Why Think Through ‘Family’?

Create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become. It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is ‘nkali’. It’s a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another’. Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali. How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, 2009

Introduction

This is a book about family, based on learning from the narratives of young adults who were in state care in childhood. By thinking through ‘family’ in care experienced lives, we aim to move beyond the pervasive story of the conventional family, building new insights into complex connected lives, identities and practices.

The book is based on two studies, both of which involved care experienced people living in England who were in early adulthood (all of whom were aged 16–30 years at the time of joining the research). These young adults are diverse, but they have in common that they spent time during childhood living apart from their birth parent/s: ‘looked after’ under English law, in court-ordered or voluntary arrangements that included residential care, foster care with unrelated families, kinship care with family or friends, and in some cases, legally permanent arrangements including adoption. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, these young adults are part of a diverse population,
with varied experience in terms of reasons for entering the care system as well as the timing, nature and duration of their placements. But under English law – the Children Act 1989 – a common purpose for placement is clear: to safeguard or promote the child's welfare. As such, placing a child in care is an intervention that inevitably involves thinking about family.

Yet this is not primarily a book about public care: it is a book about family. There are two reasons for this. First, it is imperative that policy, research and practice concerned with public care systems think through the meanings of family for this population: supporting people who have been in care, through childhood and beyond, depends on recognizing the continuing and distinctive complexities of their family relationships. Second, learning from diverse experiences helps to think through the concept of ‘family’: challenging normative binaries between the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘troubled’ (McCarthy et al, 2019) and enriching wider understandings of the concept of ‘family’. There is an ethical imperative for this shift, because of the ways in which certain family lives and family stories are socially and culturally marginalized, as ‘sad and secret’ stories that do not fit dominant narratives (Steedman, 1986, p 124). Writing about working class childhoods, Steedman notes that through history, such stories have often remained untold or unheard, or are homogenized and pathologized through comparison to an imaginary bourgeois ‘norm’: ‘But it is the story itself that does not fit: all its content and its imagery demonstrate its marginality to the central story, of the bourgeois household and the romances of the family and the fairy-tales that lie behind its closed doors’ (Steedman, 1986, p 139).

Steedman argues that an analysis like this ‘denies its subjects a particular story, a personal history, except when the story illustrates a general thesis’ (Steedman, 1986, p 10). Her arguments resonate with the epigraph from the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that opened this chapter. Although writing about very different geographical, historical and cultural contexts, these authors make a similar point – about which stories may be told, or heard. Their observations are highly relevant to thinking about meanings of ‘family’ for people who have been in care. Adichie was discussing the colonial power play involved in the reductive problem-focused construction of a ‘single story of Africa’. But her words resonate in considering policy and media constructions of ‘family’ in contemporary England (the focus of this book), where austerity politics have been implemented through state-crafted stigma and a political economy of disgust (Tyler, 2020). The Igbo concept of nkali, ‘to be greater than another’, as Adichie explains, can be seen to play out in reductive politicized constructions of some families as ‘ordinary’ and some as ‘troubled’, problematic, abject and ‘other’.

As Jamieson (1998) observed, class, race and gender privilege coincide in the powerful storytelling of the conventional modern family: ‘The most pervasive public stories are typically produced and reproduced by people occupying positions of power and authority, that is, they operate from and
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on behalf of powerful institutionalized structures. Their stories are never “just stories”’ (Jamieson, 1998, p 12).

Stories serve political functions and, in our late neoliberal age, the curation of storytelling – and the privileging of particular kinds of stories and story tellers – determines whose lives are recognized and how (Fernandes, 2017). Research can play a critical role in relation to pervasive public stories, providing evidence that disrupts stigmatizing binaries and hierarchies by allowing ‘the fullness and complexity of experience to be expressed’ (Fernandes, 2017, p 4). This is our aim, in thinking through meanings of ‘family’ in care experienced lives. Through the focus and analytic strategy of the book, we respond to this challenge: bringing forward the stories of family that our research participants have shared; treating them analytically with respect for their integrity and particularity, and with sensitivity to their accounts of complex and sometimes very difficult experiences.

The studies

The book draws together narrative material from interviews with young adults in England who took part in two different studies conducted between 2015 and 2020:

- **Against All Odds?** was a Norwegian Research Council funded study which involved interviews with 75 people (aged 16–32 years) in Denmark, England and Norway, who were in care in childhood. At the time of recruitment to the research all the participants were in education or employment, full- or part-time (including voluntary work). For this book, we draw on interviews with the 21 young adults who took part in the research in England.

- The **Evaluation of Pause**, funded by UK government, examined a programme which provides intensive, individually-tailored practitioner support over an 18-month period for women who have had children removed into care and who are judged to be at risk of future removals of children. For this book, we draw on interviews with 14 women who were part of a ‘care leaver pilot’ (and were aged 18 to 25 years at time of referral to Pause), all of whom had experienced the removal of at least one child into care or adoption.

The studies differed in many ways, discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, but both used qualitative longitudinal methods concerned with understanding lives over time. While conducting interviews, I was struck by both similarities and differences in participants’ experiences across the two studies, and this prompted the idea of bringing the two samples together in a new analysis. The aim is not comparison, nor is it to identify pathways to risk or protective
factors, as this carries the danger of essentializing the experience of participants in *Against All Odds?* as ‘doing well’, or defining women who took part in the *Evaluation of Pause* in terms of their child/ren’s removal. That would not only be an oversimplification, it would be an injustice to all those who took part.

As we have written about elsewhere (for example, Boddy et al, 2020b; Bakketeig et al, 2020; Hanrahan et al, 2020; Gundersen, 2021), life was far from straightforward for the people who took part in *Against All Odds?*. As researchers, we must recognize the stigma and challenges they face, as well as their strengths and opportunities. And the same is true for women who have worked with Pause: it is crucial that we do not reify them as definitionally vulnerable (see Butler, 2016), effacing their agency and resistance by writing about them only in terms of the difficulties that they have navigated. Instead, writing about participants in both studies, we need to recognize and engage respectfully with complex experience. In a previous study (of family lives in India and the UK), we used the metaphor of ‘juxtaposition’ to create a research narrative that would challenge the false ‘universalism’ of the single story, in order to ‘argue for a more nuanced and contextually situated analysis entailing recognition of … commonalities and differences’ (Boddy et al, 2021, p 18). Throughout this book, we apply the same metaphor in thinking across the two studies discussed here. Considering the experiences of these young adults together illuminates the diversity of care experience. Recognizing their lives as varied, specific and socially and biographically located means paying attention to what is ‘ordinary’ as well as what is ‘distinctive’ in their stories of family, rather than emphasizing (or reducing them to) their differences or the difficulties they have experienced.

The analysis presented in this book focuses on England, but the insights it generates are relevant for other nation states. Thinking through family entails thinking about welfare policy and practice, because familial and intergenerational resources are increasingly expected to compensate, as ‘the protective carapace of the welfare state no longer promises social reproduction or cradle-to-grave social security’ (Thomson and Østergaard, 2021, p 1). With these arguments in mind, this book forms part of a growing body of evidence for the importance of family-minded approaches to welfare policy and practice (Featherstone et al, 2014).

**Conceptualizing ‘family’**

Before we start to think through the ways in which family lives and practices may be shaped by child welfare interventions – and specifically, by the placement of a child in care – it is necessary to set out the understanding of ‘family’ that we employ in this book. This explanation matters because the idea of ‘family’ in popular and political discourse tends to be highly normative. Jamieson (1998, p 11) refers to the normative construction of the conventional
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modern family as a ‘pervasive story’ – ‘a repertoire of themes, stereotypes and judgements’ which shape both public and private lives, and Morgan (2011) similarly warned of the dangers associated with the ‘thing-like’ quality of the concept of ‘The Family’. He highlighted the imaginary of the ‘cornflakes packet’ family – the purported ‘norm’ against which a problematic ‘other’ can be constructed. To take an illustrative example of this metaphor, a 1960 Kellogg’s cornflakes advertisement depicts a mother standing and serving her husband and child. The caption – promising the cereal will ‘bring you much more essential goodness than whole grain’ – illuminates the morality inherent in this story of this modern, White, middle-class heterosexual-couple family, in which the mother ensures everyone’s wellbeing and visible happiness. This representation can be understood as contributing to what Gillis (1996) termed ‘the families we live by’ – imagined families that do symbolic work: ‘Constituted through myth, ritual and image, they must be forever nurturing and protective, and we will go to any lengths to ensure that they are so, even if it means mystifying the realities of family life’ (Gillis, 1996, p xv).

Heaphy (2018, p 163) argues that these normative understandings continue to pervade academic scholarship, as ‘the sociology of family lives in the shadow of a cultural imaginary of the conventional family’, even while the essential diversity and fluidity of family forms and family lives has long been recognized (for example, Morgan, 1996; 2011; 2019; Jamieson, 1998; Finch, 2007; Dermott and Seymour, 2011). In this light, thinking through family in care experienced lives has the potential to nuance and extend existing theoretical conceptualizations of family, and so to enable new sociologically informed approaches to family in child welfare policy and professional contexts.

Within contemporary family studies, some scholars have argued for a need to move beyond the language of ‘family’ to allow expanded and/or alternative conceptual frameworks, for example, focusing on ‘personal life’, kinship or intimate relationships (for example, Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2011). But recognition of the normative implications of reifying ‘the family’ does not negate the value of attention to ‘family’ (Edwards et al, 2012). Family matters – within relational practices and identities, in everyday lives and over the life course. There remains a need to attend to ‘what is being evoked in the relational language of family togetherness’ (McCarthy, 2012, pp 70–71), while recognizing the diverse and multiple possible meanings of ‘family’ and the inherent interdependency that characterizes all our lives. These arguments have sharpened relevance for child welfare contexts, because they highlight the need for policy and practice concerned with children’s best interests to recognize the relational child. As Featherstone and colleagues (2014) argued:

We need to change because more and more we have seen a decoupling of the child from their family in a child-focused orientation. This
orientation concentrates on the child as an individual with an independent relation to the state, thus ignoring the most fundamental of insights about our relational natures. (Featherstone et al, 2014, p 152)

Talking in terms of *relationality* also allows that families are active and dynamic, and not ‘simply given (and hence unchanging) through one’s position in a family genealogy’ (Smart, 2011, p 17). Roseneil and Ketokivi, (2016, p 149) observe that both the ‘individual’ and the ‘family’ must be understood as in a ‘state of becoming’, constructed through dynamic and relational processes, rather than existing as ‘pre-given bounded entities’. Placement of a child in care is an intervention that highlights the active and dynamic nature of family, because it reconfigures family in complex ways. Beyond the circumstances and experiences that led to placement, family is shaped through the legislative provision and entitlements offered by care and aftercare systems; by the timing and nature of placement/s in the child's life; and by frameworks for regulating family involvement (for example, contact arrangements). These systems and frameworks shape children’s experiences of family, both during and after their time in care, including their relationships with family members – and those who they understand to be family, including kin and unrelated carers.

‘Doing’ family: practices and display

In writing about the dangers of the ‘cornflakes packet’ imaginary, Morgan (2011) suggests that a productive alternative is to treat the word ‘family’ as an adjective and verb, so it is possible to think about ‘doing family’. This makes it possible to recognize ‘family’ as active, fundamentally social and dynamic. Thinking about the ‘doing’ of family practices and about family ‘display’ is thus particularly useful for understanding family meanings and practices when ‘the family’ does not conform to conventional structural forms (Finch, 2007). As Dermott and Seymour (2011, p 12) observed:

> A focus on practices and display is useful in managing the challenge of deepening our understanding of families and personal relationships while navigating through a wide range of settings and circumstances, as practices and display offer the possibility of moving away from thinking about families in terms of categories which are supposedly, a priori, significant.

Thinking about the diverse ways in which family may be practised by people with care experience is also helpful in thinking through the distinction between family and intimate practices. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, this
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is especially apparent in placement contexts where practices of upbringing are the responsibility of carers who may or may not feel like family to the child. Some significant intimate practices ‘do not include any strong sense of family’ (Morgan, 2011, p 37). Equally – and especially evident in the experiences of care experienced women whose children are in care or adopted – practices that are inherently about family (such as a mother’s display of her child’s picture) can occur in contexts where opportunities for relational intimacy are highly constrained. These considerations are discussed in Chapter 6.

Thinking about family display has particular value in attending to the risk of reproducing stigma in giving an account of care experienced lives. Finch and Mason (1993, p 27), writing about families’ public identities, highlight the external audience, ‘who observe what goes on and make judgements about it’. While all our family lives are observed within our social worlds, this experience of observation and judgement is especially acute for care experienced families, whose biographies are shaped by professional evaluation and intervention, and by the stigma that can often be faced by those with care experience (for example, Rogers, 2016; Roberts, 2021). As Finch (2007, p 66) observed, ‘the meaning of one’s actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting “family” practices’.

Throughout this volume, our account is focused through a narrative analytic lens. As discussed further in Chapter 2, this approach involves recognizing narratives as ‘a means of exchange’ (Steedman, 1986, p 132). When participants respond to questions about family, or talk about family within the interview conversation, their accounts can be recognized as a form of family display, constructed with and for the interviewer (Phoenix et al, 2021). Listening to participants’ explanations of what family means to them demands respectful recognition of complex and diverse experience – from us as researchers and from you as readers. Only by attending to their perspectives – on what is difficult, distinctive and ordinary, and what matters from their point of view – does it become possible to counter the misrecognition that positions some accounts of family as ‘wholly other or simply invisible’ (following Fraser, 2001 p 24).

Thinking beyond childhood

Our focus on the perspectives of young adults who have been in care highlights the ways in which family continues to matter in lives over time. As Finch and Mason (1993) documented in their classic study of family responsibilities, the significance of relationships between adult kin includes – but extends far beyond – their importance as sources of practical and financial help: ‘Much more is at stake therefore, than simply the material value of the goods and
services which are exchanged. People’s identities are being constructed, confirmed and reconstructed’ (Finch and Mason, 1993, p 171).

Nevertheless, kin do play a crucial role in practical and financial support: this is shaped by the ways in which family lives and practices are subject to wider welfare contexts, and so reveals tensions in between state and family responsibility. Finch and Mason (1993, p 8) highlighted the long history of politicians and policy makers who ‘have sought to draw a line between the responsibilities which the state is going to assume for the welfare of its citizens, and those which can be presumed to be taken care of by the family’. As we will document through this volume, the politicized delineation of ‘family vs state’ responsibility has particularly sharp consequences for care experienced people of all ages. Children are described as ‘looked after’ by the state as ‘corporate parent’ within the underpinning legislation of the Children Act 1989 – a role defined in statutory guidance to the Act as ‘acting as any good parent would’ (Department for Education, 2018, p 8). But what does this mean beyond childhood?

Young adults who have been in care often face accelerated and compressed transitions out of state care (Stein, 2006) and so the presumption that family will take care of responsibilities instead of the state is especially problematic. Unlike young people from more privileged backgrounds, they are unlikely to be able to rely on the ‘propulsive power’ of parental capital, increasingly critical for negotiating early adulthood in societal contexts of widening inequality (Toft and Friedman, 2021; p 105). As well as experiences of stigma, the resources afforded them through relational interdependence are likely to be especially precarious, or simply inaccessible (see also Bakketeig et al, 2020; Boddy et al, 2020b; Glynn and Maycock, 2021; Gundersen, 2021; Roberts, 2021). To understand how best to support young adults who have been in care, it is necessary to think through family – particularly in times when the shrinking of state responsibilities presumes increasing reliance on informal and familial resources.

**Austerity and ‘the other’**

The two studies which form the basis of this book were conducted between 2015 and 2020, in a sociopolitical context of austerity policies in England. Funds available to councils to fund local services have fallen by an average of 24 per cent per person in the last decade, with the largest cuts in the most deprived urban local authorities (Harris et al, 2019). Cuts to universal and targeted welfare provision have disproportionately impacted children, young people and families who are already disadvantaged in other ways, as a narrowing of support coincides with increasing rates of material deprivation, labour market insecurity and income inequality for families (for example, Shildrick et al, 2012; Furlong, 2015; Bywaters et al, 2018;
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Bilson and Bywaters, 2020; Sanderson, 2020; Batchelor et al, 2020; Webb et al, 2021; Rehill and Oppenheim, 2021). Rehill and Oppenheim (2021, p 3) document the ‘hollowing out’ of services designed to support families who are struggling; spending reductions have particularly affected public health and preventative services for children and families. At the same time, as Gupta and Blumhardt (2016, p 170) argue, the role of social work has increasingly been narrowed ‘from support to policing’, while the ‘distortion of relationships caused by a risk-saturated system mitigates against effective work to support families’.

Political justification for changes to the welfare state rely on a particular ‘austerity story’ about ‘the family’, as Featherstone et al (2018b, p 149) observe: ‘Like all good and memorable stories, it has a plot, heroes and villains and a clear moral, is full of metaphors and very memorable and easily grasped.’ Rooted in a political economy of stigma, this ‘austerity story’ marks some people and families as responsible for their own and society’s problems (see Tyler, 2020; Featherstone et al, 2018a, b; Gillies et al, 2017). The story of the troubled, or problematic family (McCarthy et al, 2013) is constructed in contrast to the imaginary of the “ordinary” family “doing their best” (in the words of former UK Prime Minister Theresa May, 2016). This political conceptualization of family can be recognized as a dividing practice (see Foucault, 1983) – a practice of exclusion and objectification that positions some families as essentially ‘other’. Thus, stigma becomes part of the machinery of inequality, producing stress and discrimination which has cumulative effects on stigmatized groups over time, such that the stigmatizing construction of the other in itself perpetuates disadvantage (Tyler, 2020).

Thus, the families we live by (see Gillis, 1996) are constituted politically through the legal and cultural legitimation of particular kinds of family (Cooper, 2017), which coincide with the ‘cornflakes packet’ imaginary. The Kellogg’s cornflakes advertisement I described is 60 years old, and of course the representation of family within advertising has changed throughout that period – but arguably, not that much. In late 2020, the UK supermarket Sainsbury’s experienced racist trolling on social media after screening a Christmas advertisement, Gravy Song, which featured a Black (heterosexual couple) family. The advert was widely defended (including by other supermarkets), but the fact that it was distinctive enough to trigger a racist response and public defence indicates the persistent dominance of the White normative ‘ideal type’. This is evident in another exemplar image (Figure 1.1), taken from a video published in 2019 by the Ministry for Children and Families in Norway. The Minister at that time, Kjell Ingolf Ropstad from the Christian Democratic party, sets out his vision for a ‘new family politics’ (En Ny Familiepolitikk) – presented over a backdrop of vintage footage of White Norwegian families from years gone by, engaged in traditional gendered family practices (such as women making sandwiches for children).
This normative imaginary of the ‘good enough’ family can also be seen to inform contemporary family policy through the persistent influence of Baumrind’s (for example, 1975) concept of ‘good enough’ parenting. Her typology of parenting ‘style’ was derived from research with White, middle-class, highly educated, heterosexual couple families in California, and she acknowledged the specificity of this selective sample of ‘urbane families … nontraditional, child centered, and rational’ (1975, p 14). More recent research raises questions about the universal applicability of Baumrind’s notion of parenting ‘styles’, for example, documenting the need for greater sensitivity to cultural and contextual variations (Smetana, 2017). Yet, the qualities of parenting that Baumrind identified among these ‘urbane’ White Californian families continue to shape policy and political understandings, as demonstrated in Dermott and Pomati’s (2016) research in England, which suggested that ‘the most educationally advantaged fraction of the middle class is setting the tone and standard in terms of key markers of educationally ‘appropriate’ and ‘supportive’ parenting’ (p 138). In this way, societal inequalities are obscured. The stigmatization of low-income families is reinforced, while those who are among the most well-resourced, educationally and economically, are represented as ‘ordinary’ through governmental discourses of evidence-based parenting (Jensen, 2010; Dermott and Pomati, 2016; Gillies et al, 2017; Boddy, 2023).

Writing about the US, Cooper (2017) documents a contemporary political discourse of family crisis, which has led to ‘the strategic reinvention of a much
older, poor-law tradition of private family responsibility’, such that ‘welfare has been transformed from a redistributive program into an immense federal apparatus for policing the private family responsibilities of the poor’ (p 21). Her observations are equally pertinent for other contemporary neoliberal welfare states including England. As Jensen (2010, p 2) writes: ‘This sort of talk is not simply an evasion of socioeconomic class; it is also part of a much longer and broader rewriting of the very terms of social differences and inequalities, a rewriting which goes back to distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor.’ The ‘evidence’ that is drawn on to inform policy and practice understandings of family is thus likely to reinforce unhelpful binaries, as McCarthy et al (2019, p 2214) observe:

The real and apparent danger … is that the dichotomy between mainstream and problem-oriented family studies, besides creating academic siloes, risks constructing unrealistic binaries between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ families, the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘problematic’, often on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions about what family lives ‘should’ look like, what family practices are entailed, and what meanings are invoked in the attribution and legitimization of the powerful language of ‘family’.

Thinking beyond the ‘troubled’ family?
The tendency to academic siloes (see McCarthy et al, 2019) is also a danger in research concerned with care experience, where a substantial literature has documented that young people who have been in care face heightened risk of disadvantage across multiple domains (for example, Stein and Dumaret, 2011; Courtney et al, 2011; Kääriälä et al, 2018; Häggman-Laitila et al, 2018; Jay and McGrath-Lone, 2019; Berlin et al, 2021). While it is crucially important to understand the barriers and challenges that care experienced people face, restricting their stories to assessment of risk, or evaluating their lives in relation to narrowly defined outcomes may inadvertently function to (re)produce stigma and social inequality, if such work contributes to the assumption that care is associated with lifelong problems (see also Bakketeig et al, 2020).

In considering this tendency to think in siloes in the context of ‘family’ and ‘care experience’, it is helpful to borrow from a distinction noted by Phoenix (for example, 1987) in her writing about parenting and ethnicity. Phoenix defined a couplet of ‘normalized absence and pathologised presence’, observing that families from minoritized ethnic groups are customarily absent from research on ‘ordinary’ family lives and tend to be included only when research is risk- or problem-focused. Arguably, this tendency to normalized absence and pathologized presence can be seen in research
with other groups within society – including care experienced people – who face stigma and are commonly defined as vulnerable or at risk. Diverse family lives and practices are either rendered invisible or else pathologized, discursively constructed through problem-focused research and problem-saturated narratives. In this light, the normalized absence/pathologized presence couplet can be understood to contribute sociopolitical misrecognition in Fraser’s terms: ‘When … institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we should speak of misrecognition and status subordination’ (Fraser, 2001, p 24). Phoenix’s (1987) couplet of normalized absence/pathologized presence highlights the need for research that takes a holistic approach that recognizes nuance and subjectivities in care experienced people’s lives (see also, for example, Reimer and Schäfer, 2015; Brady and Gilligan, 2018; Rees and Munro, 2019; Join-Lambert et al, 2020). This means engaging with the complex and dynamic diversities of family lives in time and across space, place and generations (Edwards, 2020), working to ‘destabilize any tendency to write about “family” in conventional terms, while still centralising the importance of writing about family’ (McCarthy et al, 2019, p 2214).

Here, we can draw a parallel with Heaphy’s writing about same-sex couple families. He argues that attention to the ordinary aspects of unconventional family lives makes it possible to understand their ‘double nature’, recognizing both the normative and non-normative aspects of family relationships and practices and enabling insights ‘into the everyday possibilities and troubles’ that families encounter (Heaphy, 2018, p 174). Thinking through ‘family’ for people who have been in care also necessitates this kind of ‘double thinking’. By attending to meanings of family for marginalized and stigmatized groups within society (Edwards et al, 2012; Wilson et al, 2012), it should be possible to challenge policy discourses that rely on ‘impoverished stories about family life’ (Smart, 2011, p 16), stories constructed in opposition to the imaginary of an ‘ordinary’ other. This approach also has practical and political consequences. By revealing the lie of the austerity narrative that constructs some people as deserving of their hardship, we enable the development of humane, family-minded policy and practice in child and youth welfare (Featherstone et al, 2018b). Moreover, as Heaphy observes, ‘double thinking’ can build a better understanding of ‘family’ as a contemporary social institution, disrupting unhelpful academic siloes between mainstream family studies and child and youth welfare research (Heaphy, 2018).

Thinking through ‘family’ in care experienced lives

For people with care experience, placement in care is an intervention which fundamentally reconfigures family for children and adults alike.
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The nature of that intervention inevitably depends on the wider welfare system in which it is situated: ‘social, political, economic and systemic contexts matter for why and how decisions are made’ (Burns et al, 2017, p 2). Cross-national research highlights the ways in which child welfare policy and systems are shaped by wider welfare contexts, as well as how different approaches shape experiences of family – for example, in relation to use of adoption or in the extent to which family involvement is related to use of voluntary and court-ordered arrangements (see Boddy et al, 2013; Skivenes and Thoburn, 2016; Boddy, 2017; Burns et al, 2017). Drawing on Gilbert’s (for example, 2012) typology of welfare systems, Burns and colleagues’ cross-national analysis describes England as a risk-oriented ‘child protection’ system – with high thresholds for intervention – in contrast ‘family-service’ oriented systems (for example, in Nordic countries), which place greater emphasis on early intervention to promote healthy childhoods as well as mitigating risks.

The underpinning legislation for children in care in England – the Children Act 1989 – could be seen to have a strongly child-centred family service orientation. The Act was designed to protect the best interests of the child within a legislative framework that encompasses several different aspects of family lives, uniting previously disparate ‘legislation relating to child protection, the support of families in difficulties, and decisions about the care of children whose parents were divorced or separated’ (Hetherington and Nurse, 2006, p 55). A key principle of the Act is that local authorities should work in partnership with families and that children are best brought up within their families, so local authorities should provide support and services to enable that to happen. In addition, the Act sets out a definition of parental responsibility, referring to ‘all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property’ (Children Act 1989 Section 3 (1)). Parental responsibility can be awarded to others through legally permanent arrangements (including Special Guardianship Orders and Placement Orders for adoption) and can be shared with the local authority.

Family is further emphasized in statutory guidance on planning for permanence, defined in terms of ensuring that: ‘Children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging’ (Department for Education Children Act Guidance 2015, pp 22–23). This conceptualization of permanence spans all forms of intervention under the Act, ranging from family support to placement of a child in care. It can be also seen to accord with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights, both of which set out the child’s right to a family life.
Despite the emphasis on family and partnership with parents within the Children Act 1989, the influence of neoliberal ideology – embedded in the history of child and family policy in England (Cunningham, 2006) – means that policy and provision are dominated by a targeted or ‘residual’ approach. Family is seen as a private domain and difficulty in linking the ‘parallel tracks of child protection and family support’ persists (Hetherington and Nurse, 2006, p 82), with early intervention and family support conceptualized as corrective interventions rather than as a matter of child or family rights, or an expression of state responsibilities to families (see Boddy et al, 2013; 2014; 2023; Gillies et al, 2017). As Gupta and Blumhardt (2016) observed, this tendency is heightened in times of political austerity. It obscures recognition of the impacts of poverty on child and family lives, within and across generations, and fails to recognize the strengths of families and communities, so that ultimately, ‘the orthodoxies are masking complexity and making children less safe’ (Featherstone et al, 2014, p 152).

If policy and practice are to provide adequate support for children and families who encounter care systems, we need to respect the complex diversity of care experienced people (discussed further in Chapter 2) and their correspondingly diverse experiences of ‘family’. We must recognize the contingency and the ambivalent complexity of lived experience, recognizing how care experience shapes ‘unconventional’ and diverse family forms and relating practices (for example, Gabb, 2011a; b; Heaphy, 2018), illuminating fluidity and ambiguous boundaries, while recognizing the enduring importance of family in people’s lives over space and time.

The structure of this book

The first two chapters set the context for the volume as a whole, including this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), and a contextual framing of the focus on care experienced people and the two studies on which the book is based (Chapter 2). The second chapter begins with an overview of key policy and legislative contexts for young people in and after care, reflecting on how key family-related features of children’s lives and care experiences (including the presence of siblings, recurrent removal of children into care from the same parent/s and so on) are recognized within policy and published data. The chapter then goes on to discuss ethical and methodological debates in researching vulnerability. It sets out the argument for taking a narrative approach to thinking through family in care experienced lives, including the need for methodological and analytic approaches that avoid the enforced narrative of the ‘terrible tale’ (Steedman, 2000), challenging the tendency for categorizations of ‘vulnerability’ to disempower, silencing narratives of resistance (Butler, 2016). This discussion links to an overview of the
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two studies, addressing methods, study contexts, and sample recruitment and characteristics, and the details of the analytic approach to linking the two datasets.

Drawing on Morgan’s (2011) conceptualization of family as entailing a sense of the active, and seeking to highlight the (continuing) significance of birth families in care experienced lives, Chapter 3 addresses the significance of the ‘ordinary’. Undeniably, care experienced people have often faced significant challenges within their family lives. But if we focus only on documenting those adversities we risk engaging in a dividing practice (see Foucault, 1983) as discussed before, whereby care experienced people – and care experienced families – are reduced to the problems they have faced. Accordingly, this chapter draws attention to ‘ordinary’ memories within extraordinary childhoods, encompassing narratives of regular, ritual and habitual family practices and the importance of these within participants’ accounts.

Chapter 4 considers how family practices shape family boundaries, considering who ‘counts’ as family and examining family connections over time and through experiences of placement in childhood. Participants in the two studies had very varied experiences of placement – ranging from a single foster or kinship placement from early childhood to adulthood, to experiences of 20 or more placements, and of residential care and mother-and-baby placements (especially in the Pause sample). This chapter addresses participants’ narratives of the practices that enable a placement to feel ‘like family’ – or not – and explore the different possibilities for doing ‘family’ that participants highlight in their narratives of placement.

Chapter 5 builds on the material discussed previously to consider care and connectedness, and the challenges, responsibilities and resources that are part of those linked lives. In line with previous research concerned with young adults who had been in care (for example, Wade, 2008; Havlicek, 2021), participants in both studies had contact with their birth families and gave accounts of practices of care within and across generations. This chapter draws on these accounts to think about the sharpened significance of family connections for care experienced young adults living in a historical moment of heightened precarity and political austerity.

Chapter 6 turns to understandings and experiences of parenthood. It begins by focusing on the experiences of participants who are parents (all but one of whom were mothers), including the implications of child removal for understandings of parenthood and family. The chapter will consider how participants practise family at-a-distance, and how they manage and maintain identities as parents separated from their children, taking account of different permanence, placement and contact arrangements. Finally, this chapter engages with participants’ narratives of future imagined families, and the ways in which those are positioned in relation to their past and
present experiences, including relationships with partners and children not-yet-born, as well as the potential return of children who are currently in placement.

Chapter 7 concludes the book by drawing together learning from the preceding chapters to consider the value of a sociological lens, and of attention to family practices, for thinking through the conceptualization of family for people who have been in care. We argue that learning about ‘unconventional’ family lives from the perspective of people who are care experienced enriches the theorization of ‘family’ more generally – in terms of understanding family practices, fluidity and continuities, for example. This in turn helps with identifying the implications for the politics, policy and practice of child and family welfare, highlighting the importance of thinking through ‘family’ when working with children in care and with families who encounter public care systems, through childhood and beyond.

**Summing up**

This chapter began by quoting Adichie’s warning of the danger of the single story. The aim of this book is to enable new, more nuanced narrative understandings of what ‘family’ means for care experienced people: ‘To expand and legitimise opportunities for different types of dialogue, storytellers and audiences’ (Featherstone et al, 2018b, p 2). We live in a historic period of precarity for young adults, who are increasingly reliant on familial support. This has sharp implications for those who have been in care, who may have complex intergenerational responsibilities yet fewer intergenerational resources than their peers, and so there is an urgent need to attend to their experiences of family in early adulthood. Achieving the aspirations of statutory guidance for the Children Act 1989 – ensuring a secure, stable and loving family, and enabling a corresponding sense of security, commitment, identity and belonging through childhood and beyond – depends on listening and learning from people whose families have been shaped by encounters with care systems. It requires that we think through what family means and how family matters in complex and diverse lives, over time.

By learning from care experienced people’s perspectives and experiences, this book moves beyond the existing ‘single story’ of care experienced family lives. A narrative approach makes it possible to curate diverse stories of family – recognizing the ordinary and extraordinary, and challenging stigmatizing constructions. The aim is to illuminate features of complex family lives that might otherwise be missed, or misrepresented; attending to relationality, care and connectedness; recognizing the significance of the mundane; and considering how family lives over time – including
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experiences as a child, sibling and parent – can be distinctively shaped, supported and challenged by being in care. Thinking through ‘family’, as expressed in our participants’ narratives, should help policy makers and practitioners think how best to support people who encounter care systems in their family lives, while building new understandings that connect the conceptualization of ‘family’ in mainstream family studies and in child and youth welfare research.