

Introduction: Moving towards the edge

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Introduction

Research on leaving residential and foster care and transitioning towards young adulthood has been burgeoning in recent years. A solid foundation of knowledge about care-leaving processes and outcomes has been laid, albeit largely in a few Global North countries. This knowledge foundation has edges that have been neglected, even overlooked. Young people leaving care are, in many ways, ‘on the edge’, as they transition between childhood and adulthood, care and independence, school and work. This book aims to shed light on these aspects of leaving care, by reporting about on-the-edge research. The book addresses edgy topics regarding specific groups of care-leavers, methods and theories, rather than keeping to the mainstream research topics. The authors of the chapters in this book are themselves ‘on the edge’ – emerging from their postgraduate studies and starting the journey towards the ranks of ‘established researchers’. Many of these on-the-edge researchers bring a fresh, critical and innovative perspective on leaving care. This book illuminates not only marginalised facets of leaving care and care-leaving research, but also looks forward towards the future, anticipating where leaving care and care-leaving research might go over the coming years.

Balancing on the edge to ensure relevant knowledge for the future

Leaving-care research has contributed significantly to the field of out-of-home or alternative care (including residential and foster care) by raising the first-hand experiences of children and young adults. Care-leaving research was and is responsible for evidence-informed arguments, for the participatory creation of perspectives and for identifying opportunities for quality improvement. This growing field of scholarship consistently advances the voices and needs of young people transitioning out of the care system into young adulthood. Leaving-care scholars have often been closely engaged with practice, care-leaver associations and advocacy groups, working to translate research into real-world improvements to the lot of young people exiting state care. For this book, we construct leaving care as ‘living on the edge’.

Young people transitioning out of care towards independence, out of school towards work, or out of adolescence towards adulthood are on the edge between these phases. 'Living on the edge' speaks to the liminality inherent in youth transitions and leaving-care transitions. Furthermore, living on the edge speaks to the precarity experienced by many care-leavers between dependent care and independent adulthood, who lack the social capital and resources to transition into stable education, employment and family life, and who are at risk of marginalisation and social exclusion.

Recent publications on leaving care have tended to focus on challenges that care-leavers face in the transition to adulthood and their outcomes in adulthood. Many publications have presented results from single research projects, international comparisons or on changes in policy and practice. These were very important sources that often prompted changes to the law, practice and conditions of growing up in and leaving care in many countries. But once a discourse has been established, it always risks recycling and reproducing similar themes and topics, methods, perspectives and ethics – system theories name it 'autopoiesis' or a self-referential system.

However, in a rapidly changing world, various new questions arise for which previous answers are not always sufficient. That is why our aim with this book is to make known and encourage researchers around the globe to dare to do 'research on the edge'. To facilitate such a fresh angle on the edges of the leaving-care field, the authors selected to work on this book are part of an international research network on leaving care, come from around the globe, have different experiences in practice and research, and mostly have either recently finished their PhD or are still working on it.

Research on leaving care is burgeoning, because those who provide services to and research young people in care have increasingly realised that the end point of care is the transition out of care into young adulthood. In essence, the success of child welfare is judged by how young people do after they have left care. Consequently, there is a growing interest about aftercare among all those working in, teaching and researching child welfare. At the same time, there is the emergence of new experiences, sensitive questions and issues, and new knowledge, which the current books on leaving care do not adequately address.

This book intends to develop and connect an experience- and methodology-based store of international research knowledge, questions and answers to make an innovative contribution to an important dialogue about the next steps in leaving-care scholarship. This dialogue 'on the edge' between past, present and future has the aim of influencing future researchers and research, future policy makers and policies, as well as future concepts of leaving care. As it is designed and internationally coordinated by the next generation of scholars, it will support care-leavers, scholars and practitioners to shape the future development of high-quality care and leaving care through accessible and innovative knowledge transfer.

Leaving care – as a specific concept of structural, processual and/or individual transitions from care to adulthood – has been in focus and widely studied in several countries, is still emerging in many countries, and is not studied at all in others, particularly in the Global South. This unevenness in research across the globe informs this publication: how can we reflect on learnings, on gaps and on child- and practice-oriented futures of leaving-care research internationally? We address these questions by inviting emerging leaving-care researchers with diverse ranges of experiences and countries of origin to write about their most important cutting-edge methodological, theoretical, ethical and political learnings, as well as about their imagination for the future. In summary, following our idea of ‘edgy’ topics in the field of leaving-care research, the authors of this book are not reproducing existing (albeit important) knowledge, but developing so-far under-researched paths on overlooked care-leavers using creative research methods and fresh theories.

This book presents recent innovative and edgy international leaving-care studies to create future scenarios of research and practice that is on the edge, by presenting and discussing the following three themes:

- *Part I: Groups of care-leavers living on the edge*: the way we consider groups of care-leavers with specific needs or types of transitions who may have been overlooked in the research to date.
- *Part II: Methods of care-leaving research*: addressing power imbalances, using existing methods mindfully and raising critical questions about taken-for-granted methods.
- *Part III: Theory and conceptualisation of leaving care*: theoretical frameworks that shed new and provocative light on our understanding of leaving care.

This publication avoids merely presenting, comparing and discussing the latest results and implications of care-leaving research. While this is important, it is already being done by many publications. This book aims to explore themes on the edge. It draws on the work of emerging scholars, from around the world, studying under-researched groups (such as care-leavers with a street-connected history who go back onto the streets), using innovative methodologies (such as institutional ethnography) and exploring the use of innovative theories and conceptualisations of leaving care (such as the concepts of stability versus instability among care-leavers).

The global network behind this publication

When aiming to generate new insights, on new stages, by new actors – when aiming to be cutting-edge and innovative – we need to have a promising pool of interesting and interested researchers, who are willing to recognise and define various edges: edges between enabling and labelling specific groups

by research, the edges within innovative or underutilised methods, and the edges when doing theoretical reflections that lead to conceptualisations of leaving care (as set out in the three parts of this book). The idea of this book is a result of several meetings and discussions in the PhD care-leaving research network CoRiT (Community of Researchers in Transition).¹ The CoRiT network aims to establish a forum for research and knowledge dissemination about care-leavers' situation, capacities and support needs during their transition from care.

The CoRiT network is an offspring from the already established INTRAC (International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care) that brings together internationally leading researchers in the field of leaving care.² The pioneer work of leaving-care research was carried out mainly by a small number of members of INTRAC. As the field of care-leaving has grown, so has INTRAC, which now (in March 2023) has 331 signed-up members representing 47 countries around the globe, from (in descending order of membership) Europe, North America, Oceania, Asia, Africa and South America. INTRAC hosts an annual Global INTRAC meeting, which sometimes runs as a standalone symposium or connected to an existing conference (such as the EUSARF³ conference).

CoRiT members constitute the next generation of care-leaving scholars – they are on the edge of becoming established and picking up where the original INTRAC members, many of whom are retiring, left off. Thus, the CoRiT network aims to expand the opus of research it has inherited from the first generation of care-leaving scholars, by setting it in relation to challenges in our contemporary and anticipated future society, such as issues of migration and the consequences of a more globalised world. Further, we identify a great need for continuous work on improving policy and translating research into practice. It is also crucial to develop an even more reflexive stand in the field and thus also to focus on research methods and methodological issues.

Members from CoRiT have presented several symposia together at conferences like the European Conference of Social Work (ECSWR) and the European Scientific Association on Residential & Family Care for Children and Adolescents (EUSARF). Through those presentations and intense discussions, we realised that many of the CoRiT members are interested in research concerning care-leavers who are in an especially vulnerable situation and/or care-leavers who meet other or additional challenges in the transition to adulthood (compared to care-leavers in general). Much of the research on care-leavers until now has had a broad focus and tends to treat care-leavers as a homogeneous group, leading to young people with specific profiles or challenges being overlooked. Recent reviews of care-leaving research find that much of the research is focused on policy, programmes and services that target care-leavers in general, and there is also much research on transition markers and outcomes, which often draws on large data sets. Less research

is focused on sub-populations and specific challenges, and there is also limited research on youth participation. We thus concluded that these are topics that researchers ‘on the edge’ – the next generation – could have the unique potential to address.

From the middle towards the edges: overview of the book

This book moves from the middle of often well-established care-leaving research topics towards the edges. It sets out the authors’ concept of the ‘edge’ and ‘edgy’ in connection with care-leavers’ resources and needs, emerging researchers, specific groups, creative methods and innovative theory. ‘On the edge’ in the title speaks to the liminality inherent in leaving-care transitions and to the precarity experienced by many care-leavers. But it also speaks to the status of recent developments in research and practice or to evolving questions, methods and paradigms, thanks to the next generation of researchers. The book is structured in three parts: Groups, Methods and Theories.

Part I: Groups of care-leavers living on the edge

Unaccompanied minors usually become familiar with ‘living on the edge’ at a young age, when they start their migratory process as minors and move towards a journey in which they cross multiple borders at geographical and legal levels. However, after turning 18, they are treated as adult migrants and depend on the immigration law. But still, the transition to adulthood remains one of the less studied life periods of this group of young people, at both national and international levels. That’s why Laura García-Alba and Federica Gullo (Spain) aim to explore, through a mixed-methods approach, the profiles, needs and experiences of transitioning to adulthood of this especially vulnerable group in comparison with non-unaccompanied-migrant care-leavers in Spain.

Marcela Losantos Velasco (Bolivia) was disturbed by the fact that in Bolivia, 97 per cent of street-connected children who entered care programmes left care before reaching adulthood to return to the street for a variety of reasons. She observed through her extensive practice experience that this was common also when formerly street-connected young people aged out of care. Thus, her research aims to understand what leads young adults with a street past to transition back onto the streets when they aged out of care. This chapter explores the factors that drove five street-connected looked-after young adults back to the streets. Considering the findings, the author questions if there are real possibilities for social integration, after a street-connected and care history, for young adults who have lived for many years at the margins of society or within institutional walls.

Sam Mokgopha, Adrian van Breda and Sue Bond (South Africa) also conducted research with and on former street-involved children in South Africa. They used a social-ecological construction of resilience to interpret findings. One main finding expands the normative concept of family: children build family-like connections when living in the streets. The chapter underlines the relevance of recognising, naming, celebrating and advancing such resilience processes when working with children with a street-involved history while in care and leaving care. Following these findings, attention should be given to enable these children to recognise the care setting as a safe and collaborative ‘family’ of supportive relationships, similar to what they formed on the streets.

Further, we know that LGBTQIA+ youth are disproportionately represented in foster care. In addition to experiencing mistreatment and victimisation at home, school and within their communities, they report experiences of homophobic and transphobic discrimination and victimisation from peers and professionals within child welfare system. But as there are still very few studies that explore the outcomes of LGBTQIA+ former foster youth, June Paul (United States) discusses three theoretical frameworks/perspectives to understand and improve the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth leaving foster care. They include minority stress theory, life course theory, and an anti-oppressive practice perspective.

Part II: Methods of care-leaving research

Ingri-Hanne Brønne Bennwik and Inger Oterholm (Norway) understand the process of leaving care as a complex balancing act between the young person’s own agency and ruling relations from a wide range of service organisations. In contrast to much research on leaving care that ignores this complexity and focuses on either individual or organisational factors, this chapter uses institutional ethnography to establish a connection between individual experiences of leaving care and institutional practices that shape these experiences. Drawing on two studies on leaving care in Norway, the findings illustrate the importance of including the institutional conditions to understand the support given to care-leavers and their experiences of this support.

While research on care-leaving is growing globally, for disabled youth this is an emerging field of study, and little is known about how to design studies to recruit and involve disabled care-leavers. When disabled care-leavers reach the age of majority, they often have a dual experience of ageing out of both child welfare services and children’s disability services. Therefore Wendy Mupaku (South Africa), Ingri-Hanne Brønne Bennwik (Norway) and Berni Kelly (United Kingdom) aim to highlight the methodological issues encountered by the authors as they engaged disabled youth leaving care in qualitative research in Norway, South Africa and Northern Ireland – three

countries, each with different policies. The chapter presents a thematic discussion of the challenges and methodological issues identified across the three countries and offers guidance to inform future care-leaving research that is more inclusive of disabled youth. Whilst the primary focus is on research with disabled care-leavers, the discussion also has relevance to the ongoing advancement of leaving-care research more widely to ensure it is inclusive of the heterogeneous experiences of care-leavers.

To improve the engagement of hard-to-reach cohorts generally, Jade Purtell (Australia) suggests in her chapter the use of trauma-informed research designs. She starts with her experiences carrying out a PhD project concerning care-leaver early parenting in the state of Victoria, Australia. The aim of the chapter is to explore ways that low-resource research can be carried out to ensure minimum risk of tokenism or re-traumatisation, while maximising reach and impact. Her reflections have led to the development of an adaptive participation model to assist in research and consultation design.

Róisín Farragher (Ireland), Petra Göbbels-Koch (United Kingdom), John Paul Horn (United States) and Annie Smith (Canada) notice that while much of leaving-care research has been addressing a wide range of issues, it seems to be slowly shifting towards exploring caring relationships and the relationship between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’. The authors use case studies from different countries to examine transnational strategies for addressing power imbalances, bias and disempowerment in the research process from the perspective of both care-experienced and non-care-experienced researchers. Their chapter on addressing the power imbalance present in research with care-leavers, also provides practical advice for those engaging care-experienced people in research.

Part III: Theory and conceptualisation of leaving care

Although placement instability has been found to correlate with problematic outcomes in several areas, including mental health, criminal behaviour and sexual behaviour, existing empirical literature has not found close links between placement stability and positive outcomes. Jenna Bollinger (Australia) criticises operationalisations that use continuity of a placement as a factor of stability as this considers neither the care-leaver’s internal experience of the placement nor the many moving parts in residential care. Her examination of stability in residential care is based on semi-structured interviews with eight care-leavers in New South Wales, Australia. The essential elements of stability based on their experiences include a consistent care team, consistent rules within the house, a sense of safety within the placement and a perception that the staff genuinely care for the wellbeing of the young people. The young people’s relationships were the main drivers of them feeling stable.

Anne-Kirstine Mølholt (Denmark) also explored the facets of instability in the lives of young people who have been in out-of-home care. She draws on the concept of a habitus of instability, by stressing that the young people's actions, strategies and perceptions of self are based on their uncertain and unstable circumstances. Her qualitative longitudinal study conducted in Denmark with eight care-leavers focuses on their everyday life. The findings point to different ways of how the care-leavers position themselves in relation to experiences of instability, for example, when they changed educational status, living arrangements and circle of friends.

However, extreme experiences of instability can have dramatic consequences: care-experienced young people are considered to be at higher risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts and attempting suicide. Previous research on this topic has largely neglected considering existing theories of suicide to explain the elevated risk among this group. Petra Göbbels-Koch (United Kingdom) brings together the two fields of theoretical suicidology and leaving-care research. She wonders if theories – specifically, Joiner's Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide – can help to better understand the elevated risk of suicidal ideation and behaviour among care-leavers. The results highlight the relevance of a theoretical understanding of young people's experiences in the context of leaving care. The author discusses how far the practical application of theories of suicide could inform guidelines for suicide prevention tailored to care-experienced young people.

Overall, leaving-care literature emphasises that developmental and environmental resources are critical for helping care-leavers navigate transitional difficulties. However, these resources are not always obtainable by formal systems of support. In seeking to examine how informal social resources may assist in a gradual transition for care-leavers, Jacinta Waugh, Philip Mendes and Catherine Flynn (Australia) have developed an overall conceptual and analytical framework of how social capital and social support interact to provide these resources. For this, they interviewed eight care-leavers and six nominated informal support people in Victoria, Australia. The main findings of the study are that informal social capital and social support can be valuable for all care-leavers. They are more accessible and continuous than formal social capital and social support and help develop resilience and positive self-identity.

From the edges into the future

In the conclusion, the editors – Samuel Keller (Switzerland), Inger Oterholm (Norway), Veronika Paulsen (Norway) and Adrian van Breda (South Africa) – bring together and analytically discuss the key learnings from each part of the book (groups, methods and theory) as well as from the book overall. We consider which edges we learned about in the book and where will they

lead us. On this basis, we imagine the future of care-leaving research that we referred to earlier in this Introduction, but which is not much visible in the individual chapters: What do we imagine going forward? What are the ‘edges’ that are still sharp? What specific groups with specific needs or vulnerabilities could be overlooked or re-stigmatised by practice or research, such as LGBTQIA+ or Indigenous peoples? What methodological paradigms can we expect to change because of greater numbers of care-experienced researchers, participative collaboration with care-leavers in research and the emerging of new or neglected research designs? How might these changes result in research that is more strongly theory-driven, increasing leaving-care discourses in the Global South and to new interdisciplinary perspectives in theories and concepts (for example, anthropology, sociology, youth studies). The conclusion ends with a specific focus on the meaning of global research and practice exchange (Global South and North), of children’s and young people’s perspectives and of self-critical reflections.

We wish our readers many provocative insights and edgy thoughts that, in alliance with care-experienced young people and their supporters, inspire your further thinking, further critical self-reflection, further research and further action concerning developments in policy and practice in the field of childcare, leaving care, child protection and child services all around the globe.

Notes

¹ <https://globalintrac.com/corit/>

² <https://globalintrac.com/>

³ European Scientific Association on Residential & Family Care for Children and Adolescents