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Chapter 4

Space and Agency in Everyday Lives of Young People in Care in France and England

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Abstract

Based on a cross-national study on French and English young people's perspectives, this chapter explores the importance of one very special place, the bedroom, in the everyday life of 16 young people living in care. The ELTA study was conducted in 2014 and involved social mapping, walking interviews, and making and commenting on photos, intending to give participants some control over the data collection process. 8 young people aged between 14 and 18, living in institutional and foster care in each country participated in the research.

The aim of the study was to gather young people's views and experiences on their everyday lives while in care. A cross-cutting theme that this chapter will explore is the choice of spaces which young people were particularly keen to talk about. The most important place, which almost all young people talked about, was their own bedroom. This analysis will look at (1) how young people described themselves in their rooms, (2) what was the specificity of this place which made it so important, (3) and what were the challenges they had to face.

Finally, we will seek to draw some lessons for child protection systems to learn from these young people's lived experience.

Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to places, which young people who live in care in England and France found to be important in their everyday lives. After giving an overview of the spaces they chose to talk about, we will focus more especially on one of them. These places serve as an empirical lens to understand the reality and meaning of agency in young people's experience.

Through their narratives on these spaces, we will reflect on what makes them special, what young people do there that would be important to them, and what issues would arise in link with these spaces. Thus, everyday places are used like stages where actors perform their parts, and we as audience can see what their motivation is for acting like they do and the limits they experience when they want to act in specific ways.

This approach is grounded in the idea that children's and young people's participation is related not only to organisational structures and policies, but also to skills and motivations which are learned and practised in everyday life throughout the process of growing up.

Promoting the participation in decision-making for children in care has been a major trend internationally for several decades. Previous research reminds us that one feature of young people leaving care successfully is their ability "to *negotiate* good-quality accommodation, *engage* in education and employment and *participate* in community leisure activities" (Stein, 2012, p. 160). These abilities, however, do not arise out of nowhere at the edge of leaving care. Rather, they are a result of long-term experimentation that is embedded in everyday practice. For example, as we will see in this chapter, choosing who you let in or keep out of your room, learn how to protect your feeling of privacy, enjoy time you spend on your own, constitute crucial aspects of young people's everyday life. This is where they will experiment skills to negotiate, convince others, take account of external constraints. Adolescents who raise up in their own family usually have plenty opportunities for agency in many areas of their daily lives (De Singly, 2006; Rauschenbach & Bien, 2012). As Thomson puts it, "experimentation is an inescapable part of young people's experiences" (Thomson, 2009, p.2). The experience of agency appears as a pre-condition for participation.

However, when you live in public care, the possibility of experimenting your ability to negotiate is often limited. As has been documented by several researchers, the experience of young people in care is often that they are not listened to, and their voice remains unheard in processes of decision-making – whether it relates to school orientation, contact with parents, leisure activities etc. (Wolf, 1999; Join-Lambert, 2006; McLeod, 2007; Potin, 2012; Schaffner & Rein, 2013). As a result, this leads to "feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem and poor confidence" (Leeson, 2007, p.268). Although these observations are not recent, they are still accurate in France (Robin, 2020).

This chapter focusses on England and France, two countries where the participation trend for children in child protection and in society more broadly has developed differently. Mike Stein (2012) reminds us that in the UK, first steps towards children's participation were taken back in 1975 with the Children Act. In child protection it has led to the implementation of Children in Care Councils in local authorities. "Although there was no statutory requirement, in November 2009 the *Department for Children, Schools and Families* reported that more than 75% of authorities either had or were planning to set up a Children in Care Council" (Thomas & Percy, 2012). In France, despite children's councils having been implemented in many towns, this does not, by far, cover all children. Children's right to participation is still not implemented in schools and other public or private settings (Défenseur des Droits, 2020). In child protection, children's participation is still underdeveloped (Faisca, 2021). Mandatory tools for users' participation which were included in 2002 and 2007 Acts, like user's councils and a "project for the child", which should be prepared at the beginning of each child protection measure, are not actually implemented in practice up to this day (Défenseur des Droits, 2020). However, some local authorities are currently seeking to implement children in care assemblies, which reveals a concern about this topic.

Therefore, looking at everyday lives of young people in care in these two countries might highlight differences regarding how participatory policies can shape young peoples' experience of care and agency.

Sociologists have been studying everyday life since the middle of the 20th century. Lefebvre, de Certeau and Goffman looked at how everyday routines are a result of social control yet also give opportunities for choice (Scott, 2009). Through the everyday life, James and Prout (1990, p. 12) see social life “as being constantly created through the activities of social actors.”. According to them, “children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives” (p. 4). Liebel (2020, p. 180) insists that children as well “are actors, express their needs, organize their lives, and try to participate in the organization of their environment, seek their position in their interrelations with other people, measure the scope of their influence, assume tasks and functions, fulfil their responsibilities or refuse them.”.

In this sense, we will focus on agency as a core dimension of young people’s everyday lives in care, and more specifically on where they see themselves as actors.

Child protection in France and England

In 2021, there were 0.65% of looked after children in the under-18 population in England (NSPCC, 2021). The number of children in foster care in 2020 was 80 080, representing 0.67% of all children.¹ Thus, foster care is the most widely used form of out-of-home placement in the UK. When a placement is made, there is a clear distinction between permanent and respite care, and in the case of permanent care, contact between children and their birth parents is supervised and very limited.

In France, 1,1% of children and young people under 21 years old are in out-of-home care, 58% of them in foster families (Tillard & Join-Lambert, 2022). A key feature of the French system is that in most situations where children are placed, the parents retain parental authority (Join-Lambert & Séraphin, 2020). Foster carers receive a salary depending on the number of children in their care. Court placement decisions are revised every year, which creates a lack of stability and ability to plan for carers, children and their birth parents.

Spaces in young people’s lives

Previous research has shown the relevance of studying spaces in children’s and young people’s everyday lives in order to understand the shaping of their identity and agency. Following Lefebvre’s theory, Thompson and colleagues analysed space as the ground where young people develop their identity: “in lived space we may also find the countercultural, the attempts to re-impose individuality and control within the interstices of the formal spaces of everyday life (Thompson et al., 2014). Raffo also argued that “It is in particular places that young people are both actors and acted upon” as they “can and do operate at the boundaries of any particular symbolic system, opening themselves to new and different experiences that [...] provide different ways of thinking about self and in demonstrating autonomy” (Raffo, 2011, p.9).

Thus, the study of space in young people’s everyday lives gives insight into core dynamics of growing up, through the agency (van der Burgt, 2015; Sniekers, 2018) and the identity (Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2013) they develop in their use of space. In the following we will see what we can learn from everyday places in relation to agency of young people in care.

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2020>

Research context, aims and methodology

The ELTA study was conducted at the University of Sussex (UK) between September 2013 and September 2014². The aim of the study was to gather young people's views and experiences on their everyday lives while in care. After conducting an international methodological review on research with children and young people in care, and holding consultations with six care experienced young people in France and in England, a combination of three specific qualitative methods was chosen. These included social mapping, walking interviews, and making and commenting on digital photos.

Together with local authorities or local child protection services, the researcher organised group presentations of the research in several places in England and France. If they were interested to participate, young people could leave their phone numbers or email addresses to the researcher who would then contact them and make meeting arrangements. At the beginning of the first individual meeting, the researcher discussed a consent sheet with each participant and asked them to sign it.

For the first interview, the researcher invited young people to draw a social map, consisting of places they felt were important in their everyday lives. While drawing, they were prompted to describe those places and explain what made them important. During the first or the second meeting, the researcher also asked young people to take her on a walking interview, or guided visit of a place of their choice. While walking, they described the places and what they meant to them.

At the end of the first meeting, young people received a digital camera and were asked to make pictures of places, people, things, etc. that were important in their everyday lives. During the second and third meetings, they could choose the pictures they wished to share and comment on with the researcher. The main goal while choosing these methods was to give participants some control over the data collection process (Join-Lambert et al., 2020).

Eight young people in each country, aged between 14 and 18 and living in institutional or foster care, were interviewed up to three times within a time frame of six to 12 weeks, and some interviews were conducted with their carers as well. In total, 74 interviews were recorded between December 2013 and September 2014. A total of 16 social maps were collected in the first round of interviews, 171 pictures in the second round and 316 pictures in the third round.

Places mentioned by young people

The social mapping and the guided walk methods used in this study suggested that participant focus more specifically on places that are important to them. Also, many of the pictures they made included places. These paved the way for descriptions and accounts on what is important in their everyday lives, including core aspects like friendships, trust, relationships with friends, mothers and siblings and plans for the near and far future. In this section we explore the choice of places which young people were particularly keen to talk about, whether they lived in France or in England.

Table 1 gives an overview over the places young people chose for the mapping during the first interview. The table shows that all 16 participants have drawn their school(s), whilst 14

² Everyday Lives: (Re)Conceptualising Transitions to Adulthood for Young People in Care, funded in MSCA intra-European fellowships

mentioned the foster or residential home and 13 young people mentioned the bedroom – just the same number that mentioned shops/ cafés/ restaurants/ cinema.

During the second and third interviews, young people showed and commented on the photos they had taken. 481 digital pictures were shared by participants, and six 'virtual pictures' were described during the interviews (Join-Lambert et al., 2020). *Table 2* summarizes the various places and persons which young people chose to show and talk about during the research. Out of 14 participants who shared pictures, 11 showed pictures of their bedrooms, 9 of the living rooms or other places linked to the foster home, 7 showed pictures of their friends, 6 of their schools.

Table 1: Places young people drew during social mapping

	bedroom	Foster/ residential home (kitchen, living room)	Former carers' home	(grand)parents' home	Siblings' placement	School	(boy)friend' s home	Shops / café / restaurant /cinema	library	Place to meet outside	Public transport	Child protection service	Park/ trail/ gym/ swimming pool	doctor
Kimber (girl 14 residential)	X	TV				X		X					X	X
Britney (girl 14 residential)		TV	X			X				X			X	
Marie (girl 16 foster)	X	TV		X		X	X	X					X	
Emilie (girl 16 foster)		x		X		X	X	X						
Druidsphere (boy 14 foster)	X	x				X		X	X					
Angel (boy 15 foster)	X	x		X		X		X				X	X	
Hermionne (girl 14 foster)	X	x				X			X				X	
Anne (girl 16 foster)	X			X		X		X						
Lucy (16 foster care)				X ³		X	X	X				X	X	
Mary (16 foster care)	X	x		X		X		X		X			X	
Sophie (14 foster care)	X	x			X	X		X				X	X	
Nicola (16 foster care)	X	x		X		X	X	X						
Sarah (16 residential care)	X	TV				X		X			X	X	X	
Paul (16 foster care)	X	x				X	X	X					X	
Alfie (16 foster care)	X	x				X		X			X	X	X	
Alexander (18, supported lodging)	X	x	X			X				X				

Drawing on these results and the frequency where different places appeared in the mappings and in the pictures, we can identify two kinds of places. First, places related to where they live: their bedrooms and their foster or residential homes; and second, places related to their friends: their schools, the shops, cafés, restaurants and cinemas where they like to go.

During the interviews, the drawings, mappings and pictures served as a starting point to ask young people to talk about their everyday life. The following part focusses specifically on the descriptions young people made of one place, which was central in almost all the narratives: their bedrooms. It is based on a content analysis and aims to show the reasons why young people want to talk about them, and how they see themselves as actors in their rooms. A thematic review of the interviews shows that the themes associated with bedrooms might vary, but can be summarized in a few categories. Most of them show no difference between English and French young people, as to the reasons why this place is so important. When a difference can be seen, it will be highlighted.

³ Restaurant where she meets with her mother

Table 2: places pictured in digital photographs/ virtual pictures

participant	bedroom	Living-room (TV, sofa)/ foster home	bathroom	kitchen	food	party /wedding /restaurant	school	Public transport	selfie	friends ⁴	mother ⁵	siblings	(former) carer	pets/ horses	craft / drawings /clothes	playground/ leisure park/ holiday centre	library/book	tablet/ videogame / computer	landscape	hairdresser / shop	blurred	total	
Kimber (girl 14 residential) 3 virtual pictures	1	1																1				3	
Britney (girl 14 residential)							2		2				5	14									23
Marie (girl 16 foster)	4	4	1			19	9	2	1	57	1	94				81			12	1	18	304	
Emilie (girl 16 foster)	4	2	1	1		6	2		8		1	7										32	
Druidsphere (boy 14 foster)	1														1		2	2				6	
Angel (boy 15 foster) 3 virtual pictures	1	1												1								3	
Hermionne (girl 14 foster)	1	2				1					1					4	2					11	
Anne (girl 16 foster)	1	6			2				8	1			8		1				1		4	32	
Lucy (16 foster care)		2					3			3		2			4	1			4	1		20	
Mary (16 foster care)								3		3						13			3			22	
Sophie (14 foster care)	3		1				1				1											6	
Nicola (16 foster care)																							
Sarah (16 residential care)																						0	
Paul (16 foster care)	1						5			2												8	
Alfie (16 foster care)	2	1					1															4	
Alexander (18, supported lodging)	3	2		1						6			2	5					2		2	23	
																						497	
Number of young people out of 16	11	9	3	2	1	3	6	3	3	7	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	1	5	2	3		

⁴ including boyfriends, schoolmates and other young people in the same foster placement

⁵ incl. photo of mother, place for supervised meetings with mother

Bedrooms

When they had been asked what is important in their life, almost all young people mapped and made pictures of their rooms. In their experience, their bedroom relates to having one's own place, being free to use digital devices and screens, deciding over who can come in, and enjoying safety. Both in England and France, bedrooms are associated with a feeling of control. However, across the various narratives, some limitations appear as to how much control young people actually have over their own rooms.

My bedroom is “my” place

This is the first and most common feature of bedrooms in young people's lives. They feel that it is ‘the’ place where they can do what they want. Of course, there are rules to be followed even in their own bedrooms, but still this is described as a place of their own.

Even when they share their bedroom, a way of owning their individual space is to decorate the walls as they like, at least to some extent. Several young people showed pictures of the decoration on the walls of their rooms. Some have pictures of their mothers, brothers and sisters, of former foster carers. Also, they describe pictures of their friends, like Marie:

“When we were at college, we had to make nice posters of our classes and this is the one we did in the 9th grade. I kept it as a souvenir of everyone because we had all participated and written little messages on it. This, for example, it's a picture of all girls in the volleyball team I was in at college. This is my class, this too.” (Marie, France, 16 y.o.)

Some young people decorate their walls with drawings of their own, as well. So, it becomes ‘their’ space, while in many cases they didn't have a place of their own before being in care. Emilie's (16, France) feeling about having her own room for the first time is described by her carer:

“Sometimes when I knock at her door to ask something, she is sitting on the stairs and watching. I ask her ‘what are you looking at?’ and she says ‘the room’. It's the first time she has her own room.”

Having your room also means you have a place to be out of reach for others, where you can deal with your own emotions. Thus Britney (France, 14 y.o.) recalls a day she spent alone in her room:

“So, in my room, I can cry unbothered.”

Kimber explains how other young people in the home had been unfair to her, educators had made her angry, so she had done her homework on her own and didn't talk to them. She also felt sick and had a headache.

*“So you went up in your room and cried on your own?
Yes, all day long.”* (Britney, France, 14 y.o.)

In this example, Britney leaves the living room where she was together with adults and other young people from the home, because she feels that she is not being treated fairly by either of them. Although the fact that she has cried all day shows that it took her a long time until she felt cheered up, her bedroom appears to be a way the escape conflicts with others.

Inside the bedroom, the bed has importance of its' own. Young people talked about their bed as a place they particularly like, using a lively terminology. For example, while Marie says she

loves her bed because it feels so soft, Angel described his bed as follows:

“My bed, it’s my friend. My big friend for ever, even though it changes all the time.” (Angel, France, 16 y.o.)

Furthermore, the bed is the actual place within the bedroom, where a range of important activities are carried out by young people.

Screens

As for most young people in France and England, screens of all kinds constitute a significant part of their everyday life. This includes televisions as well as cell phones, and often computers and tablets. In their rooms, they can control what they do, when they do it, and they can focus on it.

English young people have a television in their room so watching TV is one of the activities they mention, like Nicola:

“I listen to music and I watch “Skins” in my bedroom. That’s an important one for me. [...] A TV programme, or a series. It’s like – I can’t explain it. It’s a TV programme with people – you know on “Eastenders”? They’re acting as teenagers, whereas it is teenagers being teenagers – does that make sense?”

For those who have a TV, they would watch in while in bed:

“So I watch it in bed. [...] Every night before I go to bed. I watch – they are all an hour and 15 minutes long. Some of them are 45 minutes long. I’m on Series 4 which has been a couple of weeks.” (Nicola, England, 16 y.o.)

This description from an English girl comes as a contrast to the description of French young people who didn’t have a TV in their room. For instance, Britney, who lived in residential care, had hard times trying to watch her favourite series. She describes what usually happens when she starts watching:

“I come back from school and I start watching this old series [...] and I close the door. There are people vacuuming, making noise or putting plates into the cupboard, educators talking, people coming along saying ‘hi Britney’ when I just want to focus on my thing, well all this makes me nervous so I shut the door. But [adult] she comes and opens it. All right, never mind, I stand up and close it again, she comes and opens it. [...]. And then I ask her ‘look what difference does it make to your life that the door is shut?’ What does she think I’m doing; I’m just watching telly? So, I was so annoyed I just shut down the TV and locked myself into my room because it’s like that every Monday.” (Britney, France, 14 y.o.)

The fact that the TV is in a shared area, rather than in the bedroom, also means that you have to share it with other young people who usually don’t want to watch the same program as you:

“You go get yourself a glass of water and when you come back, someone has changed the programme and doesn’t want to change it back” (Britney, France, 14 y.o.)

Britney’s experience is probably more typical of a residential setting. In foster care in France, although young people don’t have TVs in their bedrooms, they can still watch in the living room, and no other young people have mentioned the same experiences as Britney. Marie, who lives in France in a foster home, has no issues watching her series on a shared TV.

“There’s a series, a reality show, angels of reality show. I just love following this.

- Do you watch it every night?

Yes, all the time, and when I skip it because I play the volleyball, then I can catch up on a Sunday afternoon.

- You have one television for the whole house?

No, there's one in the dining room, one in the living room, and in the carers' bedroom." (Marie, France, 16 y.o.)

However, having a TV in one's own bedroom is something French young people would certainly like. For instance, Hermionne obviously enjoyed the bedroom she had during the summer holidays:

"I'd rather stay in my room to watch telly, because in my room when I'm on holidays, there's a TV". (Hermionne, France, 16 y.o.)

These testimonies show that having a TV in their bedroom makes a significant difference in their everyday life, as they are then able to choose their program and watch without being disturbed.

Many young people also like to be in their bed when they use their computer, tablet or mobile phone to socialize on social media or to play video games. Regarding digital tools, only one participant in our sample had no cell phone, at least eight had access to a computer and four had their own laptop, whilst at least four had their own tablet (Join-Lambert, 2020). While this is not specific to care experiences, it nevertheless is probably even more relevant within a care environment. Previous research revealed that young people living in care "may find these technologies especially appealing as they struggle with maintaining connections, establishing an identity, and locating others with similar interests" (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2015). Moreover, these technologies allow for virtual contacts with family members, which might not be easy, or even allowed, within the frame of out-of-home placement, but still appear to be crucial for some of the young people in France (Potin et al., 2018). The present research confirms the centrality of digital devices in young people's lives, which adds to the importance of the bedroom as a place to keep them safe. For instance, Druidsphere (France, 14 y.o.) says he will not take his tablet to the leisure camp during holidays, because it could get stolen there.

To summarize, from descriptions they made of their beds we can see this is where they feel free to use screens, including TV, computers, tablets and mobile phones. We know that these devices actually serve to share experiences or just information with others – friends, members of the family, schoolmates etc. Interestingly then, the beds and bedrooms are a space of ones' own, which young people use to socialize with others in a free manner: digital devices can be used, or switched off, whenever you wish to. The feeling of agency is enhanced through the ability to decide when you use them, to what purpose, and with whom you share this activity. As we will see below, the bedroom can also be a space where you chose to let specific people physically in or out of your space.

Control other people's access to my bedroom

Having a place of your own also means that you can control who can come in or has to stay outside your space, without giving any explanation.

The most common rule, that many young people apply, is that anyone has to knock on the door before entering their room.

"It is my place of my own. If they want to come in, they have to knock and then if I say 'yes, come in', they can come in. That's it. [...] Sometimes I don't answer and like, I'm not in my room or I don't answer because I don't want to see the person or I want to be alone." (Hermionne, France, 16 y.o.)

At the same time, Hermionne (France, 16 y.o.) enjoys that she can invite a good friend to her foster home and they would spend time in her room, where they can share secrets and everything. The same is true for Nicola (England, 16 y.o.), who is giving the interview together with her best friend:

“Nicola: I am going to stay at her house this Saturday.

Friend: And I’m staying at hers Friday. [...]

- Where do you sleep when you come to her place?

Nicola: In the bed with her.

Friend: She sleeps in my bed, don’t you!” (Nicola and friend, England, 16 y.o.)

Sophie as well likes to have friends in her room. However, there are some people coming into her room, which she doesn’t have control over. What she doesn’t like is when her younger brother comes around, because he comes into her room even when the door is closed:

“But my brother comes in my room all the time which is really annoying. [...] Well he wants to play most of the time but it’s really annoying anyway.”

Kimber who lives in a residential home also had issues with controlling her brother:

“He walked in, slapped me in the face, and then we started arguing. [...] because he doesn’t control his strength, he slapped me really violently. So then I told him ‘you get out of my room immediately’

- Did he get out?

Well, he stayed ten minutes. Then I said ‘GO OUT!’ [shouting]” (Kimber, France, 14 y.o.)

Kimber’s brother was older than her, and she had no possibility to keep control over him coming into her room. Her bedroom didn’t keep her safe from his attacks.

These are examples of girls not being able to control their brothers entering their rooms. These look like exceptions to the rule that on most occasions, young people can control who comes in and when.

However, there are still some adults who young people would have to let into their room, without being able to control when they would come.

French young people never mentioned social workers coming to visit them in the foster home, whilst two of the English young people did. This is related to the difference between the English and the French context of foster care. Sophie describes this rule:

“ Yeah. And social worker sometimes, like when... Like normally we’re in the kitchen but when she wants to talk to me one-to-one we go into my bedroom and sit and chat.

- Right. And so you can’t tell her not to come into your bedroom?

No I can’t because it’s kind of my social worker.

- Right. Okay. And is there anybody else who comes into your bedroom?

My carers because they’re my carers. And [foster carer] puts my clothes. Yeah.” (Sophie, England, 14 y.o.)

It appears that controlling who comes into their room is not always that easy, and it is pointed out as an issue for some young people in their everyday lives. In some cases, discussions around the bedroom reveal crucial issues regarding the relationship with the carer. From the interviews with young people and with carers in France and England, it appears that carers would occasionally check on the bedrooms to make sure they are clean and everything is fixed. One carer mentioned that she usually checks once a week, but it happened that the shower

attached to the young person's bedroom fled over but the young person didn't mention that to her. So checking was necessary to avoid this kind of situation.

Although this means that young people have no control over the carer coming into their room while they're away, most of the young people didn't mention this as an issue. Emilie, however, was very upset. She made a picture of how her carer has searched in her suitcase while she was away:

"she searched for the sweets and put them on the bed.

- So, she searched your belongings?

Yes, because I had hidden the sweets in my suitcase so she doesn't find them and throw them away, well she found them." (Emilie, France, 16 y.o.)

Emilie's carer had purposively left a sign showing she'd found something that shouldn't have been there according to the rules in her home.

So, the bedroom, which is supposed to be young people's place, where they can control who can come in, is in fact subject to control from the side of the carers. This was experienced as deeply disturbing by Emilie, when she found out her control over her room, and over her belongings, was very limited. Furthermore, some girls experienced lack of control over their brothers coming in, and in one instance, abusing them violently. This raises the issue of safety, which was not granted to Kimber in her own room.

My bedroom is a place where I keep things that are important to me

From young people's accounts, one more reason why bedrooms were important is that this was the place where they could store things that were precious to them, knowing they would be in a safe place.

Other belongings that young people talked about and made pictures of, were related to their mothers or to their childhood before they were in care. For example, they kept gifts from their mothers. Druidsphère (France, 14 y.o.) for instance had some comics he was reading after his mother gave them to him the last time they met. Lucy (England, 16 y.o.) had her computer from her mother, that she was using during the interview, although she didn't make a picture of it.

Some French girls made photographs of pictures of their mothers, or siblings, which they had on the wall in their room.

« Yeah, we had made a picture because for Christmas, after New Year, we meet at the child protection service, and make photos. We meet, give each other gifts and all this. Mrs xx, she's the educator and psychologist of my little sister, she printed the photos we'd made. Yes I have one in my room. » (Marie, France, 16 y.o.)

While comparing the French and the English sample, it appears that English young people had no pictures of their mothers hanging on their walls.

Sophie had a picture of herself as a baby, when she was with her mum. When she described this picture, she didn't mention her mother, but it was a picture she somehow liked.

"Then if you look up here there's like a picture of me when I was a baby [...]"

Is it the only picture you've got from then?

No it's not but that's the one I have on there because I look cute." (Sophie, England, 14 yo)

So for some French and English young people, the bedroom also serves as a place to keep nice memories from the time before care, or from mothers and siblings with whom they no longer live together.

Like several young people, Alexander (England, 18 y.o.) mentions his room as the place where he uses his computer, but he also has other important things and activities in his room:

“I spend a lot of time in there doing homework or research or making herbs... like herbal remedies and stuff like that, so...”

- Aha... so you're... you're into herbal remedies?

I'm a Pagan.[...] Paganism is a religion. [...] But yeah in my room I've got like my altar which has got like my candles on and my bowls, and then I've got my alchemy table with all my herbs and my tools and stuff like that, and I've got my research table which is just piled with books of different subjects... so astrology, christology, tarot, numerology...” (Alexander, England, 18 y.o.)

He describes his room as a place where he can have all his 'stuff', which is very important, but also, he can follow his own interests, including practicing his religion. Other young people talked about socializing on social media, watching TV, listening to music, or also, drawing, as activities they liked to do in their room.

For instance, Anna (France, 16 y.o.) and Britney (France, 14 y.o.), both like to draw in their rooms, which means they keep their drawing stuff there. Also, Kimber (France, 14 y.o.) likes to listen to the music, and she has a CD-player that she keeps in her room.

Nicola and her friend also mention painting their nails:

“Nicola: We listen to music, don't we?”

Friend: Paint our nails.

Nicola: Paint our nails, listen to music, eat.” (Nicola and friend, England, 16 y.o.)

This suggests that cosmetics, including nail varnish, are part of the belongings that young people keep in their rooms as well. Similarly, most young people talk about the books they have in their rooms, that they like to read when they are on their own.

All these examples of mundane activities and the objects they involve reveal how the bedrooms are crucial in everyday lives of young people for whom it is the only place where all these objects are kept out of reach for anyone else.

Sharing bedrooms

Most of the participants in this research had their own bedroom; however, two girls living in a residential and one in a foster home in France had to share their rooms with another girl. Although the ways in which they describe this differ significantly, they all express a lack of control over major aspects of their everyday life, compared to other participants in this research.

Britney for instance is very clear about how she dislikes the fact she has to share her room:

“- In your room, you can't do what you want?”

Only if it's both of us [...]

- Your room, is it a place you like?

Well, when [roommate] is not there, yes.”

She also explains the reason she doesn't like her roommate:

« *When I was asleep, I had the feeling she was making some noise on purpose [...] Every morning she makes noise and turns on the big light*” (Britney, France, 14 y.o.).

Britney's experience highlights the issue of sharing intimacy with another girl.

Anna, who lives in a foster home, describes a very different experience of room-sharing:

“*We share everything, it's not like 'this is yours; this is mine'. I give her, she gives me.*

- Oh really, so you lend her your clothes?

Yes, *well we share everything*” (Anna, France, 16 y.o.)

Anna describes her roommate, who is slightly younger than her, as a good friend whom she has been living with for three years.

In a similar way, Kimber, who lives in a residential home, feels quite close with her roommate. She made some pictures of her.

« *It's xx – my roommate. [...]*

- So you don't have issues with your friend who shares your room?

We're with her brother who's 17 years old, and my brother who lives here. LOL in fact, we consider each other like brothers and sisters.” (Kimber, France, 14 y.o.)

However, when Anna talks about her summer holidays, she recognizes that spending time apart from one another is nice, too.

“*Well, it feels good because we're always together in the room, 24 hours a day. Sometimes it feels good to stay alone.*” (Anna, France, 16 y.o.)

Anna, who feels very lucky to be in France with such a nice foster carer, is happy to share a room but nevertheless admits that being on her own is a good feeling, too. Britney doesn't like the room-sharing at all. Only Kimber, who considers her roommate like a sister, doesn't mention any issue with this. In all three situations, the girls have not chosen to share a room nor have they chosen whom to share it with, which in itself is a lack of control over their own lives.

Discussion

Among the places mentioned by young people living in care, bedrooms appeared to have a special meaning. Most of the 16 English and French young people who participated in this research chose to talk about their rooms, to show pictures of them, and some chose their rooms as a place where to conduct research interviews.

This gives a slightly different idea than what seems to be usually the case among young people. Literature suggests that adolescents and young adults rather engage with spaces outside the parental home, mostly public places where they can meet with peers and develop their own identity independently from their families (Zaffran, 2010; Danic et al. 2010). In our study, although bedrooms are the most mentioned places in young people's accounts, they are by far not the only ones. Public spaces like cafés, shops, parcs etc., as well as schools, are also mentioned frequently.

However, the study of the everyday lives of NEET young people revealed that among them, too, “many participants spend large amounts of time at their place of residence” (Thompson et al 2014, p. 72). As Thompson and colleagues analyze this, “agency/resistance finds expression in avoidance and self-exclusion, as many of our participants take refuge from

external pressures in familiar surroundings where they have some degree of autonomy.” (Thompson et al 2014, p. 76). This could give an explanation of why bedrooms play such an important role in the everyday life of young people in care, too. Indeed, young people in care can feel more vulnerable than others. Their choices in life are more limited, and they might find they have less agency in public spaces, than their peers.

In this study, the analysis of young people’s narratives shows several features, which make bedrooms so important.

- Young people feel they own their room, for example by decorating it by themselves.
- They like the room, and especially their bed.
- They feel free to be on their own.
- They can choose to do activities they like, to watch the TV, to play games on the computer, to draw or listen to music.
- They are free to socialize on social media, to let other people into their lives, or to switch them off.
- With some exceptions, they can also control who comes in physically, or doesn’t.
- With some exceptions, bedrooms are a safe place where they can keep belongings that are important to them.

Across all these features, the main characteristic is that in their rooms, young people exercise control over little bits of their everyday life. Bedrooms are places in their daily experience, where participation has a concrete meaning: they have a say about what is happening to them in the time they are in the bedroom.

Interestingly, participants mentioned very few rules or restrictions to this feeling of control. Issues around bedrooms arise when they feel they can’t control who comes into their room - for instance, if can’t keep their brother out - or when the carer, who can come in while they’re away, breaks their privacy by searching their belongings.

Most of the features listed above are common to experiences of young people living in care in France and in England. The comparison reveals that mostly, it is the same places that are mentioned as important in their everyday life, and for the same reasons.

However, some differences arise when we look into the challenges they describe. Regarding their bedrooms, a crucial aspect that makes it important is that they have control over who comes in or doesn’t. However, in France we saw that it could still happen that young people aged 14 and 16 had to share their rooms with other young people they had not chosen. This was not the case of any of the English participants.

In both countries, carers would come in, without it being mentioned as an issue, except in one instance, when Emilie realises her carer searched her suitcase while she was away. This kind of example did not appear in the English sample.

Another difference is that English young people watch the television in their bedroom, while none of the French young people had a television in their room. They had to watch television in the living room, which meant they needed to share with others and were being controlled by adults while watching.

Explanations for these differences are not obvious. Regarding the issue of carers controlling young people’s belongings, the sample includes only one instance, and thus doesn’t allow for any generalisation or comparison between the two countries.

Probably, English young people are more trusted by adults, than French young people. Hence, they can have a TV in their room and adults would not feel the need to check what they are watching or at what time they would switch it off and go to sleep.

Also, the finding that France still has shared rooms for young people in care could be linked to the historical fact that children's status in French society has not developed as fast as in the English society.

These two differences point towards an important difference with regards to participation. Indeed, participation of young people is only possible if adults trust them and give them a status where they are respected in their own rights. Differences in young people's everyday experiences between the two countries can be seen in link with historical developments regarding Children's rights.

Lessons for child protection systems that can be learned from these young people's lived experience include attention to the issue of control they can exercise over their own environment. Bedrooms are a basic space where everything starts from. If this is where you keep your most precious belongings, including memories from before care, this place needs to be safe. If it is where you can have activities you like, then this place needs to be private. If this is where you go when you feel down, it needs to be comfortable. Most of all, if young people are to exercise agency, they need to be in control of who comes into their rooms and who doesn't.

All these rules seem to be obvious when we look at the lives of adolescents living in their parents' homes, which is why they are not really highlighted or questioned. However, when we ask young people in care, we realize how important this is, and also how far their everyday experience can be from the one of their peers.

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