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# Developing care experienced young peoples' participation as peer researchers in an inter-disciplinary study: applying the 'Ability-Motivation-Opportunity' framework

## Kinder- und Jugendhilfe und die Klimakrise – Konzeptionelle Erweiterungen durch sozial-ökologische und sozialräumliche Ansätze

Amy Lynch<sup>a</sup>, Seana Friel<sup>b</sup>, Emily R. Munro<sup>b</sup>, Mariam Sultana<sup>a</sup>, CJ Hamilton<sup>a</sup>, Gary Kerridge<sup>a</sup>, Rosie Oswick<sup>a</sup>, Tia Pillay Mitchell<sup>a</sup>, Hayley Alderson<sup>c</sup>, Carrie Harrop<sup>d</sup>, Ruth McGovern<sup>c</sup>, Jibril Mohamoud<sup>a</sup>, Deborah Smart<sup>c</sup> and Graeme Currie<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK; <sup>b</sup>Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK; <sup>c</sup>Population Health Sciences Institute, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; <sup>d</sup>Care Leavers' Association, Manchester, UK

### ABSTRACT

There is a growing trend towards the use of participatory methods, within health and social care research and an increase in the inclusion of Peer Researchers in leaving care studies internationally. Whilst multiple benefits have been identified, they are not automatic and consideration also needs to be given to the complexities involved and how challenges might be mitigated. This paper focuses on the participation of care-experienced young people as Peer Researchers in an inter-disciplinary study examining how to sustain, scale and spread innovation to support young people's transitions from care. It shares learning from a nested action research study that was co-developed to explore and support Peer Researchers' contribution to and participation in the wider study. Key learning from the qualitative survey and focus groups centred on the discovery and application of the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity ('A-M-O') theoretical framework [Applebaum, E., Bailey, T., Berg, P., & Kalleberg, A. L. (2000). *Manufacturing advantage: why high performance work systems pay off*. ILR Press.] and its use to explore, analyse, reflect on and develop the Peer Researcher role. The application of A-M-O as an analytical and reflective tool offers a valuable and practical way to develop Peer Researchers' contribution to and participation in and beyond health and social care research studies.

### ABSTRAKT

Dieser Artikel beginnt mit einer kurzen Darstellung der gegenwärtigen sozial-ökologischen Krise und ihrer zentralen Auswirkungen auf die Lebensbedingungen von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Er reflektiert dann diese herausfordernde strukturelle und entwicklungsbezogene Situation innerhalb der Perspektiven der Sozialen Arbeit, der Sozialpädagogik, der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe und der neueren Konzepte der sozial-

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**CONTACT** Amy Lynch  amy.lynch@wbs.ac.uk  Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Scarman Rd, Coventry, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

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ökologischen Sozialen Arbeit. Danach werden sozialräumliche Ansätze der Sozialen Arbeit vorgestellt und in Bezug auf ihre Potenziale und Begrenzungen der Adressierung sozial-ökologischer Probleme reflektiert. Das letzte Kapitel stellt dann erste Ausblicke bereit, wie sozial-ökologische und sozialräumliche Ansätze in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe implementiert werden könnten, um die gegenwärtigen Herausforderungen und Bedarfe zu adressieren.

## Introduction

This paper contributes to developing understanding of the participatory research approach of including care-experienced young people as Peer Researchers, drawing on experiences in a large inter-disciplinary academic research study in England. It shares learning from a co-designed action research study that led to the identification and application of the ability-motivation-opportunity (A-M-O) theory from human resource management, which explains relationships between individual factors, human resource processes and organisational performance (Applebaum et al., 2000; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016). Application of A-M-O created valuable learning that supported Peer Researchers' involvement in and contribution to the wider study.

### *Peer research as a participatory approach in leaving care studies*

The growth in the application of participatory approaches in health and social care research represents increased recognition of the value of collaborations with community members and service users to co-produce research and develop new forms of understanding (Bell et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2019). In leaving care studies, aligned with the increasing emphasis on rights-based research agendas, there has been a shift away from simply *consulting with* young people, towards more active, deeper and inclusive approaches, involving *working with* those with lived experience as Peer Researchers (Dixon et al., 2019).

Peer research is a method that enables those with 'insider' knowledge of the subject, communities and context that is the focus of a study to take on the role of the researcher in academic study teams (Bell et al., 2021). In leaving care studies, Peer Researchers are care-experienced young people who contribute their lived experiences and perspectives as co-researchers (Dixon et al., 2019). The nature and extent of the Peer Research role across the research cycle varies between studies and may include: establishing topics of enquiry; framing research questions; designing materials; conducting interviews or focus groups; contributing to data analysis; creating outputs, co-delivering presentations and refining recommendations (Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2016, 2020; Liabo, 2018; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Mannay et al., 2019; Stein & Slamnescu, 2012; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014; Verweijen-Slamnescu & Bowley, 2014; Walter et al., 2023).

Whilst the potential benefits of participatory methods including Peer Research are widely recognised they are 'not automatic' (Lushey & Munro, 2015, p. 522). Inherent complexities and emergent challenges require careful management and the investment of appropriate resources (Bell et al., 2021; Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Oliver et al., 2019).

Widely recognised potential benefits to the academic research process of facilitating the inclusion of the perspectives and lived experiences of community members and people who use services, are to generate a deeper understanding of issues, increase relevance and credibility and enhance impact for policy and practice (Bell et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2019). In care leaving Peer Research studies, these benefits have been related to the use of more accessible and less-stigmatising language, rapport-building, potential to reach young people who might be reluctant to participate otherwise; and research participants feeling more at ease and empowered (Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020; Lushey & Munro, 2015). An inherent risk to quality relates to the relatively less-developed research skills of Peer Researchers. There is a need to focus on and support the development of Peer

Researcher skills by attending to transferable skills in the recruitment process and providing initial and ongoing research training (Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Walter et al., 2023).

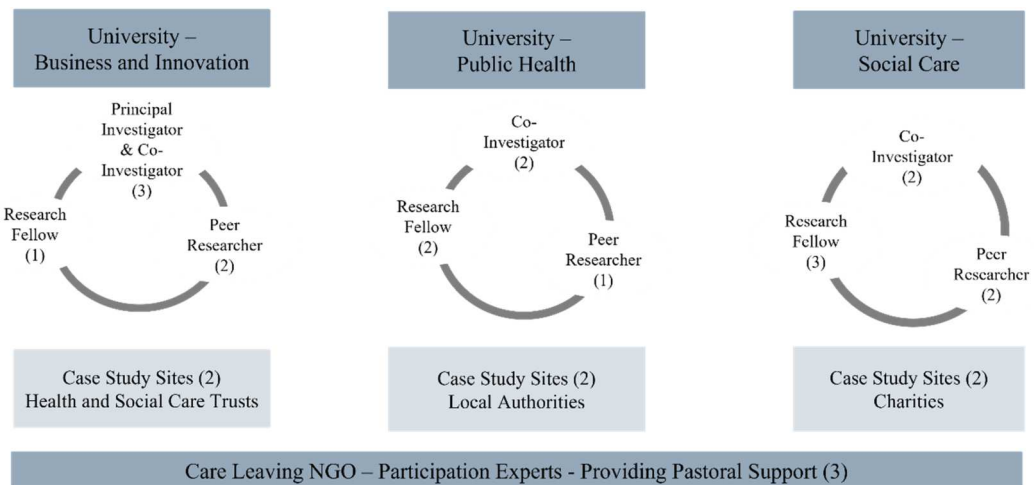
Strong advocacy for Peer Research and related approaches is underpinned by the implicit values of empowerment and inclusion, with less-discussed and more-political benefits associated with developing more democratic research processes (Oliver et al., 2019). Hamilton and colleagues (2019) reflected on how young people's experiences of their perspectives being valued during co-production processes, counteracted prior judgements of vulnerability, immaturity, or naivety in relation to the relevance and validity of their views and contributions to society, leading to development of self-worth. In care leaving studies, Peer Researchers have increased confidence, developed new employability skills and experienced their participation as therapeutic. The therapeutic benefit associated with the opportunity to contextualise leaving care experiences is related to ethical risks to wellbeing during discussions of sensitive topics in interviews, both for participants and Peer Researchers, that require the careful development of ethical protocols and provision of support (Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2016, 2020; Stein & Slamnescu, 2012; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014; Verweijen-Slamnescu & Bowley, 2014).

Focussing on inclusion and empowerment indicate the complexities of enacting these principles and the importance of the research environment. A focus on inclusion relates to diversity of representation and the heterogeneous nature of the care-experienced community, with challenges experienced in representing the broad range of care leavers' voices in Peer Researcher positions (Dixon et al., 2019). Tensions around inherent power imbalances concern academic researchers dominating processes and Peer Researchers feeling 'ignored or used' rather than empowered (Oliver et al., 2019, p. 6). In care leaving studies, this issue has been identified in relation to Peer Researchers' unequal access to professional development opportunities (Kelly et al., 2020). A focus on the research environment emphasises the importance of an inclusive ethos, where academic researchers approach the collaboration with Peer Researchers with respect and humility, value their contributions, focus on relationship building, provide strong communication channels, commit resources and adopt a reflexive and flexible approach surrounding the nature and extent of Peer Researchers' involvement (Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020; Liabo, 2018; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014; Walter et al., 2023). For researchers supporting and supervising Peer Researchers, challenges are associated with investment in time and required inter-personal skills and emotional labour of developing relationships, which are not always recognised, resourced and valued in funding and design processes (Kelly et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2019; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014).

With active approaches to co-production, including Peer Research in leaving care studies, still in their infancy, there are unanswered questions around resources required, challenges encountered, strategies employed and outcomes achieved (Dixon et al., 2019; Oliver et al., 2019). A consensus about key features that make it an 'effective' approach 'has not been reached' and there is a need to be 'more reflective and generate more empirical evidence about the processes and outcomes' (Oliver et al., 2019, p. 8). This paper aims to contribute to this important field by sharing learning from empirical experiences in an inter-disciplinary leaving care study that included a Peer Researcher approach.

### ***The inter-disciplinary care leaving study***

A Peer Researcher approach was incorporated in the design of our inter-disciplinary study that aimed to develop understanding of how to sustain, scale and spread innovations for young people leaving statutory care. The study was conducted in England between 2020 and 2024. The design incorporated an initial literature review, exploratory strategic interviews and a core Case Study approach, including interviews and observations with stakeholders including care-experienced young people. Data were analysed thematically and included whole research team workshops. Ethical approval was granted by the lead university (Reference IASR 25/19) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services.



**Figure 1.** Study structure.

The study structure is outlined in [Figure 1](#). Inter-disciplinary expertise in business and innovation, social care and public health was drawn from three universities. Participation Experts from a care leaver-led charity supported Peer Researchers' participation. The universities and charities were geographically dispersed across England. Over the course of the study, the team comprised 22 individuals in five roles across four organisations, including a PhD student, with a research interest in participation, who had arms-length involvement. Resources permitted each university to employ one full time Research Fellow (the higher number in two of the universities reflected job sharing arrangements and one leaver/joiner). There were six empirical case study sites. These were organisations in England that had implemented innovations for young people leaving care; two health and social care partnerships, two local authorities and two national charities. Researchers at each university were responsible for two case studies according to geographical location and typology.

As the empirical work coincided with COVID-19 restrictions, most activities were facilitated by virtual communication platforms. Remote-working continued throughout the study period, helping overcome the challenge of geographic dispersion, with the inclusion of some in-person activities when practicable.

### **Peer researcher role in the study**

Drawing on the experience of a co-investigator (Lushey & Munro, 2015), Peer Research was incorporated in the study design. The inclusion of Peer Researchers was prioritised within available resources, to coincide with the Case Study phase to ensure most effective input, with exclusion from design, planning and initial research phases recognised as a limitation. The Peer Researcher recruitment process involved designing and formally grading the job description, confirming employment structure and salary and engaging in promotional activity amongst networks to reach care-experienced young people. The role incorporated employment by the lead university with a temporary, flexible part-time contract, with hours of up to 10 hours per month, from the second year of the study until its end. Six young people with care experience expressed interest and met virtually with members of the academic team to discuss the role. One young person decided not to pursue the role due to the impact of the Peer Researcher employment status and pay on their receipt of government financial support and risks to their tenancy.

Five young people were employed, all with lived experience of the English care system, recruited through university networks, in positions as undergraduate students and aged between 18 and 25 years. Demographic diversity related to gender, race and ethnicity, with representation from Asian-,

Black – and White – British groups. One of the Peer Researchers had previous experience of supporting research and three had additional part-time employment. Peer Researchers' duration of involvement ranged from 20 to 36 months, with two leaving the study following graduation to pursue full-time employment and three being involved until the latter stages.

A virtual 10-week induction programme introduced the study, research methodology and ethics, and was attended by all Peer Researchers. A later half-day in-person workshop, attended by three Peer Researchers, focused on analytic methods.

Whilst the Peer Researchers were all employed by the lead university, they were each assigned to work with a Research Fellow at one of the three universities with a specific Case Study focus and offered pastoral support by Participation Experts. Peer Researchers met with Research Fellows throughout the study to plan and review involvement and attended group and one-to-one meetings with Participation Experts. Increased attention to Peer Researchers' wellbeing in the context of Covid-19 and remote working was reflected by regular communication from Research Fellows using WhatsApp and text messages. Peer Researchers' participation included attending and contributing to research governance meetings, including at the case study sites; reviewing literature; preparing information and consent materials; shadowing, co-delivering and leading interviews with their supervising Research Fellow; reviewing analytical themes; and presenting research findings. There was some variation within this broad range of activities between universities, case study sites and amongst the five Peer Researchers.

## Method

The research team co-designed an internally focused nested action research study (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) to explore and develop the contributions of the Peer Researcher position in the wider study. The process was underpinned by a shared commitment to supporting Peer Researchers' participation with a collaborative, reflective and focused approach, strengthened by previous experiences of participatory approaches including peer research (Alderson et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020; Lushey & Munro, 2015) and an awareness of the potential challenges presented by the large inter-disciplinary research team and remote working context. Following an initial meeting to explore appropriate research methods, the emergent three-phase process was conducted over 28 months (Figure 2). Ethical issues were explored in relation to power and anonymity and additional ethical approval was granted by the university providing expertise in social care research (IASR\_25/

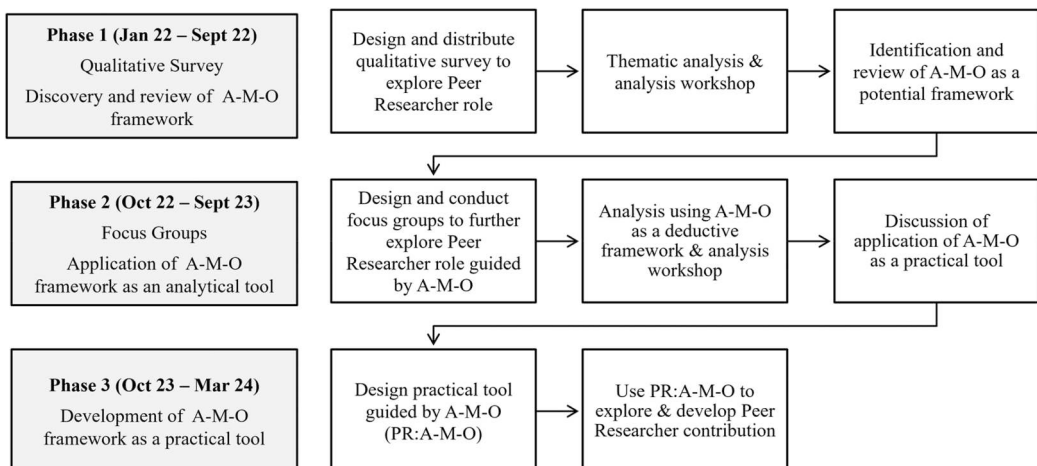


Figure 2. Overview of research process.



19). The nested study supported reflection on areas of strength and areas for development and led to addressing challenges and identifying and applying A-M-O theory (Applebaum et al., 2000; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016). The application of A-M-O as both an analytical device and practice tool enabled exploration and development of the contributions of the Peer Researcher position in the wider study.

### ***Phase one: Qualitative Survey (January 2022 – September 2022)***

The 10-question qualitative survey (Braun et al., 2021) included profile information, limited to the participant's role to protect anonymity, and focus on positive experiences, challenges and areas for development of the Peer Researcher position. It was distributed using an online software tool (Qualtrix) to 21 members of the study team. There were 19 responses, with all roles represented. The analytical process was led by the PhD student, guided by inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and enhanced by an online member reflection workshop. During discussion of themes relating to areas of strength and development at the workshop, the A-M-O framework (Applebaum et al., 2000) was identified. Subsequent review and discussion in a further workshop led to the decision to apply A-M-O as an analytic framework in Phase Two. All Peer Researchers were involved in one or more aspects of Phase One, including in reviewing the questionnaire, responding to the survey, attending the workshops and reviewing and presenting the A-M-O theory.

### ***Phase two: Online focus groups (October 2022 – September 2023)***

Phase Two incorporated online focus groups (Keemink et al., 2022) designed to be conducted separately by role (Research Fellows and Participation Experts; Peer Researchers; Principal Investigators/Co-Investigators) and facilitated by the PhD Researcher. This formation aimed to protect anonymity and mitigate the potential impact of power differentials between roles in restricting opportunities for Peer Researchers to feel safe to contribute their views. The topic guide was designed to explore the elements of ability, motivation and opportunity in relation to what was working well, challenges and areas for development in the Peer Researcher role.

Two focus groups were conducted, each of one hour duration. Following an informed consent process, the focus groups were audio recorded and the PhD Researcher offered a space at the end of the focus group for individual discussion. The first focus group was attended by three Peer Researchers and the second by four Research Fellows and a Participation Expert. Following logistical challenges that prevented the Principal/Co – Investigator focus group from being convened, the topic guide was edited as a series of reflective prompts and emailed to three senior members of the study team, and a Research Fellow who was unable to attend the second focus group. Their written reflections (10 questions; one to two pages of responses) were synthesised anonymously by the PhD Researcher and interpreted alongside the transcripts using A-M-O as a deductive framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Discussion in workshop focused on strengths and areas for development of the Peer Researcher role, relating to ability, motivation and opportunity, and the potential value of using the framework as a practical tool. All Peer Researchers were involved in one or more aspects of Phase Two, including in designing the configuration and topic guide, participating, creating a transcript, analysing the themes and attending the workshop.

### ***Phase three: Developing and using a reflective tool 'PR: A-M-O' (October 2023 to March 2024)***

The Peer Researcher A-M-O Reflective Tool, PR:A-M-O, was co-designed with a series of reflective questions around the three elements of ability, motivation and opportunity to use to enhance Peer Researchers' experiences and contributions in the wider study. PR: A-M-O aimed to help identify and review possible opportunities (O) that would be motivating (M) for each Peer Researcher,

including focusing on what might be required to support their ability (A) to engage with the opportunity. Over the last six months of the study, three Peer Researchers used PR: A-M-O in reflective planning and review conversations with a Research Fellow.

### Findings

Three key areas of learning are outlined. First, an overview of the A-M-O framework (Applebaum et al., 2000; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016) identified in Phase One. Second, its application as an analytic framework to develop understanding of the strengths and areas for development of the Peer Researcher role in Phase Two, including synthesis of the survey findings from Phase 1. Third, the reflective practice tool, PR: A-M-O, developed in Phase Three, with two illustrative examples.

### Overview of the Ability- Motivation-Opportunity Theory (A-M-O)

The A-M-O theoretical framework identified in Phase One, with origins in human resource management (HRM), highlights how HRM practices that support employees’ ability, motivation and opportunity contribute to enhanced performance at both individual and organisational levels (Figure 3; Applebaum et al., 2000). The framework’s widespread acceptance and application by HRM experts across organisational sectors relates to pragmatic value in illuminating HRM practices that support individuals’ abilities, motivations and opportunities (Marin-García & Thomas, 2016).

The theoretical definitions for ‘ability’, ‘motivation’ and ‘opportunity’ are outlined in Table 1. alongside examples of HRM practices that have been shown in business research to enhance each element and contribute to individual and organisational high performance (Marin-García & Thomas, 2016). Examples of ‘enhancing practices’ that contribute to individual high performance (Marin-García & Thomas, 2016, p. 1045) include formal and informal training and development

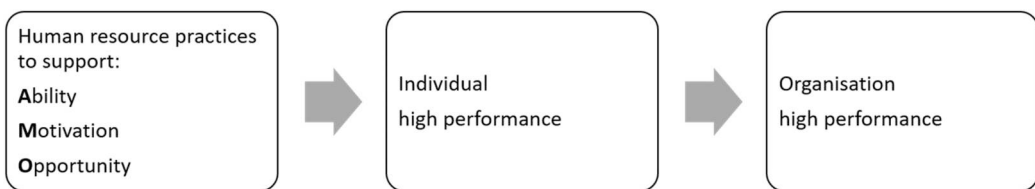


Figure 3. A-M-O Framework (developed from Applebaum et al., 2000).

Table 1. Ability Motivation Opportunity (A-M-O) Framework and Enhancing Practices.

Dimension	Ability	Motivation	Opportunity
Definition	Capacity enabling an individual to engage in a particular task successfully	Extent to which an individual wants to engage in certain activities	Set of circumstances that makes it possible for an individual to participate
HRM practices to enhance individual and organisational performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment and selection: education and experience</li> <li>• Training and development: formal and informal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extrinsic: economic rewards, recognition, appraisal.</li> <li>• Intrinsic: interests and values.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job design e.g. role and responsibilities.</li> <li>• Autonomy enhancing e.g. team working, flat hierarchies, joint decision-making, flexibility.</li> <li>• Knowledge-sharing e.g. communication, fostering employee voice.</li> </ul>

Developed from Marin-García & Thomas, 2016, pp. 1063–1065.



that supports an individual's ability (A) to develop skills to perform well at their job; receiving a thank you email from a manager provides recognition as an extrinsic motivating factor (M) that supports an individual to engage positively with work; and flexible team working with strong communication practices creates opportunities (O) for individuals to participate. In turn, individual high-performance leads to organisational high-performance, including financial, operational and human resource outcomes such as 'increased profit', 'service quality', 'trust in management', 'employee commitment' and 'innovation' with a positive impact on organisations becoming 'more participative and flexible' (Marin-García & Thomas, 2016, p. 1069).

Although Table 1 provides clear examples of enhancing practices to guide employers, further considerations have been identified. First, there is recognition that to be effective, individual employees need to perceive these practices as subjectively meaningful (Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016, p. 1069). Second, although the three elements are portrayed discretely, an element of interactivity is assumed, with some debate around the nature of the relationships between them (Marin-García & Thomas, 2016). Third, there is a need to attend to wider contextual factors (Boselie et al., 2005; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016).

### *Application of A-M-O as a deductive analytical framework*

Application of A-M-O as a deductive analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enabled a clear outline of strengths and areas for development in respect of ability, motivation and opportunities relating to the Peer Researcher role to be created (Table 2). 'Ability' highlighted the benefits and limitations of the recruitment and selection process through university networks, the importance of providing induction training and informal ongoing support to meet Peer Researchers' needs, and the impact of competing priorities and life events. 'Motivation' emphasised the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic individual factors, including the wider aims of the study to improve care leavers' experiences. 'Opportunity' highlighted elements of the study design and knowledge and autonomy practices, including duration, complexity, clarity of role, contextual elements at the case study sites and the relational approach and pastoral support provided by Research Fellows and Participation Experts.

### *Application of A-M-O as a peer researcher reflective practice tool (PR:A-M-O)*

PR: A-M-O is outlined in Table 3. The reflective questions designed around ability, motivation and opportunity provided a helpful framework that enabled planning and review conversations between Peer Researchers and Research Fellows. Its application in practice created a focus on identifying and reflecting on motivating opportunities that supported the development of subjectively meaningful experiences for Peer Researchers that were aligned with the study aims.

Two illustrative examples help illustrate the value of applying A-M-O as a practice framework and how PR:A-M-O offered a clear and shared heuristic that enhanced peer research processes.

Example 1: Academic Conference

- **Opportunity:** Attend and present at an in-person international academic social care conference in England as part of a wider study symposium.
- **Ability:** Two Peer Researchers expressed interest and a Research Fellow offered support. One Peer Researcher was living abroad which prevented them from engaging in the opportunity due to the in-person conference format.
- **Motivation:** The opportunity aligned with Peer Researchers' interests and aspirations: engaging in in-person activities with the wider study team; extending breadth of development of research skills to include knowledge exchange activities; accessing and developing a network of academic social care researchers.

**Table 2.** Application of the A-M-O framework to understand areas of strength and development relating to the Peer Researcher role in the study.

A-M-O Element	Enhancing practice	Areas of strengths	Areas of development
Ability – Peer Researchers’ capacity to participate	Recruitment and selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peer Researchers’ experience of the care system provided a valuable perspective throughout.</li> <li>Peer Researchers’ under-graduate educational experience enabled a high level of engagement with research activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address issues of Peer Researcher inclusion and representativeness related to lack of diversity in educational experiences.</li> <li>Anticipate fluctuating levels of Peer Researcher availability due to study and employment commitments and changing life circumstances.</li> <li>Develop formal induction training ‘<i>more robust, focused and shorter</i>’ to include more on implementation science.</li> <li>Provide training and support for all Research Fellows to support Peer Researchers’ participation.</li> <li>Explore Peer Researchers’ individual values and interests and reflect on possible challenges to motivation throughout the study.</li> </ul>
Motivation – Peer Researchers’ values and interests	Training and relational support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informal training and support offered by Research Fellows to Peer Researchers was highly valued by them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop more in-person collaborative working opportunities to address ‘<i>disappointing</i>’ continued post-COVID-19 remote working practices due to disparate geographical locations.</li> <li>Explore impact of financial reward in relation to the wider context of individual young people, in relation to the barrier it created that prevented a young person from being employed.</li> <li>Reflect on equality and suitability of opportunities related to: contextual factors at case study sites, experience and expertise of Research Fellows.</li> <li>Address limited opportunities for Peer Researchers’ involvement at the beginning of the research process, including designing research agendas and ‘<i>bid-writing</i>’</li> <li>Explore opportunities for Peer Researchers to support impact activities e.g. ‘<i>developing research outputs for care-experienced young people</i>’</li> </ul>
	Intrinsic factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aims of study aligned with Peer Researchers’ ‘<i>passion</i>’ to make a positive difference for care experienced young people ‘<i>to transform the lives of future care leavers</i>’.</li> <li>Research experiences offered aligned with Peer Researchers’ interests in developing research and transferable employment skills.</li> <li>Financial reward being ‘<i>well-paid</i>’ was ‘<i>important</i>’ for Peer Researchers who joined the study.</li> </ul>	
	Extrinsic factors		
Opportunity – possibilities for Peer Researchers’ participation in the study	Job design practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Breadth of research and professional opportunities offered to Peer Researchers (supported by 4 – year study period, dyadic relationship with Research Fellows and Case Study Focus).</li> </ul>	
	Knowledge sharing and autonomy enhancing practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dyadic Research Fellow-Peer Researcher relationship identified and valued by Peer Researchers as their main source of support, informal training and access to opportunity.</li> <li>Availability of Participation Expert to provide pastoral support highly valued by Peer Researchers.</li> </ul>	

**Table 3.** Peer Researcher Ability, Motivation and Opportunity Reflective Tool (PR:A-M-O).

Focus of Peer Researcher and Research Fellow Conversation	Reflective Questions focused on Ability (A), Motivation (M) and Opportunity (O)
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the upcoming research opportunities that are available and accessible to the Peer Researcher? (O)</li> <li>• What abilities and skills will the Peer Researcher require? (A)</li> <li>• Which opportunities fit well with the Peer Researcher's interests and values? (M)</li> <li>• How can the Research Fellow support the Peer Researcher's ability to contribute to the opportunity? (A)</li> </ul>
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were the most/least fulfilling opportunities for the Peer Researcher? (O/M)</li> <li>• What supported/challenged the Peer Researcher's ability to offer a contribution? (A)</li> <li>• What abilities and skills has the Peer Researcher developed through it? (A)</li> <li>• What abilities and skills would the Peer Researcher like to develop? (A/M)</li> <li>• What further opportunities might be available to the Peer Researcher and the Peer Researcher be interested in exploring? (O/M)</li> </ul>

- **Peer Researchers' Experiences:** Peer Researchers developed and delivered the presentation independently and received positive and engaged responses from the wider team and conference delegates. Peer Researchers developed positive team relationships with one another and the wider study team. Peer Researchers joined a network of care-experienced researchers.
- **Contributions to the study:** The study achieved positive pathways to impact through the Peer Researchers' presentation at the Conference.

#### Example 2: Journal article

- **Opportunity:** Contribute to the development of a journal article as co-authors focused on the nested study, a flexible and remote-working opportunity. The opportunity developed to include the Peer Researchers contributing to the literature review section, reviewing and editing drafts of the paper, reflecting on their understanding and experience of the A-M-O framework and developing a Vlog to share the key messages of the paper in a more accessible version.
- **Ability:** Two Peer Researchers had capacity. Both Peer Researchers identified writing skills as an area to develop. The PhD Researcher and Research Fellows offered support. One Peer Researcher was not available due to other commitments.
- **Motivation:** The opportunity to develop writing skills aligned with both Peer Researchers' interests. For one Peer Researcher the opportunity aligned with their goal to develop a career in academic research. For the other Peer Researcher, the opportunity aligned with their interest in developing reflective and creative writing processes.
- **Peer Researchers' Experiences:** Peer Researchers developed and applied academic review, writing and presentation skills. The poem 'Regeneration' created by one of the Peer Researchers as part of the reflective writing exercise focused on the value of applying A-M-O is presented below:

#### Regeneration

Nature's descent on Man-Made's kind,  
 Lost in shadow's embrace, a care leaver's soul,  
 They are the fruits of a mother's womb.  
 Like fragile sunflowers, the care leavers bloom,  
 Aligning their dreams,  
 Motivating their spirit,  
 Optimising and growing their potential.  
 Like The Stars Guiding the Souls in the darkness,  
 Care Leavers Empower Political and Educational initiatives on man-made cement.

Nurturing their potential, strong seeds of hope are discretely sown.  
This is the power of A-M-O, and EXIT.

- **Contributions to the study:** The study achieved pathways to positive impact through Peer Researchers' involvement in the paper, creating the Vlog and reading the poem at a meeting of the study's Strategic Advisory Board.

The examples illustrate how a focus on ability, motivation and opportunity enabled the creation of opportunities within the wider study that were motivating for Peer Researchers, aligned with their skills and developing abilities, and led to positive contributions for the Peer Researchers and the study. Responses to the presentation at the conference and to the poem at the Advisory Board Meeting indicated the affective power of care experienced young people sharing their experiences directly and in creative formats, representing pathways to creating impact. The examples also highlight how neither opportunity was accessible to all three Peer Researchers; while one Peer Researcher was able to participate in both, the other two Peer Researchers were able to participate in just one, indicating a need to be attuned to Peer Researchers' individual needs and availability.

## Discussion

Development of the nested action research study as a collaborative and flexible approach provided valuable learning, enhanced Peer Researchers' experiences and supported contributions to the wider study, with broader implications. The value was enhanced by inter-disciplinarity, with complementary contributions relating to experience of participatory approaches, including peer research, within social care and public health (Kelly et al., 2020; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016) and theoretical knowledge of A-M-O from business (Applebaum et al., 2000; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016).

Application of the A-M-O framework as an analytical device enhanced understanding of the Peer Researcher role within the study, with broader implications. A discrete focus on ability, motivation and opportunity demonstrated an alignment between enhancing practices identified in the study (Table 2) with business literature focused on application of A-M-O (Table 1) and enabling factors in social care literature focused on care-experienced young people as Peer Researchers, and new insights were generated.

### Ability

The importance of attending to recruitment and selection and training and support practices (Applebaum et al., 2000; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016) to enhance Peer Researchers' ability were emphasised. Recruitment strategies in our study led to a Peer Researcher group with university-level educational attainment and the transferable skills identified as an important factor in previous Peer Research studies (Lushey & Munro, 2015) that enhanced their ability to engage with research tasks and contribute to the study. This indicates the potential for studies focused on leaving care to collaborate with universities with an active role in supporting care leavers, such as those with the 'National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) Quality Mark' (NNECL, 2024), in the recruitment of Peer Researchers.

However, Peer Researchers' parallel positions as undergraduate students with educational and other employment priorities restricted their ability to consistently engage with research opportunities, and emphasised the importance of a commitment to a flexible approach to support their participation (Kelly et al., 2020). Relatedly, as in previous studies (Dixon et al., 2019), promoting inclusion and enhancing diversity were identified as requiring attention. This included reviewing employment structures that prevented one young person from joining the study and widening recruitment strategies related to increasing diversity in educational attainment to better represent the care-

experienced population (Harrison, 2017). The study team reflected on these tensions, in relation to the benefits of employing Peer Researchers with transferable skills in the context of limited availability of resource to support skill development, balanced with the desire to promote inclusion and ensure representativeness. However, it was not possible to address them retrospectively, and they were noted for consideration in future studies.

In line with previous leaving care peer research studies (Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020; Lushey & Munro, 2015), formal induction training enhanced Peer Researchers' ability to participate. Concerns with the relevance of some of the training led to a refocus on training needs and a further analytical methods workshop. Learning for future studies includes involving Peer Researchers in designing how formal induction programmes are delivered.

### **Motivation**

The importance of attending to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors were emphasised (Applebaum et al., 2000; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016). The perception of a good level of pay and training to support skill development as extrinsically motivating for Peer Researchers supports the importance of providing fair compensation, training and professional experiences (Dixon et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2020; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Oliver et al., 2019). However, as noted in respect of ability, whilst the level of pay was generally a positive extrinsic motivating factor, it acted to demotivate one young person and prevented their employment, emphasising the need to be attuned to individual circumstances. The importance of intrinsic motivational factors, including alignment of the study aims with Peer Researchers' values suggests there are further opportunities to communicate research project aims to impact policy and practice in recruitment processes, although careful management of expectations would be required.

### **Opportunity**

It was acknowledged that the flexibility of the role and availability of a broad range of activities across the research cycle replicated previous care leaving studies (Dixon et al., 2019; Lushey & Munro, 2015) and represented enhancing job-design practices (Applebaum et al., 2000; Marin-García & Thomas, 2016). However, the importance of opportunities at the beginning of the research cycle, such as contributing to setting research agendas and formulating research questions, was identified as an area for development that could not be retrospectively addressed. A further area for development, with implications for further studies, was identified through variation in the contexts of case study sites. It led to the creation of broader research opportunities in our study and suggests that research teams need to attend to the equality of opportunities available to each Peer Researcher within a cohort.

In addition to these discrete areas of focus within each of the A-M-O elements, two further cross-cutting areas were identified. Relational and pastoral support was identified at the core of buttressing Peer Researchers' participation, and the Covid-19 context was identified as a key challenge.

### **Relational and pastoral support**

The importance of the relational and pastoral support provided by Research Fellows and Participation Experts was identified in relation to both ability and opportunity. This enhanced Peer Researchers' ability to participate and as important elements of knowledge-sharing and autonomy enhancing practices, enabled suitable opportunities to be identified. This heightened awareness of the importance of the dyadic relationships between Research Fellows and Peer Researchers led to regular reflection on experiences of and approaches to supporting Peer Researchers. This represents further evidence of the need to attend to, value and properly resource relational and pastoral support for Peer Researchers, creating capacity for and offering training to members of the research

team to provide Peer Researchers with informal ongoing training, supervision and support (Kelly et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2019).

## COVID-19

Challenges related to the wider unique context of COVID-19 and reliance on remote working and lack of available physical spaces to come together impacted on Peer Researchers' abilities, motivations and opportunities. These challenges were addressed in part by regular communication and offers of support from Participation Experts and Research Fellows through virtual platforms, and concerted efforts to create in-person events and research activities. More broadly, this provides evidence of the need to attend to the wider context and impact on Peer Researchers' experiences.

The adaption of the A-M-O framework to create PR: A-M-O as a reflective planning and review tool for Research Fellows and Peer Researchers extended a pragmatic focus on reflexivity and flexibility, with a collaborative ethos (Kelly et al., 2020) and supported Peer Researchers' participation in and contribution to the study. It also represents the development of a knowledge sharing and autonomy enhancing practice that supported communication and fostered employee voice (Marin-García & Thomas, 2016). The two examples demonstrated how creating space for Peer Researchers to participate, in an area of subjective interest, facilitated an empowerment of voice and democratisation of the research process and led to tangible and valuable project contributions.

The inclusion of the poem indicates how use of PR: A-M-O aligned with the study ethos of creating space for and valuing Peer Researchers' voice and unique contributions. The poem represents how PR: A-M-O enabled the Peer Researcher to articulate their reflections on their experiences of using A-M-O as empowering, in a creative form that challenged academic convention, was valued by wider stakeholders and further democratised the research process. The poem further indicates the value of including creative poetic methods to enhance inclusion of personal expression as an aligned method alongside a peer research approach (Burke et al., 2019).

The examples show how using PR: A-M-O enabled the study to achieve, in human resource management language, 'high performativity' and, as a quasi-organisation, become 'more participative and flexible' and 'innovative' (Marin-García & Thomas, 2016, p. 1045). Using the tool also highlighted variation in Peer Researcher's abilities and motivations, emphasising the need to create accessible opportunities for each Peer Researcher. Consideration must also be given timing; using PR: A-M-O earlier in our study would have been desirable.

## Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the value of adopting a flexible and reflective approach and co-developing a nested action research study to explore and support the Peer Researcher role in an inter-disciplinary academic research study focused on innovations for care leavers. In our study, this led to borrowing a concept (A-M-O) from the discipline of human resource management and applying it to co-production in research through employment of Peer Researchers. Whilst we acknowledge the need for caution in such theory borrowing, with a need to nuance application of the concept as it moves from one context to another (Whetten et al., 2009), we reflect on the value of using A-M-O within the study, and its potential wider application. Whilst our employment of care leavers undertaking university level education meant they each had transferable skills that equipped them to engage with the demands of the research study, the academic research team had to invest significant time and funding into a training and mentoring programme to support the development of specific abilities. On the 'upside', as the poem presented reveals, is the opportunity offered to care leavers by the Peer Researcher role, and the extent of motivation of care leavers regarding this. Whilst the research team invested considerable time and effort in buttressing Peer Researchers' ability, there was considerable resource (Peer Researchers' motivation) to build upon. There is scope for further research to explore the

interactivity of A-M-O elements and the role of the wider context (Boselie et al., 2005) to develop understanding of how accessible, ability-enhancing and motivating opportunities that meet the aims of studies adopting Peer Research methodology can be developed. Wider use of PR: A-M-O as a knowledge-sharing and autonomy enhancing practice has potential to support empowerment, the fostering of voice and contributions of Peer Researcher roles within and beyond leaving care studies.

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## Note on contributors

**Dr Amy Lynch** is Assistant Professor at Warwick Business School, University of Warwick. Amy's expertise lies in applied practice-near child and family social work research, with a focus on relational practice, including empathy. Her experience includes developing understanding of innovation designs and processes through exploratory and evaluation research, including within the Department for Education's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme.

**Seana Friel** is a Research Fellow at the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care at the University of Bedfordshire. Seana is an experienced mixed-method researcher and has a particular interest in participatory research methods.

**Emily R. Munro** is Goldberg Professor of Social Work Research, Director of the Institute of Applied Social Research and Director of the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care at the University of Bedfordshire. She is a former Chair of the Executive Committee of the International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (2017-2022; INTRAC: <https://globalintrac.com>). Her expertise lies in child and family social work, with a focus on children in and leaving care.

**Mariam Sultana** has been awarded an honours degree in Law by the University of Warwick, and is further enrolled in a Masters degree of Law. Mariam's notable poetic conveys the transformative impact of EXIT. This poetic work bear the imprint of Mariam's extensive involvement of charitable projects for children in South Africa, enriching her understanding of diverse cultures and ethnicities. Mariam's scholarly acumen and multidisciplinary insights equips her to positively touch the lives of many care leavers by encouraging them to explore, if not create, opportunities via the cultivation of a resilient and empowered mindset.

**C. J. Hamilton** is a Research Assistant at the University of Bedfordshire's Institute of Applied Social Research (IASR). As a founding member of the Institute's Young Researchers Advisory Panel (2016-2021), CJ worked collectively with other young people to advise and shape research, policy and practice pertaining to childhood sexual violence. During his time as a care-experienced peer researcher supporting the EXIT Study, CJ's main contributions were to the implementation and ongoing refinement of the study's data collection, analysis and dissemination processes. Since leaving the EXIT Study, CJ has enrolled on an MPhil programme at the University of Oxford, pursuing aspirations for a career in the evaluation of child and family social interventions.

**Dr Gary Kerridge** is a Research Fellow within Warwick Business School after having been awarded his PhD in 2016. His research interests lie in psychology and organisation science with a passion for social justice. As a historical care leaver, Gary brings a perspective from lived experience alongside applied research expertise in both leadership and innovation practices in health and social care.



**Rosie Oswick** has been a PhD student at Warwick Business School since 2020. She is in the organisation and work department and is exploring the role of co-production in health and social care settings. Using qualitative techniques she is particularly interested in ethics and organisational change.

**Tia Pillay Mitchell** has a degree in Biomedical Science from the University of Warwick. Tia is excited to work on the EXIT study because Tia wants to raise awareness for other care leavers and use their experience to help make a change.

**Dr Hayley Alderson** is a Senior Research Fellow for the NIHR ARC North East North Cumbria (NENC). She has a practice background in substance misuse and mental health services. Her research portfolio focuses on individuals and families with multiple and complex needs, often considering the trilogy of risk (domestic abuse, mental health, and substance misuse).

**Carrie Harrop** is care experienced and has worked in the sector of social care for over 10 years.. Carrie is currently undertaking a PhD. Carrie works directly with those at the leaving care age, up to the age of 30, to improve the current system and to support those going through the transition process.

**Dr Ruth McGovern** is a NIHR Population Health Career Scientist Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Public Health Research at Newcastle University, UK. She is also a qualified social worker. She leads a programme of research focused upon intervention development and evaluation to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children and families.

**Jibril Mohamoud** has a Masters degree in History from the University of Warwick. Jibril is excited to work on the EXIT study because it will give them the opportunity to provide a care experienced perspective, which will ideally lead to a positive impact for other care leavers.

**Deborah Smart** is a Research Assistant in the Population Health Sciences Institute at Newcastle University. She has a research interest in the health and social care needs of vulnerable children, young people and families, their experiences of accessing services, and interventions that can support them to improve their life chances. She has a practice background in the voluntary sector, managing and delivering services to young carers and their families, with an expertise in involving young people in the development of services.

**Graeme Currie** is Professor of Public Management at Warwick Business School and Deputy Director of National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Centre West Midlands (NIHR ARC WM). Graeme is Principal Investigator for the ESRC funded EXIT study. His expertise lies with understanding what inhibits and enables the implementation and scale up of evidence-based innovation in health and social care.

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