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Dragged kicking and screaming: Agency and violence for children entering secure accommodation

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Abstract

Children entering secure accommodation, also known as 'secure care', are prevented from exercising free choice over most aspects of everyday life. This paper focuses on the relationship between agency and violence during transference to and early time in secure accommodation. Sharing interview extracts from 11 young people with experience of secure care as children, we explore how the routine processes of 'suppressing' children's agency supports the emergence of violence. We argue that the manner of transfer to secure accommodation creates a violent encounter that forces children's emotion and agency to redirect and intensify onto the self and others as further violence.

KEYWORDS
agency, children, participation, secure accommodation, violence

INTRODUCTION

The rights of children to be protected, listened to, and their views accounted for decision-making has achieved widespread acceptance in childhood policy, practice, and research. However, within childhood studies, the discipline has evoked a renewed focus on the question of children's power, participation, and agency in their social worlds and the extent to which this discourse of participation is meaningful in their lived experiences (Nolas, 2015). Much of this work has critiqued the proposed universality of children's rights discourse, epitomised by the

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), arguing that many of its principles are founded on a normative Western ideal of what childhood should be: Innocent, carefree, and protected (Holzscheiter, 2010; Quennerstedt et al., 2018). A growing number of scholars are raising concerns about the exclusions produced by this rights-based discourse of participation for childhoods that do not and cannot fit within its boundaries, particularly those growing up in non-Western cultures (Abebe, 2019). Others share concern that the notion of 'participation' is applied as an ill-fitting proxy-descriptor of agency in ways that conceal and protect structural and contextual power dynamics (Morrison et al., 2018). In other words, participation discourse may give the illusion of empowering children while concealing the fact that many children are excluded from participation because of their personal circumstances or professional judgement of these. Addressing these concerns, a reconceptualisation of childhood agency is emerging within the field that troubles binary notions of 'having' or 'not having' participation rights or agency, and instead theorises the concept as fluid, contextual, and relational (Horgan et al., 2017).

This paper applies this reconceptualisation of agency to the experiences of a group of UK children[1] whose experiences and negotiations of agency differ radically from those of the normative ideal of Western childhood: Those who have been ordered to reside within secure accommodation under the care of the state on welfare grounds.[2] There is a recognised deficit in qualitative studies relating to experiences of children in UK secure accommodation (Hart & La Valle, 2016). The early lives of many children referred to secure accommodation for welfare reasons are characterised by neglect, abuse, family dysfunction, insecure attachments, bereavement, and relationship difficulties (Andow and Byrne, 2018); some also have special educational needs, disabilities, or emotional and behavioural problems (Barron & Mitchell, 2018; Hart & La Valle, 2016; Rose, 2002; Williams et al., 2019). Although most of these children's families have been known to social services for some time, many have remained at home for years and enter care at a relatively late stage (Hart & La Valle, 2016). Once in local authority care, these children tend to experience multiple behavioural and emotional challenges (Hiller & St Clair, 2018). They also tend to experience higher numbers of placement moves than other children in care, and most often reside in residential care - rather than foster care - immediately preceding their entry to secure accommodation. Referrals to secure accommodation typically occur where children's behaviour is perceived to become unmanageable, or too risky for standard care placements. The time immediately preceding such referrals is often characterised by a rise in high-risk or antisocial behaviours such as self-harm, violence to others, substance misuse, and sexual exploitation, with relatively few successful attempts to address the underlying causes of such behaviours evidenced (Hart & La Valle, 2016). Approximately half of the children accommodated in secure care are placed on welfare grounds, while the other half are referred from the criminal justice system (Department for Education, 2022). In 2021, England and Wales approved 231 children and young people for placement in secure care (Department for Education, 2022), while Scotland admitted 177 children and young people (Scottish Government, 2022).[3] Children admitted to secure care are largely aged 15 and over, though referrals are made from the age of 10 (Department for Education, 2022). Secure care referrals are often repeated, with Williams et al. (2020) evidencing that 35.6% of children in England leaving secure accommodation for other placements are re-referred to it within 1 year.

Similarly to first entry to foster or residential care, the referral decision and subsequent actions to transfer the child to secure accommodation are often made against the child's will and are frequently met with verbal and physical resistance from the child, which sometimes manifest

violently against others or the self. Children then typically go through a period of highly restricted agency within secure care; if their behaviour is deemed to be responsible and reasonable, they can gradually 'earn' more agential capacity (often applied in a 'points-based' system in secure homes) in the form of choices about their actions, movements, and environments, such as being allowed a television in their room, or access to sports activities. The agential negotiations of children within the highly controlled process of entering and living in secure care are of interest in exploring the value of emergent reconceptualisations of childhood agency, expanding understanding of their potential application and relevance to practice and policy. Most importantly, a theoretically grounded discussion of agency offers pertinent questions about the ways in which the agential capacity of children is approached within institutions that restrict liberty, focuses on their views and affective experiences, and prompts a reconsideration of how they are listened to and cared for throughout the process.

Here, we briefly review the recent literature conceptualising agency and children's rights within childhood studies, and research applying this work within the field of children's social care. We then present a series of data extracts from our qualitative interview data with young people aged between 13–18, produced as part of a broader study investigating the life trajectories of children from Wales referred to secure accommodation. We consider how the agency of children and others featured in the extracts, alongside the systemic agential power of the social care system and its institutions, emerges and shifts through the situational relational ties or meetings they experience during transitions to, and living within secure homes. In this, we trace how violence emerges as a agential phenomenon that seeks to move between bodies through dynamic relations of power, and how, when it is frustrated in this agential emergence, is held in the child's body and may instead emerge in acts of self-harm and other violent expressions, escalating the risk and responsibility of harm to the child and to others. In our analysis here, we trace violence not as an individual action where a perpetrator and victim require definition, but rather as an agential realist phenomenon that encompasses all subjects and historic-cultural-social contexts contributing to it (Barad, 2007; Webb, 2021). This allows us to approach dynamics of agency beyond those emerging within the specific example through examining the relational meetings of subjects and objects in violent encounters.

We argue here that violent expressions during secure care transferrals are produced due to a fundamental misapprehension of the nature of subject-agency: The style of transferral to secure care, which relies on elements of surprise and force, is intended to supress emergent violence from the child. However, our interpretation of the data extracts here positions the transferral process itself as producing and escalating this violence through the nature of the interactions between transferral staff and the children they are transferring, operating in combination with the social and cultural contexts imposing on the situation. This is not an error in implementation or individual mistakes made in the process; it is directly attributable to the design and delivery of secure care transfers, making the self-harm and other violent acts of the child towards the self the responsibility of transferral agencies and other organisations involved in the interaction.

We conclude that predominant children's rights-based and participative discourse around childhood agency may be unhelpful in relation to children in the process of having their liberty reduced or removed, and suggest that considering agency as dynamic and relationally emergent may produce more positive interactions for children and reduced capacity for harm during forced movements or in the aftermath.

AGENCY AND CHILDHOOD STUDIES

Agency is commonly understood as the capacity to act through influencing, changing, or resisting elements of the social or material world, exerted through physical, mental, emotional, or verbal actions directed towards the self, others, or physical and metaphysical objects (Ahearn, 2001). Sociological discussions of agency that interrogate the concept and its use are saturated in questions of power, subjectivity, and discourse (Burkitt, 2016; Davies, 1991; Giddens, 1979; Martin & Dennis, 2013): These discussions allow us to explore the focus, range, and limitations of a person's ability and will to act in or impact on a given situation and contextualise this understanding in the social world around them.

Conceptualisations and applications of agency have proven to be of particular interest to childhood studies scholars, as one of the universal experiences of childhood and youth is perceived to be the gradual extension of agential capacity and a recognition and acceptance of that agency by others (James & James, 2012: 3–4). The paradigmatic turn of the 'new sociology of childhood' that emerged in the 1990s takes as its central principle that children of all ages are 'social actors' with the capacity to impact the world around them (James et al., 1998; Prout & James, 1990), which thereafter gave rise to the interest in 'childhood agency' (James et al., 1998). Applications of the concept in practice are dominated by 'children's rights' framings (Holloway et al., 2018; Lansdown, 2010; Stoecklin, 2013), wherein children's independent agency is recognised and sought to inform work that affects them. A focus on children's rights in public and policy discourse has led to a value being placed on their views, experiences, and participation in decision making; though evidence demonstrating how their participation in such organisational processes tangibly impacts services and children's experiences of them is scant (Crowley, 2015; Davis & Smith, 2017; Tisdall, 2016). While this shift has been met with almost universal acceptance or celebration within social policy discourse, critiques of its application and its potential for uncritical co-option within otherwise oppressive practices are not usually foregrounded, raising the risk of the misuse of rights-based discourse to veneer a continued systemic inconsistency in how, when, why, and which children's views are sought and respected.

Reconceptualisations of agency and childhood

While the rise of children's rights discourse has played a substantial role in promoting the interests of many children, childhood studies as a field has recently become more critical of these framings as scholars interrogate their sociological and political implications (Abebe, 2019; Hanson, 2022). Critics of agency-based children's rights have argued that agency is not a possession that can be 'held' or 'exerted' by an individual in a humanistic sense, but is rather co-constituted by intersecting structures, discourses, embodiments, and other agencies—including subjects and objects—that an individual encounters (Esser et al., 2016; Jeffrey, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). In other words, they are always 'relational, rather than individual' (Abebe, 2019; Wyness, 2019). In this framing, the children's participation rights discourse of children being 'given' agency and voice becomes problematic in several different ways: 'listening' to the voices of children—a common framing applied within literature focusing on children's rights—does not take away the social and embodied structures which impact how and when individual children can or wish to express their views or how this might emerge as meaningful agency that impacts their lives beyond the superficial or highly temporal (Afroze, 2022; Ansell, 2009). It also risks a deficit of attention to those intersecting agencies which impose upon their capacity and will to express their voices

and experiences (Tisdall, 2016; Tisdall, 2017), despite the fact that children facing additional challenges here have an equal right to have their views and experiences accounted for. A relational notion of agency troubles the idea that participation rights or 'voice' can be 'given to' or 'removed' from children in a simplistic way, suggesting that its capacity to emerge in various ways - regardless of the will of others for it do so - supersedes this 'allowance', though its relational nature means that its form of emergence will be impacted by all individuals or institutions involved in those relations. Children's agency will emerge regardless of the will of adults holding greater power, however, if those adults refuse to listen and act on their views, that agency may redirect to be exerted in ways harmful or offensive to the child themselves or others around them.

Relationality and childhood agency

Recent reconceptualisations of agency in childhood and youth studies have sought to decentre agency as a subject-possession and locate it as a fluid and inter-relational continuum that is contextual (tied to social constructions and material constraints), situational (emerging differently depending on the configuration of subjects and objects involved in an event), and temporal (dynamic and unstable). Drawing from global childhood studies and critiques of children's rights framings of agency, encountering children's experiences within this framework allows us to "reveal the social, cultural, material, and political contexts as well as relational processes within which their everyday agency unfolds" (Abebe, 2019: 2). This moves us away from the salve of prominently embracing children's capacity to speak to power, and brings us to a more critical overview of what it means to overlay a rights-based participation discourse on the contexts of childhood; one that instead directs us to interrogate embodied experiences, engagement in relational processes, lived outcomes, and emotional affect, rather than venerating the symbolic voice as indicative of respect and dignity. It supports us in acknowledging the diversity of childhoods when encountering experiences where their agency is affected (Valentine, 2011), and to question why a particular child's experience emerged in a particular manner at a particular time. In this, the reconceptualisations of agency that we reference here respond to the call of Quennerstedt (2013) and Hanson (2014) to reach towards a more critical field of inquiry around children's rights and agency, and their use in society.

Understanding agency in this way enables us to better comprehend non-normative childhood agency, where the childhoods in question (such as those referred to secure accommodation) do not fit the social construction of childhood as innocent, carefree, and protected by adults. It also implies that where social relations exist, agency necessarily emerges and will be characterised by the nature of those relations. Therefore, where social relations are violent and aggressive, agential violence and aggression will emerge and can only be altered through changes in those relations, not prevented from emerging. It is therefore appropriate to question, "the social conditions behind opportunities to act arising from certain positions" (Esser, 2016: 55). Crucially, Esser also highlights the 'physical and embodied' nature of agency; rather than existing as an abstract and transient concept, agency can be deeply felt within the body, and frustrated agency—prevented from emergence that aligns with embodied emotion—even more so.

Understanding what forms of agency children experience during the transition to and residence in secure care offers nuance and complexity in understanding to what our data illustrates as a brutal, traumatising encounter.[4] However, reaching this understanding in the reconceptualisations of agency we have explored requires an analytic framework, which enables this nuance to emerge through decentering the 'ideology of personhood' (Abebe, 2019) and the consequent

possessive and positive formulation of childhood agency it produces. This task reaches towards understanding the child as an inherently relational subject, rather than a boundaried humanistic and individually agentic subject (Spyrou, 2017: 435), thus our analysis here focuses on temporal relational meetings within young people's narratives, rather than the potential reasons, background or justifications that any parties involved might give for their actions in the moment. This entails that where agency can be removed as an individual property that one can be 'given' or 'allowed', and instead recontextualised alongside subjectivity as "constituted in interventions or practices within the social world" (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014: 470), one can access an enhanced perception of how power is operating through the different human and non-human bodies involved in an interaction. This also has implications for how we handle our conceptualisation of violence in this paper, which takes influence from agential realism (Barad, 2007). In this conceptualisation, the individual violent action cannot be approached in analysis without also accommodating the historical, cultural and social contexts within which it is taking place, giving equal weight to human and non-human agencies in its production. This decentres intentionality and draws one to consider the conditions under which violence emerges and what is contributing to it beyond the momentary experience.

Studying interview data generated with young people who have experienced secure accommodation and, as a condition of this, a temporary full withdrawal of their participation in decision-making about their lives, we consider how these reconceptualisations of agency can inform our understanding of their experiences of emergent subjectivity and agency as they grapple with the institutional and individual agencies producing this withdrawal. Through this attention, we seek insight as to how children entering and held within secure care can be best protected and supported with compassion, respect, and dignity.

METHODS

The data shared here was generated with 11 young people, 6 male and 5 female, between 13–18 years old during a study exploring the experiences and outcomes of children from Wales referred to secure accommodation on welfare grounds (via a Secure Accommodation Order) between April 1st 2016 and 31st March 2018. The young people we interviewed were accommodated as children in different locations throughout Wales, England, and Scotland, and some had attended more than one Secure Children's Home. We also interviewed social workers, other professionals, and parents and carers, and conducted documentary analysis of the young people's case files, though the data in this paper focuses exclusively on their own narratives in interviews. This wider exploration was particularly important due to the high prevalence of mental health issues amongst the sample population which prevented their involvement in interviews. Ethical approval was granted by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, with enhanced support for participants and research acknowledged as necessary for this study. The interviews, lasting between 30 and 120 minutes, were usually highly emotive for all concerned due to the severity of negative experiences contained within participant narratives. As offered by the research team in recruitment to the study, during the face-to-face interviews seven young people chose to have their social worker or other well-known professional present to offer emotional support as they spoke. Whilst we accept that the presence of a professional may inhibit the young person from speaking freely, the critical narratives they provided did not seem to reflect this. It was also our priority to ensure these young people's comfort and safety, and for some of them the presence of a trusted adult was a key part of this. In addition to this, the

interviewers were supported by each other and the research team post-interview to support them in processing the often-harrowing narratives they had elicited. Interviews were semi-structured, beginning with a broad opening question of "tell us a bit about yourself". Interview schedules then progressed through a broadly chronological account of the young person's experiences prior to, during and after secure care, and were adapted according to participant engagement.

After data generation, an initial thematic analysis produced a coding framework, and we pulled out and immersed ourselves in the data that was particularly focused on young people's emotions and embodied narratives (Terry et al., 2017). From this immersion, it became apparent that verbal and bodily resistance were highly visible in these extracts and from this observation the negotiation of agency between children and adults during entering and living in secure care emerged as a point of interest and importance for the team. From this point, we tracked agency as our primary analytic category throughout these narratives, layering narratives that referenced emergences of force and violence, before exploring those extracts for relational embodied meetings and expressed emotions, producing the analysis below. Note that the young people's accounts shared here are presented as a subjective retelling of their experiences, and we do not present them as factual observations of practice; instead, they give insight into the importance, interpretation and meaning the events have taken on for participants in their memories and self-conceptualisations, and enable us to explore how they locate themselves as subjects emerging and becoming themselves through an externally imposed and often violent life experience. As a result, some of the experiences recounted below are both vivid and potentially re-traumatising for people experienced in similar circumstances. It is also important to point out that this analysis does not constitute an evaluation of practice in relation to these young people's experiences. It does, however, offer insight that may be useful in improving practice within this and related areas.

TRANSFERRAL TO SECURE ACCOMMODATION

For many young people we interviewed, attempts to supress their agency were initiated before direct contact was made between children and transferral staff, as many were unaware of the application for a secure order or were prevented from engaging with the process in other ways. For some, social workers stated that this was because they were missing or there were concerns that the knowledge would cause the child to run away or attempt suicide. In some cases, this concern was justified by the young people; Jack reported that if he knew what was happening, "I would still be on the run now". William, who was not afforded the opportunity to inform the court proceedings regarding his secure order, said that he "felt like they were trying to stop me from being there, from putting my point across... they didn't like it". Misdirection as a common feature of transferrals to secure accommodation emerges particularly strongly in Jack's narrative, where he initially believes he is having a pleasant surprise on his birthday:

> "Woke up nine o'clock to- it wasn't my social worker, it was like one of the social workers' boss, managers. So she come in and she said, 'There's someone here to see you,' and this is when the three blokes walked in, on my 16th birthday like. And I think I lost my head, though, because when she said- she come in with a big smile on her face, 'Someone here to see you', and I thought it was my mother and the kids. And then no, just three fat bastards walked in behind. I was fuming. And then they were like, 'You're moving to [city].' And I was like, 'I'm fucking not.' So I tried to

make like obviously... well, just wrestled with them, made my way to the door, and then one of them just sat on me like, he just come from nowhere. Because they were proper like fucking rhinos."—Jack

Jack describes his confusion, anger and disappointment at the apparent misdirection of the senior social worker before he is removed by three men. His initial thought that his family were coming to wish him happy birthday makes the misdirection even more distressing for him. In Jack's narrative, the largeness and strength of the men, 'fucking rhinos', is emphasised, bringing to the fore the embodied emergence of anger and physical aggression. There are three different attempts described here by Jack to suppress his agential resistance to his transferral: The surprise of the professional's visit and announcement; the smile and obtuse framing of the news of what is to come, and the intimidating physical presence and powers of the transferral staff. In each case however, these attempts actually escalate Jack's shock, anger and fear, which subsequently emerge as the physical aggression, which he has been presented with as a possible—and therefore, legitimate, if undesirable—response to what is happening to him. The conditions for violence were created by others and presented to Jack, which he then responds to in the only manner available to him given the emotions he is feeling and his lack of alternative options to exert agency.

The 'tunnel of violence'

Beyond the initial secure order and arrival of transferral staff, the experiences of young people of being transferred to secure care were saturated in aggression, force, and violence. Transferrals and transport to secure accommodation is usually facilitated by social workers, police or contracted private security agencies. Some of the young people who took part in interviews spoke of traumatic transfers that were unexpected, forced and were often undertaken by individuals they had never met before.

"I was at my [relatives] house. I got thrown in a van. I, actually, I was covered in marks, and the geezer before he shut the door, he actually punched my [relative]... I didn't know anything about it, I just had social worker turn up and she was talking me through it, and then next minute these men came up behind me and picked me up and threw me in the van, and I always just like, I didn't know what was going on. I thought I'd got kidnapped, like it was so scary. And it was horrible. [...] I didn't know what was going on. I really didn't. I was ringing the police because I didn't know what was going on. They took my phone off me. Umm, like this one man, I would never ever forget his face, he was constantly hitting me, shoving me down. There wasn't even a seat. It was like a hole, near the hole, and he just shoved me down there. And I was there for like god knows how long it took us to get down to [the secure home]"—Megan

Here, Megan shares her particularly distressing memories of being forcibly taken to secure accommodation; her fear and her vulnerability, as her body is 'thrown', 'shoved' and hit, is palpable. Apparently safe at a family home, a social worker informs her of the court order and from this point, the circumstances quickly change to one of aggression and violence, as the assemblage of tussling bodies enter what Collins describes as a 'tunnel of violence'

(Collins, 2008), explosive, all-encompassing and self-perpetuating. The relations of agency in this extract shift rapidly throughout as the competing social bodies—Megan, the men paid to transfer her to the secure home, and at one point, her relative—vie to impact the emergence of the violence. Meanwhile, the social worker Megan mentions rapidly disappears in the narrative, along with the protective promise of social services professionals, leaving Megan to fend for herself.

Other bodies are drawn into Megan's resistance to her transferal: First, her relative intercedes on her behalf but is punched in the face for the attempt, which appears to end their intervention. Megan's phone—the next 'body'—creates a potential connection to a further authoritative and protective institutional body: The police. Here, Megan attempts to turn her agential fear and anger into a non-aggressive emergence, though appeal to an external body to protect her. This appeal is, however, prevented through the forcible intervention of the transferral staff, though it is unclear why they would not be content with her calling the police. Once the phone is forcibly snatched from her and the potential non-violent emergence of agency is prevented by the staff, she is left only with her own body to manifest her fear and anger, which faces multiple stronger adult male bodies in its violent resistance. The two key embodied 'meetings' that we can pull out from this narrative are Megan's body being 'picked up and thrown', and being 'shoved in a hole', each time by larger, stronger male bodies which are initially imbued with the institutional authority of court orders to act. Through each meeting, her body is rewritten as unhuman, treated rather as dangerous animal, or unruly object. How she is ultimately positioned in the van is a pointed illustration of her dehumanisation: She is pushed to a place where there is no seat, a position not intended for people, but cargo, an ominous 'hole'. The hole swallows her body and, with it, its capacity to further resist. This forms the total and final suppression of Megan's agency in the extract as her body and its capacity to act becomes fully controlled and her anger and aggression has nowhere to emerge. Megan's body and brain are both imprinted with this experience: The marks of violence on her body and the 'unforgettable' man's face in her brain, as he hits her.

Megan's account gives a clear sense of being 'kidnapped' by strange, violent men in a van. This also emerges in the next part of Jack's narrative, that follows on from the events of the last extract:

> "All I seen was three big men come and big men and tell me, "You're going to [city]." So I started fighting them. And then the one bloke who was driving, I ended up hitting him a few times, and we had to stop... So the other one jumped in the back, and as soon as he jumped in the back, he grabbed my arm, just for no- like I was just sat there. But he just grabbed my arm. So just sat there, and I was still on it, so I hit him again and hit him again"—Jack

Jack's narrative here belies this inevitability of violence created by the way his transferral is handled: Confronted with force and aggression, he is prompted to respond with force and aggression. The violence that characterises each of these narratives produces a sharp contrast with a rights-based conception of protecting vulnerable children and challenges the social imaginary of childhood bodies as weak and vulnerable. The standard procedure of sending three intimidating, unknown men to forcibly transfer the children does not merely pre-empt but actively creates the violent tussles described here; it is the implicit physical threat of the men's bodies on the capacity of the children's bodies to act that instigates the violence of their reactions. Their presence asserts that violence is not only possible but likely, creating the conditions for its emergence.

Negotiating Agency in Secure Homes

In terms of time spent in secure homes themselves, young people generally reflected that they found arrival at the homes difficult. While one of our 11 participants liked their home immediately, all the others reported being upset and confused on arrival. Jack's arrival was particularly violent due to his immediate and unanticipated detoxification from unnamed narcotics:

> "You go straight into, down in the integration room... because I was so bad, like up off the drugs, I had to like- it took me a long time to come down off them. Because apparently- I don't know, apparently, I punched myself and I split my head open or something and then... apparently, they put me in that room, and I just went mental and just kicked off, so my head started pissing out with blood or something." Interviewer: Was there like a plan for trying to come down off whatever you'd been on? "No. Just chuck me, just chuck me in the room, give me food three times a day. That's all it was."—Jack

In this extract, Jack describes how upon arrival at his secure home, still affected by the drugs he was taking, his anger and frustration at the seismic event he described above turns inward on himself. His ability to express his emotions in any other form thwarted, he reports that he 'apparently' assaulted himself, though this event is absent from his memory. Jack's imagery here is violent: He 'kicked off', his head was 'pissing blood'. His sentience in absentia as he 'went mental', 'chucked in a room' and fed, like a dog in a kennel, his body becomes fully animal, a locus of rage, messy and unboundaried, piss and blood. His humanity further dissipates without detoxification support, which after his forced, violent transferral forms a fresh trauma of itself. His self-harm is readable as a desperate 'last gasp' of agential capacity, an attempt to feel control over the self, body, and actions in the face of extreme external restraint and denial of agential capacity to affect other people or events. This is where the 'tunnel of violence' created by the transition to secure care ends for Jack: Violent agency, prevented from emerging in any externalising form, turns to Jack's body to manifest.

Alleviated agency: Life in secure accommodation

When talking about later life in secure accommodation most young people described how they settled into a highly structured routine of waking up, meals, education, activities and sleep. Many appeared to have benefited from this with a number saying it made them feel safe, echoing previous research (Hart & La Valle, 2016). Tracking changes in agential capacity in this period through our data, some participants discussed how the strict regulation and monitoring of their behaviour produced a sense of relief that elements of their self-determination, which have not been good for their own well-being in the past, have been taken over by the structure of the secure environment, an experience we term 'alleviated agency'. Their recognition of this demonstrates a surrender of their previous agential methods to handle their traumatic experiences or troubling emotions, manifesting through a resistance to adult regulation and in behaviours harmful to themselves or others.

Not all experiences of alleviated agency within secure homes we discussed were positive, however. The negotiation of social relationships and privacy emerged as common anxieties; some participants expressed anxiety over the forced unfamiliarity of the homes and residents,

with others expressing nervousness about the staff and their capacity to control every moment of their lives. The power of staff to forcefully restrain and punish them through bodily control was a constant possibility in the lives of children in secure homes, with over half of our participants sharing direct experiences of this. Mia's narrative of being forcibly moved by a male member of staff epitomises these stories:

> "......He had these massive hands as well, both his fingers were in my eyes when I was being dragged down the corridor, I couldn't see nothing. Like literally, it was horrible. I don't think he should have done that. Like putting fingers in kids' eyes so they can't see, being dragged down a corridor"—Mia

Despite the positive experiences of some residents, this extract from Mia's interview brings us sharply back to the underlying threat of force that sustains the structure of secure care. It is evocative of Megan and Jack's experiences of being forcefully moved to secure care by a full physical withdrawal of agency and overwhelming bodily control. Mia's capacity to see and move or protect her body are removed by a bigger, stronger agential figure, by way of the 'massive' hands that control her and the fingers that obstruct her sight. In her narrative, these hands and fingers are themselves almost disembodied from a person—they symbolise force and power, things that hold and grab. She also diminishes herself here to greater differentiate the competing agency's power: She is a 'kid' being blindly 'dragged', a light weight to be transported by a greater power. Finally, the corridor here also emerges as symbolic of that capacity to be moved around against self-will, taken to places one does not choose, a reminder of that first unwilling journey to a strange place that simultaneously promises safety and violence.

Alleviated agency recognises that the routines and environment of secure care do not change the underlying learned methods of how traumatised children learn to handle difficult embodied emotions like anger and aggression, as it focuses on suppressing these potential emergences entirely. While therapeutic support is offered, we did not hear evidence from the young people we interviewed that such treatments focused on finding healthy ways for anger and violence to emerge safely, or on directly addressing embodied trauma (though this is almost certainly offered in some settings its impact appeared insignificant to our interviewees). The environment and management of secure homes allows manifestations of anger to be reduced because children's lives and behaviours are so heavily externally regulated, however after leaving secure care this external regulation will end and their own agential capacities will have greater freedom to emerge again, whether in safe or risky forms.

The problem posed for these children, and the secure home staff tasked with their care and support, is that alleviated agency is implicitly linked with the rigid material and social structure of the home, and an ever-present question for secure home staff is how children can be helped to learn healthy self-determination to guide their behaviours and actions once they leave this rigid environment. Alleviating the capacity for agency, and the children's surrender to this once they realise that acceptance is the only method of being safe in secure care, is not a sustainable solution to helping their agency manifest in more positive ways once it is 'returned'. This is a quandary that remains highly challenging for the sector, and many children who have lived in secure accommodation and leave before 18 will return to it after continuing to experience extreme social, emotional, and behavioural challenges (Williams et al., 2019).

DISCUSSION

Vulnerable children with the traumatic experiences of those who are directed towards secure care are likely to be hyper-sensitive to physical and emotional threat and many have learned to react with their own aggression in order to protect themselves. This threat is implicit in the style of transferrals to secure care that our participants recounted. In this way, regardless of who may have initiated violence on removal events, removals into secure care are inherently violent, spawning further trauma and distrust, and this violence is created by both parties, not only the child. It is worth remembering at this point that our study only covers children being taken into secure care on welfare, rather than criminal grounds. This means that they are being removed to secure care for their safety and well-being, not as a punishment. The experiences of these participants raise clear points at which more could have been done to attempt to prevent or contain that violence, while still having the support of trained and skilled workers present should they be required to physically restrain a child. Returning to the agential realist conceptualisation that we apply in our analysis here, the conditions for violent emergence in these transfers and during secure care are largely created and sustained outside of the child. Drawing from the narratives we have shared here, we argue that the processes currently in use within and around secure care transferral both create and escalate violent confrontation that prompts the child to become a locus for that violence and manifest it in their actions.

The alleviated agency evident in secure homes does not permanently alter the potential for violent manifestations of children's trauma. In an unknown number of cases, violent agency changes form in order to emerge, shifting from being directed at others to being directed towards the self in the form of self-harm. Many of the young people who had experienced secure care during our time period were unavailable for interview due to severe mental health issues including histories of self-harm, the high prevalence of which in and preceding entrance to secure accommodation is well-evidenced (Barron and Mitchell, 2017; Trainor et al., 2017). In fact, the continuous threat of violence and force that remains a constant possibility in secure care, due to the powers of staff to physically and materially restrict the agency of children, perpetuates the sense that violence and force are a legitimate method of dealing with confrontation and relational challenges.

We argue that the difficulties of children leaving secure care and adjusting back to being able to exert their agency partially originate from a systemic misunderstanding of agency that locates it as being able to be altered in nature via vigilant suppression. This understanding of agency is contained within the prevailing rights-based discourse of agency, which locates agency as a property of individuals that can be 'given' and 'taken away' or changed according to social and cultural norms. However, contemporary reconceptualisations of agency that locate it as relational and dynamic, emerging within social relations of power, provide alternative readings that position this former belief as misguided and, sometimes, dangerous for children held where this belief guides practice, as in secure accommodation.

'Tactical agency' refers to the actions of children designed to aid them in coping with extremely difficult, damaging, or violent conditions, originating from the research of Honwana (2005) on child soldiers (Abebe, 2019). These exertions may be deemed problematic in normative conditions, such as violence and aggression, however they are a realistic and practical method for children to manage their lived experiences under unacceptable conditions. Examples of tactical agency are observable within the data we share here, as coping strategies and targeted resistances occur within the young people's narratives. In our data, suppressed agency manifests in directing the anger and pain towards the self rather than externalising it when the opportunity to do so is

withdrawn. This raises the question of how this reconceptualisation of agency can support better transferrals to and care for children within secure accommodation, and how professionals and institutions can be better equipped to help children during and after stays in secure care. Given the numbers of repeated referrals to secure care (Williams et al., 2020), it is clear that this support requires urgent improvement.

If, as we have argued here, violent agency expressing embodied trauma cannot be suppressed in the manner that secure care currently conceptualises in its underpinning approach, then the range of treatments, therapies and activities offered within secure homes should be expanded to address underlying agential issues manifesting as violence and aggression. While clearly these young people's experiences as children suggest that methods of transfer to secure care require urgent review, there are other ways that professionals can seek to address some of the issues raised here in secure homes. Providing safer ways for violent agency to emerge, rather than attempting to prevent it from happening, offers recognition and accommodation of this agency. and potentially offers benefit to children beyond their residence in secure care. Exploring the contemporary therapies that provide this and their applicability to UK secure accommodation could be promising. These include psychodynamic therapy paired with physically-orientated practices such as, drama, yoga, boxing, dance, and martial arts (Smeijsters et al., 2011; Twemlow et al., 2008). Safe conflict-replication and movement-based embodied activities may provide a healthy outlet for children to learn control over how their aggression manifests during conflict situations, as well as directing physical energy in positive ways. The inclusion of these treatments within secure care contexts would not sufficiently ameliorate the concerns raised regarding the violence in the young people's experiences included here, however, and strategies that escalate violence are clearly counter-productive to these aims.

CONCLUSION

The critical juncture for the agency of children in secure accommodation is when they are discharged and have to re-enter society, at which point their agency—to full or partial degree—is no longer alleviated and is free to manifest. While we have not focused on this aspect of children's journeys here, there are several studies accounting for the challenges faced at this stage. Williams et al. (2019) and Kendrick et al. (2008) suggest an incapacity of secure accommodation in its current form to support children in recovering from their underlying embodied trauma, during or after secure care, based on children and young people's trajectories after care. These trajectories suggest that in many cases the issues leading to children entering secure care continue in a stable form or escalate during secure accommodation. The narratives shared here give some indication of how this may be occurring. By challenging the predominant rights-based conceptualisation of agency that locates it as something to be given and taken away from children, we can better understand the risks and challenges faced by children subject to attempts to remove or restrict agency. This leads us to focus on a re-evaluation of how forcible movements and restrictions on children that may be necessary for various reasons can be handled in a way that seeks to de-escalate a felt need for violence against others or the self. It troubles the notion that 'difficult' agency can be contained or suppressed and instead prompt practitioners to focus on methods of treating embodied trauma. It also suggests an increased focus on shifting practice towards therapies that acknowledge the anger, frustration and aggression that such vulnerable children have developed due to their early experiences, and in assisting them to find positive routes for those agencies to be expressed to support better outcomes for secure care and other similar institutions that restrict children's agency.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Please note that due to the small number of participants eligible for this study, and the life-story nature of narratives, participants are potentially identifiable from the complete dataset, even with appropriate anonymisation measures. Due to this, the extreme sensitivity of the data generated, and the vulnerability of the participants, we will not be making available the complete dataset for this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Throughout this article, we use the term 'children' to refer to people under the age of 18 when discussing experiences of secure care, and 'young people' to refer to our participants themselves or when the term covers those aged 18 and over. We make this distinction as many of our participants were close to or had transitioned to adulthood at the time of the study but the experiences they described took place at a younger age, from 10 years old onwards.

[2] Welfare-based referrals to secure care may only be made if the child has a history or probability of absconding, or 'running away', or if it is argued that they pose a risk to other people or themselves. Orders for secure care may also be made on criminal grounds.

[3] Northern Ireland does not publish yearly figures of children admitted to secure care.

[4] We apply the term 'trauma' in this paper to refer to negative experiences that create long-lasting detrimental impacts on a person's thoughts, emotions, or behaviours, and 'embodied trauma' to refer to that which manifests physical effects on the body (Warner et al., 2020) while recognising that there is ongoing debate regarding the use and application of this term within children's social care (Spratt & Kennedy, 2021).

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