Archives of Childhood: Memory-Identity-Rights in Records-Access (MIRRA) project

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Introduction

UK government figures show that on 31 March 2021, 80,850 children and young people were living in out-of-home care in England.[1] Looked after children's lives are documented by social workers, foster carers and others, recorded in 'care files'. Writing from a care leaver's perspective, the UK Access to Care Records Campaign Group expresses both the importance and the inadequacies of current recordkeeping practices in social care. The Group states, 'Knowing where we have come from and what has happened in our past is an important part of making sense of ourselves and our lives. For many people who have been in care, however, the collective family memory of events is often not available and there can be gaps in information or confusion about what actually happened'.[2] Children and young people in care often lack family narratives, especially where their experience has been complex, disrupted or traumatic. The UK independent review of children's social care, *The Case for Change*, found that care experience carries stigma and can weaken identity and that 'Accessing care files … can play a role in the lifelong memory and identity needs of care-experienced people'.[3] Literature in the fields of social work and archival studies suggests that what is written about children and young people in child social care records has significant impacts on lifelong wellbeing, belonging and sense of self, but they may not be able to answer even basic questions, such as 'why was I in care?'. Fivush et al[4] suggest this 'discoherence' can lead to feelings of anger, frustration and guilt, whereas proactive reminiscence and collaborative memory curation, such as life story work, may enhance self-worth and lifelong positive outcomes.[5] A group of researchers at UCL have been

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[1] HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT *Children looked after in England including adoptions.* London: HMSO, 2021. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/6aee986e-0102-40e6-aaab-b8130d7fdf27 [accessed 04/10/2022]

[2] ACCESS TO CARE RECORDS CAMPAIGN GROUP "It's My Journey: It's My Life!" Care Leavers and Access to Social Care Files *The Care Leavers' Association* 2016, http://www.childabuselawyers.com/core/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/CLA-ATR-report-final-feb-2016.pdf [accessed 14.01.21]

[3] INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE *The Case for Change,* 2021, p71. https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/case-for-change.pdf [accessed 28.07.21]

[4] FIVUSH, R., HABERMAS, T., WATERS, T. & ZAMAN, W. The making of autobiographical memory: Intersections of culture, narratives and identity. *International Journal of Psychology* **46**, no. 5, 2011, pp.321–45.

[5] SHOTTON, G. "Remember when…": Exploring the experiences of looked after children and their carers in engaging in collaborative reminiscence. *Adoption & Fostering,* **37**, no. 4, 2013, pp.352–67.

investigating these issues in a UK context, and the experience of care leavers seeking their records is also being explored in many countries, including in Australia and Canada.[6]

MIRRA research project

MIRRA (Memory-Identity-Rights in Records-Access) is a participatory research project based in the Department of Information Studies at UCL, working in partnership with The Care Leavers' Association, the largest UK care leaver-led charity, and with Family Action, a charity which supports families by providing practical, emotional and financial support to those experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social isolation. Two phases of the research were funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) between 2017 and 2021. The study explored the information rights of care experienced adults (that is, people who were in out-of-home care as children) and their need to access personal information about their childhoods, particularly for memory and identity purposes. The research sought to map the complex legislative and regulatory landscape (partly governed by the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation) and the practical challenges faced by care leavers seeking access to their care files so as to develop a better understanding of the experiences of care leavers in accessing records. The project took England as a case study, because of its distinctive legislative regime, but the findings are relevant to the rest of the UK and relate to international research and recordkeeping practice.

The MIRRA study examined, firstly, questions surrounding lifelong access to records for care experienced people, including problems related to redaction (removal of information from the file) and the disclosure of so called third party information, and the provision of associated services and support. Secondly, it considered questions around recordkeeping practices, including the language and content of records, child social care recording systems, including digital systems, and social work practices such as life story work. MIRRA also explored information rights, with a particular emphasis on rights to privacy, confidentiality and access to records and data.[7]

When MIRRA explored care experienced people's motivations for wanting access and their experiences in accessing and reading their records, we found that seeking access to records often coincided strongly with 'significant moments of reflection' such as moving into a new career, being in prison or having a child. However, care leavers often experienced 'significant harm and pain' when reading their files, caused, for example, by redactions described as 'both morally and ethically reprehensible'.

The research was co-produced, initially bringing together four university researchers with six adult care leavers who brought their lived experience to the project. The partnership with the

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[6] WILSON, J. Z., & GOLDING, F. Latent scrutiny: Personal archives as perpetual mementos of the official gaze. *Archival Science*, **16**, no. 1, 2016, pp.93–109. GODDARD, J., MURRAY, S. & DUNCALF, Z. Access to child-care records: A comparative analysis of UK and Australian policy and practice. *British Journal of Social Work,* **43**, no. 4, 2013, pp.759–74. GHADDAR, J. J. The spectre in the archive: Truth, reconciliation, and indigenous archival memory. *Archivaria* **82**, 2016, pp.3–26.

[7] HOYLE, V., SHEPHERD, E., FLINN, A. & LOMAS, E. Child Social-Care Recording and the Information Rights of Care-Experienced People: A Recordkeeping Perspective *The British Journal of Social Work* 49(7), 2019, pp.1856–1874.

Care Leavers' Association was critical in ensuring that the research amplified the voices of those often marginalised in recordkeeping processes.[8]

Four perspectives were captured in the initial study. Care-experienced adults, whose records and lives were the subject of study; child social care practitioners, who create and use the records in their work; information and records professionals, who manage and provide access to records; and academic researchers, who wish to use the archives in their studies. In total over 80 individuals provided data to the project in 2018 and 2019, including twenty-one adult care leavers ranging in age from 18 to 80 years old, who had experienced foster or residential care in England between the 1940s and 2018. Sixteen had accessed their care records; four had chosen not to; and one was in the process of doing so. A qualitative mixed-methods approach was used, comprised of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and workshops. Interviews, focus groups and the discussion elements of workshops were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, and coded using a thematic framework co-created by the research group. Details of the data collection, analysis and findings are further described in four journal articles published about the project.[9]

Practical guidance from MIRRA

MIRRA found that for care leavers seeking access to their records the process is both emotionally and practically traumatic. Care leavers in England must use the generic subject access request process under the UK Data Protection Act 2018 to see their files. They must make a separate request to each organisation who might have acted as their 'corporate parent' and therefore might hold their care files. A child in care may be moved between multiple care settings, spread across several different local authorities and charities, and they were often in and out of care and then returned home for periods throughout their childhood. Even having a 'roadmap' and timetable of foster and institutional care can be hard to establish. Care leavers must then navigate bureaucratic processes that are explained in formal terms, using specialist language, in order to make the access request. When seeking their care files, care leavers are described as 'subjects' of the records and they are beholden to authorities and institutions who might have mistreated and abused them as children to find out about their childhood. It can be a traumatic and emotional experience which may take years to pursue. Care leavers are not usually offered the emotional support they may need and given little practical guidance about how to access their records.

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[8] CASWELL, Michelle "Feeling Liberatory Memory Work: On the archival uses of joy and anger." *Archivaria* 90, 2020, pp. 148-164.

[9] HOYLE, V., SHEPHERD, E., FLINN, A. & LOMAS, E. Child Social-Care Recording and the Information Rights of Care-Experienced People: A Recordkeeping Perspective *The British Journal of Social Work* 49(7), 2019, pp.1856–1874. HOYLE, V., SHEPHERD, E., LOMAS, E., FLINN, A. Recordkeeping and the life-long memory and identity needs of care-experienced children and young people. *Child and Family Social Work*. 25(4), 2020, pp. 935-945. SHEPHERD, E., HOYLE, V., LOMAS, E., FLINN, A., SEXTON, A. Towards a Human-Centred Participatory Approach to Child Social Care Recordkeeping. *Archival Science*. 20(4), 2020, pp. 307-325. LOMAS, E., SHEPHERD, E., HOYLE, V., SEXTON, A., & FLINN, A. A framework for person-centred recordkeeping drawn through the lens of out-of-home childcare contexts. *Archivaria*, 94, 2022, (Special Issue on Person-Centred Archival Theory and Practice).

To help fill this gap, MIRRA co-produced resources for social workers[10] and free publicly available guidance for care experienced people on how to access their care file.[11] A free web resource, *FamilyConnect*, based on MIRRA research findings has been produced by Family Action, a charity which supports families. *FamilyConnect* helps adults who have been adopted or in care to find answers to questions about their origins, help understand inherited health risks, make important life choices and understand more about why they were separated from their birth family, understand their legal rights when accessing their birth and care records, what they can expect to receive and how to go about searching for information in the first place, providing information, guidance, support and signposting to sources of help.

MIRRA also developed a set of Principles for Caring Recordkeeping in Child Social Care.[12] In developing the framework of principles, a new approach to child social care recordkeeping was conceptualised, which combined existing participatory continuum models with a capabilities approach to social work.[13] The first Principle is that "Care-experienced people should be able to participate in every stage of child social care recordkeeping, if they choose; including the creation of records while they're in care, the management of records during the period of retention, and the provision of access to records at any stage of life". Children in care are situated within organizational systems which act as corporate surrogate parents. These systems are complex and include sometimes conflicting rights and requirements of diverse actors including social workers, information and records managers and researchers, alongside the information rights of care experienced people. MIRRA's work requires a rethink of the relationships and responsibilities around the records and systems to build a framework which enables person-centred recordkeeping for child social care.

MIRRA+: developing a children's diary app

A second phase of the study, also funded by AHRC, Memory - Identity - Rights in Records - Access: Embedding Participatory Recordkeeping in Child Social Care (MIRRA+) was carried out in 2020-2021. As the first phase of MIRRA research demonstrated, records are a vital emotional resource, especially for care experienced people themselves in understanding their own life. Digital systems are usually proprietary, procured from commercial providers, and are rarely interoperable with the software from competing vendors used in adjacent services (such as health, education or youth justice), making the information they contain difficult to share. They can only be accessed by a limited number of individuals, not normally including the looked after child, exacerbating a work culture which sees the record as internal, administrative and bureaucratic. MIRRA+, therefore worked with a commercial partner, OLM Systems, a major vendor in the social care systems market, to develop a specification for a digital participatory recordkeeping application (app) designed to enable

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[10] BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS *Recording in Children's Social Work guide*, 2020. https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_recording_in_childrens_social_work_aug_2020.pdf [accessed 11.12.20]

[11] FAMILY ACTION *FamilyConnect*, 2022, https://www.familyconnect.org.uk/ [accessed 01/10/2022]

[12] LOMAS, E., SHEPHERD, E., HOYLE, V., SEXTON, A., & FLINN, A. A framework for person-centred recordkeeping drawn through the lens of out-of-home childcare contexts. *Archivaria*, 94, 2022, (Special Issue on Person-Centred Archival Theory and Practice).

[13] SHEPHERD, E., HOYLE, V., LOMAS, E., FLINN, A., SEXTON, A. Towards a Human-Centred Participatory Approach to Child Social Care Recordkeeping. *Archival Science*. 20(4), 2020, pp.307-325.

children, young people and their families to collaborate in the creation and content of records while they are in care. If developed commercially, this would help to alleviate the disconnection, isolation and disempowerment care leavers face and enable their voices to be captured and their experiences and feelings centralised. The development of the specification and first stage of the app will be the focus of the rest of this article.

The aim of this follow-on project was to create an open-source specification for a digital social care recording system which takes into account the recordkeeping needs of multiple stakeholders and agents, most especially enabling children in care to record their own feelings and thoughts. The published specification is now available for use by system developers as a roadmap for software design, acting as a basis for estimating product development costs, assessing associated risks and developing implementation schedules.[14] This phase of the research meant consulting children and young people in care about the specification and what it ought to include. Working with people under age 18 or other 'vulnerable' populations is regarded by university ethics committees as requiring special protocols and more rigorous evaluation. In order to obtain ethics approval, possible risks needed to be identified, such as the chance of negative feelings provoked by recounting care experiences. As the second phase of the MIRRA project focused more on the future of recording than on past experiences this risk was considered low. However, details of support organisations to which participants could be referred for help and support were made available. Other risks, such as for service providers including social workers that of disclosing information or opinions that could be harmful to their professional status or career progression, were mitigated by anonymity protocols. Participants had the choice of their contributions being anonymised, although recognising, as in phase one of the MIRRA project, that as many care leavers felt their voices had not been heard whilst they were in the care system (and certainly not in their records) they were offered the opportunity to use their own identities. They were able to leave the research at any time, without giving a reason, and have any contributions deleted. In order to talk to young people under age 18, the researchers needed to find gatekeepers to facilitate access to them (i.e. adults in a position to identify children in care under their jurisdiction who might be willing to take part in the research, such as social work managers or foster carers), as well as the guardians of the young people (i.e. adults who would sit with the young person in loco parentis during the user testing and who would discuss the research with them to assess the young person's understanding of the process). Researchers also had to assess a child participant's capacity to consent to take part in the research, by consideration of issues including, the child's age, maturity and mental capacity; their understanding of the research and their role in it and the advantages, disadvantages, risks, and implications of their decision to take part or decline; how well they understand any advice or information they had been given; and their ability to explain their reasoning and decision making. The gatekeepers had a fairly intimate knowledge and understanding of the people in their care and were able to help the researchers assess these issues.

Data collection in phase two also included two online knowledge exchange focus groups involving adult participants from the first phase of MIRRA. These focus groups (one of care

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[14] SHEPHERD, E, SEXTON, A, LOMAS, E, WILLIAMS, P, DENTON, M, & MARCHANT, T. *MIRRA app SRS: Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access Research Project: a participatory recordkeeping application Software Requirements Specification (SRS),* 2021. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5599430 [accessed 04/10/2022]

leavers, the other of social workers and information professionals) discussed experiences of accessing and reading care files, to inform the development of the participatory app. Three issues caused most anxiety. First, accessing care records can be an upsetting and stressful process, since files may include negative and critical information, often hitherto unknown and possibly emotionally damaging, and exacerbated by the fact that the voice of the young person in care may be absent or mis-represented. Secondly, care files are often heavily bureaucratic and seldom include tangible memory objects, photographs, letters, school certificates and so on. Thirdly, and most importantly, the scale and amount of redacted material meant that often care leavers could not discover what had happened to them in care. One person commented, 'My record was so heavily redacted it might just have been a blank piece of paper', while another was given a family tree with names redacted.

For the social workers and information professionals involved, the key concerns were deciding on age-appropriate levels of access to the file, with fuller access given to older children, alongside practical considerations in terms of ensuring record retention and being able to provide access. Professionals displayed considerable support for a participatory recordkeeping system and for better training in ways of recording and writing in child centred ways to help those accessing records later to understand the files. As with care leavers, social work and information professionals felt considerable stress around redaction and different views were expressed on legal and privacy aspects, a tension between openness and the rights of different parties to privacy. Redaction needs to be explained and justified when it is undertaken, but redaction practice is often quite subjective and influenced by organisational attitudes.

Based on the workshops, MIRRA+ developed a problem statement as a basis for the app specification development. The problem is expressed as four questions: *Who is this for*? For looked after children aged 13-17; *What do we want to enable?* They may not have the tools, experience, or opportunity to express themselves; *When/where will it be used?* When children are trying to explain their lives and what they're feeling, what's happening to them, and what's important to them; *Why does this matter?* It provides autonomy over their own life story as it gives them control and enables them to speak for themselves in the care file.

The specification developed was for a child diary app which can be given to a child in care to use on their phone or table. For example, the greetings page invites the child to say how they are feeling that day and write something about why; customisation or personalisation enables them to change their picture, background colour, mood emojis and so on; they can make a journal entry by adding text, photo, drawing or video, and they are encouraged to think of good things about the day. Importantly, the child can then choose which entries they share with their social worker, and what they choose to share is then formally captured as part of their care file and is preserved and made accessible as part of the official social work recording system.

As a next stage of development, MIRRA+ took the published specification to a group of computer science students at UCL, who built a prototype app as a piece of business-supported project work as part of their Masters degree. They were asked to prototype a diary app for use by children in care (13-17 year olds) to record and keep their memories in a safe place to support the development of their identity now and throughout their lifetime. They were given some principles to work within, including, creating a safe, simple way for a young

person in care to record a digital personalised diary, parts of which could be shared with their social worker or carers. Another key principle was to give the young person control over content and appearance, through the personalisation features in the app where customisation can be applied. The app uses gamification for engagement as a method to nurture and help the young person in getting the most from it. The data generated by the app will be the responsibility of the corporate parent to manage over time. The interface and features include greetings page, personalisation, posting and creating journals, journal reflection, engagement and rewards, and archive or delete options. An important aspect of control for the child is to decide what is shared with their social worker. If the child decides to share a journal entry, it would be captured in the official social care file, which the corporate parent has an obligation to preserve and provide access to, thus, ultimately enabling the child's voice to be in the file very directly. It might be possible to delay formal retention for a period of time in case the young person decides to delete something they have posted, treating new posts as provisional until a final decision to retain it as part of the record a few weeks later.

The computer science students developed some additional principles of their own to which they adhered to improve the design. For example, aesthetic and minimalist design means all screens display only the necessary information and components to navigate around the app, too much clutter and information could inhibit memory retrieval of relevant information; large fonts are used with icons and a colour scheme designed to appeal to all ages between 13-17 and text is replaced with icons where possible for faster navigation. To improve user control and freedom, the design ensured backward steps are possible, including deleting or editing recent diary entries and the app is designed for the 'impatient user' by allowing for quick navigation and completion of tasks. Users maintain control over who their posts can be shared with, although the mechanisms for this are not yet developed. Visibility includes push notifications to inform users where operations have been completed and display loading screens so users understand the current state of system operations. Gamification was employed enabling users to unlock achievements by earning reward 'stars' when they create new diary entries, encouraging continued use. Users can opt out of the achievements if they wish to do so as some older users might not be incentivised by such rewards. This is a colourful and interactive design prototype of the children's diary app which, we hope, users will find both attractive and intuitive. The MIRRA+ team is looking for further ways to build a commercial app for the market.

Future considerations

Further work is needed on the prototype app. The app as it stands is quite cartoon-based on style and likely to appeal to younger age cohorts, so different presentations of the app is needed for different age groups. At present, the prototype enables only limited posting media and ideally, it would allow for audio recording, dictation, short video clips, handwriting and drawings, although these multimedia would have technical implications. Gamification seems to be an important way to encourage children to use the app, but there are many other ways in which gamification functionality can be developed, with more personalisation, such as being able to create tags rather than drawing them from a pre-existing library. Additions would need further user testing for feedback on preferences and ease of use.

The prototype is compatible with the most common operating systems, iOS and Android, but a wider range of compatible devices and compatibility tests are needed. In order to enable data transfer and data sharing with a social worker from the app, further work would be needed on integration with existing case management systems, and consideration of the technical ways to achieve this, which have not yet been addressed.

Before the specification or the prototype app can be delivered to market as a module which can be integrated into an existing social work recording system, several other issues need to be addressed and developed. In terms of the content of the app, two major considerations are, first, the extent to which, if at all, content would need to be moderated by an adult, for safety, privacy or other reasons, and secondly, the active involvement in content creation by people other than the child 'app owner', such as a social worker or relative. Regarding the first, a child might upload content that, for various reasons, might be considered inappropriate or malicious, deliberately or inadvertently. This raises the prospect of moderation, perhaps by the social worker or foster carer, which might seem to negate the idea of autonomous, youth-led contributions to care records, nevertheless moderation has become very widespread across social media. Secondly, and related to this, is the idea of the extent to which, if at all, the young person and their relative or support worker could co-create an entry. Some children (especially younger ones) might enjoy co-creation, or might allow others to upload content such as a photo of a school event or party invitation and give it to the young person for approval and possible retention. Such a participatory approach coincides with initiatives such as Watts's 'Me and My World' model for communication between professional support workers and children.[15] Watts's work encourages social workers to make the care records more participatory, by writing directly to the child, thus encouraging 'a simple, direct writing style with [less] jargon and acronyms'. Foster carers are encouraged to write a letter every six months highlighting 'magic moments in family life… key experiences for the child and any worries and help'.[16] These activities could be undertaken collaboratively with the child, using the app as the medium of expression and making use of the multi-media possibilities.

Conclusion

So far, the MIRRA research project has investigated issues of the lifelong value to care leavers of the records created about them while they were in out-of-home care as children, using a participatory approach which seeks to allow previously unheard voices of care leavers to be expressed. Although the research focused on England as a case study, increasingly around the world work continues to allow the voices of the marginalised and disadvantaged in society to be heard. Child social care recording reflects care leavers' broader experience of powerlessness and lack of self-determination over their own lives, an inequality which may have long term impacts on personal history, identity and belonging. Social workers and information professionals need to reflect on recording practices within their organisation and

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[15] WATTS, R. *Me and My World: Developing Practice and Procedure with Children in Care.* Brighton and Hove City Council/University of Sussex, 2020. WATTS, R. (2021): Relationships, Reviews and Recording: Developing Practice for Children in Care, *Practice: Social work in action*, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2021.1889488 [accessed 12.07.21]

[16] WATTS, R. *Me and My World: Developing Practice and Procedure with Children in Care.* Brighton and Hove City Council/University of Sussex, 2020, pp.5, 10.

to reframe children's social care recording as a caring, human-centred activity rather than bureaucratic necessity. The app development discussed in this paper propose one possible manifestation of a more inclusive and participatory approach to creating care records which would better reflect the lives of those in care.

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Summary of the article (181 words)

Children and young people who live in out-of-home care, such as with foster parents, in children's homes and other children's care settings, looked after by local authorities or children's charities, often suffer lifelong impacts on their wellbeing, belonging and sense of self and identity. Care experienced people may lack family narratives, especially where their experience has been complex, disrupted or traumatic. Looked after children's lives are documented by social workers, foster carers and others, recorded in 'care files'. Literature in the fields of social work and archival studies suggests that what is written about children and young people in child social care records has significant impacts on them throughout their lives, and yet they may not be able to answer even basic questions, such as 'why was I in care?'. MIRRA (Memory-Identity-Rights in Records-Access) is a participatory research project based in the Department of Information Studies at UCL which has been investigating

the experience of care leavers seeking their records in England, but care leavers rights in records is also being explored in many other countries, including in Australia and Canada.