

Youth in Transition: Exploring a life course perspective on leaving Care in Africa

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Abstract

While there is a substantial body of leaving care research, the theorization of care leaving has been more limited. Only a few studies have incorporated a life course perspective, mainly in Global North contexts where life course perspectives may differ significantly from those in the Global South, including Africa. Drawing on findings from a feasibility research study, this paper contributes to the emerging international literature on theorizing care leaving by applying a life course perspective to the experiences of youth leaving care in four African countries. The paper highlights how life course can be a useful conceptual framework for understanding the experiences of care leavers with an emphasis on four core concepts: biography, linked lives, waithood, and agency. Implications for policy and practice are outlined with a focus on interdependence, participatory practice, biography, and cultural transition planning alongside efforts to redress systemic, oppressive barriers facing care leavers in society.

Keywords

life course, youth transition, leaving care, waithood, agency, Africa, emerging adulthood/adult transition, foster care, service learning

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Introduction

Youth leaving care encounter a range of transitional challenges yet also demonstrate considerable resilience and agency (Frimpong-Manso, 2017; Stein, 2012). After living in foster or residential care for some time they must leave, usually at age 18, and find ways of coping with the challenges of young adulthood. There is now a substantial body of research on the difficult experiences many of these young people face (Mann-Feder & Goyette 2019). Much of this research has focused on preparation for leaving care (Frimpong Manso, 2012; Cassarino-Perez et al., 2018) and outcomes for care-leavers (Kääriälää & Hiilamo, 2017; Kelly et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2021). Within this growing literature the theorisation of care-leaving is still at an exploratory stage (van Breda, 2015; Storø, 2017) and there has been some recognition of the need to take account of the dominance of theory emanating from the Global North (Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2020); a caution that has been flagged within youth studies more broadly (Furlong, 2013).

One theoretical perspective that has been used to good effect in several care-leaving studies is the life course (Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014; Brady & Gilligan, 2018, 2020a; Dima & Skehill, 2011; Horrocks, 2002). Life course theory has brought new insights into care-leaving, however to date these studies have only been in the Global North. To help address that imbalance, this paper seeks to contribute to the emerging body of theoretical work within leaving care by considering a life course perspective (particularly concepts of biography, linked lives, waithood, and agency) to the findings of a research feasibility study undertaken in four countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kelly et al., 2020).

Life Course Theory: Key Concepts for Leaving Care

Contemporary life course theory has shifted from deterministic, linear life cycle models toward a life course approach that acknowledges the social construction of generational categories, the complexities of youth transitions and wider environmental, temporal, and structural issues (Elder et al., 2003; Furlong 2013; Hunt, 2016). This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding care-leaving youth who may not easily meet developmental norms and for whom the relational, social and structural constraints on their transitions to adult life differ (Dima & Skehill, 2011; Gundersen, 2021; Horrocks, 2002; Storø, 2017). Life-course researchers in the Global North have highlighted the relevance of three key life course concepts for care-leavers: biography (Ferguson, 2018; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014), linked

lives (Brady & Gilligan, 2020a), and agency (Bengtsson et al., 2020; Brady & Gilligan, 2020b).

Biography is a fundamental aspect of life course, as care-leavers' histories, identities, and past experiences impact on current experiences and future aspirations and pathways (Bond, 2022; Horrocks, 2002). Several studies have emphasized that subjective interpretations of care biography are critical to young people's transitions from care and development of self-identity. This underlines the need to support care-leavers to make sense of their biography as they work toward self-actualization and seek out pathways into adult life (Pinkerton & Rooney 2014; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014; Refaeli & Strahl, 2014).

The life course concept of linked lives replaces the view of adulthood as a time of self-sufficient independence with seeing it as socially and relationally embedded and, therefore, interdependent (Brady & Gilligan, 2020; Elder et al., 2003; Storø, 2018), consistent with social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). However, for care-experienced young people the extent to which these forms of communal relationality are available is uncertain, given they may have disrupted attachments before and while in care and limited social networks to draw on after care (Frimpong-Manso, 2017; Boddy et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2018; Stubbs et al., 2022). It is now widely recognized that interdependence, not independence, should be the goal of preparation and aftercare work with care-leavers (Moodley et al., 2020; Storø, 2018).

Agency, a further core aspect of life course theory, is a common theme in the literature on youth leaving care (Bengtsson et al., 2020). Care-leavers demonstrate individual and collective agency as they navigate their way to young adulthood (Storø, 2017). Youth leaving care can engage in reactive agency in response to present issues that can have ongoing consequences, including decisions to disengage from formal support services (Van Breda, 2015). Brady and Gilligan (2020b) argue for an acceptance of negative agentic actions as a normative part of the developmental process for youth in transition and call for flexibility in the care system to allow care-leavers to redress negative decisions and re-engage with support as required. Critical decolonial perspectives on youth agency in the Global South are also relevant as the legacy of unequal power relations and paternalism continue to impact on youth agency in African contexts (Liebel, 2020).

A fourth life cycle concept, which has been found to be useful in the Global South, is that of *waithood*. It denotes an involuntary suspended state where youth transitions to adulthood are constrained by oppressive socio-economic and political systems that restrict opportunities to attain the socially valued markers of adult life and exacerbate inequalities (Honwana, 2014). *Waithood* is not a result of individual failure or simply about being poor,

unemployed or marginalized. It is the absence of social markers of adulthood valued in a cultural context. “What matters here is . . . the ways in which being unemployed or unmarried, for instance, become barriers to being adult in the eyes of others” (Carling, 2015, p. 3).

The relevance of waithood to the experiences of youth populations in African contexts has been well researched (Carling, 2015; Honwana, 2014; Kovacheva et al., 2018; Mclean, 2020; Oosterom & Sumberg, 2021). While waithood can prompt youth agency and advocacy to challenge structural inequalities, waithood also fosters frustration that can lead to behavior that reinforces stereotypical notions of youth as idle, dangerous, or violent (Finn & Oldfield, 2015). Despite its apparent relevance for care-experienced young people in African contexts, where the social markers of adulthood are often unattainable due to a lack of basic resources, post-care instability and social exclusion (Frimpong-Manso, 2017, 2018; Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2019), waithood has had limited application in the field of leaving care (Pouw et al., 2017).

Building Positive Futures Study

This paper’s exploration of the applicability of life course theory to care-leaving in African contexts is grounded in the Building Positive Futures feasibility study (BPF) undertaken through the UK Government’s Global Challenges Research Fund in four Sub-Saharan countries (Kelly et al., 2020): Ghana (Frimpong-Manso, 2018), South Africa (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016), Uganda (Bukuluki et al., 2020), and Zimbabwe (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Gwenzi, 2020). These countries were selected as all had national law and policy relating to leaving care (although services were provided on an ad hoc basis) and all offered the infrastructure required for a cross national study—a host NGO (SOS Children’s Villages, SOS-CV) and an in-country academic with care-leaving expertise. Inter-country differences were less evident due to the fairly consistent SOS-CV approach of providing residential care in a family-like environment where an SOS-CV “parent” looks after several children in the same house in a residential “village” with other SOS-CV families. Aftercare support is also provided for some young people for a limited period.

The aim of BPF was primarily to test the feasibility of a mixed methods approach to comparative research on leaving care in African contexts. The methods combined qualitative interviews with care-leavers about their experiences, led by care-experienced peer researchers, along with quantitative questionnaires, administered to care-leavers and social workers to collect data on demographics, resilience, and outcomes (although this is not reported within this paper). This paper draws on findings from the qualitative interviews. The study findings, research instruments, and peer research

methodology are provided in the main BPF report (Kelly et al, 2020). The study was granted ethical approval by the research team's universities in each country and formally approved by SOS-CV.

To protect anonymity, SOS-CV staff identified young people who met the inclusion criteria and invited them to participate. Interested young people gave written agreement to be contacted by the research team. The researcher purposively selected a sample of 45 care-leavers who met the inclusion criteria: at least 12-months of SOS-CV care experience and in preparation for leaving care or already left care. Sixteen participants were 25 years old or older and 29 were aged 17 to 24. This paper focuses on the latter group of 17 to 24 year olds (Ghana 3, South Africa 8, Uganda 7, Zimbabwe 11). Gender was almost even: 14 females and 15 males. Most were single with just three married (one female and two males)

Prior to interviews, participants gave written, informed consent to participate. For those under 18, written consent was given by their legal guardian. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymized using pseudonyms before being shared with the research team. All data was subject to strict data protection procedures. Hard copies of participant information were destroyed once digitalized and electronic copies were stored on secure, password-protected computers at each university. Anonymized transcripts and analysis files were shared with the team via a secure password protected Dropbox system.

The peer researchers who led the qualitative interviews had themselves all left SOS-CV's care at least 1 year previously and had been told about the opportunity by SOS-CV. The academic research team provided them with formal training and undertook an assessment of their research skills before offering them positions. The academic researchers accompanied the peer researchers to provide safe transport and support, as required. If participants knew the peer researcher, the academic researcher reminded all parties of the duty of confidentiality and offered to conduct the interview themselves or to reschedule with a different peer researcher. In most cases, the young person chose to be interviewed by the peer researcher known to them.

Participants were interviewed in the SOS-CV site where they had previously lived or at an alternative setting of their choice, such as their own home, and interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. Multiple languages are used in each of the countries, but all participants spoke English (secondary education in each country is in English) and only one interview was conducted in a local language the researcher also spoke (Afrikaans). Although interviews were in English, participants often slipped into using local dialect for particular phrases, so it was helpful that researchers were familiar with local languages.

The interviews addressed young people's preparation for leaving care, transition from care and post-care care experiences. Qualitative interview data was analyzed thematically and inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This process began with free coding of two transcripts from each country and then clustering codes into themes and sub-themes. These eight coded transcripts were then merged into one dataset on the ATLAS.ti computer package for review by the study lead (first author) who collapsed overlapping codes into a final coding framework for the whole dataset. At least one peer researcher in each country verified and refined this coding framework, which was used to analyze the remaining transcripts at country level and identify cross-country expressions of life course concepts. Although there are structural and cultural contextual differences across each of the countries involved, in consideration of life course theory, the data suggested more unity than diversity across the study sites.

Theorizing BPF

Findings

In this section, the BPF qualitative interviews are analyzed according to the life course concepts of biography, linked lives, agency, and waithood, to investigate the usefulness of life course theory in articulating and understanding the experiences of care-leavers in African contexts.

Biography

Biography was apparent in the interviews as a key theme relating to how the care-leavers negotiated their sense of identity and connection with family, culture and community. Participants made it clear that in their cultural contexts knowledge of their genealogy was key to understanding who they were. Knowledge of cultural and family background is an integral part of African youth identity, captured in the notion of Ubuntu with its emphasis not only an individual's interconnection with family, taking in wider networks of clan or kin, but also ancestral lineage (Van Breda, 2019). So unsurprisingly care-leavers who had been abandoned or who had no knowledge of their biological family lineage felt isolated and stigmatised and limited in their sense of identity and belonging: People like us, you have to be on your own and you have to learn to grow up on your own since you do not know your biological parents. (Thulani, 21, South Africa)

Even where family was known to participants, disconnection from their cultural identity while in care could leave them lacking knowledge about the cultural norms, customs, and even the language of their backgrounds:

I had to attend a funeral in my hometown and I had to read about the dos and the don'ts because those things were not established when we were growing up in SOS. There was a time that I got embarrassed because I went to meet elderly people and I didn't know that I wasn't supposed to wear certain things and I had to do things like scarfing my hair. (Maame, 23, Ghana)

All the countries in the study are multi-lingual and some participants no longer spoke their birth family's language. This was a clear barrier to resettle with their family and community after care. To promote belonging to their birth family, several participants were actively taking steps to learn their language.

Lost or limited biography had implications for participants' access to practical resources to build a sustainable life, such as, housing and employment. For some of the young men it may have effectively disinherited them from land or other resources. Several participants indicated that lack of knowledge of their birth family also negatively impacted on opportunities for marriage:

It helps to know my biological parents . . . Those people I want to marry will really want to know about where you came from. It helps to know my totem, this will help me to know my origins . . . they can ask me, and I do not have a clue . . . (Kudzai, 23, Zimbabwe)

Where marriage is considered a contract between extended family groups primarily, rather than individuals, knowledge of the participants' biological family, lineage, and ancestry can be a pre-requisite to marriage negotiations (Ansell et al., 2018). Care-leavers who do not have knowledge of their biographical and family identity can, therefore, be disadvantaged and the relatives of their partner may discourage or object to their marriage.

Attention to biography, particularly missing biographies, appears crucial to understanding the lived life-course experience of care-leavers. A clear message from the participants was that they needed greater support over the care-leaving transition to understand their biography as a core aspect of their identity and to establish, strengthen, and sustain family-community networks:

Some children leave SOS when they do not have even a single relative . . . this person is not all that exposed to the outside community . . . SOS can go an extra mile and find some community families for us . . . so that it is not very hard for us when you go out. (Francis, 24, Uganda)

Linked Lives

The life course focus on linked lives resonates with the growing recognition of interdependence within the care-leaving literature (Storø, 2018). The BPF

participants were conscious of how their lives were linked through informal, often reciprocal, relationships with peers, family, and community connections. Given the strong bonds that participants had established with peers and carers in SOS-CV, they often invested much time in maintaining these links, which gave them a sense of belonging and became a source of support:

We encourage each other . . . We know each other's backgrounds . . . and we are always there for each other and we share everything that we feel . . . since I don't have family so I am taking them as my brothers and sisters. (Amogelang, 21, South Africa)

For those who did have family links, when these were positive they greatly helped the participants resettle into the community and facilitated access to networks that could offer employment or housing. However, participants often found it difficult to forge deep connections with their family due to strained, distant relationships during care:

We didn't have any bond . . . because of the separation they put between us from the time we were young . . . we are so separated. Everybody is on his own. (Emmanuel, 22, Uganda)

Several participants felt judged by their family and community for being a child who grew up in care, free from deprivation and exposed to alternative cultural norms. Some families inaccurately assumed participants lacked for nothing, given their access to SOS-CV resources and so expected the care-leaver to provide for them now:

The problem which made them take me to SOS still exists . . . a family living beyond absolute poverty . . . It hasn't been alleviated . . . If I have a problem and I go to them it will be a burden to them. . . so I just let them know that things are okay. . . I feel you have already been stigmatised and there is jealousy . . . They still see you as a visitor even though you are part of the family . . . because you didn't grow up with us. (Maame, 23, Ghana)

Although participants reported forming new personal relationships, it was clear that they were strategic about the relationships they chose to foster and sustain. Participants tended to view their post-care relationships as purposeful alliances offering advancement in their social status or life opportunities rather than close relationships. In the context of minimal resources and opportunities, care-leavers could not "afford" to invest time and emotion in relationships that may stall their social mobility or drain their limited resources. These difficulties in relationships with friends and lovers often concerned the stigma of having been in care:

I don't have friends . . . I did not want to get judged by other people for living at SOS. Some people take advantage of that . . . I get lonely sometimes feeling that people don't want me . . . besides, I didn't want to be pitied by people . . . Mostly I just . . . be alone . . . I just reject all their offers. (Sibongile, 17, South Africa)

It makes love relationships difficult . . . Imagine I fall in love with a girl and she knows that I live in the SOS Children's Village, that person will never really love me because of the image, the view people in the community have of us . . . I once . . . gave her [previous girlfriend] a hint at that and when we had problems she ended up using my background to demonise me. So . . . I learnt that I will never share my background. (Kudzai, 23, Zimbabwe)

The stigma of care could also sour relationships at work:

I have faced . . . bullying at workplaces . . . Some men, when they learn that you come from care, they despise and disrespect . . . mistreating you because they know now that you do not have a family of your own like biological parents . . . you do not have people who are going to come to your rescue . . . That is why . . . we tend to hide that fact that we come from care . . . because of that fear. (Pauline, 23, Uganda)

Beyond SOS-CV, family and peer support, some young people spoke of harnessing resources from other relationships, including sponsors, mentors, or employers. Those who had been less successful at building purposive relational networks felt they would benefit from having a mentor to guide them as they navigated their post-care lives:

I need someone that can help me with everything; someone that is like a parent to me . . . It is hard when you do not have anyone. . . . I think it was very important to have someone to discuss with, a mentor. (Nduna, 23, Zimbabwe)

Waithood

The BPF interviews showed that the areas of life they found most challenging were those in which they felt unable to attain the social markers of adulthood valued in their cultural contexts. Instead, their experience was of "waithood." They regarded themselves as having had a privileged upbringing in SOS-CV, with generous access to resources and support, but when that ended they had to adjust to the harsh structural disadvantage experienced by many youth:

When you are in SOS . . . it is too nice and they do not show you the real picture outside . . . I have to start looking for my money and sustain myself without anybody's help. That is very difficult. (Emmanuel, 22, Uganda)

The pursuit of secure, well-paid employment was challenging for participants in the context of high rates of unemployment and limited community networks. Many participants highlighted the need to be entrepreneurial, creative and strategic in their efforts to generate a stable income. For some this involved self-employment in farming or trading; for others it meant using strategic connections to link with job opportunities. Participants reported failed business ventures due to not having financial backing or community networks and it was suggested that SOS-CV needed to do more to help them build sustainable livelihoods:

I have been doing chicken projects . . . It did not work out because of finances and the economy . . . So far I am doing nothing . . . it is very tough. This hardship and the economy is really killing us, especially us who do not have real parents. Those that have parents . . . are using their parents to grab the employment opportunities and we do not have those opportunities. (Nduna, 23, Zimbabwe)

Those who were unable to secure or sustain employment were struggling financially and unsure about their futures:

There is no money, you even don't know what you are going to eat . . . Sometimes, if there is a small job, I go out there and do it . . . It is not every time I get some money, so sometimes you . . . sleep hungry. (Joseph, 22, Uganda)

Several participants had engaged in what they described as “hustling” to secure the basics for daily life, such as food and shelter. This sometimes put them in dangerous situations and led to criminal activity. In addition to periods of homelessness, many young people experienced living in unstable or crowded housing. In these harsh contexts, participants often felt isolated and were concerned by their lack of support or safety net:

It was tough. We had to find ways to survive . . . but there is nothing . . . because people didn't know me and I had to start from the beginning . . . (Melokuhle, 22, South Africa)

The thing is having someone to fall back on if there is a problem . . . that is very necessary . . . who to go to if I have a problem? (Efua, 23, Ghana)

Regarding marriage and parenting as cultural markers of adulthood, participants' experience was mainly that of waithood. For some young people, pursuit of further education as a pathway out of waithood was prioritized over plans for marriage. Others, particularly males, focused on gaining a secure

income and building their financial assets, so they could support a partner and family in the future:

The major problem is money . . . I don't have that money to give them so, I rather be alone . . . (Joseph, 22, Uganda)

Others focused on marrying someone who offered a better and more stable life and would not consider settling down with a partner who was struggling financially. Several participants felt that providing for a partner would threaten their own financial stability or that a partner might leave them if they became financially insecure:

[A girlfriend] profits me nothing . . . If girls . . . see you with money they will spend all of it . . . and then leaves you . . . and you will be broke . . . (Tawanda, 22, Zimbabwe)

While parenthood was a future goal for most participants, they often preferred to wait until they were financially secure and married before they became parents. Only four participants were parents, all of whom were male and had one child. Two of these parents explained that they had consciously decided to limit the number of children in their home to ensure they could provide for their children. Those who were parents were concerned about providing for their family, seeing a "good" father as an effective breadwinner for the family:

I am a good parent . . . I have not faced any challenge because I am working. If I was not working, it would be hard because a child will cry, she wants medicine when you can't afford it but . . . My role is to take care of my family and . . . to attend to their needs. (Ivan, 24, Uganda)

Agency

Despite the range of socio-economic and structural barriers constraining participants' transitional experiences, most felt personally responsible to rise to the challenge:

In life you don't need only to depend . . . you got to work with what is on the ground, learn to . . . fight hard on your own for yourself. (Kudzai, 23, Zimbabwe)

Their efforts to survive and flourish showed a dynamic response to the challenges of aftercare life. Most spoke of being hard working, focused and self-disciplined, and seizing opportunities as they arose. Participants had identified

multiple sources of income and juggled more than one job, often alongside studies to support their education or to save money for future ambitions:

The people that have made it big outside . . . have been disciplined and always worked hard . . . you have to be productive and sharp, say think outside the box, always have a B plan . . . be disciplined, humble and not taking things for granted . . . (Pauline, 23, Uganda)

Reflecting the earlier discussion of linked lives, agency was not solely an individual act, but was produced through relational interactions with others that could inhibit or enable capacity for agency. Care-leavers drew on interdependent relationships for various forms of support to overcome challenges and enhance their life opportunities:

I would do every work that was available . . . but I was just surviving . . . and a friend taught me how to ride a motorcycle and he gave it to me . . . so I started working and was earning daily and kept on saving and this made me to rent a room . . . I also bought a plot of land . . . and I have a plan of constructing rentals on that piece of land. (Ivan, 24, Uganda)

Relationships with SOS-CV peers provided emotional support, but were also a reliable source of practical and economic support, for example, providing food or basic household items when participants were struggling financially:

The people that I grew up with in SOS . . . they are people you can lean on, count on, when you are stuck somewhere. Someone you can call that help me with this money. I will give it back when I get. (Pauline, 23, Uganda)

The reciprocal nature of these relationships was evident as many participants expressed a desire to “give back” to others and provide support and resources to SOS-CV siblings. This sense of collective agency enabled relational help-seeking behavior as care-leavers sought to support each other practically and emotionally and engaged in advocacy to improve opportunities for other youth leaving care.

Discussion and Practice Implications

Having considered the qualitative findings from the BPF study through the life course lens, in particular the concepts of biography, linked lives, agency, and waithood, it would appear that, as in other areas (Furlong, 2013), life course theory does provide a useful perspective. It both articulates and directs attention to important aspects of young people’s experiences of care-leaving

in African contexts. Furthermore, life course concepts manifested similarly across the four country sites.

These findings highlight how knowledge and understanding of genealogy and biography are key not only to supporting positive self-identities for this African sample of care-experienced youth, but also for engaging the relational, economic, and community supports available to them.

Practice implications include sustained attention to young people's biography while in care. There are already accounts of such work in African and other contexts: life story work to develop understanding of social capital within institutions (Ucembe, 2013); therapeutic work to explore aspirations for future selves (Bond, 2022); and greater efforts to support family and cultural identity before youth leave care (Gwenzi, 2020; Mendes et al., 2021).

The concept of linked lives was also shown to illuminate the participants' self-reported experiences of interdependence as an expression of Ubuntu (Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020; Moodley et al., 2020). Relationships with family, peers and community members have particular importance in enabling youth leaving care to establish themselves within communities and succeed in adult life. Conversely, the dislocation of those links while in care is detrimental to care-leavers' prospects. There is greater vulnerability to stigma, exclusion, and exploitation once out of care. Unsurprisingly, care-experienced young people are tentative and defensive in their approach to relationships.

Practice implications are clear: a relational approach to establishing multi-layered family and community connections before youth leave care (Van Breda, 2022; Boddy et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2021) and, post-care, the need to help them retain or obtain the cultural and linguistic skills needed (Frimpong-Manso, 2017; Cooper, 2018). These needs can be addressed through cultural transition planning informed by partnerships within local communities (Mendes et al., 2021).

While thinking about the life course has moved away from normative, linear acquisition of adult attributes such as employment, own home, marriage, and children, the BPF interviewees clearly had frustrated or delayed aspirations for just such markers, well captured by the concept of *waithood*. Within African contexts, the extent of structural barriers and the severity of their consequences (Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Honwana, 2014), alongside very explicit cultural endorsement of key markers of adulthood (Kovacheva et al., 2018), caution against losing recognition of just how structural youth transitioning is for care-leavers and their peers. That is not to downplay the role of agency. Delaying key markers of adult life were presented by some of those interviewed as intentional and strategic, displaying "*active waithood*" (McLean, 2020, p. 136) or "*agentic waiting*" (Bottrell & Pessoa, 2019, p. 142). Support for care-leavers needs to explore their expectations and the extent to which

these are disempowering them rather than informing realistic but affirming agentic navigation of both structural constraints and possibilities.

Despite the levels of adversity and constraint apparent in the life course experiences of the study participants, their sense of personal agency was clearly evident as they developed creative and entrepreneurial strategies to carve out pathways to adulthood. At the same time, it was equally clear that these strategies were not executed independently. In contrast to an individualistic view of agency dominant in the Global North, interdependence was a core feature of their agency as they mobilized relational resources in ways that were mutually beneficial (Liebel, 2020). This included the important roles that youth leaving care play in each other's lives, as mentors and providers of practical and emotional support in the context of adversity and youth oppression. Widening that supportive bond to encompass others who recognize care-leavers as fellow citizens with needs and rights to be supported can help to fill the gaps in care-leavers' social and support networks (Van Breda, 2022; Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Macdonald et al., 2020; Oosterom & Sumberg, 2021;).

Greater efforts are needed at policy, practice, and community levels to bolster care-leavers' relational connectedness. This requires not only an interdependence focus to preparation and aftercare work with individual care-leavers, but also macro policy and structural interventions to promote their socio-economic wellbeing and address broader social inequality (Frimpong-Manso, 2019; Van Breda & Pinkerton, 2020; Brady & Gilligan, 2020b; Gundersen, 2021). Harnessing the advocacy skills of youth who have left care may also encourage their engagement in broader community and political activity and help to give a stronger voice for care-leavers to achieve social change. Participatory practice, peer mentorship, advocacy roles, and participation in research and policy development are ways in which youth leaving care can collaborate with peers and allies to enact change and develop new approaches to promoting interdependent adult lives (Gundersen, 2021).

Study Limitations

It is important to note that, as a feasibility project, the BPF study was small-scale and exploratory. It is limited by the small sample size in each of the four countries and so makes no claim to the representativeness or generalizability of the findings to national or cross-national care-leaver populations in these countries. The rigor of the methodology and the richness of the qualitative data should however give confidence in the findings. Participants coming from only one service provider, and that provider doing the recruitment of the participants, created potential bias and we only had information about those interested in taking part (not those who did not wish to participate). However,

the research team worked closely with SOS-CV to explain the sampling criteria and were reassured by the sampling profile and range of participant experiences reported that a diverse group had been recruited. The BPF study has shown, not only the need for further large-scale African cross-national and cross-provider research, but also the feasibility of doing such research and engaging care-experienced young people as informants and researchers.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the emerging theorization of care-leaving by highlighting the relevance of a life course perspective to care-leaving in African contexts. The findings show that life course theory is a helpful conceptual framework for understanding the experiences and needs of young people leaving care and moving toward young adulthood. Applying a life course perspective also foregrounds important aspects of care-leavers' transitions that require more attention in both research and practice, including the importance of biography, agency, and linked lives. Furthermore, with a central focus on the African context, the study findings have elucidated some apparently distinctive expressions of life course concepts among African young people leaving care as they navigate active waithood. These insights cluster around the significance of interdependence and cultural connection and the need for further action to challenge the stigma and oppression experienced by youth leaving care at social and structural levels. While recognizing the distinctive experiences of care leavers in these African contexts, given youth precarity and structural insecurities globally, these findings may also bear relevance to youth leaving care in Global North contexts (France, 2016). We encourage other researchers to consider life course theory as an integrative and flexible conceptual framework for theorizing care-leaving in the Global South and across different national, cultural, and ethnic contexts.


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