

Title: Care Leavers and Children's Services; Exploring the Utility of Communities of Practice in Theorising Transition

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Abstract

This article considers the application of Communities of Practice theory to understand transition into, through and out of care, arguing that a sense of belonging and identity emerges from participation in supportive communities. We consider the influence of community on looked after children and care leavers' sense of identity, engagement and well-being in transition. We also focus on the ways in which service policy and provision shapes professional practice. In doing so, we move beyond the argument for supportive relationships to examine some of the practices which mediate the interpersonal and reflect on the need to understand the meanings of disengagement. We discuss some of the ways practices within and across different communities affect young people's trajectories and professionals' responses, such as developing resilience, preparation for leaving care and achieving independence. Whilst current policy and provision focuses on preparation for independence, the article claims that resilience emerges through community and considers the importance of developing supportive social ecologies for cared for children to sustain them in their transition from care. It also calls for an examination of assumptions of accountability and measurement in policy and the importance of hearing the voices of professionals and developing dynamic and responsive practices.

Key words

Care leavers, communities of practice, identity, social policy, social support, transition

Introduction

Research has consistently demonstrated the challenges facing young people in care as they negotiate a pathway into adulthood. For example, they are more likely to be disadvantaged in education, training and employment, accommodation, health and well-being (Stein et al., 2011). They are also vulnerable in the youth justice system (Berzin, 2010) with school exclusion, instability in placements and time in care being significant predictors for involvement in crime (Barn and Tan, 2012). Poor outcomes for children ageing out of care have been reported both nationally and internationally (Ward, 2011) and highlight the centrality of the key issues that characterise the experiences of care leavers, but which receive insufficient attention in support for care leavers. These include isolation and loneliness (H.M. Gov. 2016); lack of social and moral support as a result of disrupted family networks, disengagement from community activities that can provide support, such as sports, recreational and cultural activities (Munford and Sanders, 2015) and an accompanying dissonance between self-hood and social context. The data on care leaver outcomes in the UK shows that despite continued monitoring, there has been limited improvement over time (H.M. Gov. 2016). This suggests a need for different ways of theorising and responding to the transition from care.

Pinkerton (2011) argues that “In every country there needs to be increased attention to making explicit and testing models for understanding the experiences of care leaving. These models have to address not only the needs, expectations and rights of young people making these transitions but also the theories of change underpinning service design and delivery” (p. 2413). This paper aims to provide new ways of understanding the experiences of care leavers and professionals by examining the social systems they inhabit. We consider the utility of adopting a psycho-social approach to understanding care leavers’ trajectories through and out of care by the application of Communities of Practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Communities of Practice theory (CoP) was originally conceived as an explanation of the situated nature of learning. However, its analytical power in theorising transition has been widely recognised. (Turner and Tobbell, 2018, Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013, Turner, 2013, Crafter and Maunder, 2012). Transition can be understood as a negotiation between the individual and their social contexts. It is not simply moving from one physical location to another but instead involves psychologically challenging changes to identity as the individual adapts to new ways of being. CoP therefore lends itself to providing a framework for understanding the experiential nature of transition into, through and leaving care. This paper firstly focuses on identity as a key issue in transition, discussing the ways in which young people navigate and reconcile their sense of self as they inhabit and move through different social spaces such as foster care, residential care, educational institutions and employment. The paper makes claims about the ways in which children and young people's transitions in and through care influence transition from care. We argue that community membership can support young care leavers not only by establishing supportive relationships but also in developing positive identities through active and collaborative engagement.

The theoretical perspectives which have been applied to care leavers typically do not include fellow participants in their worlds, the professionals and carers charged with supporting them. Our second focus addresses this omission. Pinkerton (2011) calls for a whole person and whole system approach and in drawing on Communities of Practice theory this paper aims to promote debate about the ways in which service policy and provision shape the lives and experiences of both professionals and care leavers. In particular, we challenge the current skills acquisition approach to transition preparation, arguing that the development of self-care and resilience is situated in supportive community membership. We also discuss some of the ways in which accountability practices in children's services affects both young people and professionals. In doing so we endeavour to avoid blame or stigma in both communities and look instead to ways of "deepening our understanding of the conditions needed for excellent practice" (H.M. Gov. 2016 p. 20) In keeping with Lave and Wenger's

approach we provide vignettes and examples to illustrate our arguments. These are based on real scenarios of children in care taken from a number of different research projects.

Communities of Practice, belonging and identity

The theory looks to the shared and agreed practices which create a sense of belonging in a social group. It involves the social processes involved in acquiring competence and knowledge over time, enabling members to identify themselves as part of the group. Participation is also a means for the community to claim the person as a member. Identity can be collective, for example the descriptor “looked after child” or “social worker” conjures up a set of expectations, assumptions and actions connected to these particular groups. It is also individual, as we each have a unique understanding of what it means to occupy our various roles. It is something we are actively engaged with but also something that others do to us. How we perceive ourselves will change depending on where we are, who we are with and how we are treated (Lave and Wenger, 1991) Developing and maintaining a positive and healthy sense of self is closely connected to participation in supportive communities which provide a sense of personal value and belonging and, in the case of care leavers, the basis for successful outcomes (Stein and Dumarat, 2011) To gain an in depth understanding of looked after children’s lives would necessarily involve an examination of the communities they inhabit.

Community membership is therefore a central premise for identity development in the theory. Identity is not simply a descriptor of gender, ethnicity or religion. It is a participatory sense of selfhood. Throughout our lives we join and leave many social spaces. We attend educational establishments, join groups based on hobbies or interests, live in and create new families, begin or change employment. Identity is multi-layered and complex and involves negotiation and reconciliation between past and present experiences and future aspirations. Relationships are important, as effective communication between group members increases the likelihood of participation. However, participation is also contingent upon the valued practices in a community and so attention needs to be given to the ways in which these practices affect relationships and communication. For example, a young person may have a good relationship

with a support worker but be aware that they are unable to have continued connection with them beyond work hours, because this goes against accepted professional practice. This will influence the decisions they make during a crisis. Practices shape participation. Crucially, community membership involves more than establishing supportive relationships and suggests a need for a focus on the practices which mediate the interpersonal.

Negotiating identities in transition

Children coming into, living in and leaving care will experience psychological flux and identity reconstruction as they participate in different communities. The negotiation between past and present identities highlights the deeply emotional processes of transition but this may be currently (and understandably) given more attention in children's services during the transition into care, underpinned by professional's knowledge and understanding of the effects of trauma and attachment difficulties. We acknowledge this position but also offer an alternative perspective in theorising development as an ongoing process, mediated by participation. When we experience new situations we have to negotiate different ways of being and reconcile this with our previous understanding of who we are. Community practices are often implicit and taken for granted by full participants and finding ways to understand how to be in a new situation is challenging for the newcomer. For example, a new foster family will have different practices in any number of activities, such as when, where and how food is prepared and eaten, the spaces which different members of the family occupy, communication with each other, leisure activities or use of technology, connections to the workplace or education. On entering a new community, we gain what Lave and Wenger described as legitimate peripheral participation, we are on the edges of the social group and need time to observe and understand the practices through gradually increased participation. As we increase participation and gain a sense of belonging we may be able to shape practices and influence the community itself. Contributing to practice also builds self-esteem which suggests that a receptive foster family could look to ways of enabling children to engage in practices which they identify with. This may require subtle alterations in established family practices. Toronnen

et al., (2018a) acknowledge the importance of reciprocity in relationships with looked after children and care leavers and Ojanen (2014) saw being able to influence the environment as an essential component of well-being. Transition can also be supported by joining communities where practices are already familiar. For example, a Muslim child may engage more readily in a foster family who engage in spiritual practices irrespective of the denomination as they recognise the values they share.

Cared for children may have to negotiate connection with their own families and their contingent sense of self within that social group, whilst also finding ways to be in a new community. They may also be moving areas and changing school. Lave and Wenger (1991) see transition as an emotionally challenging process as the individual grapples with which aspects of their previous identity to maintain and which require transformation. Willingness to engage depends on how connected an individual feels to a given community. Unequal relations of power must therefore be included more systematically in any analysis of participation. As a vignette illustration a young person coming in to a residential placement due to sudden parental ill health may distance themselves from the community in order to hold on to their previous sense of self. They might struggle to understand why they have been separated from their younger siblings who have been placed in foster care. Where community practices favour independence, for example in resolving disputes with other residents, a newcomer may find these unfamiliar practices overwhelming. As a consequence, the young person may frequently abscond to visit their siblings or return home. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that disengagement comes from a lack of connection and that individuals' actions are not merely personal choices but reflect the social relations and cultural expectations of communities.

In a second vignette, a different young person coming into the same residential placement after being the sole carer for a parent, may experience the community as place of freedom from responsibilities and a chance to enjoy being cared for. They may easily relinquish their incoming identity, participating fully in the new community but reconnecting with this way of

being on leaving care. In this particular illustration, the young person leaving care will be skilled in managing health issues, budgeting, paying bills and cooking as a consequence of participating in their family. They can already demonstrate many of the preparatory transitions skills highlighted as crucial by professionals and be perceived as cooperative and unproblematic. However, if they have not been encouraged to build new social networks during their time in care, their transition from care will leave them vulnerable. Despite their apparent competence they lack a sense of belonging gained through ongoing community participation.

Our vignette examples here are supported by research from McIntosh et al., (2011) who found participation in meal time activities was seen by staff as a positive way to establish a sense of belonging in residential care. However, whilst some young people welcomed the approach, it was actively resisted by others. Shaw (2014) also reflected on the ways in which inflexible practices in residential homes conflict with young people's sense of an autonomous self, resulting in aggressive and angry behaviour. Young people in transition through and from care will experience different trajectories as a dynamic interaction of identity negotiation and participation in the practices of the communities they inhabit.

Practices across communities also require negotiation. Mannay et al., (2017) discussed the ways in which cared for children's participation in school was affected by practices in the social work community. Young people described how Local Authority Care meetings were conducted at school in rooms that could be viewed by their peers which they felt highlighted their "different" status. Meetings in school time not only impacted on their participation in terms of missed lessons during the time of the meeting but often created stress and anxiety which began before the meeting and remained with the young person beyond it. The practices of these two communities conflict, with emotional and cognitive consequences for the participating young person.

Failure to engage with social workers or carers can tell us something about the unfamiliar practices of these different communities and what they come to mean. Lave and Wenger argue that disengagement typically indicates a disempowered position in the community. This lack of engagement can have consequences for the young person who may be perceived by professionals as uncooperative and problematic. Participation in the support offered on leaving care may also be limited by this lack of connection. Whilst a clear valued practice in the professional community is hearing the voice of looked after young people, (Thomas and Percy-Smith, 2012) attention to the meaning of their none engagement also offers a way of understanding and reflecting on their perspectives. Importantly, practices will have different meanings for different participants. The challenge for professionals is to consider current practice and respond flexibly to the individual identity needs of the young person. This may not be an easy task when professionals are also required to engage with standardised procedures within their community of practice.

Participation as a means of transforming and transcending deficit discourses

The descriptor “looked after child” creates a set of assumptions and actions connected to this group. For example, Ward et al., (2017) reported the concern of a care experienced student about the deterministic approach to teaching attachment theory on her social work course. She said “they were saying basically if you don’t form an attachment at an early age you are doomed” (p 345). Morgan (2012) claimed that 45% of children and young people were worried about what other people thought about them because of their cared for status. This will have psychological consequences for young people.

One way of negotiating the negative discourse is through membership of forums such as the Children In Care Council (CiCC). Whilst their primary objective is to give voice to young people, participation in this community also has the power to transform the cared for label by investing the participants with a sense of valuable expertise. Participants are engaged in shaping future practices which CoP would argue builds confident identities and a dynamic, forward moving community. This will only occur if the community responds to the ideas of

the young people by changing practice rather than simply asking for suggestions. Thomas and Percy-Smith's (2012) evaluation found that one of the most important benefits of the CiCC was positive identity development and the opportunity for meeting other young people in care. However, not all children or young people in care will want to join this community.

The renegotiation of identity may also influence young peoples' trajectory out of care if they are able to reposition their experiences as potential labour market assets. The idea that some care leavers draw on their cared for experiences when considering employment is supported by Gilligan (2008) who interviewed young people who were working part time whilst in care. A third of participants said that their experience of being in care had influenced their career choices. The care leaver identity may be providing aspiration for future community trajectories for some young people.

Sulimani - Aidian and Benbenishty (2011) have demonstrated that employment is an area where care leavers have less optimism about their future. There appears to be less research or wider literature on the employment of care leavers which raises the question whether this issue is less of a priority for practitioners as they focus on meeting more immediate needs. Gilligan (2008) argued that for some young people, engaging in part time work is a means of transcending their care identity and gaining a more positive sense of belonging beyond the cared for community. It may be that education is being given a central focus by professionals with concerns that working would negatively impact participation in schools and colleges. Stewart et al., (2014) acknowledged the tension between school work and part time employment for looked after young people but also found a positive ripple effect on education and developing new social networks. This demonstrates a beneficial dynamic between and across communities and would seem to be a way of establishing relationships to sustain young people in the transition from care.

There are many other communities which could offer care leavers spaces for positive identity development and a sense of belonging. However, as Adley and Kina (2014) argue

professionals tend not to work with young people to widen their social network which is highlighted as a key weakness in current practice. Practitioners with local knowledge about available activities, events and social groups could act as brokers to engagement with organisations such as youth and community groups, sports teams, charities, drama, music, theatre and arts groups, voluntary work as well as local employers. The aim would be to develop a social network of community membership for each individual cared for person to facilitate the development of positive identities, relationships and aspirations which can sustain them in their journeys through and beyond care.

Reification

Turning now to the influence of professional practice, CoP theory also considers the process of reification. Communities typically produce terms which transform abstract concepts into documentation. This becomes a focus for the negotiation of meaning, as people rely on them to understand the phenomena. When we reify, we turn experience (for example “leaving care”) into a material object (for example “transition strategies”). Wenger (1998) argues that we project our meanings on to the world and then view them as if they exist independently from ourselves and have their own reality. Reification therefore involves giving form to our experience by producing objects that transform what is essentially experiential into something tangible. Wenger states that “In doing so we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized” (p 58) For example, writing a Care Leavers Strategy gives form to a particular understanding of how transition should be governed. People can then use these “laws” to argue a point or as a framework for knowing what to do. However, Wenger argues that the focusing strength of reification can also become problematic as the tool itself can prohibit innovation and lead to a disconnection from the lived experience. He cautions that reification can become detached from practice and turn into a poor substitute for what it originally intended to reflect. Individual social workers are not the designers of policies but they must absorb them into their practice. This suggests we

should consider how successful transition from care is reified and the impact this has on professionals' and care leavers' attempts to negotiate meaning.

CoP theory assumes that we learn and become who we are through interaction not only with other human beings but also the language, tools and documents of the community. Practice is not only what is said but also what is unsaid, it includes perceptions, underlying assumptions and shared world views (Wenger et al., 2002). The proliferation of care leaver research demonstrates a strong commitment across the sector to help care leavers during the transition process and this is clearly reflected in the Department of Education's Care Leavers Strategy in England (H.M. Gov. 2013). The document looks at how to improve care leaver services and makes recommendations for local and national government, reflecting current concerns by focusing on the key areas of education, employment, health, housing, the criminal justice system and ongoing support. The document also outlines a new inspection framework for professionals to ensure "young people acquire the necessary level of skill and emotional resilience to successfully move towards independence." (p. 21) There are several examples of reification to consider here. Firstly, there is an assumption that it is possible to prepare for participation in a future community, so that in the same way that a young person can pack a bag and move their belongings to a new home, they can be furnished with certain attributes which can be easily transferred and drawn upon in a different lifestyle. Secondly, that emotional resilience is a permanent asset rather than a context dependent state. Thirdly, that independence is a measure of success. Finally, it tells us something about the surveillance of professionals to help drive improvements to the care system and ensure that standards are monitored effectively. These reifications deserve some further attention.

Reification of skills acquisition

Transition planning in the UK includes providing young people with a personal advisor to support them in planning a pathway from care. The personal advisor should undertake and document a needs assessment in relation to education, training or employment, health and

development and financial management. In doing so, the policies and practices which shape care leavers trajectories from care take a necessarily procedural approach, outlining the services and skills needed to ensure successful transition. This seems a reasonable and informed approach for professionals but may have unintended consequences. The skills acquisition approach to transition necessarily locates deficit within the young person, inadvertently perpetuating a negative discourse. The notion of a complex, social, active human being is neatly reduced to a list of required and demonstrable actions (Turner 2013). Where the existing research and policy is largely outcome focused, the dynamic psychological processes of care leaver participation remain largely unexplored. When young people struggle in new environments a typical response is to blame the lack of preparedness either on the individual or point to shortcomings in the preparation training received (Turner 2013). However, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is a situated experience and we can often only understand what is required through participation. For example, a young person may succeed in budget planning training but struggle with the reality of managing their finances once they are living alone. Of course, this also remains true for any young person leaving home.

The acquisition model draws on notions of transferability, where the development of skills in one domain can be easily transferred and applied in another. Research on educational transition demonstrates that this is often not the case (Turner 2013). Transition is an emotional experience and even well established ways of being can be challenged by the responses it provokes.

Both participation and none participation are contingent upon the degree of identification with practices. Willingness to engage depends on how connected an individual feels to a given community. For example, despite attending several training interventions around safeguarding in preparation for leaving care a young person may still place themselves at risk on leaving care. The transition training has not developed a sense of belonging or changed their identity in any meaningful way. Lave and Wenger (1991) make a fundamental distinction between

learning and intentional instruction. Whilst they do not deny that learning can take place where there is delivery of information, they also highlight that what is learned may be problematic with respect to what is delivered. Thus research which focuses on the social organisation of knowledge will bring into focus not only what young people learn through current practices in transition preparation but also what they do not. Importantly, the focus would move from individual deficit to a more meaningful evaluation of practice and participation.

The reification of independence

When the Care Leavers Strategy in England highlights the importance of developing independence this indicates current valued practice in enabling transition from care. It implies that adulthood by necessity involves achieving a state of independence. For the majority of us however, a healthy and happy adulthood involves interdependence. Over the last two decades the number of young adults living at home with their parents between the ages of 20 and 34 in the U.K. has steadily increased to 26% (H.M. Gov. 2017) These statistics are likely to be an underestimate as they do not include university students who are living away from home during term time. If an increasing number of young people are choosing to remain at home, this brings into question the imperative of independence in achieving adulthood. In addition, moving away from home does not indicate a psychological state of independence. Rather, successful adulthood involves interdependence, between family, friends, work colleagues and romantic partners. Research suggests that a diminished reliance on relatives is actually not a general phenomenon of Western cultures in the transition to adulthood (Fiori et al., 2008).

Care leavers may therefore be one of the few groups in society subjected to an institutional requirement of independence. Stein et al., (2011) suggests that looked-after children's development is accelerated and compressed where young people commonly take on board adult responsibilities and higher levels of independence than they would if brought up in other environments. For young adults who are leaving care, it must also be acknowledged that

independence is a necessary economic imperative which frees the local authority of its obligations and so it is unsurprising that this atypical state of being has been reified.

The Keep on Caring Report in England (H.M. Gov. 2016) noted that “overwhelmingly, the biggest issue raised by care leavers was one of isolation and loneliness” (p.18). Where family connections no longer exist and professional support is time limited, it seems crucial that emphasis should be placed on creating enduring and stable social networks for cared for children which can sustain them in their transition from care. There is a growing body of research both nationally and internationally about the importance of supportive relationships for young people leaving care. (Torrönen et al., 2018a, Torrönen et al., 2018b, Brown et al., 2019, Ward, 2011). In particular, there is acknowledgment of the importance of interdependence. The challenge for transition policy is to reflect the central importance of these protective social relationships by developing strategies to create and maintain connections for young people.

Support for this suggestion can also be found in the growing body of research focused on the well-being of practitioners in children’s services which emphasises the importance of community in coping with work related stress. For example, Antonopolou et al., (2017) highlight the importance of generating a range of connections such as family, friends and colleagues to restore emotional balance. Positive community membership is psychologically protective. We will go on to explore this further by discussing the concept of resilience.

The reification of resilience

Concern about care leavers’ well-being has been widely reported. Memarzia et al., (2015) interviewed and assessed 53 young people who were leaving social care to determine their mental health status. They found that 64% met the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis and only 6% were judged to have successful outcomes at the one-year follow-up. Responses to

the mental health crisis amongst care leavers have pointed to inadequate service provision and an urgent need for system responses to allow more one to one interventions (Fernandez, 2008, Schofield and Beek, 2005, Stanley et al., 2005) The focus here is on potential recovery with mental health issues being seen as individual pathology residing within the young person as a consequence of traumatic family lives. We acknowledge there is a wealth of evidence that trauma plays a part in ongoing mental health issues however we also argue that a sense of well-being can emerge through participation in supportive communities. This is supported by international research (Torronen et al., 2018 b) who found that indicators for stability in young care leavers in Finland and England included participating in education, employment and meaningful activities. Whereas one to one support may focus on recovery from historical events, or a diagnosis requiring medical treatment, community participation is an active means of enabling reconciliation between past and present identities. Communities are also places where we can have fun and relax. Group membership provides the space for participants to “deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being” (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p.149).

In response to concerns about mental health there has been an emphasis on developing emotional resilience for young people making the transition from care (H.M. Gov. 2015). If resilience is reified as a personal asset this would lead to interventions through training at the individual level. However, the subjective experience of resilience is neither enduring nor static. Mental health and resilience are dynamic processes. Each of us will respond differently to the same or similar stressors at different points in time. We may also show resilience in one difficult life event and vulnerability in another. Whilst everyone has the potential for resilience there is increasing acknowledgement of the social and contextual resources that empower people in times of crisis. Courtney et al., (2014) considered the beneficial contribution of peers and siblings to care leavers’ well-being and strong social networks have been shown to increase opportunities in education and employment. (Arnau-Sabates and Gilligan, 2015). Ward (2011) found evidence across national and international

research which demonstrates the importance of a sense of belonging and connectedness as key factors in successful transition. It must also be noted that gaining a sense of belonging and feeling valued as a member of a team has also been identified as a protective factor against work related mental health difficulties for social workers (Biggart et al., 2017).

Community membership, whether this be through family, friends, education, work, hobbies, leisure activities or religious affiliations, is a way of developing and maintaining a valued and positive sense of selfhood to sustain and support young people during and when leaving care. Resilience is not a personal trait. It emerges through participation in supportive contexts and appears to have beneficial developmental power across emotional, social and cognitive domains. Adopting a context driven approach to developing and maintaining resilience again demonstrates the importance of building and maintaining positive social ecologies in which young people and professionals can thrive.

The reification of accountability

The production of documents has become an accepted means of measuring professional performance in social services. McBeath et al., (2014) reflect on the unfortunate irony that paperwork created to ensure quality of service provision may impede workers' ability to provide these services. The production of readymade assessment forms with scripted formats is a means of ensuring standardisation in information gathering and actions taken. Whilst the development of identity remains central to many child care assessments in social work the way this is defined and understood is influenced by participating in the valued practices of the professional community. Thomas and Holland (2010) discuss how practitioners' knowledge of the children they were working with was transformed into a formal output on an assessment form. Standardised descriptions were then replicated from guidance and other assessments and the definition of identity narrowed to mainly encompass only self-esteem and family relationships. In this way practitioners' ability to provide reflective and contingent accounts of children's lives became constrained through the reporting process into 'scientific' rational

accounts where the complexity of identity and self were absent. Thomas and Holland's research demonstrated a rich and complex understanding of identity when professionals reflected on their own sense of self which was not manifest in the documentation of their clients. This reflects participation in valued practice rather than individual shortcomings and demonstrates the ways in which engagement with documentation can sometimes limit and constrain. Participation in the community of practice shapes both professional understanding of their clients' identities and also what may be subsequently experienced through participation by clients themselves. These reified practices of attaining accountability come at a cost to the participants in the community. Practices are not neutral. They construct meaning.

McBeath et al., (2014) argued that in practice, professionals often temporarily set aside standardised documentation in order to fully hear what their clients have to say. However, this professional disengagement with practice may remain hidden. The tools of the community are not fit for purpose and practitioners need to negotiate ways of working within the limitations of these tools. As a consequence, limiting practices may be unacknowledged and therefore remain unchallenged.

Conclusion

Wenger (2010) recognised that the term community risks implying harmony and this perceived notion of a benign, self regulating community has been one of the criticisms of the approach. However, Wenger acknowledges that a community can be dysfunctional and counterproductive. The social history of an organisation gives rise to a set of criteria and expectations by which participants can recognize their membership. Wenger called this a "regime of competence" (p2). The regime can also become an obstacle to development within the community. A dynamic community needs to respect the history of its practices but also be prepared to relinquish them in order to evolve.

This paper has considered CoP as a means of theorising care leavers and professional interactions. In doing so, we have challenged a number of assumptions which currently

underpin policy and practice in children's services. CoP positions identity as a participatory experience. Ways of being and identities are not fixed but emerge from community membership. We have made an argument for a change in focus for systems which prepare young people for transition out of care with an emphasis on developing enduring and sustaining community membership beyond care. This could be achieved through the establishment of a professional Community Broker role which would involve considering the distributed social ecology of individual children and young people in care and locating potential community membership opportunities which reflect their interests, preferences and aspirations.

Participation in supportive communities has the potential to shape successful trajectories, enabling young people to resist the negative collective discourse and resulting disempowerment which may contribute to poor outcomes. We argue that expansion of community membership to provide spaces where young people are able to relax, enjoy themselves and focus on simply being should become a priority. In contrast to current policy, which promotes routes to independence for young people, we make an argument for social work procedure and policy to focus on practices which facilitate interdependence and the development of sustaining relationships through communities. In rejecting the independence imperative in transition we suggest that establishing interdependence may contribute to better mental health outcomes for care leavers.

The paper also recommends an examination of current children's service practices with a view to challenging assumptions, understanding unintended consequences and finding ways to change practice to the benefit of all participants in the community. The application of CoP can illuminate some of the ways in which practices within and across communities interact or conflict. Strategies for leaving care typically highlight the importance of hearing the voice of care leavers. We must also pay attention to the voices of practitioners, the ways in which practices shape participation and the meanings behind disengagement. This would

necessarily involve ethnographic methods of enquiry which can explore community practices and their influences on participants' identities.

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