Exploring the multi-dimensionality of permanence and stability: emotions, experiences and temporality in young people’s discourses about long-term foster care in Ireland

Abstract

This paper focuses on qualitative findings on how young people in long-term foster care in Ireland interpret permanence and stability. We focus principally on subjective and relational permanence, emphasising the significance of these concepts for social work, while extending some conceptual approaches to permanence. Importantly, findings from this study highlight conceptual gaps in how permanence and stability are conceptualised in research and we outline an approach which more fully embraces the multidimensionality of young people’s life experiences and emotions. Recent studies underline that permanence encompasses several elements (e.g. ecological, legal). However, this paper extends current research in illustrating how Irish young people in foster care experience permanence and stability every day, and how these experiences embrace discursive, emotional and temporal dimensions.

Keywords: permanence, stability, emotions, multidimensionality, foster care

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1 In this study, Ireland denotes the Republic of Ireland
Introduction

Permanence and stability attract considerable attention in policy, research and practice in Ireland, the UK, and internationally. As Biehal (2014: 955) states; ‘permanence is a key goal of child welfare systems internationally for over 40 years’. There is some variation in how permanence and stability are defined but there is broad consensus that they are interlinked. Generally speaking, permanence and stability are living arrangements which are characterised by loving relationships with families, peers and others in the young person’s social ecology which endure over time (Stott and Gustavsson 2010). In the literature, several categorisations of extrinsic and intrinsic factors are shown to impact on permanence and stability; organisational and systemic factors such as social worker training and support; the characteristics of individual foster families and family dynamics; factors within the family of origin and the young person her/himself (Rock et al. 2015). This further reflects assertions by Schofield et al. (2007: 620) that achieving permanence and stability for children in care is a ‘complex reality’.

Drawing on qualitative findings from a study of young people in long-term foster care in Ireland from 2008 to 2013, we argue that more qualitative research is required on how young people conceptualise permanence and stability. There is extensive literature on young people’s experiences in care; feelings of loss, concepts of home and family (cf. Selwyn et al. 2010). However, further research is needed on how young people conceptualise permanence and stability per se, across their unique care journeys. Frequently, permanence is conceptualised as encompassing distinct dimensions which are objective, subjective, enacted and uncontested (MacDonald 2016). Placements are said to exhibit objective permanence when there is legal certainty around placements. Subjective, uncontested and enacted
permanence are young people’s realities of life in care, which link to pre-care experiences and future imaginaries about life after care (Samuels 2009). Subjective, enacted and relational permanence are embedded in young people’s cultural repertoires. They shape and reflect young people’s relationships with carers, peers, social workers, and other people in their social ecologies. They affect how young people interpret home, belonging and their reactions to seemingly ‘ordinary’ events that are part of their everyday experiences. Stability is usually conceptualised as continuity in care placements. It is frequently measured as the numbers of placements, breakdowns and school moves. Recent conceptual approaches offer deeper insights into what stability and instability means (Speirs et al. 2015) but more qualitative research is warranted into young people’s interpretations of stability too. This paper sheds light on young people’s experiences of stability/instability and the factors that affect the stability of care placements from their perspectives.

It is generally assumed that permanence and stability are interlinked; however, there is a sparse literature which explicates how young people connect them every day. Recent research highlights the complexity of permanence and stability discourses, thus indicating that young people connect them to their unique everyday experiences (see Biehal 2014). This paper contributes to the literature by arguing for a fuller conceptual approach which incorporates insights on emotions, experiences and temporality. We present qualitative data in subsequent sections of this paper to show that different dimensions of permanence and stability (e.g. ecological, enacted) simultaneously connect to several interlinking concepts including home, belonging and family, and are deeply emotional.
Child welfare systems and young people in care in Ireland: an overview

In December 2018, Tusla\(^2\), the Child and Family Agency reported that there were 6,072 young people in state care in Ireland (Tusla 2018a).\(^3\) Nationally, 93% of young people in care are in foster care placements.\(^4\) Ireland along with Australia has one of the lowest percentages of young people in residential care internationally. Statistics on care placements in Ireland contrast markedly to other EU member states in this regard. For example; in France 31-40% of young people are in residential care. In Italy, the number of residential placements is approximately 41-50%. In Germany approximately 51-60% of young people in care are in residential placements (Ainsworth and Thoburn 2013).

In Ireland, the predominance of family-based placements over residential care developed in response to socio-historical factors (Gilligan 2019). Before the 1970s, Ireland had a long history of residential care for adults, babies and young people. This included Mother and Baby Homes, for women who experienced crisis pregnancies, and Industrial Schools, for orphaned boys or children born out of wedlock, run principally by religious orders (Garrett 2017). The exceptionally strong links between Church and State and the powerful impacts of Catholicism on the Irish Constitution\(^5\) are some of the prime factors advocated by social scientists regarding the predominance of institutional care after the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922 (Inglis 2017). Since the 1980s, several historical developments precipitated de-
institutionalisation in Irish care systems. A series of scandals into abuse and neglect perpetrated in institutions (Garrett 2017), claims about forced adoptions by religious orders and the decline of the Catholic Church nationally since the 1990s were pivotal amongst these. Moreover, governmental policy commitments to end institutionalisation in the 1960s and an increase in public social workers since the 1970s were important in policy shifts away from institutional placements (Gilligan 2019).

In Ireland, most young people are in long-term care; which is defined as being in care for one calendar year or more. This is evidenced in Daly and Gilligan (2005) who contend that Irish young people tend to ‘drift’ from one long-term care placement to the next. Gilligan (2019) documents that 45% of young people nationally are in care for more than 5 years; 43% are in care for 1 to 5 years and 11% are in care for less than one year (Tusla 2018b, cited in Gilligan 2019: 2). O’Brien (2013) suggests that while most young people experience relatively high levels of stability in Ireland, some young people experience more placement moves. O’Brien (2013) states that 172 young people from a total of 5965 experienced three or more placement moves within the first three months of entering care. This suggests that some young people experience greater instability, particularly on entering care. Other stability indicators include the number of young people with an allocated social worker and a designated care plan. Tusla (2018a) data indicates that social work systems achieve well in both domains; for example, approximately 90% of children in care nationally have a social worker.

Comparable to international research and policy, the participation of young people in care features strongly in Ireland, which relates to a marked emphasis on child protection and youth
development discernible in successive governmental administrations since 2000. Other policy landmarks on children’s rights include the establishment of a specially devolved governmental Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2011, sustained governmental investment in early childhood education (Garrity and Canavan 2017) and the publication of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014). The latter set ambitious targets for enhancing outcomes for all young people in Ireland; that they are active, connected, respected and healthy, amongst others.

Despite evidence of ‘best practice’ participatory standards in targeted programmes for young people in care, Brady et al. (2019) underlines systemic gaps around young people’s access to complaints mechanisms in care systems, in their analysis of reports by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA). Despite calls for child welfare systems to promote ‘respect, collaboration and accountability’ internationally (O’Brien 2002: 66), findings from Winter et al. (2016) highlight that young people’s interactions with social workers are sometimes negative, non-participatory, and destabilise care placements. Significantly, Buckley et al. (2010) argues that parents and young people often encountered indifference and insensitivity from child protection staff in Ireland when domestic violence and acrimonious separation were involved. This broadly corresponds to McGregor et al. (2019) on the centrality of power gradients in social worker’s relationships with biological parents and young people, and international research documenting systemic factors, like social worker’s attitudes and

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6 HIQA was established in 2007. It is an independent body which assesses and develops standards in children’s services, community healthcare, disability and older people’s services, among other areas.
organisational socialisation of care workers which negatively affects service users’ emotional wellbeing (cf. Fargas-Malet and McSherry 2018).

**Permanence and stability for young people in care: Irish and international research perspectives**

In Ireland and internationally, the range of adverse outcomes for young people from multiple and unstable care placements is extensively documented (cf. Rock et al. 2015). Farmer and Dance (2015) emphasise how ‘placement alignment’ impacts on permanence and stability; a process whereby the needs and experiences of people involved in care placements (e.g. young people, parents) are aligned to enhance placement longevity and quality (Stott and Gustavsson 2010). Outcomes associated with greater instability include lower educational attainments (Darmody et al. 2013), difficulties forging friendships (McMahon and Curtin 2013) and contact with families of origin, negative impacts on self-esteem and ‘dual identity’ with biological families and foster carers (Fernandez 2009). Detailed statistical analyses document the range of extrinsic and intrinsic factors which stabilise and/or destabilise care placements internationally. Some of the principal factors identified include young people’s emotional problems, mental health status (McNicholas et al. 2011), the duration and quality of contact with families of origin, relationships with siblings, and placement type (Kiraly and Humphreys 2016). That said no singular factor affects placement stability. Recent approaches which incorporate life course insights further illuminate how permanence and stability discourses are contextual (Brady and Gilligan 2018). How young people interpret permanence and stability relates to individual circumstances and unique life histories. Simultaneously, interpretations of stability and permanence change over time in response to turning points across the lived life, momentary experiences and interactions. Permanence and stability are
therefore negotiated; their meanings change in relation to individual experiences, discursive frames and relationships in the home, at school and in other domains, which are deeply personal and emotive.

A comprehensive corpus of Irish and international qualitative studies illuminates how young people in care deconstruct notions of being ‘at risk’ and ‘vulnerable’ (Beckett et al. 2014). However, few studies focus on how young people interpret the factors that affect care placements through different discursive frames. Biehal (2014: 956) argues that ‘subjective perceptions of permanence may be just as important for child wellbeing as objective permanence’. Significantly, Biehal (2014: 956) states: ‘what is missing from discussions of permanence is an understanding of how young people make sense of their location, within and across birth and substitute families to create a sense of belonging to one or both families’ (ibid.). Biehal (2014) underlines how young people in long-term care in the UK interpret belonging and family, in relation to emotional bonds with carers. Importantly, Biehal (2014) found that young people’s perceptions of belonging in foster families are categorised in four ways; ‘as if’, ‘just like’, ‘qualified’ and ‘provisional’. Comparable to a spectrum, young people varied in their attachments to foster family. Young people with an ‘as if’ belonging felt deep attachments to foster carers and those categorised as ‘just like’ had dual identity. Those with ‘qualified belonging’ had lower attachment to foster carers partially due to their pre-care experiences. Those with ‘provisional belonging’ had the lowest level of belonging. Significantly, this group experienced more placement moves and greater uncertainty about where they belonged. Comparably, Schofield et al. (2016) reveals how intricate narratives of risk, agency and resilience shape and reflect young people’s sense of being ‘bad children’, ‘survivors’ and ‘victims’ which affect how they interpret permanence and stability.
Studies from Ireland and the UK also provide valuable insights on young people’s experiences in foster care. McMahon and Curtin (2013) attest to the importance of foster carers to stability; providing emotional and material supports which can positively affect young people’s relationships with biological families. Significantly, UK research by Schofield et al. (2013) illustrates that how foster carers negotiate their roles as parents and/or carers relates to how work and family life intersects in late modernity. The increasing professionalization of social work, interpretations of foster care as work and/or family, and role enrichment markedly affect self-identification.

Social theoretical approaches to permanence and stability: an overview of literature

Conceptual frameworks to permanence and stability are discernible in the literature (Bullock et al 2006; Samuels 2009). There is greater conceptual clarity around permanence compared to stability. However, some aspects of Speirs et al. (2015) on stability in child care transitions can be applied to young people in care. Stability and instability are frequently measured in relation to factors such as duration of care placements, school moves, and breakdowns (see Stott and Gustavsson 2010). However, on a conceptual level, there are gaps and authors often overlook young people’s emotional and material circumstances and the complexity of ‘ordinary’ social encounters.

Speirs et al. (2015) elucidates the concept of instability, arguing that it can be understood in relation to four types of transitions; planned, averted, forced and failed. As per Speirs et al. (2015), stability and instability are not necessarily opposed to each other as is sometimes
assumed in the literature on children in care. Experiences of instability and stability in care can support young people’s wellbeing across time. Applying this schema implies that planned transitions are care arrangements that are negotiated in advance with young people, foster carers, social worker and families of origin. These arrangements are more likely to succeed and any short-term instability could give rise to smoother transitions across time. This corroborates the importance of participation before and during alignment (cf. O’Brien 2013) and the significance of emotions to these processes.

There is broad agreement that permanency encompasses subjective and objective dimensions. While some writers discern four main elements to permanence (MacDonald 2016), others discern three; relational, legal and physical (Stott and Gustavsson 2010). Until recently, legal permanence was accorded greater emphasis in some jurisdictions (e.g. the USA). It was often assumed that relational or ecological permanence would follow, if legal permanence was prioritised. However, recent research underlines the importance of relational permanence to young people (McSherry and Fargas Malet 2018). The prioritisation of legal permanence through reunification can significantly undermine relational and physical permanence, jeopardising relationships with foster families, and feelings of being ‘in place’. Relational permanence is strong and loving relationships with caregivers, family members and peers; physical permanence is stability in place, in schools and communities. Legal permanence is legal relations and obligations between young people and caregivers (e.g. care orders).

Three and four dimensional models of permanence underline the multi-dimensionality of permanence and stability. However, areas of confluence and convergence in permanence
concepts (e.g. legal, relational) are under-researched. Recently, Pérez (2017) presents a conceptual schema of felt relational permanence, which encompasses; the affective tone young people use to describe relationships with caregivers, five relational dimensions (e.g. feeling loved by caregivers, belonging; caregiver commitment, openness to biological family, and relationships with foster carers). Semanchin-Jones and LaLiberte (2013) argues that relational permanence encompasses several processes; building a ‘safety net’ for young people, sense of belonging and connectedness. In turn, each of these comprises other dimensions; social connectedness encompasses relationship quality, emotions, supports, norms, obligations and social capital. The ‘safety net’ are the supports young people need during and after their ‘care journeys’ (e.g. emotional, financial) and the quality of supports. Belonging is about connectedness, satisfaction and the ability to be oneself. In conceptualising belonging as emotions, this category embraces intricate aspects of young people’s biographies and turning points that define their experiences.

Blending together aspects of these models emphasises processes and intersections; how experiential knowledge and emotions are embedded in different permanence concepts (e.g. subjective, enacted). It similarly underlines how temporality, momentary experiences, and interpretations of context shape and reflect young people’s emotional responses and discourses. This highlights the mediating effects of macro and micro factors on permanence and stability interpretations; for example, the role of history, culture, policies, and behavioural conventions. This approach illuminates that the boundaries between permanence dimensions (e.g. uncontested, relational) from young people’s perspectives are more permeable than is often assumed, although the intersections between permanence dimensions are often overlooked in the literature.
Methodology

This paper forms part of a qualitative study conducted by the NAME OF RESEARCHER’S INSTITUTION and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in 2015-2017. The study focused on permanence and stability in two counties, Donegal and Galway; how young people experienced breakdowns emotionally, and how permanence discourses relate to unique life histories. We were interested in how young people interpreted permanence and stability, and factors affecting placement breakdown and instability (e.g. micro and macro). The research ethics committee at THE RESEARCHER’S INSTITUTION granted full ethical approval in 2015 and fieldwork was completed in 2016. We used a participatory approach with Tusla social work teams, who provided anonymised information about participants. All young people deemed to be in long-term care in both counties from 2008 to 2013 were included in the sample (n=506). Due to the sensitivity of the research, we consulted the Data Protection Commissioner, who discerned that when sampling young people aged less than 18 years of age, it was necessary to obtain their assent, and the consent of biological parents and foster carers. This resulted in very low returns. Ten people were interviewed who ranged in ages from 12 to 23 years. More information about participants is below;

7 The focus on these counties was determined by Tusla. The genesis was a call made by Tusla to social work teams nationally to commission research to improve an evidence-base.
8 Donegal is a rural county in the north west of Ireland. In 2016, the population was 159,192. The population of Galway is 258,552.
9 We consulted the Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) for clarification if Tusla needed the consent of both biological parents and/or foster carers. When sampling people aged over 18 years of age, we needed the consent of the young person only. The Data Protection Commissioner is an independent authority responsible for upholding the rights of EU citizens in Ireland on data protection.
Table 1 Research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (approximately)</th>
<th>Length of time in care (approximately)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ciara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>20 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saffron</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>18 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>19 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
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BNIM: an overview

The Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was used in this study. Per Wengraf (2001: 1) BNIM facilitates narratives that represent ‘historically evolving persons in
historically evolving situations’, and ‘the interactivity of inner and outer world dynamics’. Participants retrospectively tell whole life stories or stories about particular events, to access ‘vanished and mutated times, places, states of feeling and ways of living’ (Wengraf 2006: 1-2). BNIM is a free flowing method; young people elucidated exceptionally rich data on so-called ‘ordinary’ events relating to permanence and stability. As BNIM focuses on story-telling and the ‘lived life’, some of these stories may not have been elicited using semi-structured interviewing. There is a sparse literature that uses BNIM with young people; although recent examples like Pinkerton and Rooney (2014) use it with care leavers. We also chose BNIM because we wanted to capture young people’s descriptions of turning points and transformative moments as they experienced them.

BNIM interviews are comprised of one, two or three sub-sessions. During sub-session one, participants are asked a single question used to induce narrative (SQUIN). In sub-session two, interviewers use specific cue-phrases from sub-session one to ‘push’ for personal incident narratives (PINs). We recognised the ethical responsibilities of using BNIM, like inducing memories of abuse and/or neglect. To lessen these, we designed a SQUIN that focused on the whole life rather than specific events. Interviewees could give us as much or as little information about foster care and pre-care experiences as they wished. We wanted to

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10 In the literature, young people in care are often referred to in policy and research as ‘at risk’. However, these assumptions reinforce conceptualisations of young people as ‘needy’ rather than challenging structural/material inequalities, and largely overlook how young people transcend this. One of the prime motivations for using BNIM was to identify where participants challenged these assumptions in ordinary interactions.

11 The number of sub-sessions depends on the predilection of the researcher and the depth of the data in sub-session one. Some researchers use only sub-session one if it generates rich data. We mainly used two sub-sessions.

12 Cue phrases are distinctive phrases of the interviewee in sub-session one.

13 The SQUIN was as follows; ‘I want you to tell me about your life since you can remember; all the events that happened that are important to you. You can tell me about your house, family, pets, school or anything else. I want to know about you! I won’t interrupt. I’ll just take notes’.
emphasise young people’s agency in the research so that they could decide which events they wanted to tell us about, and things they did not wish to share.

There were variations in how we applied BNIM. We did the first sub-session by asking the SQUIN but we did not always use the full guidance as per Wengraf (2001). Some interviewees preferred us to ask direct questions rather than pushing for PINs in sub-session two. In line with BNIM’s emphasis on stories, we followed up questions with ‘can you tell me a story about when that happened to you?’ Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were subsequently analysed using an approach to Thematic Analysis (TA) similar to Nowell et al. (2017). We did not use BNIM analysis for this study (e.g. panels, twin track interpretation). Our main output was a report on young people’s interpretations of permanence and stability and TA was appropriate for this. During analysis, we read and re-read transcripts to become immersed in the data and searched for codes and meanings. We analysed statements individually, and applied codes to each utterance which was essential to building themes. Themes were subsequently redefined to ensure consistency. We linked the themes back to the literature to ensure that the study was conducted in an integrative manner. This resulted in exceptionally deep understandings of how young people’s experiences embody various conceptualisations of permanence simultaneously (e.g. objective, ecological).

Belonging, home and family
Concepts of belonging, home and family were significant to how participants interpreted permanence and stability. Frequently, interviewees used these concepts interchangeably which further indicates the multidimensionality of permanence experiences. When asked what a permanent, stable placement meant to them, all young people commented on the importance of belonging, which they defined as being ‘part of a family’ and ‘having a place to call home’ (lead author’s fieldnote, 10/04/2015). Significantly, participants alluded to these concepts, regardless of the number of breakdowns they experienced previously. Young people did not often mention legal aspects of permanence and stability in interviews. Instead, they talked about their unique life experiences which underline how permanence is contextual.

Drawing on Biehal (2014), we examined if there were differences in participant’s responses about permanence depending on if they expressed deeper/lower levels of belonging in foster families, stronger/weaker relationships with biological families, or if this varied with gender or age. We found that age or gender did not affect responses as home and family featured strongly in all interviews. However, narratives of feeling safe tended to feature strongly when participants experienced abuse and/or neglect (author’s fieldnote, 05/05/2016). Furthermore, people who experienced greater numbers of moves often talked about their futures with less certainty compared to those with lower numbers of breakdowns. This signifies the significance of pre-care and in-care experiences to permanency discourses; however, the impact of pre-care experiences is often overlooked in the literature too.

It is widely acknowledged that subjective and enacted permanence are interlinked (Samuels 2009). However, in contrast to much of the literature, our data underlines some of these interconnections. Home, family, and safety are part of subjective and enacted permanence;
they coloured interviewees’ expectations that some care placements shall/shall not endure.

Some participants commented that their behaviours changed when they were in a stable care placement when they thought that placement would endure over time: ‘I wasn’t the same when I was there; I wanted to be better because I thought the placement would last’ (author’s fieldnote, 08/10/2015). This is indicative of how subjective and enacted permanence (e.g. behaviours) are interwoven in young people’s emotional responses and experiences.

Home and family were often used in the same sentence, which is suggestive of how these concepts intersect. Seven interviewees experienced at least one placement breakdown, and some experienced up to five breakdowns (author’s fieldnote, 07/05/2016). Most participants were in care since childhood, and two went into care as teenagers. When conceptualising breakdowns, participants spoke about being ‘displaced’ and ‘uprooted’. Uncertainty about home and family figured very prominently in Ciara’s interview. She returned to feelings of uncertainty several times in her interview. Her feelings of uncertainty emanate from childhood and continue to affect her relationships with partners. This is further indicative of how experiences of instability from childhood endure across time; thus showing how memories affect permanence interpretations. Furthermore, our data illustrated that participants who experienced abuse, neglect and more breakdowns tended to relive these experiences daily; in dreams, talking with others and imagining futures;

It’s what I saw since childhood. I’m not certain about my living arrangements. You never really settle. I don’t think we feel secure... I relive it (Ciara, 15/06/2016).
Uncertainty as connected to home and family also figured prominently in other interviews. Saffron relayed feelings of uncertainty about her living arrangements saying: ‘you don’t know why you’re in the stranger’s house’ (Saffron, interviewed 20/06/2016). All interviewees mentioned certainty and uncertainty when discussing what home means. However, there were some differences in participants’ accounts of enacted permanence (e.g. the likelihood that placements would last), depending on the number of care placements experienced. Young people who experienced fewer breakdowns had greater optimism about placements enduring, compared to interviewees who experienced more moves. The effects of a stable care placement on future optimism were evident in Kevin’s account. He was in a stable care placement since childhood and did not experience breakdowns. He spoke about the uncertainty that he said is experienced by most young people in care which contrasts with his experiences:

I expect my family will always be there. I don’t question it. They are my parents. My biological parents are not ... They never know where they are and there’s no security (Kevin, 27/06/2016)

Kevin’s interview illustrates the importance of strong, supportive relationships with adults in relation to permanence. Moreover, an analysis of Kevin’s interview as applied to Biehal’s (2014) permanence spectrum shows that there may be a permanence type that implies deeper belonging than the ‘as if’ group in Biehal (2014). Kevin does not refer to his foster carers ‘as if’ they were his parents; rather, he says they are his parents. This suggests that approaches like Biehal (2014) may require another layer. Kevin’s interview, among others is also indicative of how instability substantially affects subjective and enacted permanence.
Emotions to do with home and belonging figured strongly. Sarah experienced several breakdowns and described it ‘a cycle... it feeds in to how you feel about yourself and looks completely negative and bleak’ (author’s fieldnote, 12/06/2016). Participants often attributed placement breakdown to their pre-care experiences, attributing breakdowns to their inabilitys to cope with past experiences. For example, Christine commented that she feels ‘emotionally crippled’ by pre-care experiences which affected her placements (author’s fieldnote, 04/05/2016). Young people with multiple placements tended to interpret home as ‘transient’ and ‘unstable’. An interview extract from Charlotte below, is indicative of how permanence and stability are renegotiated in connection to pre-care and in-care experiences;

It’s not my house... Things change... I’ve moved about all the time... lost so many friendships. That’s always on my mind... It’s not my house. I’m living with my boyfriend ... We’re together but it could change (Charlotte, 30/05/2016).

Feeling safe and being in danger were connected to how young people interpret home and family too. Charlotte talked about home as a risky space: ‘My new place... it’s not dangerous’ (author’s fieldnote 11/06/2018). Some transcripts were replete with descriptions of homelessness, neglect and abuse, such as Charlotte’s extract below. Moreover, Charlotte’s narrative, like several others revealed how circumstances that emerged at specific moments continue to affect her relationships. Elucidating complex narrations of specific interactions in time is significant to the BNIM method;
She has a really bad temper, really bad. You never knew what you were going to find. She was violent or sad, depressive. She’d threaten to kill herself ... She went to the bathroom with a knife. I was banging the door down... I remember being outside not knowing what was going on. She was screaming (Charlotte, 12/06/2016).

Discourses of normality, permanence and stability

All interviewees, who experienced breakdowns, said they long for normality; having a loving family or secure placement was described by interviewees as ‘normal’. Normality featured strongly in Kevin’s interview. He contrasted his own situation to people who experienced different placements, and discusses what he considers is a ‘normal’ life:

It was just normal, my upbringing... It was just the normal way to be. I didn’t question it, why I was in the family or anything (Kevin, 27/06/2016).

Several participants interpreted normality as routine events that are part of enacting family. As Katie said; ‘Normality... walks on the beach, putting the wellingtons on and going out’ (lead author’s fieldnote, 14/06/2016). This notion of ‘performing’ family emerged powerfully. Interviewees who had sporadic contact with biological families, and who experienced more instability frequently commented on enacted permanence (author’s fieldnote, 21/06/2016). The notion of ‘performing family’ seemed particularly important for Katie who exhibited
‘provisional belonging’ (Biehal 2014). Katie went into care as a teenager but she experienced greater instability because of her relationship with her biological mother. Katie wanted stable relationships with her family of origin by attending family events. However, they imposed boundaries on the relationships which affected how she labelled herself as ‘different’:

They bring me in and they keep me out... I don’t know where I stand. They want me to be their friend, then they unfriend me, so it’s difficult... I’d just like to be normal (Katie, 11/06/2016).

Family surnames were powerful markers of family identification. This is further suggestive of MacDonald’s (2015: 35) work on ‘family display’; when ‘families communicate to one another that they belong together as kin, thereby strengthening relationship bonds, and through which they publicise to external audiences who hold membership of the family’. Ciara and Saffron were embarrassed that they did not have the same surname as their foster siblings (author’s fieldnote, 10/05/2016). Ciara relayed the following story about an event at school:

I saw them as brothers and sisters but we had different names. Stupid things I said, ‘my sister is a couple of years older’ and the teacher said ‘she couldn’t be your sister, she has a different name’ in front of the whole class. Everybody was looking at me and I could feel my face going red and people laughing (Ciara 15/06/2016).

Most interviewees who experienced breakdowns, abuse and/or neglect commented on specific life events when they questioned what a ‘normal’ childhood is. This could be
conceptualised as a ‘critical juncture’ where a specific event, person or place transforms how a person interprets her/his reality and/or future life. Saffron recounted how her assumptions about normality changed when she visited her cousin. She returned to this several times in her interview as it transformed how she interpreted normality:

I remember one of my cousins saying something about their dinner... They were complaining and I thought ‘What’s going to happen?’ I was expecting plates to be thrown, hair pulling. And my aunt said, ‘stop complaining and eat’ and they moved on with their lives and it was like, ‘is this normal?’ (Saffron, 20/06/2016).

**Emotions, loneliness and family**

Descriptions about emotions were interwoven with narratives about placement breakdowns, school and family. Young people who experienced instability exhibited deep loneliness as they had lower belonging to family and place. Saffron and Christine, who went into care as teenagers spoke about loneliness for foster families when placements ended. They described placements ending as ‘difficult’ and neither of them knew why they were going into care in the first place. Christine said: ‘*I remember being pulled out of bed at night and my dad said you’re going away*’. Her loneliness for her family immediately after going into care was compounded by feelings of guilt and not knowing why she was in care: ‘*I thought I did something wrong*’ (author’s fieldnote, 04/05/2016).
Although some participants experienced neglect and abuse pre-care (e.g. Sarah, Saffron, and Christine), relationships and the renegotiation of emotional bonds with biological families figured prominently during interviews. Ciara spoke about her relationship with her mother and commented she still needs to ‘process’ what this relationship is. Ciara felt a deep abandonment and anger towards her mother, and talked about reliving prior life events in her interview;

She wasn’t fit. What she did was a good thing... When you’re younger you don’t understand. You think ‘she didn’t want me’... Why am I different? Why did she not want me? I went through being angry (Ciara, 15/06/2016).

Breakdowns were interpreted as ‘emotionally draining’ (author’s fieldnote 12/06/2016). Some participants said dynamics in foster care profoundly affected feelings of loneliness. Ciara spoke of loneliness for foster parents when disagreements emerged between herself and a foster sibling, which ended the placement: ‘I looked like the bad one, the one that was causing trouble’ (author’s fieldnote 12/06/2016). Sarah also said that loneliness affected placement breakdown; she found it difficult to connect to foster parents and the rural location of the placement heightened feelings of isolation (author’s fieldnote, 12/06/2016). Young people, even those who were in stable care placements talked about feeling alone and different. As Christine stated; ‘I don’t have anybody’ (author’s fieldnote, 04/05/2016).
None of the interviewees developed dual identification. Young people seemed to develop stronger relationships with foster parents when they went into care younger. When young people went into care at advanced ages, they tended to experience more breakdowns and had lower identification towards foster parents. Ciara and Christine, who went into care later, did not have any contact with biological parents. Saffron met her mother only once a year. Christine said she felt ‘torn’ between foster carers and biological parents when she was younger. While she experienced abuse in her family home, she still loves her parents but also experiences other emotions such as anger and wariness. This corroborates the multi-dimensionality of young people’s experiences; the centrality of emotions, and personal circumstances to understanding permanence and stability:

I do still love her regardless. She tells me she loves me, then she hates me, which is hard to hear but I still love her. I’m wary of her too (Christine, 04/05/2016).

**Discussion and conclusions**

The paper corroborates existing international research on the complexity of young people’s experiences in foster care (cf. Kiraly and Humphreys 2016) and the significance of pre-care and in-care experiences. However, the paper goes further than some contemporary work on permanence and stability, focusing on conceptual gaps and approaches. Comparable to
similar research (e.g. Biehal 2014), this paper highlights that ‘ordinary’ experiences that happen pre-care and in-care often have long-lasting emotional effects on young people. The impact of pre-care experiences is often overlooked in the permanence and stability literature; however, our research indicates that the pre-care lived life indelibly shapes how young people interpret their unique care histories.

This paper further underlines the importance of subjective and relational permanence (cf. McSherry and Fargas Malet 2018), illuminating how relationships, identity and belonging shape and reflect permanence narratives. Importantly, our findings show that young people draw on several interconnected ideas to define permanence and stability which simultaneously relate to different dimensions of these concepts, such as ecological and enacted permanence. This underlines the importance of considering intersections between different permanence dimensions from service users’ perspectives. Work by Samuels (2009) and MacDonald (2016) underline some of the intricacies of permanence and stability, but more conceptual work is required on relationships between permanence types.

One of the principal contributions of this paper is that current conceptualisations of permanence and stability do not go far enough in capturing how young people’s material and social realities simultaneously affect and intersect with temporality, knowledge and social conventions in specific circumstances which affect how young people interpret permanence and stability. More theoretical work is required on the discursive, historical and emotional aspects of permanence to understand the uniqueness of young people’s discourses in relation to life histories, and the multidimensionality of emotional responses and care experiences across the life course. The conceptual approach outlined in this paper which centres on
knowledge, discourse, emotions and the lived life offers substantial scope for social work
theory and practice in understanding how young people interpret their realities.

More qualitative work is necessitated on young people’s experiences of permanence and
stability, as there are gaps in the literature here. The conceptualisation of permanence
outlined here stresses the intersection of micro and macro-level factors and underlines that
measuring stability which predominates in some research contexts, does not capture social
dynamics and how discourses change over time. Temporal dimensions of permanence and
stability are largely overlooked in the social work literature too. The BNIM approach which
captures subtle transformations in discourses across time offers scope in revealing deeply-
seated factors that markedly affect permanence and stability, such as communicative
conventions in social work (see Winter et al. 2016) and trust. While more general narrative
approaches attract considerable attention in social work research (cf. Leigh et al. 2019), more
conceptual work exploring the complexity of the ‘every day’, such as tacit knowledge in
routine interactions with social workers, bodily movements (Winter et al. 2016) and silences
(Green et al. 2019) deserve attention.

This paper broadly supports Semanchin-Jones and LaLiberte (2013) and Pérez (2017)
regarding the multi-dimensionality of relational permanence. The concept of ‘felt security’
ofers much to social work in encapsulating interlinking dimensions of young people’s
experiences and the connections between emotions in different domains. More empirical
research which subsequently applies Pérez’s (2017) conceptualisation would be valuable in
exploring the multiplicity of young people’s emotional and discursive experiences, and how
they intersect with policy and practice discourses. Further research is also required on how
social worker’s views intersect with young people’s interpretations of permanence and stability, and parental experiences. This corresponds to Biehal (2014) who asserts the importance of service users’ permanence and stability discourses. Overall, socio-cultural processes, by which people construct permanence and stability, through the lenses of unique life histories, require critical exploration. Research would also be enhanced by more sustained emphasis on permanence discourses which are culturally embedded in child welfare systems internationally and how this links to institutional knowledge and socialisation.

Existing qualitative literature presents detailed accounts of young people’s lives in care. However, the closer incorporation of social theoretical concepts in conceptual approaches to permanence and stability advocated in this paper, such as knowledge, emotion, the lived life, and temporality could greatly enhance social work understandings of how young people interpret permanence in relation to unique life experiences and meanings.

References


