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Young people aging out of care: The poverty of theory

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Abstract

Although there is a growing body of international empirical work on young people aging out of care, very few of these studies have been informed by theoretical approaches. Set in the context of social exclusion, this paper explores three perspectives that may contribute to a greater understanding of the main findings from empirical research: attachment theory; focal theory; and resilience. Each perspective includes a discussion of the implications for practice in linking empirical and theoretical work. In conclusion, it is suggested that there is a need for more studies grounded in theory.

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Keywords: Young people; Care; Attachment theory; Focal theory; Resilience; Empirical work; Social exclusion

1. Introduction

There is a substantial body of international research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, on young people aging out of care, but very few of these studies have been informed by theoretical perspectives. Also, whereas the weakness of the empirical portfolio has been highlighted, especially the need for more outcome monitoring and programme evaluation, there has been little reference to the lack of theoretical exploration (Courtney & Hughes, 2003).

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The purpose of this article is to explore potential theoretical directions. Set in the context of social exclusion, three different perspectives will be introduced: attachment theory; the focal modal of adolescence; and resilience. The discussion will draw, where available, upon the small number of studies that have engaged these perspectives, as well as discuss the links with the main empirical research and the implications for practice.

2. The social exclusion of young people aging out of care

International research has shown the high risk of social exclusion for young people aging out of care. They are more likely than other young people to be homeless or on the streets, be young parents, have poorer educational qualifications, lower levels of participation in post-16 education, higher levels of unemployment, offending behaviour, and mental health problems (Asquith, 1999; Biehal, Clayden, Stein & Wade, 1995; Bilson, Armstrong, Buist, Caulfield-Dow & Lindsay, 2000; Broad, 1998, 1999; Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Council of Europe, 1994; Courtney, Piliavan, Grogan-Kayor & Nesmith, 2001; Dixon & Stein, 2003; Festinger, 1983; Harwin, 1996; Kelleher, Kelleher & Corbett, 2000; Morgan-Klein, 1985; Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999; Smit, 1995; Stein, 2004; Stein & Carey, 1986; Stein, Pinkerton & Kelleher, 2000).

In European social policy discourse, social exclusion has come to mean both material disadvantage and marginalisation. Whereas the former is usually associated with low income and relative poverty, the latter refers to the way groups may be excluded, omitted or stigmatised by the majority due to characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, appearance or behaviour. Also, these two meanings are often linked, merging causes and outcomes — such as unemployment and social isolation (Hill, Davis, Prout & Tidsall, 2004).

In this context, the international research evidence summarised above, suggests young people aging out of care are among the most excluded groups of young people in society. Many experience a cluster of problems both whilst they are in care, including stigma, especially at school, and after they age out of care, including dependency on benefits, mental health problems and loneliness (Courtney et al., 2001; Dixon, Lee, Wade, Byford & Weatherly, 2004; Stein, 1994). Specific groups of care leavers may face additional disadvantages: young minority ethnic people; young disabled people; and young parents (Barn, Andrew & Mantovani, in press; Chase, Knight, Warwick & Aggleton, 2003; Priestley, Rabiee & Harris, 2003).

Broad (1999), discussing the findings from his policy survey of leaving care teams in England, has argued that the problems of young people leaving care were derived from a mixture of ‘social justice’ issues (structural exclusions and inequalities) ‘social welfare’ issues (poor parenting) and ‘technical difficulties’ (skill deficits). Leaving care workers responding to his survey suggested that young people would benefit from policies to address the former although they are usually offered assistance with the latter, especially after they leave care (Broad, 1999).

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