CARE-LEAVERS' EFFORTS TO BUILD RESILIENCE THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS OF BELONGING

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to deepen and theorise our understanding of the need for belonging among young people transitioning out of residential care. The study adopted a qualitative approach, with a sample of 31 residential care-leavers in South Africa, who were followed-up annually for seven years. It addresses the lack of theoretically informed studies and builds an indigenous theory to explain the care-leaving journey. This paper presents findings on care-leavers' deep desire for authentic belonging, their investment in building authentic relationships, and their frustration and failure in doing so. Implications for practice suggest an imperative to build care-leavers' sense of belonging after removal from home to care, which will ultimately lead to building resilience. Social workers and child and youth care workers need to co-build networks of belonging to foster young people's perceptions of themselves and the part that belonging plays in their post-care reintegration.

Keywords: aging out of care; belonging; care-leaving theory; leaving care; resilience

INTRODUCTION

For any young person raised in a 'normal' family, the transition to adulthood can be a daunting time – it involves making serious life decisions, such as beginning or completing an education, finding employment and accommodation, and establishing a household and family (Arnett, 2007; Barn, 2010; van Breda, 2018b; Wade, 2008). It is sometimes characterised as a period of many emotions – excitement, fear, hopefulness, anxiety – in starting a new life outside the comfort of a protective family environment. Ideally, this transition happens gradually, is not

forced, and provides young people with options for the essentials to grow and develop, namely a stable job, shelter, security and a supportive network.

This is not so, however, for children who grow up in alternative care, that is, in foster care or child and youth care centres (CYCCs). For young people in care, this transition typically means moving immediately from alternative care into independent living, which led Stein (2006:25) to call the phase "instant adulthood". An extensive body of research in the Global North focuses on young people transitioning out of care. Care-leaving research has revealed that many challenges are experienced during this transitioning phase – from childhood to adulthood, from dependence to independent living (Abdullah, Cudjoe, Emery & Frederico, 2020; Bengtsson, Sjöblom & Öberg, 2020; Berridge, 2017; Stein, 2006; van Breda, 2014b; 2018b). The complexities that care-leavers face range from the struggle with securing stable accommodation and employment, and attaining further educational support, leading to overall poor outcomes in all areas of life, e.g. compromised health, criminal activity and substance abuse. One of the most significant challenges for many young people leaving care is having to return to the very same family structure that warranted removal or living entirely on their own with often limited support structures (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, 2019; Harder, Mann-Feder, Oterholm & Refaeli, 2020; Moodley, Raniga & Sewpaul, 2018; van Breda, 2018b).

Despite the growth of care-leaving literature, there remains a gap in the generation of care-leaving theory (van Breda, 2014a). Stein (2006:422) states, "theoretical perspectives have informed very few of these [care-leaving] studies." He reiterates that this lack of theoretically informed studies includes a lack of building of new theory to explain the care-leaving journey. While Stein's 2006 article is now dated, and substantial work has been done since on theory-informed research, the theorising on care-leaving remains limited. Glynn (2021) and Storø (2016) concur with this; they critique the lack of generation of care-leaving theory and the absence of a theoretical framework underpinning care-leavers' journey out of care.

To narrow this gap, a group of researchers in South Africa conducted a grounded theory study, which examined the journey of nine male care-leavers about five years after they had left the care of Girls and Boys Town (GBT) (van Breda, Marx & Kader, 2012). This study was broadly informed by resilience theory, with resilience defined as "multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity" (van Breda, 2018a:5). Resilience theory was considered a useful broad theoretical foundation for both the original 2012 study and the current study, because it seeks to understand and explain the processes that facilitate improved transitions from care towards young adulthood.

On the basis of their findings, the "theory of care-leaving" was formulated. The focus was on the "social processes – i.e., the actions, more or less consciously and deliberately performed by young people in their interactions with their social environment over time – that underlie a longer-term care-leaving journey" (van Breda, 2014a:232). Subsequently, Hlungwani and van Breda (2020) replicated the original study with females from several CYCCs. They proposed that the four care-leaving processes identified by Van Breda operate similarly for both male and female care-leavers. This lends greater credence to van Breda's care-leaving theory by suggesting that these are gender-inclusive resilience processes (van Breda & Hlungwani,

2019). Although these studies have been influential in clarifying South African researchers' understanding of the care-leaving journey as well as forming the foundation of an ongoing longitudinal study on care-leaving (van Breda & Dickens, 2016), the research teams described their care-leaving theory as "nascent", because it required further exploration (van Breda *et al*., 2012).

Given the need to further develop and strengthen this "nascent" theory on care-leaving, this article focuses on the first of the foundational psychosocial process outlined by van Breda *et al*. (2012): "striving for authentic belonging". This study generates a clearer understanding of the attempts made by care-leavers to develop deep, meaningful relationships in their lives after leaving care. This study explores the nature and efforts made by care-leavers to establish authentic relationships with significant individuals in their environment. In the following sections, we review the literature, highlighting theoretical gaps and shortcomings; then we describe the methodology adopted for the research, outline and illustrate the findings, and discuss the findings. The article concludes with a final section on implications for practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Central to our developing knowledge about the care-leaving field are the links that exist between good family support/connections and youth resilience (Gullo, García-Alba, Bravo & del Valle, 2023; Hiles *et al*., 2014; Stein, 2019; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan & Tayri-Schwartz, 2021; van Breda, 2014b). Care-leavers are often referred to as "a group at risk of social exclusion, [thus] social networks are essential for care-leavers because they can promote social integration and social connectedness" (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020:246). The lack of an aftercare support network meant that care-leavers experience a gap between 'inside' and 'outside' the care system as they transition from almost total support to no support (Dima & Skehill, 2011; Niiranen, Isola, Känkänen & Manninen, 2022). This kind of support is referred to as a young person's social support network and is recognised as providing three types of social support (emotional, practical and informational) to benefit an individual's ability to cope with life stressors (Melkman & Benbenishty, 2018). Therefore, studies have shown us that what fosters better outcomes in care and during the transition out of care seems to occur in the interaction between the youths and their social environment (van Breda, 2022). Thus, the support in this transition from care means that care-leavers are more likely to enjoy a positive self-identity, self-confidence and better outcomes overall (Mendes, Johnson & Moslehuddin, 2012; Stein, 2019).

Studies have shown that adolescents with higher levels of social support in care and after manage the transition from care more successfully (Atwool, 2020; Frimpong-Manso, 2018; Stein, 2008; van Breda, 2014b; 2022). Thus, good adjustment to life after care is linked to the social connections with family, school, peers and community structures. These relationships are important in providing practical, emotional and social support (Frimpong-Manso, 2017; Sulimani-Aidan, 2020; van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019). However, research indicates that the reality is that care-leavers spend time away from their families and communities, which means weakened family/social bonds and disrupted parental relationships (Chimange & Bond, 2020; Mendes *et al*., 2012; Sulimani-Aidan & Tayri-Schwartz, 2021). The care-leavers' family

support is an important safety net (Groinig & Sting, 2020; Virat & Dubreil, 2020), but care-leavers often experience the absence of such a safety net (Boddy, 2018; Mendes *et al*., 2012).

Research also suggests that access to family and community networks signifies levels of social capital. Social capital is vital in raising children and young people, and in instilling a sense of belonging, trust and reciprocity (Barn, 2010; van Breda & Pinkerton, 2019). Key constructs in this regard are "social capital (the bonds of commitment, trust, and obligation that arise from attachment and facilitate the exchange of resources) and social control (greater compliance and commitment from youth that result from having greater social capital)" (Smith, 2011:149). Thus, the investments of love and care by the young person's social network instil a sense of attachment and commitment to people and society.

Therefore, attachment and development of relationships are focal points in our discussion – and the need for care-leavers is to ultimately secure relationships with trusted individuals. As alluded to earlier and linked to this concept of social capital is a deepened sense of belonging that care-leavers continuously strive for (van Breda *et al*., 2012). A sense of belonging is provided by secure attachment and is the extent to which an individual feels loved, valued and cared for in their shared social milieu. A sense of belonging among youths who were removed from their families is vital, since their departure from their parents is an experience of a loss of attachment figures. Moreover, this loss is ambiguous (Boss, 1999), because attachment figures are both psychologically present and physically absent, and are often both loved and hated, making relational resolution difficult. Smith (2011) also states that adverse childhood experiences and entry into foster care can generate and promote insecure attachment. Therefore, the young person's need to belong is an important focal point when conducting a developmental assessment of young people in CYCCs in South Africa.

In our analysis of a young person's 'need to belong', it is difficult not to reference attachment theory. John Bowlby, the originator of the theory, describes the human need for attachment as the most powerful universal need (Smith, 2011). This theory provides a framework for understanding care-leavers in terms of pre-care experiences and separation from birth families, their care careers (e.g. placement disruption), and the impact of these experiences on life after care (Stein, 2006:425). Research findings indicate that disturbed or disrupted attachments with significant others can compromise care-leavers' optimal development and their sense of self-worth. This disruption inadvertently affects their ability to pursue an education, maintain employment, and initiate and sustain friendships and romantic relationships (Andersson, 2018; Barratt, 2018; Smith, 2011).

The narratives of both van Breda's (2014a) and Hlungwani's (2017) studies echo the hunger for this need for belonging, attachment and connection for an authentic relationship, which is what characterises care-leavers' journeys out of care. The efforts made by young people are endless, and this striving is said to extend over time and contexts in the young person's journey out of care. Their studies highlight that having relationships of love and acceptance was more important than who that person was (family, friend, teacher, etc.).Their later publication (van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019) highlighted that there were slight differences between men and women in striving for authentic belonging. However, this social process was central to both

and achieving a sense of belonging appeared to be the basis for facilitating success in other areas of life.

This study explored the attempts made by care-leavers to 'establish authentic relationships'. The failures and the investments made by care-leavers, and the impact this had on the young person's psyche on their journey towards adulthood, will be discussed.

METHODOLOGY

This study was located within an extensive longitudinal research study (titled *Growth Beyond the Town*) being run at Girls and Boys Town South Africa (GBTSA), a CYCC situated in multiple sites across three provinces of South Africa. This study adopted a qualitative approach, since this allowed for a deeper focus and exploration of the psychosocial processes that enable resilience. The study used a descriptive and interpretive design (Fouché & Schurink, 2011), because it is concerned with developing a fuller understanding of the social processes that were identified with only the male participants in the first study (van Breda *et al*., 2012) and only the female participants in the second study (Hlungwani & van Breda, 2020). This study further explored the psychosocial processes as young people transitioned out of care. Consequently, a central focus of this study was how the people being studied made sense of (i.e. interpreted) their social world.

This study served as another round of data collection and analysis within the ongoing theory-building research on the care-leaving journey conducted by van Breda (2014b) and Hlungwani (2017). The study involved exploring, validating and advancing the theory on care-leaving, specifically focusing on the psychosocial processes of young people striving for authentic belonging.

The population for this study was all young people who were residents at any of the six GBTSA Youth Development Centres or Family Homes in Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal for at least six months, and who had disengaged from GBT one to seven years prior to data collection. The study intended to use the entire sample of care-leavers in the Growth Beyond the Town study (125 individuals). However, some participants declined to participate and others were lost to follow-up. We interviewed those who were available and willing to participate, leading us to use a volunteer sample in the study. Based on this non-probability sampling process, participants agreed to enrol in the 2019 wave of the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity. The study enrolled a total of 31 participants, 12 females and 19 males, who had been out of care for one to seven years. In the findings section participants are described by pseudonym, gender, current age and years out of care.

Data were collected using semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Each province had two fieldworkers who were trained in the data-collection method. Charmaz (2014) alludes to the concept of intensive interviewing, meaning a gently guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants' perceptions of their personal experience with the research topic. Since this study was an adapted replication of the studies of van Breda *et al*. (2012) and Hlungwani and van Breda (2020), the same opening question was used, together with prompts for the care-leaving theory themes/processes. An attempt was made to pick up on cues, hints, as well as nonverbal and certain other important data that would assist in deepening, critiquing

or validating the care-leaving model. The schedule included prompts to move the interview both forward and more deeply. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed by the transcribing company used by the GBTSA research team.

Grounded theory methods of data analysis were used in this study (Charmaz, 2014). These methods were best aligned with the aim of this study. The analysis process occurred in stages. All analysis was done manually on the Word transcripts. First, we did an intensive reading of the interview transcripts and familiarised ourselves with them, including verifying the accuracy of the transcription against the recording. Second, line-by-line initial coding, using gerunds, foregrounded participants' agency (Charmaz, 2014). This was followed by focused coding, which involved identifying the apparently recurring themes that emerged from the data. Quotations for those themes were then grouped together. During this process, the transcripts were constantly compared with one another to identify recurring themes that frequently emerged across the data-collection and analysis process. Lastly, the emerging themes were compared against those that had emerged in van Breda's and Hlungwani's studies. This last process involved identifying areas of similarity and difference in the emerging themes of their studies. For each round of analysis, the first author did the first round of coding, after which transcripts were provided to the co-author, who verified and reviewed the transcripts against the recordings. If any discrepancies emerged, the authors discussed them to reach consensus.

The study's credibility was ensured by all transcripts being read consistently and ensuring familiarity with the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As stated above, the co-author rigorously checked all analysis and subsequent coding. A clear audit trail of the process from data collection through the transcript to recording the findings was kept, which helped to ensure confirmability. All themes and ideas were tested with the co-author, and examples of coded transcripts were sent to the co-author, with similar quotes clustered under themes. Thus, the second author provided a second layer of analysis, contributing to the rigour of the presented data. The first author was employed by GBTSA solely as a researcher, not as a social worker; she had no contact with young people in care or who had left care, except in her capacity as a researcher. The study itself focused on the young persons' journey towards young adulthood, not on the GBTSA programme. Thus, her employment by GBTSA did not pose any kind of conflict for participants.

Some participants were very familiar with the research process. All had participated in the study at least once before; some were in their eighth interview. We had a history with them and therefore a prolonged engagement with participants, which meant they were familiar with the research process. Participants established some attachment to the fieldworkers, and there was periodic communication between them throughout the year, seeking advice or assistance. Therefore, participants understood that there was no obligation to participate, and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. Participants received and completed an informed consent form addressing issues of confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation. One participant was 17 years old, thus both a parental consent form and youth assent form needed to be signed for this participant. Provision was made for participants to request free counselling services after the interviews, if required. The Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics

Committee at the University of Johannesburg provided ethical approval for this ongoing longitudinal study (dated 20 September 2012).

FINDINGS

The analysis of data yielded three themes related to building relationships of belonging that facilitated resilience in young people's journey out of care towards independent living, viz.

a) The deep desire to satisfy the need for authentic belonging;
b) The investment made by car- leavers in building authentic relationships; and
c) The frustration and failure of some close relationships and the continuous striving to satisfy the need for belonging.

Deep desire to meet the need for authentic belonging

Participants conveyed their deep desire to meet their belonging needs through being able to connect with others. GBTSA often filled that need to belong, but not for a lengthy period. Participants were very aware that their stay at GBTSA was a time-limited arrangement and the CYCC fulfilled only some of the aspects of the need to belong during their stay. The need to belong seemingly became more apparent after transitioning from care. In a sense, this deep need and longing were always present – even if they connected and felt this connection within GBTSA.

Upon disengagement from care, a deep desire set in to connect, engage and build meaningful relationships with family, friends and significant others within their network. Participants shared their experiences of being reintegrated and striving to meet the deep desire for belonging. This was sought in the form of support, guidance and assistance in the transitional process from care. Care-leavers saw this as assisting them to thrive and cope while navigating towards interdependence. Nhlanhla had transitioned to her foster mother, and this is how she describes their relationship:

> *She is supportive and there for me whenever I need her. She is like a mother to me. That relationship is good. Whenever I need something, she gives it to me, she always advises me about life and everything, and she tells me how to be a good girl. To be a good lady, I respect her; I talk to her whenever I want to talk. I talk to her like she is my mother and not like a foster kid.* (Nhlanhla, F-21-2Y)[1]

We hear from Nhlanhla that her relationship with her foster mother has evolved since being away from their home. Nhlanhla appreciates her foster mother's advice, care, guidance and support.

The relationship's authenticity is shown in how the significant other relates to the care-leaver, i.e. care is shown in their actions towards the care-leaver. Mpho emphasises this point. His

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[1] Participant demographics are indicated as follows: gender (F=female, M=male), age (in years), and years out of care (e.g. 2Y indicates two years since leaving care).

grandfather telephones him every day to check up on him and show his concern about Mpho's welfare and physical well-being:

> *Because each and every single day he* [grandfather] *calls me. He doesn't pass a day without calling me. He is a kind of a person that is like because, in a shack, it usually rains, and it leaks and everything; he is the one that always calls me and asks me did it leak today? Then I will be like, yes, it did. He says, don't you want to come back home? Then I say, no, let me try and fix it first before I come back. If it gets fixed, I am not coming, but if it is not fixed, I will come back. Yes, he has been like a guardian to me, because when I need something, I feel free to call him and like, okay, I need that, I need that. And then if he can do something, he will do something.* (Mpho, M-25-7Y)

Thus, this deep desire is expressed by the significant other not necessarily being physically present, but being more inwardly present. Mpho relies on his grandfather because he telephones and checks up on him, and in this way, they show mutual care, love and support towards each other.

In exploring the desire to seek authentic belonging, participants were probed about who was their source of strength and the reasons for choosing that person. They stated that they viewed their source of strength as someone who would provide advice and guidance and, in some ways, showed that they cared by being interested in their lives. Authenticity was revealed in various ways by the display of the other person's actions – i.e. checking up on their well-being, providing them with advice and guidance daily, and most importantly, being their support structure at times of crisis in their lives.

Nkosi established solid bonds with his uncle, who he said was his source of strength. He commented:

> *My uncle helped me a lot with everything, decision-making. He tells me that I must do whatever I am thinking to do and when the thing that is right, I must do it. When it is wrong, he is telling me that it is a wrong thing. Yes, and he tells me when I am choosing the wrong way, and then he says no, that is wrong.* (Nkosi, M-24-5Y)

Nkosi's uncle thus provides him with advice, which he willingly accepts, and they discuss issues and work on a way forward. Similarly, Natalie describes the much-needed care and support provided by her biological mother at a pivotal point in her life:

> *She* [Mum] *has helped me through all of my difficult times. She has always stood by me; the first time was when I found out that I was pregnant. I was in a difficult situation, but she stood by me even though everyone was against it. Even when I moved out and stayed with my husband, I was having a difficult time at home; she was there for us and stood for us. She is always there for me, for example, if, like for now, now I am not working, it is very difficult on my side, with one person working in the house. She is always encouraging me to go out there and find a job and anything just, you know, so that I can get on my feet and be independent, so I do not have to depend on someone else.* (Natalie, F-20-3Y)

Another interesting development in this movement to find authentic belonging within the friendship system was the ability to recognise genuine relationships. Care-leavers then built on those relationships that they knew were genuine. An example of this was choosing friendships based on mutual care and acceptance. Relationships provide a safe place to express one's thoughts and feelings without fear of being judged. Natalie voiced her thoughts on her relationship with her long-term school friend, with whom she continued to maintain this friendship after her transition from care:

> *There was a friend at my school in 2016, so we still have kept our relationship, so I go often to visit her. We stayed there for the weekend; we went out. We sat and spoke for long, and I am keeping my relationship with her because, you know, sometimes, as girls, we keep everything inside of us, so I need to know that I have someone I can talk to besides family. Before was that I always chose friends over my family. I always thought family was wrong until I realised, until I grew up and realised that your family will stand by you no matter what, so that is what they helped me with.* (Natalie, F-20-3Y)

Natalie notes that, although she has a significant relationship with her friend, it does not take precedence over her relationship with her family. She shows a sense of maturity in her thinking and where she places her friends in the ecosystem of her life.

Nokuthula has an excellent friendship network. Although she is aware that she must abide by family rules, she has now chosen special friends with whom she spends time:

> *The friends I have, they are like… They are real, and it is easy to talk to them, because I am not always with them, because you cannot always go out, because of the family rules, so it is better to see friends now and then, but not all the time. So, the friends that I have there are like genuine.* (Nokuthula, F-20-1Y)

Tessa shares similar views on choosing genuine, honest, well-meaning friends. She states that friends should be there when needed. They spend quality time to support each other, most importantly, by providing advice and a listening ear during times of crisis:

> *For me, a genuine friend is, if you need help, they will always be there to help you. Generally, friendship means to me, whether you have money or you do not have money, they are there. If you need help, no matter what they are busy with, they will drop what they are doing, and they will help you no matter what. It is basically a rotation because if they are a genuine friend to you, you have to be a genuine friend back to them. So, it works both ways.* (Tessa, F-20-4Y)

Amu shares his views on establishing genuine relationships:

> *You do not have to give them* [friends] *money. I can provide them with my time and, understanding, sympathy. Let's take a walk, let's go for ice cream. The 21st century has created this thing that you have a relationship, you must have money, but there are a lot of other things you can do, like take a walk in a forest or go to the beach. Yes, those things change a lot.* (Amu, M-26-7Y)

Establishing authentic relationships is very important to care-leavers. It is a complex process for care-leavers to develop healthy and mutually beneficial relationships of trust during this transitional period. Kaleb describes how he goes about making genuine friends; he treads carefully before sharing his story. For him, the 'superficial' friends will fall away in time, and then he commits to them after a period:

> *It is kind of hard because you must look deep into a person to find out what kind of person they are, because you can just make friends, but they are not necessarily your friends. It is just maybe they are your friends for that kind of period, but if you are looking for a person that is there for decades and decades, maybe you have children and grandchildren you will still be together. Whether it is a girlfriend or a friend.* (Kaleb, M-23-5Y)

All participants sought an element of trust that needs to be built before any effort is made to build the relationship. Some participants were skilled in finding good relationships. Raju is married with one child, and states that finding a good friend is easy for him. He simplifies it as follows:

> *A good friend is somebody that will not get you arrested and get you divorced and whatever. A good friend will be somebody going to be there to walk by your side and make sure that we are doing the right thing like getting an income, because in this world you always need money.* (Raju, M-24-6Y)

Thus, participants agree that healthy friendships are meant to build up a person and make young people better versions of themselves.

Mpho sums this up aptly; he states that friend relationships are:

> *Supposed to be building me instead of decreasing me. So, my friend is like the key to my success, if I can put it that way. He is the key to my success. He always gives me the strength, so most of the time, if I have a problem at home and when I see him, I take him to one place and tell him what happened, and then he will give me a solution.* (Mpho, M-25-7Y)

Investment made in building authentic relationships

The investment made by participants in building authentic relationships is most enlightening. In this context, investment means devoting one's time, effort or energy to a particular cause in the hope for and belief in a worthwhile result. In this case, the participants invested in building meaningful relationships with family members.

The investment was made in the following way. Participants expressed their feelings about investing in an authentic relationship with their family, friends and significant others. The time in care provided them with time apart, and the programme provided the skills to reassess their past actions. These factors contributed to the building of and investment in authentic relationships. The investment was shown by changing their behaviour to be more considerate of and responsible towards others. For example, Jenny suggests that her grandmother began to

believe in her more after she changed her behaviour, which partially illustrated the investment she was making in the relationship. She states:

> *I think the main reason she* [grandmother] *does a lot for me… I think I have changed. Like, I do not do those things I used to do when I was little. So, I think she sees now that I am growing up. If I want something, I asked her, could you maybe please give me a hundred bucks. I want to go out with my friends; I will come back this time. If I do not come back, I call her. I am with my friend; maybe I am at... She knows my closest friend, Nellie, so I will say that I am going to sleep over at Nellie's house. We go to the same church, and our parents know each other.* (Jenny, F-20-3Y)

Jenny's investment in the relationship paid off in terms of building trust. Jenny's comment above shows a sense of respect and growth, and there is a mutual investment in the relationship between her and her grandmother. Robert echoed similar sentiments to Jenny. He admitted to being previously easily influenced by peers and involved in a theft:

> *Like those things, I used to do; I do not do them anymore. At least the improvement is there, and I try to change. My granny is here to help me. When it is hard sometimes, I tell her it is like this, like this, and like this. She does not understand sometimes, but tries to understand. She says, like don't do this, don't do that. I try to manage the basic things they tell me not to do and mustn't do. Maybe let's say it is late and I cannot come there late. Going out every night. When granny says don't go there, I must tell my friends I will not go there.* (Robert, M-22-6Y)

We can see from the comment above that Robert is still struggling to cope with the investment into the relationship. However, he is investing in building relationships by communicating more openly with his family, voicing his difficulties and seeking advice. Similarly, Letty refers to her behavioural change leading to fewer arguments and less tension with her family, and the development of a feeling of mutual respect:

> *When I came back, the bond just got stronger with the family, but at that time when I came back. Maybe because seeing each other and we missed each other. Everyone is happy. There are not as many fights and stuff. There are fights, but it is not like they used to be. I don't know. Maybe because my behaviour changed a little from what I used to do; I would be more helpful. I cut down on the stealing and do not lie so much. By telling the truth, even if I did something wrong.* (Letty, F-19-2Y)

The period in care assisted care-leavers value their often 'troubled' relationships with their families. From Letty, we hear the investment being made into those relationships since her transition from care. She changed her behaviour, thus showing her investment in building an authentic relationship with her family.

Mpho indicates his investment in building his family relationship and outlines the 'value' and 'role' he has taken on within the family structure. Given this new role, his family now values him and his investment in building a relationship:

> *We are family, so we have to look out for each other. So, when I am at home, I am the only one that they send to Shoprite. I clean up, and anything they need, they call me*

if I am at home. While I am not there, I do not know what they do. I think I am the right-hand person there at the house. (Mpho, M-25-7Y)

Philani echoes this investment and the role that he has taken on within his family. He invests in building the relationship by assisting in the home with cooking and shopping:

Like when she [Mum] *comes back from work because she cannot come back and cook after work because she has been working for us and we didn't do anything. She appreciates it a lot because we help her with some things. Everything is good because she can tell me if I did something wrong that she did not like, and she can approach me and tell me how to do things.* (Philani, M-17-1Y)

Thus, care-leavers saw a positive change in their behaviour. The various roles they take on ultimately meant an investment in building an authentic relationship with significant others. This investment is mutually beneficial to the care-leaver and the significant others in the relationship.

Thabiso states that, in hindsight, care-leavers struggle with the investment in relationships, because they are unable to accept responsibility for problems that arise in the relationship. He states:

Accepting when I am wrong, because most of the time, I feel like the reason relationships don't work out is when there is tension, and one doesn't want to be corrected, or one doesn't want to accept when they are wrong. Yes, I think that is about it. (Thabiso, M-24-7Y)

Some participants accepted responsibility for failed past relationships, which was a reason for being placed in care, and can provide some insight into this. The first step was acknowledging the problem area for issues faced in their relationships. After that, they take responsibility by changing their behaviours to establish trust again. Participants invested wholeheartedly in building authentic relationships.

Frustration and failure of some close relationships and the continuous striving to satisfy the need for belonging

Care-leavers left GBTSA with feelings of hopefulness to build authentic relationships. However, the data revealed that for some care-leavers, trying to establish authentic relationships was not always a positive experience.

Simba explains his continuous attempts made at striving to build a relationship with his mother. These are his attempts to want to address "problems" before they get out of control. This is part of his continuous striving to build a relationship with her:

Sometimes we talk about our problems, and then she [Mum] *becomes stubborn to talk about them. Sometimes she comes back from work, and I am trying to talk to her, and she will say, 'I have got no time to talk to you. I am really tired.' When I try to talk to her in the morning, she refuses. Sometimes she talks, sometimes she doesn't.* (Simba, M-20-3Y)

Despite the frustration of his efforts for building belonging, Simba continues to make efforts to build a relationship with his mother.

Mpho describes his continuous striving to build the relationship with his grandmother, the only caregiver that he knew. He describes the efforts from his side as he tries to tolerate the difficult relationship with his grandmother. However, he is frustrated by her "bullying" of him:

> *I can say that she* [grandmother] *is a bully. When a bully says to do that, you must do that because if you do not, you know the consequences. She is like that kind of a person. She usually doesn't ask. She tells you what to do, which is one thing I hate about people. I ask, but they don't ask. Sometimes I try telling her, okay, please let's do that. Then she will be like no, don't do that.* (Mpho, M-25-7Y)

Similarly, Tessa had located her biological mother after transitioning from care. She tried to build a relationship and made the effort and the investment. Tessa states of the relationship that she had tried to build with her biological mother:

> *Only in 2016 I found my biological mother. Then I forgave her for everything that she did, but yes, after that, I said no, because she kept doing it over and over, leaving me and pretending* [that she cared]. *When she needs something, she is all nice to me and pretending, and like when she needs money, I give it, but at a certain point I told her no, and then she is all distant.* (Tessa, F-20-4Y)

Relationships with families became frustrating for the care-leavers and they had to move away from those relationships. A series of incidents may have occurred that made the care-leaver move away from this relationship. Lumka states that a final argument broke the trust in one of her family relationships. Lumka believes that she has changed her life, yet the family does not recognise it. They fought, and she then left home:

> *I had an argument with my aunt. So, during that argument, she just started mentioning things that happened in the past. She was like, you will never change, and so I put that in my head, and I was like, you know what, this is just who I am. I am useless and whatever, and then I just decided to leave.* (Lumka, F-20-2Y)

Such arguments with the family can sometimes destroy the young person's self-esteem and lead to hopelessness. Similarly, in Thumi's situation, we hear that she is doing everything that is required of her. There is a sense of continuous striving in the efforts made by the care-leaver to be a part of her mother's life:

> *I told her* [Mum] *that if this happens* [referring to their continuous arguments]*, I am going to leave because I don't understand. In as much as my mom is my mom, at some point, she needs to understand that I am growing up, and I am finding myself, and I am not going to do the things she wants me always to do. I don't understand what this big thing is that my mom wants from me. I do the cooking, I do everything, and I am always indoors and not going out and partying. Then what does she want from me?* (Thumi, F-20-1Y)

Despite changing her behaviour and doing all her mother expects, Thumi still does not experience a sense of belonging. Phila also expressed his deep desire to form meaningful bonds with his family. After his failed attempts, he thought:

> *Family, I feel like is not a word for me because, to be honest, it just feels like that because I have never been in an environment as a family. I was telling myself last year when I was done with Girls and Boys Town that I was going to go back to Heather* [foster mother] *and maybe start being a part of the family, and that didn't work. That even made me more disconnected.* (Phila, M-20-2Y)

The frustration and continuous striving made care-leavers themselves attempt to move away from these relationships to seek and build genuine relationships with others. As in the case of Amu, there is a definite feeling of loss experienced in his failed relationship, but a sense of positivity in the building of new relationships:

> *So, I just moved away from the family completely due to the history, and I think it is a positive thing for me, because I managed to take it step-by-step. Although in modern times, families are more valuable as we grow up, you also get family that is not your blood, so your family does not have to be your blood. It can be anybody that understands you and that values you.* (Amu, M-26-7Y)

Lumka also sought other sources to assist her attempt to build genuine relationships, which assisted in their transition from care:

> *I packed my things, and I went with another schoolmate in the same situation. She had problems with her family, so we both decided, you know what, let's go. So, I was like, I am useless, and you know what, let me do just whatever I must. That is what happened.* (Lumka, F-20-2Y)

Lulu, upon discharge, after frustrated and failed family relationships, states:

> *It* [life] *wasn't easy, because I was all alone, because the entire family cut themselves out of my life. Then I had to move out, and I stayed with my boyfriend.* (Lulu, F-20-2Y)

Thus, the continuous effort to build authentic relationships led the care-leavers to find other relationships that secured their need to belong. In some instances, young people then moved on to intimate relationships and, in some cases, began families of their own. Participants tended to fulfil this frustrated need to belong in other ways, by creating the families that they never had. Raju, now married, after he reported having numerous failed relationships since he transitioned from GBTSA, states about his relationships with his wife:

> *When I need somebody to talk to, she inspires me and hopes to look into a better future. She gives me much hope to make life better, and that gives me hope to push myself forward in having better things, giving her a better life. Since I have come back, my relationship has been that we love each other and are like family. Everybody loves me out here.* (Raju, M-24-6Y)

Eventually, in his quest to establish his own family, Raju's last relationship turned into a long-term commitment to the family that he never had and sought. This authentic relationship led to building his self-confidence, a good mindset, and being hopeful and goal-driven to provide for his family. This relationship gave him a sense of purpose, to be a 'provider' within his household.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study supplemented existing knowledge about the psychosocial processes that had been previously identified. The participants in the study were all care-leavers who had exited care one to seven years before. However, the retention of participants in the later years of the study has been challenging to manage. The movement of care-leavers between the various provinces meant that some care-leavers could not get to interviews during the data-collection period. Another limitation is that the participants in the study were all from one CYCC in South Africa. We are unsure whether GBTSA's care-leavers are representative of care-leavers from other CYCCs in South Africa. The conducting of interviews in English, which is not the first language of some participants, may be a further limitation.

DISCUSSION

Research studies suggest that having trusting, reliable relationships is very important for the building of personal identity and for overall emotional and mental well-being. In fact, the process of emotional recognition remains consistently important for personal development and relationship maintenance throughout a person's life course (Glynn & Mayock, 2021). Moodley *et al*. (2018:5) reiterate the point that this transitional period is when the young people generally try to reconnect with their roots and to seek validation of their identities, which is deeply embedded in their need to belong to someone or be cared for by someone. The philosophy of the circle of courage reinforces this point, namely that when young people's need for positive accomplishments in life is met, they gain the courage to face life's challenges (Brendtro, Mitchell & Jackson, 2014). However, from this study's findings, it is evident that this need is not always met when care-leavers disengage from care. Van Breda (2014b) stated that when a young person exits residential care into a reasonably supportive family structure, their need for authentic belonging may easily be met by their social environment, and therefore there may be less difficult striving for authentic belonging. However, it must be noted that in this study not all care-leavers transitioned into such an environment conducive to their well-being.

Stein (2006) further states that a positive attachment to at least one adult was associated with improved outcomes. In this study, we see upon disengagement from care, young people having a deep desire to connect, engage and build meaningful relationships with family, friends and significant others within their network. After the separation from families while in care, there was an initial need to reconnect with their families. Gullo *et al*. (2023), Madigan, Quayle, Cossar and Paton (2013) and Virat and Dubreil (2020) also emphasised the significance of relationships for young people, with most searching for an emotional commitment and level of trust and belonging. Therefore, the attempts made in their striving for authentic belonging is a feature of the psychosocial needs of young people. Their well-being and psychosocial existence depend on having relationships that satisfy the deep desire for authentic belonging. Therefore,

van Breda (2018a:10) asserted that "Relationship-centred resilience aligns well with African Ubuntu values, which emphasise social connections as the crucible of personhood". Moodley *et al*. (2018) emphasised that sharing a common clan surname was a resource for reconnection and a sense of belonging and identity. However, this study indicated that what appeared necessary for care-leavers was the experience of feeling trusted, loved and accepted, rather than who the primary source or enabler of this experience was.

Barn (2010), like other researchers, found that many care-leavers had little or no sustained contact with birth families after leaving care. Care-leavers first sought the closest relationships – with their immediate family – and when those appeared fractured, care-leavers moved to build new opportunities to experience authentic belonging. However, Andrew, Williams and Waters (2014) point out that within the care system we see young people with complex attachment problems, children who are anxious and avoidant in relationships, and whose need to control those around them can see them denying or hiding their own needs or amplifying them. This need gives rise to complex feelings and emotions, as emerged in this study. The feelings of care-leavers are often not acknowledged. They are also compounded by feelings of rejection, resentment, fear, a lack of trust, pain and difficulties in maintaining relationships.

All these feelings are well attested in attachment theory (Smith, 2011), which explains how early fractures in these important attachments can lead to a cycle of unhealthy, harmful relationships. In the study we saw some aspects of those attachment relationships surface in the transition of young people back to the care of their families. Attachment theory explains clearly that the early attachment disruptions will continue to have an impact on young people later in life (Smith, 2011). However, this study shows that the desire by care-leavers to re-establish lost relationships is noteworthy, even though there may not always have been positive gains.

Similar to what emerged in van Breda's (2014a) study, care-leavers made an attempt to establish secure, meaningful and familial relationships in which they felt validated and accepted. The findings illustrate that when trust in the relationship was shown, it led to authentic relationships being established. Thus, part of the effort made by young people in this study involved going back into their social system and adapting to their social environment. This was done by firstly acknowledging their past behaviours, accepting responsibility since they were placed in care. After this acceptance, it was changing their behaviour, taking advice from family, and assuming responsibility for some family tasks; this was part of their attempt to build relationships. These efforts placed by care-leavers in the study recognised this vital facet in their transition from care.

Their efforts also involved care-leavers learning to conform to rules of their households, which was a fundamental factor in building trusting relationships that enabled them to achieve this sense of belonging. All these attempts were their way of actively showing their commitment to establishing and reinforcing those relationships. Belonging is considered to be the foundation of the circle of courage; Brendtro *et al*. (2014) state that life is most fulfilling when belonging is experienced with family and friends – one can trust them, be trusted in return, and feel pride and acceptance. This resonated well with care-leavers in the study: as their relationships

developed to the level of trust, they felt a sense of importance, leading in turn to pride and acceptance.

However, some care-leavers in the study continued to experience fractured attachments; in their narratives, we see a deep desire for, and investments and efforts being made, to establish authentic belonging. Stein (2008) also found that family presented a significant dilemma for many young people, who may feel drawn into counterproductive relationships with their families because of the centrality of 'the family' in popular discourse and policy making. For many care-leavers, family relationships were found to be absent or problematic rather than supportive (Stein, 2006). For this reason Stein (2008) proposed that young people must be encouraged to seek new positive relationships and be exposed to encouraging role models from within and outside their family network. This was also concluded in a later study by Sulimani-Aidan and Tayri-Schwartz (2021:4), namely that a

> sense of belonging not only makes a significant contribution to youths' resilience, but also serves as an explanatory mechanism by which mentoring relationships contribute to the resilience of youth in care.

Their study recommends actively including mentors as part of youths' treatment plans while in care. In this way, when relationships became frustrating, as with care-leavers in this study, they can move on to positive relationships with extended family members and friends, and thereby establish a sense of belonging with others. This study's findings indicate that the care-leavers do indeed have a deep desire and make a significant effort to invest in establishing deep and genuine relationships.

Similar to the studies of van Breda (2014a) and, Hlungwani and van Breda (2020), care-leavers strive to develop meaningful relationships with other people in their social environment, despite the fractured relationships with their family members. Some participants in this study felt 'rejected' in relationships with biological family members and formed relationships with others in their environment to achieve genuine belonging. These experiences are noted as part of developing their resilience, i.e. to be able to move on from relationships towards building significant attachments. The findings of this study confirm those of others (Andrew *et al.*, 2014; Yoon, 2017) in the field, that care-leavers authentically strive for stable, safe, trusting environments with significant others, which aids in promoting positive resilient outcomes. Resilience is clearly not a static state, but a process. The word 'resilience' should thus always be used to refer to the process of attaining better psychosocial functioning despite adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000).

In this study the overall process of developing resilience entails care-leavers (1) recognising a deep desire for authentic belonging, reaching back to early needs for attachment (Beaujolais *et al.*, 2020), which (2) mobilised the energy to invest in cultivating relationships characterised by trust, belonging and mutuality. When these relationships were frustrated or failed, this caused participants distress and sadness, but (3) their deep longing for relationships of belonging made them resilient in dealing with such disappointments, and they rose up and tried again to build authentic, caring relationships.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Stein (2019:403) asks a pertinent question: "How does practice contribute to promoting attachment stability and continuity in the pathways to adulthood?" From this study's findings, there is a need in social service practice to build on that sense of belonging, which will lead to building youth's resilience. It is crucial for CYCCs to acknowledge the significant impact that a sense of belonging has on young people's perceptions of themselves and the part it plays in their re-integration back into the community. Care-leaving literature references the ambiguous loss that many young people experience as a result of removal from the family and significant relationships (Brisson, Wilson, Medina, Hughey, Chassman & Calhoun, 2020; Purtell, Mendes & Saunders, 2020). A limited amount of research has analysed the short-, medium- and long-term effects of this loss on the psyche of the care-leaver. Therefore, there is a need for further research on helping care-leavers resolve the ambiguous loss of caregivers who are physically and psychologically both present and absent.

Young people aging out of care may be entering adulthood with a compromised foundation, if they have not achieved "a healthy level of agency" (Lee & Berrick, 2014:82). Therefore, gaining a sense of agency while in care and during transitions will lead to positive outcomes. The study shows that young people are active agents in plotting their life paths in striving to meet their need to belong. Agency is connected to psychological development and achievement of a secure identity (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2020; Solem, Helgeland, Brannen & Phoenix, 2020) and the opportunity to take control of their aspirations and vision of the future (Stein & Ward, 2021). Therefore, developing care-leavers' sense of agency while still in care will assist them in planning their path to interdependent living.

Studies have also shown that initiating social skills programmes is vital in establishing belonging relationships (Melkman & Benbenishty, 2018; van Breda, 2014b; 2022; van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019). Each theme in this study provides a clearer understanding of the care-leavers' striving, efforts, investments and frustrations experienced in seeking to satisfy their need for belonging. The findings from this study indicate the need for CYCCs to initiate programmes to enable young people to build on and maintain relationships. This should be at the core of their practice. CYCCs should also work in partnership with young people and their families to develop better ways of assisting them to cope upon transition. It is recognised, however, that CYCCs, particularly NGO CYCCs such as GBTSA, function under difficult conditions, with limited budgets and unpredictable income. This results in CYCCs focusing on basic care tasks and seldom on transitional services and aftercare support (Bond & van Breda, 2018; Tanur, 2012). In the light of this, Bond (2020) urges that clear, direct legislative policies that provide direction and funding are required for the CYCC sector. This study supports this call: it is imperative that CYCCs receive additional funding to provide transitional services to care-leavers, as per the national child care and protection policy (Republic of South Africa, 2019).

A recommendation for CYCCs, is to ensure that every young person has a trusted adult who is there at difficult times during and after their transition from care. Harrison, Dixon, Saunders-Ellis, Ward and Asker (2023) and Schofield, Larsson and Ward (2017) identified how close relationships in residential care can also contribute to a sense of permanence, security and

belonging. Cushing, Samuels and Kerman (2014), drawing on aspects of attachment theory, stated that relational permanence highlights the importance of one's access to a parent-figure who is present in meaningful ways over one's life course. White, Gibson and Wastell (2019) state that attachment theory can continue to guide the treatment plan once a child is in care. Understanding the past of each young person's attachments may provide valuable insights into the work that needs to be carried out with the young person. Young people would then have adequate time to prepare for the reunification with family and re-build relationships with family members from whom they have been separated for a long time. Our study shows that it would have been beneficial for care-leavers to have had additional support, with access to a mentor or an encouraging role model. Efforts like this should be an essential part of a young person's exit planning, strengthening connections for re-integration into the community.

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Prof Adrian D. van Breda is a Professor of Social Work at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He is the principal investigator of the Growth Beyond the Town study, a longitudinal study on young people leaving the care of Girls and Boys Town South Africa, which started in 2012. He co-designed and supervised the study on which this article is based, assisted with conceptualising this paper, and did multiple rounds of revision of the manuscript.