



Female Care Leavers' Aftercare Experiences and Coping Strategies: A Review of Related Literature

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Abstract

Background: The development of young people in care into self-reliant and self-sufficient individuals is crucial not only for their transition into independence, but also as a fulfillment of their rights, and also for the sustainable development of their communities and the nation at large. Yet, upon release from residential care institutions, female care leavers face a plethora of problems. The problems they face suggest that they may not have been assisted in such a way that enables them to make the smooth transition from care to independent living. They are at risk of lifelong poverty, poor health, and chronic social exclusion. Yet, a gap still exists in the current literature on the aftercare experiences and coping strategies of female care leavers out of care in Zimbabwe. Knowledge of their aftercare experiences is crucial for the evaluation and review of existing child policies especially on leaving care. The review, therefore, sought to shed light on existing literature on female care leavers' aftercare experiences in independent adult life and their responses to the faced circumstances from a global perspective.

Methods: A traditional narrative review of existing literature and previous studies were carried out to identify what has been documented regarding female care leavers after experiences and their coping strategies. Eligible for review were expert opinions and studies on care leaving written in English. Non-English articles and studies carried out within institutions were excluded. Identified search words were also used to identify studies on care leaving experiences and survival strategies.

Results: Major issues that came out were care leavers' preparedness, care leaving outcomes, resilience, family and sociocultural networks, and care leavers' coping strategies. The review also unearthed methodological, theoretical, and contextual gaps in the literature on female care leavers' experiences and their survival strategies. Previous studies carried out on care leaving were mainly surveys and phenomenological in nature. Moreover, the field is dominated by old

theories. Critically, there is limited documentation regarding this subject, and no study has been done specifically in Zimbabwe regarding this issue.

Conclusions: *In light of the review*, the time is now ripe for a constructive grounded theory study to be carried out in Zimbabwe to explore female care leavers' care experiences and survival strategies.

Key Terms: *Leaving Care, Aftercare Experiences, Female Care Leavers, Survival Strategies, Outcomes.*



1. INTRODUCTION

In order to gain a greater understanding of female care leavers' after-care experiences and survival strategies upon leaving care, a comprehensive review of qualitative evidence was undertaken. A comprehensive literature review allows for what Shulman (1999) calls 'generativity', that is, the ability of researchers to build upon the scholarship of those who have come before. Generativity helps to develop both integrity and sophistication in research. Hence, this review built on what other researchers have done regarding female care leavers' experiences including survival strategies.

By reviewing published research and other theoretical frameworks, the researcher developed the research question, highlighted in the next section. Later, the findings from other studies that corroborate, support, or counter the interpretation of the data were valuable for locating the grounded theory in the context of care leaving. According to Boote and Beile (2005), a substantive and thorough literature review is a precondition for doing substantive and thorough, sophisticated research. In order to advance collective knowledge, a researcher has to understand what has gone before. This critical review, therefore, built a knowledge base for female care leavers' aftercare experiences and survival strategies for this study. It aimed to determine the current state of knowledge regarding the review question and to enhance the researcher's theoretical sensitivity. Additionally, it illustrated an analysis of previously carried out studies, as well as the gaps in knowledge that have been identified. The knowledge base obtained through the review assisted in gap analysis, and directed the study.

1. THE REVIEW QUESTION

The aim of this review was to gather, assess and synthesize the current conceptual, theoretical, and empirical evidence about subjective experiences and survival strategies of female care leavers upon leaving care into adulthood. Specifically, the following question was set for the review:

What is already known about female care leavers' after-care experiences and survival strategies?

2. METHODS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

To find the most relevant literature available on female care leavers after care experiences, a thorough search of literature was done, and a traditional narrative review approach was adopted for analysis.

Use of Search Terms

The review question was broken down into its key components to determine the important keywords, phrases and concepts (Figure 2:3)

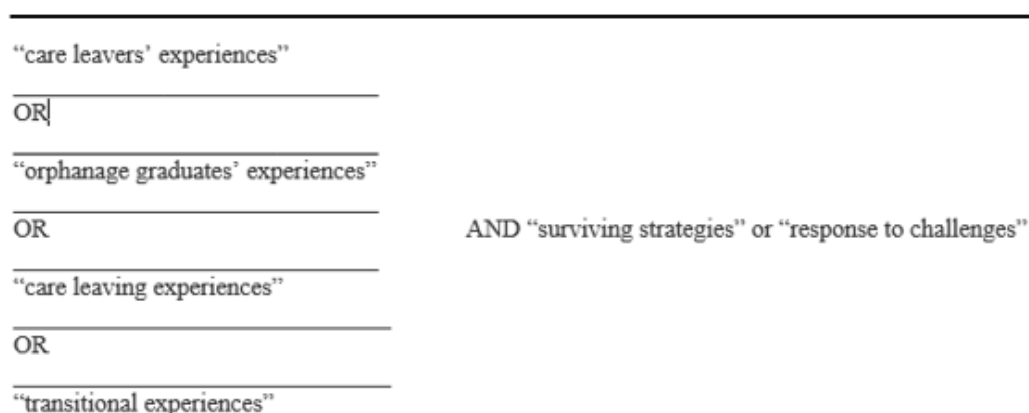


Figure 2.3: Search Terms

These key components were analysed to determine the important keywords, phrases, and concepts to search upon. Keywords were expanded to determine possible variations, synonyms, and alternate spellings. For example, the terms ‘care leavers’ and ‘orphanage graduates’ are used interchangeably in care leaving literature.

Databases

To identify potentially relevant studies, the following was additionally implemented:

- Multiple databases such as Google Scholar, Social Sciences Research Network (SSRN) and Mendeley.
- Popular authorities in care leaving, the likes of McKenzie and Stein, B. were considered.

3. KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED (EMERGING THEMES)

Key themes that emerged from the identified studies include preparedness, outcomes, resilience, family and sociocultural networks.

Preparedness

The reviewed studies highlighted the policy and practice space around the globe. They highlighted the young people’s limited preparation for interdependent living. The review unearthed that care leavers in some countries like Northern Ireland, Australia, England, KZN, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa have reported that they do not feel sufficiently prepared for living independently and have experienced multiple problems in

transitioning from care to independence including financial and accommodation insecurities (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Ofsted, 2012), with many young people feeling that they had left care too early (Coy, 2009; Ofsted, 2012). In contrast to the gradual transition to independence experienced by the majority of non-care experienced young people, leaving care is frequently experienced as an abrupt and sudden leap into an uncertain future (Munro & Stein, 2008; Stein, 2012), prompting calls for leaving care to be a more protracted and incremental process, that recognizes the needs of those who may lack any alternative support networks to assist them in their journey towards independence (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2014; Stein, 2012, 2019).

The reviewed studies revealed that for care-leavers, preparation occurred informally as part of their daily activities as also noted by Bond (2020). While the experiential nature of preparation was recognized, there was evidence of the demand for an organized preparation program providing the youth with employment, life, and communal skills among others. There was also the issue of the ad hoc character of aftercare provision owing to the lack of strong policy in all the countries studied. In my opinion, there is a great link between preparedness and aftercare experiences. Those who are adequately and appropriately prepared are the ones who are most likely to succeed in most aspects of life including education and employment. Since preparation programs vary from country to country and from institution to institution, there might be a need for aftercare experience studies to inform the review of obsolete policies so that they become relevant and beneficial to care leavers.

Outcomes

Studies on care leavers provide evidence that irrespective of the type of care, youth transitioning into emerging adulthood face multiple challenges. While some country-specific challenges exist, most care leavers have poor outcomes in three key areas of their lives: employment, accommodation, and social integration. They are likely to have higher mental health problems and poor educational qualifications and are more likely to experience homelessness than their non-looked after peers (Munro & Stein, 2008; Stein, 2012). A prevailing discourse of low expectations and ambition for those leaving care compounds these disadvantages (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Many therefore leave care ill equipped and ill supported to navigate the transition to employment, training/education, associated with successful independence (Bilson et al., 2011; Cocker & Allain, 2018; Jackson, 2010). As a result, more need to be unearthed from the care leavers themselves so that policy makers and

institutions can be informed for improved preparation programs for better outcomes to be achieved.

In South Africa, for example, Dickens and Marx (2020) found that youth who left care were often not in employment, education, or training (NEET). This situation resulted in financial difficulties for young people, affecting their ability to access self-supporting accommodation or continue their education. Evidence of these challenges faced by care-leavers in the Global South is reminiscent of those experienced by their peers in the Global North, but those in Africa have a heightened risk of achieving poor outcomes due to the volatile socioeconomic conditions into which they transition, such as high rates of crime, unemployment, and poverty (Bond, 2020). In addition, they have limited social welfare programs or specific programs for care-leavers and a weakened ability of family systems to provide informal support. This could suggest that if no further action is taken at national policy levels to equip them whilst in care, young people aging out of care will continue to suffer.

Resilience

Several reviewed studies used the theory of resilience to conceptualize their findings. Resilience refers to the “multilevel processes (care-leavers) engage in to achieve better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity” (van Breda, 2018, p. 4). Drawing on research from South Africa, van Breda (2016) concludes that both agency and structure are important factors that help in the successful transition from care. Other studies repeatedly emphasize that despite the odds and adversities, young people who leave care exhibit resilience by navigating toward better outcomes. Several attain high educational qualifications, are in stable marriages, and do not use drugs (Bukuluki et al., 2020; Dickens & Marx, 2020; Frimpong-Manso, 2020). The youth’s personal motivation, including their hope for the future and fear of failure, enables them to succeed during their transition. However, social factors (e.g., preparation, social support, positive relationships) feature more prominently in their narratives as factors that facilitate more successful transitioning.

Family and Sociocultural Networks

Previous studies note the importance of family and sociocultural networks, indicating the human quest for connectedness. Interviews with young people in Gwenzi’s (2020) study suggest that they have a refined notion of ‘family’. While their definitions include caregivers and peers from care, because of being in a family-like living arrangement, the biological family is still the most important to them, even though many have had negative experiences and lost

connections with them during their time in care. They seem to be in need to trace and connect with their living biological family members after leaving care, often because of the realization that life was difficult without support. Care-leavers in Ethiopia reconnected with their families to satisfy their need for an identity and sense of belonging, even though it could threaten the positive progress made in certain areas of their lives such as education (Takele & Kotecho, 2020). Dickens and Marx (2020) report that, though many of the care-leavers in their study were NEET, they were mostly living in formal dwelling spaces rather than informal dwellings, because many lived with their families two years after leaving care. Bukuluki, Kamya, Kasirye, and Nabulya (2020) and Frimpong-Manso (2020) also provide evidence of the importance of social support from family and community networks to successful care-leaving. In this regard, the social welfare department might need to devise or strengthen reintegration of care leavers into the community. There is need to adopt a good example SOS Children Villages. They do integrate care leavers gradually by linking them with their relatives at least sometime before they leave care rather than do it abruptly.

Care-Leavers' Coping Strategies after Leaving Care

Despite numerous challenges faced by care leavers, it is worth noting that some care leavers are able to rise above the challenges in their respective environments. They achieve this through their engagement with several positive factors that bring about good outcomes (Pinkerton & Rooney, 2014). Building formal and informal relationships after care is one way that has provided these young people with resources to cope with their challenges. Frimpong-Manso (2015), noted the significance of such relationships for the development and fare of young people after care. These are believed to help them deal with challenges they may encounter as independent adults. Where social support is rendered, evidence suggests that they have navigated better in resolving issues related to housing, finances, and life skills.

The literature further reveals that there have been ways in which institutions have tried to minimize challenges that could be faced by care-leavers, especially in areas related to homelessness experienced by care-leavers. For example, Stein (2004), asserts that some services have been instituted in some societies to assist care-leavers in their quest to settle in their new communities and manage their new homes. This form of service has been very supportive for care-leavers as it has helped them to deal with the stress that comes with reintegration outside the care homes (Stein, 2004). In my own view, this service might have

been overwhelmed and inadequate as homelessness featured frequently as an outcome in most studies in this review.

Another form of formal support provided for care-leavers who face challenges in their transition into adulthood is through the Foyer Projects in the United Kingdom. These are expanded services that are available to young people who find themselves in disadvantaged positions. Although this form of support is available to all the youth in a particular jurisdictional area, there is a condition attached to accessing such services: the service is available to vulnerable people only, who must show commitment to attaining their potential as far as their development is concerned (Wade, Henderson, Pearson, 2003). Specialist drugs and services meant to help alcoholics overcome their challenges have also been provided in some communities. This means that some care-leavers struggling with problems related to alcoholism and drug use have been given support to deal with such challenges through the provision of formal services. According to Alderson et al (2017), these forms of services are being provided by health specialist practitioners including counsellors and psychiatrists who are well-versed in supporting people with problems of substance abuse and addiction. Such services often take the form of detoxification programs for such vulnerable and disadvantaged people (Alderson et al., 2017).

Besides, the formal support systems available to care-leavers who face challenges in their transition into adulthood, there are some informal forms of support systems. Some young people have enjoyed the support provided by informal networks through friends or alumni; this kind of support can be emotional, practical, financial, material, or informational (Frimpong-Manso, 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). It has been argued that informal support is of particular importance to young people considering that the formal assistance provided to them when they are in their homes gradually reduces and eventually ceases after their reintegration (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). According to Wade, Henderson, and Pearson (2003), the main avenues through which care-leavers have accessed informal support include their friends, partners, family members, and previous foster family members. The aforementioned groups are the key sources of informal support for care leavers. However, this, of course, depends on each individual's circumstances and relationships (Wade, Henderson, and Pearson, 2003). This means that in situations where care-leavers have remained in the care system for a long period they may be estranged from their family members and friends, and their sources of informal support may be limited. In these circumstances, the key avenue of support available to them is

their previous care system. However, if they have left the care system in a chaotic manner, then care-leavers may not have any form of informal support available to them.

A confirmatory study by Pinkerton (2014), and Van Breda (2013), revealed that many care-leavers are able to cope with navigating resources and building bridges for their optimal growth and resilience through the availability of support systems, a factor that goes beyond their personal traits or qualities. Finally, some care-leavers have been able to cope with challenges they encounter through their daily navigations with resources they are able to garner by themselves. Aside from formal and informal support systems, some young people have also been identified as using skills they have learned in the care institutions for their survival. Some care-leavers rely on themselves through their application of skills they had acquired in the homes. In agreement, Mmusi and Van Breda (2017), in particular, identified that some young people have been able to cope through the application of skills learnt in the care homes to generate income for themselves and their survival.

CONCLUSION

The review revealed that despite this explosion of research, however, there remain a number of key gaps in the literature, one of which is the generation of care-leaving theory. Stein (2006) has stated that there is a substantial body of international research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, on young people aging out of care, yet very few of these studies have been informed by theoretical perspectives. He further argues that most papers on care-leaving are detached from theory in terms of context, conceptual exploration or theory building (Stein 2006). Stein thus highlights two concerns regarding theory: the inadequacy of theoretically informed studies which have a tendency to take an empiricist approach to research, and the absence of new theory construction to explain the experiences of care leavers out of care. As revealed by the reviewed literature, a sound theoretical foundation on aftercare experiences and strategies for survival does not currently exist in Zimbabwe. The current study thus begins to address Stein's second concern, theory building, in a specific social context. This study will form part of the first prospective, constructive grounded theory study of care-leavers' aftercare experiences in Zimbabwe. Data from this study will deepen the understanding of care leavers' after care experiences out of care within the unique context of the country, and how they survived. There is a gap within the Zimbabwean context hence this study will thus enable

formulation of care leaving theory constructively grounded in the experiences of local care leavers.

Prevalent in previous researches is the impact of institutionalization on young people, barriers and facilitators of a smooth transition out of care, and lack of capacity among care leavers to cope with life out of care. In a different context, this study will also explore local out of care experiences, that is in Zimbabwe. There is a significant gap on how much young people have been prepared for self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Little is also known of how they are contributing to society as expected out of them by policies of the land. Moreover, for those studies carried out in Zimbabwe, the voices of care givers and social workers dominate previous studies. In this study, participants will be care leavers themselves, hence a theory, constructively grounded in their experiences, will be formulated.

With such gaps in research, it is difficult, at present, to derive any full understanding and derive theories out of local care leavers' after care experiences in Zimbabwe. Further research in this area is critical especially as young people continue to age out of care despite the lack of adequate preparation, and much evidence base to explain the experiences of care leavers in Zimbabwe when they leave care. As revealed by both local and international literature, ensuring a smooth transition out of care is a fulfilment of these young people's rights. Moreover, if they are well prepared and transition well, they become contributing members of society, contributing towards the development of their communities and nations. Time is ripe, therefore, for the experiences of this marginalised group to be documented in Zimbabwe so as to inform policy.

Although there are quite a number of study methodologies suitable for studying care leavers' after care experiences out of care, phenomenological studies and surveys are dominant. This study noted this methodological gap hence the adoption of constructivist grounded theory as a methodology of choice.

The sheer diversity in institutions of care across the globe also requires that research be contextualized at national level. Studies from different parts of the globe outlined above cannot be contextualized to care leavers in Zimbabwe. The UNCRC outlines useful general principles and standards that underlie an approach to alternative care of children deprived of parental care that applies across international contexts, despite very relevant cultural differences. Time is ripe, therefore, for a study to be carried out in Zimbabwe, to explore the aftercare experiences of care leavers in the Zimbabwean context, and to theorize such experiences.

Moreover, the motivation behind this research also stems from personal interests, observations and questions. As a community development practitioner, I have noted that a significant number of young people who grew up in care institutions present with high vulnerability scores for aid programmes. Additionally, having visited institutions of care on several occasions to contribute to humankind, I would ask the care givers to tell me what becomes of young people once they leave care. Repeatedly, their responses prompted this research topic. They said they would be also glad to know what becomes of them, a clear indication that they look at the period when these young people are still in care and preparing to leave rather than what happens to them after they have left. Thus, there is a gap in knowledge relating to the after-care experiences of young people who have left residential institutions in Zimbabwe.

Based on these research findings, one can conclude that these youngsters are not being adequately and appropriately prepared for life after. This study will thus unleash the greatest impact in filling the most fundamental gaps left by prior studies. Findings will add to the Zimbabwean and African literature on care-leaving, inform policy, and contribute to the current local and global dialogue on the subject.



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