes a substantial contribution to understandings of conceptualisations of permanence for young people growing up in care and for young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence. The study has highlighted the shared and active role of the young person and their foster carers in both co-creating and re-negotiating permanence and the acts of permanence display that are a public demonstration that their relationships are grounded in permanence. It has drawn attention to the complex family ties that young people growing up with permanence in foster care face, both while they are in care and as they transition out of care as well as the ways that permanence supports them as they navigate these complexities. Permanence also allows the young people to make

choices about the stories they share about their care identity and their family identities as they navigate relationships with the world around them both while they are in care and as they transition to adulthood. Study findings point towards the importance of practitioners and policy makers developing and maintaining an awareness of the varied ways that young people and their foster cares together co-create and re-negotiate permanence across time. Finally, by hearing directly from care experienced young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence, valuable insights have been gained and this is a reminder of the importance of hearing directly from care experienced youth and young adults about their lives and their lived experiences to enhance our understanding of the key issues faced by those growing up in care.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Literature Review Search Strategy

The literature review was conducted between October 2016 - January 2017 and March - April 2020. Initially, because the adoption of older teenagers from foster care with permanence was a primary focus of the study, the research question guiding the literature search was:

- What are the lived experiences of permanence for young adults who were adopted in their teenage years from foster care with permanence?

When the study focus was developed to include more broad conceptualisations of permanence the following research questions guided the search strategy:

- What are the experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence?
- What are the youth transitions experiences of young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence?

Search Terms Used:

Focus of Research	Search Terms and Phrases
Young Adults	youth OR “young adult” OR “young person” OR “early adult*” OR “emerging adulthood”
Foster Care	Foster*Care*
Permanence	Permanence OR Permanent OR “relational perm*” OR “adopt*”
Youth Transition	“Youth transition*”

The following filters were applied to the searches:

- Time Frame: 2010- present
- Language: English Language
- Peer Reviewed

The databases searched were; Academic Search Complete, PsychoInfo, CINAL, Social Services Abstracts, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts.

Abstracts for all research identified was read for relevance and those that were deemed irrelevant were discarded. Articles were discarded if they related only to quantitative literature or if they were focused on intercountry adoption or infant domestic adoption. All articles deemed suitable were read in depth and included in the literature review. Further research was identified through examination of

bibliographies of relevant research. October 2016-January 2017 a total of 315 articles were identified of these 68 met the inclusion criteria and were included. March- April 2020 a total of 97 new articles were identified of which 20 new articles were added for inclusion. Snowball sampling was also used throughout with further articles being identified through bibliographies and references within relevant articles.

In addition, an alert system was used via Google Scholar to identify new literature that matched the following criteria: (permanence* OR “relational perm*”) AND (Foster care*) AND (youth OR ‘young adult’ OR “young person” OR “early adult*”) AND (“youth transitions”). New citations that matched these search criteria were sent via email. Articles identified in this way were reviewed for relevance and included as appropriate. Additional articles were also identified through recommendations from my supervisors and colleagues involved in similar areas of research.

Appendix 2: Confirmation of Ethical Approval from School of Social Work & Social Policy Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

School of Social Work and Social Policy
Faculty of Arts, Humanities
and Social Sciences,
Arts Building, Trinity College,
Dublin 2, Ireland.

11th September 2020

RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

Title: *An Investigation of the Lived Experience of Young Adults who experienced stability and permanence, either legal or relational, while growing up in long-term foster care.*

Applicants Name: Sinead Whiting
Supervisor(s): Stephanie Holt & Robbie Gilligan
Application ID No: 843

Decision: Approved

Dear Sinead

Thank you for your recent application to the Research Ethics Committee, for approval of amendments to your of: *An Investigation of the Lived Experience of Young Adults who experienced stability and permanence, either legal or relational, while growing up in long-term foster care.*

These amendments have been approved.

On behalf of the committee, we'd like to thank you for the opportunity to read about this study and we wish you the very best with it.

Yours sincerely,

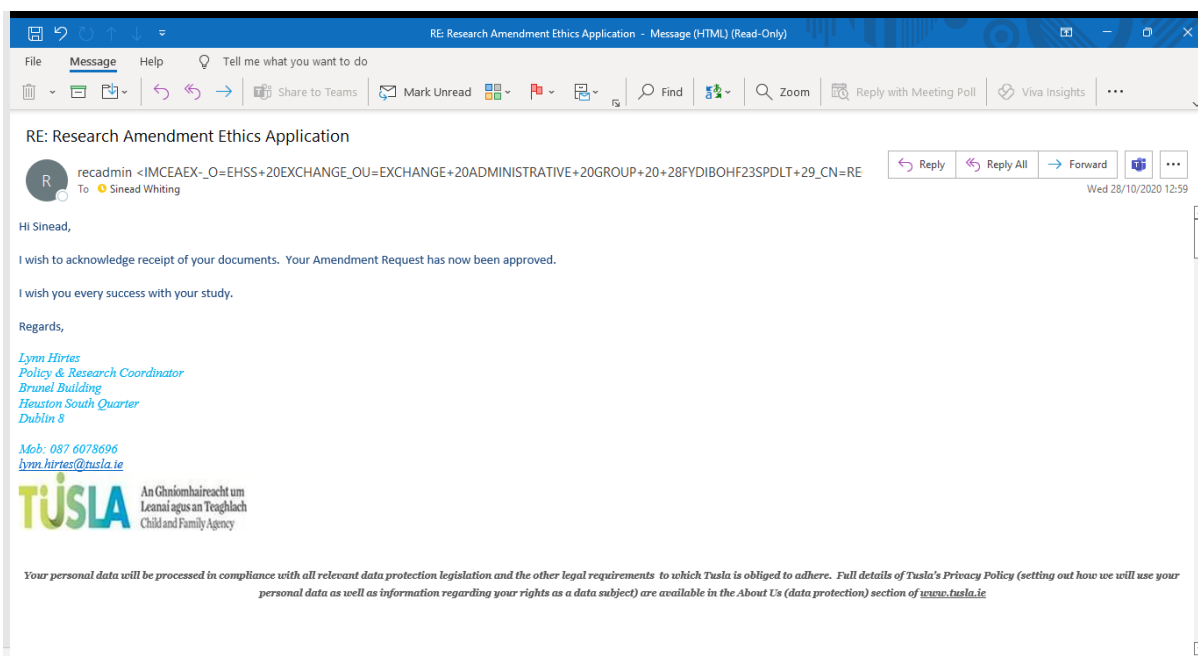
Dr. Tomas O' Sullivan (Chair)

CC: Dr. Stephanie Holt & Robbie Gilligan

Scoil na hOibre Sóisialta agus an Pholasaí Shóisialta
Dáimh na nEalaíon, na nDaonnachta
agus na nEolaíochtaí Sóisialta,

School of Social Work and Social Policy
Faculty of Arts, Humanities
and Social Sciences

Appendix 3: Confirmation of Ethical Approval from Tusla- Child and Family Agency Research Ethics Committee



Appendix 4: Recruitment Poster

DID YOU GROW UP IN LONG TERM FOSTER CARE?

PARTICIPANTS

NEEDED!

- ☒ ARE YOU AGED 20-29 YEARS?
- ☒ DID YOU GROW UP IN LONG TERM, STABLE, FOSTER CARE?
- ☒ DID YOU HAVE A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR FOSTER CARERS AND/OR WERE YOU ADOPTED BY YOUR FOSTER CARERS?
- ☒ WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO TALK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES ? (ANONYMITY GUARANTEED)

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

PLEASE CONTACT:
SINEAD WHITING, PHD CANDIDATE
TWITTER: @SINEADWHITING
EMAIL: S.WHITING@TCD.IE
INSTAGRAM: SINEADWPHD
SINEADWHITING.WORDPRESS.COM

THANK YOU !!!



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Appendix 5: Participant Information Leaflet



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Participant Information Sheet

The Lived Experience of Young Adults who Grew Up in Long-Term Foster Care and had a Close and Meaningful Relationship with their Foster Carers

Please take some time to read this information and ask questions if anything is unclear.

My contact details are at the end of this document.

What is this study about?

This study is about understanding what difference having a long-term, meaningful relationship with foster carers makes to young adults who grew up in long-term foster care. Another word for this is relational permanence.

Who is doing the research?

My name is Sinéad Whiting and I am a PhD student at Trinity College Dublin. I work as a lecturer in Trinity College Dublin. I used to be a social worker with Tusla Adoption Service. I am doing this research as part of my PhD at Trinity College. Trinity College Ethics Committee and Tusla Research Ethics Committee have approved this research.

Why have you been asked to take part?

I want to interview men and women who are:

- Between 20 and 29 years of age and
- Grew up in long-term foster care and lived with the same foster family for at least 5 years before they turned 18 years old.
- Some of the people I interview might have been adopted by their foster carers before they turned 18 years old.

Do you have to take part?

Taking part is entirely voluntary. Even if you say you want to take part but later change your mind that is okay. If you agree to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form.

You can leave the study at any time. What is important is that you decide for yourself.

What will happen if you take part?

If you take part, I will talk to you for about 45 minutes to one hour. We can meet in person or I can talk to you through Microsoft Teams. I want to talk about what it is like being a young adult who grew up in long-term stable foster care.

There are no right, or wrong answers and you do not have to answer any questions you don't want to.

I want to record your exact words, so I understand exactly what you tell me. For that reason, I would like to record our interview. I will be the only person who will watch or listen to the recording. After our interview I will type up a copy of the interview word by word. This is called a 'transcript'. Only myself and my supervisor will read this full transcript. I will store the information in a password protected file. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to this. If you want to read the transcript of your interview you can contact me and I will send you a copy.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

Your story may help social workers and other people working with children who are growing up in long-term foster care. Understanding more about this may help social workers, policy makers and others working in the area make good decisions when they are making plans for older children who will remain in long-term foster care.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I will be asking you to talk about some private information and sometimes talking about things from your past can be upsetting. If you do become upset and think you would like support, I can help to put you in contact with an agency who can support you.

Will people know that you took part in the research or what you said?

Your privacy is important to me. Any time I use the information you share with me I will change your name. I will be the only person who knows your real name.

There are some places where I will need to use your real name. These are:

- on the signed consent form.
- in the recording of our interview.

These forms will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office in Trinity College Dublin. Only myself and my supervisor will be able to open this filing cabinet. I will keep the audio recordings and the consent forms for two years after my research is complete. Then I will destroy them.

There are some things that I cannot keep private. I must adhere to Children's First

Legislation. If you tell me anything that makes me concerned or worried that you or someone else is at risk of harm, I might have to report this. I will discuss it with you first and we will talk about it together. I may have to report it with or without your permission.

What if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy with how I carry out the interview you can contact my supervisor,

Professor Robbie Gilligan. His contact details are given below. You can also use Tusla's feedback and complaints process if you want to make a complaint. If you go to www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/ there are details about how to make a complaint.

What will happen to the results of this study?

I am doing this research for my own PhD study. Once I have completed the interviews, I will write up my thesis. The information collected from the interviews will be in this thesis. I will also write some articles for publication. These may be read by other researchers and people interested in the topic. I will present my findings at conferences in Ireland and abroad. I will also have a website where I will have information about me, my research and I will put up information about the findings from my study.

At no time will your name or any identifying information be shared with anyone.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

If you have any questions, please phone me or email me. I would be very happy to talk to you.

Thank you

Sinéad

Researcher: Sinéad Whiting, PhD Candidate,

Email: swhiting@tcd.ie / Contact Number: 087 2203346

Supervisor: Professor Robbie Gilligan, Email: Robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie

Appendix 6: Participant Consent Form



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

The Lived Experience of Young Adults who Grew Up in Long-Term Foster Care and had a Close and Meaningful Relationship with their Foster Carers

Consent to take part in research

- I _____ agree to take part in this research study. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I have read, and understand, the information leaflet. I understand what the research is about, and I have been able to ask questions about the study. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that even if I agree to take part now, I can change my mind up to two weeks after the interview. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I know that I can choose not to answer some questions. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that if I participate in an interview, I can change my mind about the information I share being used. I can do this up to two weeks after the interview. If I withdraw my consent the information I shared will be deleted. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that participation involves taking part in an interview with Sinéad Whiting about my experiences of growing up in long-term stable foster care. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I agree to my interview being recorded. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that all the information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially, however, I understand that if I tell Sinéad Whiting something that makes her worried that I or someone else is at risk of being hurt she may have to report this to the relevant authorities. She will discuss this with me first but may be required to report it with or without my permission. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that when writing up a report of her research or talking about her research in articles or at conferences Sinéad Whiting will change my name and disguise any details which may reveal who I am or who I am talking about. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I consent to Sinéad Whiting using direct quotes from my interview, understanding that she will change all identifying information. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that signed consent forms will be retained in a locked filing cabinet in Sinéad Whiting's office in Trinity College and that interview recordings will be stored securely in Sinéad's Office 365 account. This information will be retained for 2 years after Sinéad Whiting is awarded her PhD. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
- I understand that under Freedom of Information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
 - I understand that I am free to contact Sinéad Whiting or her supervisor Professor Robbie Gilligan to seek further clarification and information. **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Signature of participant

Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Researcher: Sinéad Whiting, PhD Candidate, Email: whitings@tcd.ie, Phone: 087 2203346

Supervisor: Professor Robbie Gilligan, Email: robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie, Phone: 01-896 2001

Appendix 7: Gatekeeper Information Leaflet



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin

Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

The Lived Experience of Young Adults who Grew Up in Long-Term Foster Care and had a
Close and Meaningful Relationship with their Foster Carers

Information Sheet for Gate Keeper

I would like to invite you to assist me in conducting a research study. Before you decide if you can help me it is important that you understand more about this research and what it would involve for you and for the participants. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Feel free to contact me to ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information.

WHO I AM?

My name is Sinéad Whiting. I am undertaking my PhD in Trinity College Dublin. My supervisor is Professor Robbie Gilligan of the School of Social Work and Social Policy.

I work as a lecturer in Trinity College Dublin and from January 2006-July 2019 I worked as a social worker with Tusla Adoption Service. I have submitted details of my research to the Research Ethics Committee in Department of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin and to Tusla Research Ethics Committee.

WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

In this study I want to ask young adults, who experienced relational permanence while living in long term foster care about their experiences growing up in a stable and permanent foster home. Relational permanence refers to having a long-term, enduring and meaningful relationship with foster carers and it may have resulted in the foster carers adopting the young person. I want to know if having relational permanence with their long-term foster carers has made any difference to the lives of the young adults I interview. I especially want to know if and how this relationship with their long-term foster carers has had any impact on the experiences they have had in their early adulthood e.g. when they left school and started college or a new job, making new friends, starting new relationship or moving out of home.

I hope that by talking directly to young adults themselves that I will be able to help professionals working in the area with young people in foster care to better understand how different experiences

of permanence, either legal (adoption) or relational, impacts the lives and experiences of young adults who grew up in long-term stable foster care. This understanding will help professionals as they develop care plans for young people living in long-term out of home care and consider the significance of both legal and relational permanence for these young people.

WHAT I NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE WITH

I would like your assistance in recruiting young adults who might be interested in participating in my study. I would like to interview between 20 and 25 young adults who:

- Are between 20 and 29 years of age at the time of the interview.
- Grew up in long-term stable foster care and lived with their foster family for at least 5 years prior to turning 18 years old.
- May or may not have been adopted by their foster family before they turned 18 years of age.

In short, I want to interview young adults who grew up in long-term stable foster placements, who may or may not have been adopted, and had a long-term enduring relationship with their foster family throughout adolescence.

Exclusion Criteria: I do not want to interview anyone who:

- Has a diagnosis of a severe learning difficulty.

I would like you to share information of my study on your social media websites and if possible to pass on a copy of my *Participants Information Leaflet* to anyone who meets these criteria and who you think would be willing to consider taking part in the study. You should first contact the family by phone or email to ask if they are willing to receive information on the study. Once you have given the Participant's Information Leaflet to someone, they can then contact me directly by phone or email. I will tell them more about the study and answer any questions they may have. Then they can make an informed decision about whether they would like to take part. Whether or not they take part in the study is voluntary and they will never be placed under any pressure to participate.

WHAT TAKING PART IN THE RESEARCH WILL INVOLVE?

The young adults who agree to take part in the study will be asked to take part in an interview with me that will last for about 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews will take place online using MS Teams. The interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder and the MS Teams platform.

The interview will focus on the participant's experience of being a young adult who had had a long-term enduring relationship with their foster carers.

There are four main topics I will ask about:

1. I will ask about their life now and the importance of their relationship with their long-term foster parents/ adoptive parents in their life, and if and how this relationship makes any difference to their experiences in early adulthood.
2. If they were adopted, I will ask them about being adopted, how it was decided that their parents would adopt them and how being adopted-from-care impacts their life in adulthood.
3. I will ask about their experience of being in foster care so I can understand how they experience being a foster child in their family.
4. I will ask them about their life into the future and if they believe that their experience of relational permanence in foster care will impact their future life in any way.

They will not be obliged to answer any questions they do not want to answer. The interviews will be recorded, and I will personally transcribe the interviews myself.

WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO DATA FROM RESEARCH?

Protecting the privacy and confidentiality of participants in my study is very important to me. At no time will any identifying data be made available to anyone. When I write my PhD thesis, publish any articles or present at conferences I will use pseudonyms. All data collected will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office in Trinity College Dublin and digital recordings and records will be stored on my password protected OneDrive. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to these.

If the research participants tell me anything that makes me concerned that they or someone else is at risk of harm I may have to report this to the relevant authorities. I will discuss it with the participant, but I may be required to report it with or without their permission.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of my study will be included in my PhD thesis. I will also present my findings at national and international conferences and include them in articles I will publish.

I also plan to present my findings to any Social Work teams and voluntary agencies that are interested.

At all times the privacy of the participants and anyone they talk about will be protected.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

If you would like more information or have any further questions about this study you can contact me directly

Sinéad Whiting: swhiting@tcd.ie / 087 2203346

Or you can contact my supervisor

Professor Robbie Gilligan by email Robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

Appendix 8: Gatekeeper Consent Form



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin

Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

The Lived Experience of Young Adults who Grew Up in Long-Term Foster Care and had a Close
and Meaningful Relationship with their Foster Carers

Consent form to Facilitate Research

- I.....voluntarily agree to help facilitate this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to help now, I can withdraw at any time without any consequences of any kind
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will assist Sinéad Whiting in making contact with young adults who could potentially participate in her PhD research. This will involve facilitating the giving of *Participants Information Leaflets* to young adults who are aged between 20 and 29 years and who experienced relational permanence while growing up in long-term foster care.
- I understand that all data collected in this study is confidential and anonymous.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher: Sinéad Whiting, PhD Candidate, Trinity College Dublin School of Social Work and Social Policy whitings@tcd.ie / 087 2203346

Supervisor: Professor Robbie Gilligan, Trinity College Dublin School of Social Work and Social Policy robbie.gilligan@tcd.ie / 01-896 2001

Signature of gatekeeper _____ Date

I believe is giving informed consent to facilitate this
research study.

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix 9: Interview Topic Guide

Interview Topic Guide:

These topics are a guide primary purpose is to ensure participant describes their current life but may want to ensure that participants talk about the topics below to gain a full picture of current life

Probing questions will be used to gain more in-depth information.

General introduction

- Ask participants to tell me about themselves.
- What they currently do (school/college/work)
- Living circumstances, friendships, hobbies etc

Building on information shared above topics to cover are:

- Current relationship with their foster carers:
 - Do they see them much?
 - How would they describe their relationships?
 - What role do their foster carers play in their life at the moment?
 - Has their relationship changed/developed since they aged out of care?
 - How is it different/same/developed?
- How do they describe their family now to people they meet?
 - Who do they say is in it?
 - How do they refer to their foster carers? Mum/Dad? Or by first name?
- Do they talk about their care history?
 - Is their care history important/relevant in their life?
 - Do they have contact with birth family/who/why type of contact
- Youth transitions (Housing/education/relationships/parenting/out of care etc)
 - Did they talk about leaving care? After care worker? Aftercare plan? (this will depend on year they left care and policy at that time)
 - Ask about their experiences in these areas. What do these areas look like? Is being in foster care in childhood relevant to them at this stage in these aspects?
 - Have they told people in these new contexts about their care history? What has been the response? How do they feel about it? Will they describe this any differently going forward?
 - Do they think that their experience of moving to this phase in their life has been shaped in any way by their care experience? (Supports etc) How? How not?
- Relationships
 - Who are the important people in their life?
 - If they talk about birth family, follow this up with more probing about what these relationships look like? have they changed since they reached 18 years of age? How do they think they will develop into the future?
 - Has their relationship with their foster carers been impactful as they have developed these relationships talked about in this section?
 - If they think about intimate relationships how long before they talked about being in foster care? Were they nervous? Not nervous?

- Care Experience:

Manage this carefully as not all participants will have this information and for some the information may be painful so take this on a case by case basis. But some background information is useful for context.

- (If you don't mind telling me) How old when came to live with your last foster carers?
- How many previous placements?
- Did this placement disrupt?
- Was positive/negative experience of being in care? Feel stigmatised? Embarrassed? Talk about it etc?
- If talked about being in care as a child what did they say? Who did they tell? How did they describe foster carers?
- Foster carers attitude to birth family

- Permanence

- When they think about permanence in their lives what does it look like?
- How has it been shaped?
- Are there aspects of your day-to-day life now when permanence in your foster care placement is relevant/irrelevant?
- For those who were adopted ask about this decision and why/if it was important? Would they look at their foster carers now any differently if they had not been adopted?

- Future

- How do they feel about their future?
- Their relationships with foster carers into the future?
- Relationships with birth family into the future?
- What will they tell their children?

Final question: Now you are older, you have left care, you are moving on in different aspects of your life, when you look back how do you think that your experience of permanence in foster care is relevant or is not relevant? Do you think that this issue will have more or less importance into the future?

Appendix 10: Support Services Information Sheet



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Thank you for taking part in my research study. I really appreciate your help. Sometimes talking about our lives and things that have happened in the past can make us feel upset or sad. Here are a list of agencies that you could contact if you want more support or to talk to someone about anything.

Sinéad

whitings@tcd.ie

0872203346

The Samaritans: If you are feeling upset and would like to talk to someone about anything at all you can call the Samaritans at any time of the day or night. You can phone them on 116 123 or email them for support on jo@samaritans.ie

EPIC: Empowering Young People In care. this group work with young people in care and care leavers. They can give you information about your rights and any supports you are entitled to. They can also put you in contact with other relevant support agencies. You can contact them on facebook or twitter or through their website www.epiconline.ie

SpunOut.ie: This is a youth support services and their web site contains a wide range of information on a huge variety of topics. You can find them on www.SpunOut.ie

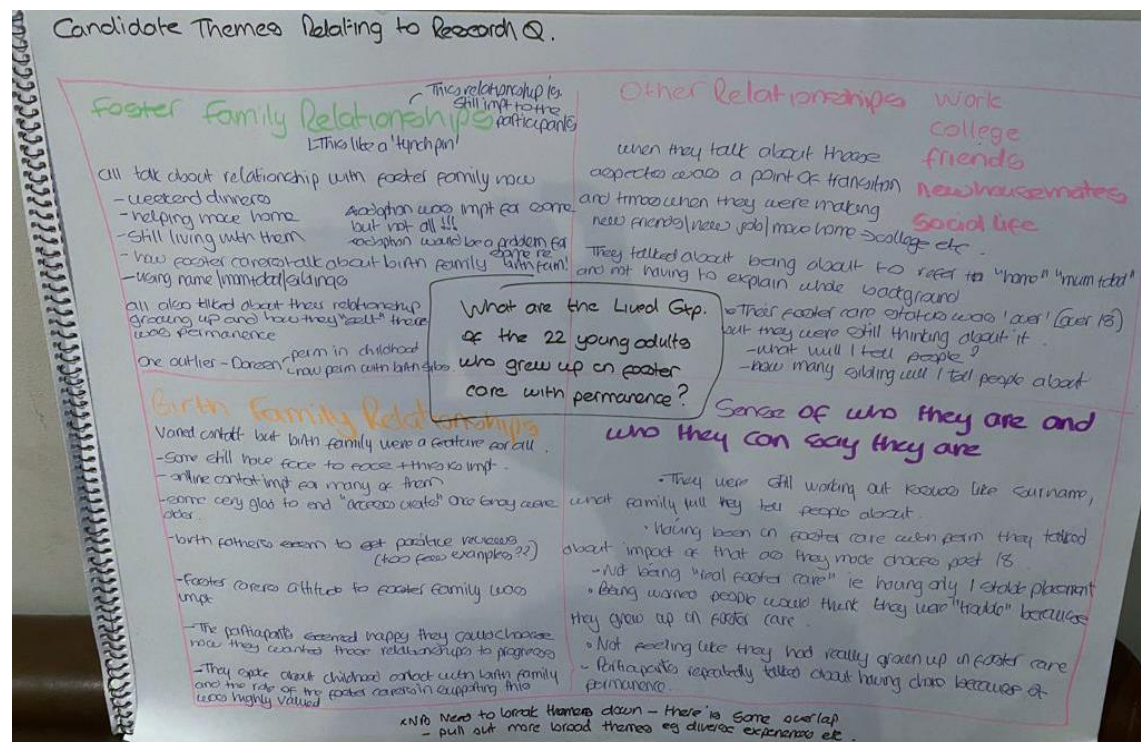
Jigsaw.ie: This is another service aimed at supporting young people. They have a website containing lots of useful information and they have local centres you can go to talk to someone. You can find them on www.jigsaw.ie

Appendix 11: Thematic Analysis Early Candidate Themes: (Phase 3)

Taking categories used in NVivo coding stage what are the common themes that can be identified at this stage (these will need to be broken down further)

Research Questions they should relate to: *What are the lived experiences of these 22 young adults who grew up in foster care with permanence?*

All themes tie to the research questions because they describe an aspect of the participants' lived experiences.



Theme	Theme Name	Summary
Theme 1	YA relationship with foster family <i>Break this down into relationship now and data relating to these relationship as they were growing up.</i>	All of the young people described their current relationships with their foster carers and they also spoke about their relationships to them as they were growing up. Descriptions included; events such as family dinners, role of foster family in their weddings, foster carers as grandparents their children, the ways foster carers helped them to move home, or are available to help with DIY etc, also available for emotional support, family Sunday dinners, emotional support managing birth family contact/relationships. Continued/ongoing support available.

		For some of the participants being adopted was very important, some did not seem to mind either way and for some being adopted was not what they wanted as they believed it would have impacted their relationship with their birth family. When talking about growing up they described the ways the foster carers made them feel welcome when they arrived in their home, how they have helped them to feel included/part of the family, supporting them through difficult adolescent stages, their attitude to their birth family and support during contact visits. The narratives primarily identify that these ongoing relationships with their foster carers are still the primary parental relationships the participants have even when contact with birth family is ongoing. In one case the relationship with the foster carers appears to have reduced and an ongoing relationship with birth family (not parents) is the primary adult relationship for that participant.
Theme 2	YA Relationship with the 'world around them' incl. school/college/work/housemates/social life/new friends	The participants all talked about their college/work life, friends, college/work and (where relevant) moving house. They described how foster carers helped and supported them. However, primarily they talked about making new friends and how they were managing their 'care identity' ie decisions they were making about telling people they had grown up in foster care. Many of them talked about fear of stigma or people thinking badly of them because they grew up in care and choosing not to tell. They described being able to talk about "mum and dad" rather than foster carers but also that this was a reflection of the relationships they feel they have with their FC. They were still thinking about the fact that they were in care when they met new people even though they were past age of 18 years and were no longer officially in care. Many

		talked about meeting new people away from where they had grown up as being an opportunity for a new start. None of the YA described feeling disadvantaged as they managed these transitions in their lives. There were stories about how they considered themselves ‘lucky’ that they had stability rather than multiple moves in care.
Theme 3	Relationships with birth family This is about relationships now but they also talked about how these have changed throughout their time in care and developed into adulthood.	All of the young people talked about their birth family in some way or another. Although not all of the participants still have face-to-face contact, they still think about their birth family or have contact via online/social media or letters/post text messages etc. They all valued their foster carers support in managing these relationships and they all talked about being glad that they could not make their own choices about these relationships since they left care. It is of note that some of them talked about their relationship being a certain way not but thinking that this might change into the future. For some they have consolidated relationships with extended birth family. Siblings were discussed differently to birth parents. Many of them talked about how their foster carers had worked with them to support contact while they were growing up and this being instrumental in maintaining contact and relationships. They like that now as YA they have choice about whether or not to have contact.

Theme 4	YA sense of self/ identity Sense of who they are/who they can say they are in their life	This theme maybe carries across the other three. The participants all talked about how they present themselves to the outside world (both now and they talked about it as it related to their time as children). Growing up in foster care with permanence seems to have been a ‘protective factor’ for most of them as they were then able to talk about one home, one set of parents. Interestingly they often talked about both birth and foster siblings They talked about feeling like they didn’t really grow up in foster care, even to these young adults foster care was about moving around, having multiple homes and instability and this is not how they would describe their lives. Does this effect how they see themselves now? They talked about being able to make choices about how they present themselves because from the outside their foster family “looks like” any other family.
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Appendix 12: Thematic Analysis (Phase 4)



Developing the Themes: Identifying Overarching Themes February 2022

Picture diagram details components of the themes in mind map format.

Overarching Theme 1: Co-Creation: Permanence is co-created during childhood by both the young person and the foster carer

The key point in this theme is that the young person and their foster carers work together to co-create permanence. Both are needed to make permanence ‘stick’, neither can create/negotiate permanence alone.

Overarching Theme 2: Re-negotiation: Permanence may have been co-created during childhood but as they transition out of care the young adults and their foster carers re-negotiate permanence

The key point is that the young people all described feeling the need to re-negotiate permanence even though they described co-creating permanence already in childhood. This shows the shifting nature of permanence, and that permanence is not ‘guaranteed’ as this was true of both adopted and non-adopted. However the adopted group who were adopted late and their adoption was a point when conversations took place about the future of their relationship.

Overarching Theme 3: Birth Family: Birth family are to be a part of the young adults' descriptions of their lived experiences.

The key point is that even though these young adults describe having permanence both while in care and re-negotiating permanence after leaving care their birth families are still a part of their lives. Different participants had different levels of contact or emotional connection to their birth family. Need to represent different experiences and not suggest that all participants have face to face contact. Also participants vocalised the potential that these relationships will change again as they get older.

Overarching theme 4: Choices about how they were presenting their life

The key point is that the young people all described a lived experience of making choices about what information about themselves they shared, and with whom, especially as they navigated youth transitions in education, housing, parenting etc. Many were fearful of stigma of care, most believed that they did not have real care experience and so to present themselves as having grown up in foster care was mis-leading because they themselves did not believe that their experiences (due to permanence/stability) were 'real foster care'. They discussed that having a stable family allowed them to have choice about how they presented themselves, because their lives appeared to mirror the lives of their peers.

Next stage is write up: Write up under these themes but need to ensure the diversity of experiences is reflected and not suggest that all participants had same experiences. Also want to present outliers (primarily Doreen).