

# Care leavers' engagement with services: Motivational factors which sustain a positive relationship

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## **Abstract**

According to Mitchell (1982), motivation refers to 'psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed' (Mitchell 1982, p. 81). Thus, motivation is an individual process which might be influenced by extrinsic and intrinsic factors to the individuals. The former refers to the external factors experienced which make us self-determined to accomplish a certain task (for example, rewards such as money or a work promotion). The latter refers to the self-interest and enjoyment that a person experiences from doing an activity (for example, voluntary work).

## **Keywords**

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## **Introduction**

According to Mitchell (1982), motivation refers to 'psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed' (Mitchell 1982, p. 81). Thus, motivation is an individual process that might be influenced by extrinsic and intrinsic factors to the individuals. The former refers to the external factors experienced which make us self-determined to accomplish a certain task (for example, rewards such as money or a work promotion). The latter refers to the self-interest and enjoyment that a person experiences from doing an activity (for example, voluntary work). One of the most acknowledged theories focused on internal factors to explain why humans are compelled to act is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943; 1954). According to Maslow, individuals' needs are hierarchically organised and if primary (survival) needs are not satisfied (for example food, warmth, shelter, safety or protection), individuals will never move on to satisfy other levels of needs (for example, psychological and social needs).

Maslow's Hierarchy alerts us to the fact that care leavers' engagement with workers and services should be essential as it is through this relationship that they see their

physiological (food, water, education) and security and safety (accommodation and protection) needs satisfied. Yet it is clear that care leavers have difficulty engaging with the staff allocated to support them (Stein, 2004; Dixon and Stein, 2005). Lack of support for young people in transition from care can be one factor in poor outcomes (Horrocks, 2002; Stein, 2006). This paper aims to examine the factors affecting their motivation and determination to engage with their allocated workers and services. It is based on information collected from PhD research aiming to explore the experience of young people suffering from depression and in transition from care to independence.

## Method

Thirty-five in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured schedule were conducted with young people aged 16-23 in transition from care to independence, supported by throughcare and aftercare services (local authority and non-council services). Participants were recruited using a variety of throughcare and aftercare services in central Scotland. Interviews were transcribed and an inductive thematic analysis carried out. Names are changed in this paper to protect the identity of participants.

## Findings

### *Transition and meaning of existing support*

All participants were, in general, satisfied with the support received, including the relationship with allocated workers, with the exception of financial help, which was felt to be insufficient. Although young people were generally satisfied with the relationship with their workers, they did not report the same level of satisfaction in relation to all professionals allocated to them. This study found a set of factors which influence young people's perception of the support provided and how this affects their transition path. The next sub-sections explore these perceptions and bring out the elements that might affect care leavers' relationship with workers and, therefore, their engagement with the support offered.

#### *A. The perception of the workers' role and its impact on the young people's engagement*

Participants living in independent supported accommodation outlined their key workers from the unit where they were placed as the most important professionals allocated to them. According to the interviewees, these professionals are often available when they need to talk about their problems or when they need advice. They are constantly present in their lives, being frequently in the office or around the unit where young people see them. Due to this constant presence, which offers safety and stability, the young people reported having better relationships with them rather than with other workers allocated. Thus, it is not surprising that they were also referred to as the most important workers in terms of developing independent living skills.

In contrast, social workers were not as well respected among young people, as illustrated in the following quotations:

Monty: '...because he is a pain, he never does anything for me, it takes ages; I'd to wait months for ma clothing money, ah got it yesterday, ye know, every time ah phone he is never in'.

Matthew: '...the social worker never really came oot, the only time ye really seen him was at panels'.

Although social workers were highlighted as the most disliked workers, difficult relationships were experienced with other workers independently of the professional background. The following table summarises all the elements identified by the participants of this study, which might contribute to these difficult relationships:

Factors	Examples
<b>Young people's stereotyped perception of workers</b>	Laura: 'Eh, social workers stereotype. If ye're a social worker ye're a bastard, it's what everybody says'.
<b>Young people's poor perception of how work is done:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of time to meet and speak to young people</li> <li>- Workers' lack of availability when young people ask for support</li> <li>- Slowness in the actions to be carried out and meeting their needs</li> </ul>	Mark: 'Well my social worker kinda of thing could have done a bit more to chase it up, not so much chase it up, but speed things along so I'm no feeling that depression, stuck here wondering what's happening kinda of thing. If they had told me the exact time scale of when I'm moving out then I would be more settled'.
<b>Lack of Trust</b>	Marianne: 'Naw [I don't trust], because at the end of the day it's only a joab'.
<b>Arguments</b>	Mark: 'just recently I've got involved in a kinda of incident, just, I just lost my temper and nearly hit her with my crutch'.

**Specific incidents**

Gabriel: ‘..they helped me to get eh budget and loans and stuff eh for to get a house...and helped get supported accommodation...then that was when I turned my back on them because they had lost the things to do with ma family...there was a letter, cos ma mum, ma real mum was in prison and ah got put into care...and that was all lost and so that’s why I don’t have a lot of faith in social work cos how can you lose things like that, that it’s so precious to somebody...’

It is important to highlight that young people fear seeing their personal information passed on to others and possibly used against them. This feeling of lack of trust and insecurity might be related to a lack of understanding about social workers’ or support workers’ roles and the aims of their actions.

Notwithstanding, young people are unlikely to develop a positive relationship with workers and engage with them if this is the case.

***B. Factors contributing to a successful relationship and engagement***

Not all young people reported having a negative relationship with their allocated workers. Louise reported having a good relationship because:

‘I guess ‘cos I have known of them for too long really...’

Louise highlighted time as an important element of the relationship between young people and workers. Thus, it is likely that long-term relationships are more likely to lead to positive outcomes than short-term relationships and be useful in supporting care leavers to move on to independence. Time allows the young people to develop trust, and trust makes the young people feel comfortable and engage with services and workers.

Additionally, young people also mentioned the following characteristics as features of a 'good worker':

Characteristics	Examples
<b>Sense of humour</b> <b>Supportive</b>	Mark: Monty - 'funny and supportive lik looking at the yersel, accommodation and stuff, it could be buying yer food, it could be...it covers a lot a lot of 'hings.'
<b>Understanding</b> <b>Emphatic</b> <b>Compassionate</b>	Maianne: Understanding, empathy, compassion and time
<b>Concerned and available</b>	Ewan: 'keep in touch and see how I'm getting on'
<b>Happy and a person who enjoys the job carried out</b>	Carla: 'a good personality' 'like (name of the person) she's smiling, happy, she got sense of humour and enjoys their job. Confidential, they should be always confidential, they shouldnae share wi' parents.'
<b>Someone who prioritises young people's needs</b>	Calum: 'jis need tae hav an understandin', needs tae be...don't know; don't think about their joab but they need actually tae 'hink aboot he young person's need.'

In summary, a 'good worker' is someone who supports them in overcoming their difficulties and understands their circumstances. It is someone available to meet with them now and again or phone to make sure that everything is fine or if they need something. It is also someone with a sense of humour and fun, empathetic and compassionate, who considers their priorities and for whom supporting young people is not only a job but a passion. Such factors might be difficult to exhibit in a system strongly focused on bureaucratic and formal procedures and where workers are often overload with heavy caseloads.

**C. 'To Engage or not: that is the question'**

According to Erikson (Hayes and Orrell, 1993) our sense of trust is developed in the first stage of our life through the relationship between a child and its mother. Visual contact and touch are paramount at this stage and to develop trustworthiness. A child who goes through this primary stage feeling loved by his or her parents and having her or his needs met, will develop a greater sense of trust in the world and confidence in the future. Conversely, failing to experience trust leads to frustration and a sense of mistrust in the world. Thus, lack of trust might be a consequence of a disruptive family background where parents fail to meet the primary needs of their child: a common feature in the lives of looked-after children. There are some factors which emerged as being helpful in allowing young people to trust. These are illustrated in the following table:

Mentioned person	Factors	Examples
Workers	Treating information confidentially	Melanie: 'Probably my counsellor because she has no other relation to anyone else, if I would tell my sister there is a chance that she tells my mum or my gran and then if I tell (name of the worker), (name of the other worker) will know, whereas my counsellor doesn't have any other connections with them and is completely confidential, so.'
	Similar life history	Agatha ( <i>in relation to her key worker</i> ): '...She lost her mum and she kens whit ah'm goan through'.
	Feeling comfortable when talking about their problems	Karen ( <i>in relation to her key worker</i> ): '...Ah feel that ah can talk to her about anyhin', ah can get, sit and cry and I know that she'll bring me out, like if ah wis really desperate for a drink she wud talk to me and she wud do it in a nice way, do you know what ah mean.'
Workers	Feeling respected, listened to and understood	Alexander ( <i>in relation to his addiction worker</i> ): 'She listens and she understands where I come frae, and ah jist appreciate her a lot, ye ken'.
	Knowledge of each other over time	Mara ( <i>in relation to her social worker</i> ): 'I just trust her because we work for so long, like she knows me quite well, so, and she has been there when I've

		been through a lot of things, so'.
<b>Foster Family</b>	Feeling understood	Ewan: 'Jist, ah dunno, like when I need to talk she always like seems to know, when there's something wrong o when ah need tae let something out or I need to talk about something - she always knows, she's easy tae talk tae'.

Confidentiality helps young people to feel comfortable when they talk about their problems. It helps them to feel positive in relation to the support provided and wish for the continuation of the relationship. These feelings might be supported if the young person feels understood and listened to and if the worker shares a similar life history. A long-term relationship allows the development of mutual knowledge of each other, which also contributes to increasing the level of confidentiality. This means that young people know the worker and have had time to test if the worker's actions correspond to their expectations.

Reasons reported	Examples
<b>Desire for independence and doing things by themselves to confirm that they are able to do it.</b>	<i>Adrian:</i> 'In a way ah thought ah cud stand on ma ain two feet, ah wis 15 and ah thought 'ah can dae this, ah cud dae that' without anyone tell me what tae dae..'
<b>Not wishing to be associated with the care system</b>	Ewan: '...They came in and they tried to do support and tell me what to do and do this and I just said no - I don't want anything tae do wi yous.'
<b>Rebellion</b>	Marta: 'Because when you're in care...you just got this attitude like you don't want to listen to anybody because like 'you're not mu mum, why should I listen to you?'
<b>Seeing need of support as a weakness</b>	Adele: 'I refused the crisis team, cos the crisis team came out to me, cos I was suicidal most of the time. They come out to see me and I used to think that folk thought I was off my heid and I used to think 'no I don't need help, I'm totally fine.' I used to go mental cos folk used to say that I needed help, and I was just like no...'

**Preference for the use of drugs as the first strategy to cope with problems**

Clayton: 'Ah wis still takin' rugs and ah thought that wis the answer but it's no' the answer'

Other reasons were found through the thematic analysis to explain the lack of engagement of these young people, which were not directly related to the lack of trust. The following table summarises the answers of the young people. Young people might want to demonstrate that they do not conform to common perceptions of care leavers - trouble makers or as fragile or weak - and that they are 'normal people' able to manage their lives. It might be also associated with the wish to prove to those who abandoned them or those who struggled to look after them that, independently of difficulties experienced, they are able to reach positive outcomes by themselves.

#### *D. Starting to engage with support provided*

The thematic analysis appraised the elements of a young person's experience that makes them accept support. The following table summarises the answers of the participants:

Reasons	Examples
<b>Development of a deeper maturity associated with the process of ageing which makes them conscious of the nature of their problems and able to reflect on their past, present and future</b>	Laurie: '...But noo ah'm older, like ah'm old enough tae have ma ain weans and that, and ah always 'hink to maself: If ah hud a child a wouldnae sit and dae that, like, do you know, sit and get drunk in front of them, she [mother] told me the other night 'tae fuck off and kill masel and...that's your fault,' and ah wis like that: it's not ma faul daye you know what I mean'.
<b>Confrontation with the reality - the need of help to achieve positive outcomes in life</b>	Adele: 'I had no one else to turn to, that was the only reason, I had no one else to turn to. It was either his or the streets, and I didnae want that'.
<b>Having a child - the wish to give a good education and be an example for their own children</b>	Anne: 'I'm at the stage now where it's no me I need to think about, it's my baby, so if I want to get on with my life, and give my baby the life that I've not had, then I need to speak...when my baby comes, I can't have all this burden...'
<b>Tiredness of being unsuccessful</b>	Ewan: 'Eh, a don't want to make the same mistakes ah made last time, ah want to learn frae them and make a go o'it this time'.

	<p>Marta: 'When I realized that I had enough of just sitting about the house all the time and doing nothing'.</p> <p>Gabriel: '...Ah am in the sort of stage that ah've hud ma fun and now I want to try a little bit a normal life you know, eh because it has jist been chaos since 16...'</p>
<p><b>To achieve goals in life</b></p>	<p>Clayton: '...If you don't try you don't get anywhere, do you?'</p>

It could be that as young people become more mature, this can bring greater consciousness of individuals' individuality and history and, therefore, of the reality experienced which includes problems, difficulties, needs, limits, abilities and self-potential. This consciousness brings to care leavers the ability to reflect upon life, assess what is good and bad and what they want and do not want. It may help the young people develop a wish to overcome the odds of a problematic experience and bring some realisation that they are individuals in a shared world. Thus, it is important to help care leavers to be conscious of their reality and acquire the necessary wisdom to manage their existence and make their transition. To do so, it is paramount to enter into the world of each young person and understand the meaning of their own existence. To enter their world successfully it is essential to establish a relationship based on trust and mutual knowledge. To do so, time, patience and sensitivity to the reality of the care experience are paramount professional skills that workers need to develop.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the elements of the relationship between care leavers and their allocated workers and the support provided. In relation to the support provided, all participants were, in general, satisfied with the practical support received with the exception of the financial help provided, which was claimed to be insufficient. Young people were also in general satisfied with the relationship with agencies and workers who were supporting them, though this level of satisfaction was not felt at the same level in relation to all professionals allocated. For instance, social workers were not as well respected amongst young people compared with other workers. The negative perception of social workers' actions, the stereotypes surrounding the profession and its role, the belief that social workers are not supportive as they rarely turn up to find out how young people are and to ask if she/he is in need of something, the fact that social work provision is slow in its process, and lack of time to meet with them, were the reasons given by young people in justifying why they have difficulties in engaging with social workers.

Long-term relationships were more conducive to positive outcomes than short-term relationships. They were also experienced as being more worthwhile when supporting care leavers to move on to independence. Through time, trust is developed, and trust makes

Care leavers feel comfortable and more likely to engage with services and allocated workers. Feelings of being understood and listened to were two key elements in an effective working relationship. This is a finding which has much resonance with past research which has sought the views of young people (Stein and Wade, 2000; Whitehead et al., 2005).

Finally, according to the participants of this study a good worker is someone who has time for them, who supports them in overcoming their difficulties and problems and understands their circumstances. The good worker is someone who is available to meet with them now and again or to phone to make sure that everything is fine or if they need something. The good worker is available when they are in need or in a crisis situation. If they have a sense of humour and fun, are empathetic, have a high degree of compassion and look at the young person's priorities first, this is even better. Clearly, for the good worker, it is not only a job, but a passion.

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