

## Experiences of Young People Preparing to Transition Out of Cluster Foster Care in South Africa

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### Abstract

**Purpose.** Research on young people transitioning out of care due to reaching the age of majority (referred to as care-leaving or aging out of care) is still emerging in South Africa. To date, almost all research on leaving care has focused on the transition out of residential care, with little attention to the transition out of foster care, including cluster foster care (roughly equivalent to group homes in other countries). This paper aims to describe the experiences of youth preparing to age out of cluster foster care in South Africa. **Methods.** Individual interviews were conducted with nine youth preparing to leave a cluster foster organization called Home from Home. In addition, a semi-structured focus group was run with six of their foster mothers. **Findings.** Thematic analysis generated four themes: the desire for independence; the centrality of meeting material and physical needs at the time of transition; the continuity of emotional care during the transition; and the supported development of the capacity for self-determination. **Discussion.** Self-determination theory, ambiguous loss and *ubuntu* (or interdependence) were found to be useful theories to interpret the findings. Recommendations are proposed to better prepare foster children for leaving care and for creating a social environment that is receptive to and conducive for foster care-leavers.

**Keywords:** Foster care, group home care, youth, aging out of care, leaving care, South Africa

## Introduction

Over a third of a million South African children are formally placed in foster care (meaning family care) through the Children's Court, accounting for about 2% of the child population of 19.6 million (Hall, 2019). Parental death accounts for a large number of children in care, since 14% of South African children have lost one or both parents (Hall & Sambu, 2018). A far smaller number of children are placed in residential care settings – estimated at 21,000 (Jamieson, 2017). At age 18 (or up to 21 if they are continuing with their education) (RSA, 2007), young people are expected to transition out of care, resulting in large numbers of care-leavers migrating into the general population each year. This study is interested in a subset of these young people; those preparing to leave cluster foster care.

While research on care-leaving is well developed in many parts of the world, as evidenced in a number of international comparative texts (e.g., Mendes & Snow, 2016; Stein & Munro, 2008), South African research is still in its childhood, with the first publication emerging only in 2003 and a noticeable upsurge in research only since 2012 (Van Breda & Dickens, 2016). While there is now a sizeable body of literature on care-leaving in South Africa (Van Breda, 2018), this is almost entirely based on residential care. Research on leaving foster care is virtually absent.

South African legislation (RSA, 2007, Section 180(3)) provides for three forms of foster care: (1) non-relative foster care (placement in a family that is not a relative of the child); (2) kinship care (placement with a family member other than the child's parents) and (3) cluster foster care (placement in a home with several foster children run by parents who are employed by a nonprofit organization that is registered with the state as a cluster foster care scheme). Cluster foster care is similar to a group home in the USA, except that in South Africa it is regarded as a type of foster care (because the placement is a family), while in the USA it is grouped with residential treatment facilities and other child caring institutions (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005).

Given the growing global impetus to reduce the reliance on residential or institutional care and increase kinship care or family-like community-based care (United Nations, 2019), the knowledge gap regarding the experiences of South Africa young people transitioning out of foster care is of great concern. This study thus reports on one of only a handful of studies on the experiences of young South African people preparing to leave foster care, triangulated with the views of their foster mothers. The aim of the paper is to describe the experiences of young people preparing to age out of cluster foster care. Our study is thus not strictly on care-leavers, but rather on those preparing to leave care. In the following section we briefly map out the extant research on aging out of foster

care in South Africa. After describing our methods, we present the four themes that emerged from our analysis of the data, which we discuss and from which we present practice and policy implications.

## **Foster Care-Leaving Research in South Africa**

The vast majority of children placed in alternative care in South Africa are placed in foster care. The distribution of these across the three types of foster care – kinship, non-relative or cluster foster care – has not been published, but it is thought that approximately 80% of foster care is kinship care, with the remaining 20% spread across non-relative and cluster foster care (K. Hall, personal communication, July 17, 2020).

There has been limited research in South Africa on children growing up in foster care. For example, Nyasani, Sterberg, and Smith (2009) found that grandparents who raise their grandchildren, and often other people's children also, struggle to provide the necessary psychosocial and emotional support and to provide financially for education, food and travel. Children in foster care report, albeit not universally, feelings of resentment towards their biological parents and feeling neglected or scapegoated by their foster parents (Mampane & Ross, 2017). Few knew their social worker, and most had no contact with them.

There has, however, been very little research on young people leaving foster care, despite 94% of children in care being placed in foster care. To date, only four studies have been conducted on foster care-leaving in South Africa. Only one of the studies specifies in which of the three subtypes of foster care the participants had been placed (non-relative foster care), but the other three appear to refer to kinship or non-relative foster care, and not cluster foster care. Two of the studies are unpublished masters dissertations, one is a technical report that is not in the public domain and only one has been published in an academic journal.

The first is a qualitative study of 12 foster care-leavers (Shaw, Steyn, & Simeon, 2020) in Zeerust, in the North West province. Most participants reported being unprepared for leaving care, including not receiving preparatory services from the social worker before leaving care and receiving no social service support after leaving care. Participants indicated that the experience of leaving care was negative: they reported the loss of social and emotional support and the foster child grant (FCG), which made survival difficult.

The second study explores the experiences of 12 non-relative foster care leavers in Tshwane, a large metropole in Gauteng province (Mogale, 2019). Findings are very similar to those of the previous

study: no services were provided to prepare them for leaving care and all support was terminated abruptly at the time of leaving care. While participants had appreciated being part of a family, none of them felt accepted by their foster family or that they belonged there; many reported being treated differently from the family's biological children. They now felt abandoned and reported a range of psychosocial, economic and educational challenges.

The third study, by Kadungure (2014), reports on the experiences of 35 late adolescents preparing to age out of foster care in East London in the Eastern Cape province (a town in a rural province). Sixteen of these participants were in foster care due to being orphaned, five had been abandoned and the remainder had families unable to care for them. Thus, poverty and (possibly) AIDS are key drivers of children into foster care in this study, consonant with other studies on children in alternative care in South Africa (Jamieson, 2015). Participants reported difficulties discussing the ending of foster care with their foster parents, but had high hopes for life after care, e.g., studying or finding work.

Participants in Kadungure's (2014) study reported a lack of preparation for leaving care services from social workers, who were seen only when there were forms to be completed. Almost universally, they felt they needed support from the social workers to deal with the challenges they were facing in care and anticipated facing after leaving care. The social workers who were also interviewed in the study agreed that there were no services available to support foster care-leavers and that when foster children turn 18 the social workers close their files and terminate social services. The only exception to this is when the 18-year-old is still in secondary school – then an extension of care up to age 21 can be requested. Because two thirds of the participants had no contact with their birth families, they were unsure about where they were going to go after leaving foster care.

The fourth study (Chiroro, Seedat, & Woolnough, 2009) explored the experiences of 60 youth who had already aged out of the FCG in the rural provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. Roughly half the participants were living in rural communities, half were students and a third unemployed, and most (particularly those in rural areas) were still living with their foster families. About a third of participants reported receiving no notification about the termination of the FCG, and it appears that many or most received little in the way of services while in care or preparation for leaving care. A small number reported that the foster parents had saved some of the FCG for the young person after leaving care. The termination of the FCG had significant negative financial ramifications for many participants, including having to drop out of school because they were unable to pay their fees, and not having money for living expenses. As a result, some found

work to generate an income, but others were unable to secure paid employment. Most thus continued to rely on their foster parents for money to live.

The absence of a body of research on foster care-leaving in South Africa is of great concern, given the exceptionally high levels of youth unemployment (over 55%, StatsSA, 2019) and inequality (63%, World Data Bank, 2018) in South Africa, which create a hostile environment for all young adults. This situation is even worse for young people leaving care, as South Africa has virtually no policy or legislation that speaks to aftercare (Bond, 2018). Those aging out are, to a very large extent, left to fend for themselves, as is seen in most research on residential care-leaving in South Africa, as well as the foster care-leaving studies mentioned above. The current study, being the only study known to focus on cluster foster care-leaving, is thus of critical importance to the very small body of knowledge on foster care-leaving in South Africa. It focuses on the experiences of young people preparing to leave care to provide a point of departure for considering further policy and practice, as well as research.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative exploratory research approach was adopted for this study due to the paucity of literature on the transition out of foster care in South Africa. We adopted qualitative description as our research design (Sandelowski, 2010; Willis, Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, & Cohen, 2016), because the focus was primarily on eliciting authentic descriptions of participants' experiences of preparing to transition out of foster care. While interpretation and theory integration are part of qualitative description, they are not as central as in other designs, such as phenomenological or grounded theory designs.

We selected as a research site a non-profit organization called Home from Home (HfH), based in the Western Cape, which provides cluster foster care, where up to six children are placed in a home with a foster mother, forming a family. HfH is staffed by foster mothers, social workers and support staff who work together to provide safe, loving environments for children in foster care. The HfH houses are in ordinary communities so that children can remain in their community of origin, speak their home language and attend their local school. The houses are unmarked and look like any other house on the street.

In 2018, when we collected our data, HfH was assisting their first cohort of youth aging out of care. This involved initial exploratory activities that would subsequently mature into a more structured and multifaceted program. During 2018, social workers and program managers received some ad hoc, occasional training on parenting young people aged 16 and older and how to prepare them for

leaving care. Foster mothers received only a few ‘debrief sessions’. The nine youth in this study received regular mentoring and attended a youth camp focused on preparing young people for leaving care. HfH was also preparing to set up transitional housing for care-leavers.

Two populations were identified and sampled. The first population comprised the nine youth living in HfH who were participating in the aging-out activities and were expected to leave care by the end of 2018. Because this was a small population, all nine youth were invited to participate and all agreed. The profile of youth (based on what participants were willing to share regarding their time in foster care) is presented in Table 1. Participants were drawn from two communities in Cape Town: Khayelitsha, which is a partially informal settlement, and Goodwood, which is middleclass suburb. Participants were aged 16 or 17 years and comprised eight females and one male. Four had been in HfH’s care since they were “young” and five from between ages 10 and 14.

Insert Table 1 here

Second, it was agreed with HfH that we would interview all the foster mothers at the Khayelitsha home, as five of the nine youth were based here (Table 2). This sample comprised six foster mothers, who had worked for an average of six years at HfH (range 2-12 years).

Insert Table 2 here

One-on-one semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2013) were conducted with the nine foster youth, enabling an open discussion in which the perspective and interpretation of the youth’s experiences were explored. Interview questions explored the full care history: coming into care, relationships within care, positive and negative aspects of being in care, and expectations of aging out of care and life after care. Regarding aging out, questions included “When you turn 18, your fostering relationship ends, according to the government. What does this mean for you?” and “Can you tell me about your experience of the aging out program?”

A single semi-structured focus group was conducted with the five foster mothers to provide a different perspective on the same topic. The focus group allowed the foster mothers to compare experiences and expectations and to work in collaboration to form a more comprehensive understanding of the topic (Liamputtong, 2011). The focus group guide explored their role as foster mothers, the challenges they face in raising foster children and how they saw a ‘successful’ transition from care.

Thematic analysis (Bradshaw, Atkinson, & Doody, 2017) was conducted on both sets of data, working inductively to generate themes that emerged from the data. The first author began by

immersing herself in the data through multiple readings of each transcript and listening to the audio files, making notes on the content, context, language use and penning down initial questions to explore the data more deeply. Thereafter, she worked with the notes in conjunction with the raw data to transform the notes into emergent themes, creating concise phrases that reflected the essence of the participants' accounts. Third, she compiled the themes from the entire collection of transcripts, looking for connections and grouping the emergent themes in accordance to their conceptual similarities, while dropping any without a strong evidential base. The third author verified coding against a sample of transcripts and the second author critically reviewed the data and themes to improve the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Children in foster care can be considered a highly vulnerable population because of the multiple layers of adversity they have experienced and because of their living arrangements under statutory protection (Horn, Sleem, & Ndebele, 2014). Consequently, careful attention was given to ensuring their protection and well-being. Information letters were drafted for both populations, providing details of the study, including potential harm and benefits. The letters were discussed verbally with prospective participants so that questions could be answered. Those aged 18 or older provided their own written consent; those under 18 provided co-consent with their foster parent.

The potential for harm was reduced through conducting interviews in their homes, ensuring privacy, confidentiality and autonomy, and through starting the interview with more neutral questions and closing with positive questions. Immediately after the interview, the participants were verbally debriefed. One participant became distressed and was referred to the social worker in HfH. All names were replaced with pseudonyms and data are stored on a password-protected computer. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Cape Town's Psychology Department.

## **Findings**

Four themes emerged from the analysis of data: (1) the desire for independence; (2) the central focus on ensuring that material and physical needs were met, particularly in the time of transition; (3) the need for continuity of emotional care; and (4) the opportunity for young people to learn to exercise self-determination with supportive contexts. These themes were evident in the accounts of both the youth in foster care and the foster mothers, albeit sometimes in conflicting and contrasting ways; thus they are presented in an integrated fashion.

## Desire for Independence

Although not explicitly asked, the desire for independence came across strongly in various ways from several youth in foster care. For Leah, the desire for independence as she grew up was expressed in a discussion on what changes she desired and anticipated in the future, as she went through the aging out process:

*I think wanting more independence, because here like in foster care they make you so dependent on other people, it gets really irritating. Like you want a bit of your own freedom, you understand what I'm saying? (Leah)*

When asked what this independence would entail, Leah clarified:

*I think like letting us do things man, like normal children do, you know like go with your friends out or, I don't know, go to the movies or something. We do go. But like... with our sisters or with other adults. It's weird. (Leah)*

Expressing a desire for independence in this overt way shows a level of engagement with developing into adulthood, while still clinging to childhood. Leah wanted an increase in, but possibly not complete, independence. Another participant expressed her desire for independence in a more subtle way, through wanting to be able to go exploring. Still another youth expressed the desire for independence through the desire for her “*own things*” when asked about the future that she hoped for and was working toward:

*To have my own house, own car, everything on me. To not rent. To have my own. No kids. Because no time for kids. And no dogs, because I don't like pets. Eh, just to have my own house, car, yah. (Anathi)*

The idea of a growth in independence – of independence as something to be worked towards – comes across strongly in this and other accounts. For Anathi, it seems as if the reliance on others was something to move away from as she grew up. Independence was seen by Anathi and others as a central goal and was expressed through desires about their own future. Lindelwa stresses the importance of independence as a way of preparing for an unsupported future after leaving care:

*You need to learn. If you're fifteen and above, you need to start learning to be independent, because not always you will have a support from other people. So, I think it's a good thing. (Lindelwa)*



Lindelwa's "*start learning*" suggests that independence was something to learn while still supported by others, particularly as her comment about needing to learn to be independent came after a discussion on how supported she felt in her foster home and how necessary that support had been for her to get to where she was in that moment.

Foster mothers held similar views that independence was important, but added that it was something young people needed to learn:

*I would like to see the children be able to stay alone when they leave this place, because I have taught them everything they need to know to protect them. Because while they are here, I can teach them; because when the time is coming that no one will be standing in front of them telling them there is food. No one is telling them what to do. They must know that when I am going to eat, I must get a sweat [I must work hard] otherwise I can't eat because I am not working. So that is the weapon I want to give them. (Mama Fezeka, translated from isiXhosa)*

Mama Fezeka saw her role as a mother as essential in imparting independence. She appears to construct this independence as being able to look after oneself physically, being able to provide for and protect oneself. Gaining this independence seemed to be a heartfelt desire of the mothers for the youth in their care.

### Centrality of Physical Care and Material Resources

Independence can be seen in two lights: financial independence and psychosocial independence. The necessity of financial independence, namely providing for the material needs of the youth, was raised in relation to coming into foster care, what foster care provides and particularly regarding concerns for the future. For many of the youth, physical care and material resources were the first and strongest points raised when asked what would change as they grew older. When asked who supported her and what that entailed, Anathi immediately spoke about her foster mother :

*[She] help[s] us with everything ... school, shoes, school uniform. Everything, clothes, food. Everything we get from [foster mother]. (Anathi)*

When asked how this would change after leaving care, and how she would be supported then, Anathi continued:

*She won't help me, because I'm going to leave here. To, to stay another home. (Anathi)*

Foster youth saw having their physical needs for nutrition, education, clothing, etc. taken care of as a main component of foster care. Foster mothers, by contrast, did not mention material support at all when asked about their role as foster mothers, even though they obviously spent a great deal of time providing material care. This marked difference is striking, given that the discontinuation of physical care and material support caused youth the most anxiety. This was evident when we asked young people how the social workers and foster mothers would continue to support them when they left care: some gave no answer at all; others gave cautious responses of “*I don’t know*”; while many made statements that reflected their belief that support would terminate after leaving care:

*I hear that um that when you are out from Home from Home... you’re no longer um in foster care, so they won’t be there for you. You’ll be provided by your family members, the ones that can... They [HfH] don’t do like that [providing ongoing support]. When you are out of here, you are out of here. I don’t, they don’t provide for. They don’t give – um – money or anything. They don’t even go and see you. You are out. (Buhle)*

For youth preparing to leave foster care, these are real concerns. Despite HfH developing an aging out program and initiating the establishment of a half-way house, these fears remain very real for the participants. The differences between the accounts of the youth who are anxious about material needs after leaving care and the foster parents who do not consider material care as within their purview, reveal the complexity and variety of individual attitudes toward transition and the various ways in which support is continued after aging out of care.

### Continuity of Emotional Care

Youth did not anticipate a complete cut-off of all support after leaving care; there was an expectation of at least some continued support, particularly emotional support, thus perhaps distinguishing financial independence from psychosocial interdependence. For the youth in foster care, the security of trusting the continuity of emotional care was not strong, but when prompted or asked directly if their foster mothers would continue to be an emotional support after leaving care, they generally agreed. Asked what would change in her relationships with those who supported her, Layla saw the only change as reduced contact:

*We won’t see each other that much, that often, yah, yah, that’s it. (Layla)*

She, and others, saw the relationship with her foster mother and others as stable, and something that would continue beyond leaving care, even though she was aware that things would change practically, e.g., less frequent contact.

In addition, the young people seemed to experience a desire for family, which was expressed in different ways, including a desire to have their own children and characterizing their foster mothers along familial terms:

*Aunty [previous foster mother] was like a mother... Aunty [another previous foster mother] was like an aunt that I never had... Aunty [current foster mother] also was like a mother. (Chloe)*

Chloe's use of 'aunty' is culturally appropriate and commonplace when referring to adult or older women in Cape Town, by she extends this by linking 'aunty' to 'mother'. Lethabo similarly refers to her foster mother as her 'mother':

*I'm living with my [foster] mother and she's the um nice mother to me, because I love her so much, uh so I love this place, because this place is a very um healthy and protective place for me. (Lethabo)*

Lindelwa takes this even further by using the more intimate 'mom' to refer to her foster mother, speaking to a desire for family, particularly when framed as something they never had before. Into this fits the understanding that family is something you can depend on to be there for you always – 'home':

*When I'm here like I feel like I am at home, like **really** I'm here. I don't care about I wonder where's my mommy, where's my daddy, because I do have a mom here, so what else do I need? (Lindelwa)*

The type of care the foster mothers expressed most strongly concerned the continuity of emotional care. They seemed to have a clear sense of identity of being a mother to the youth, more than being a childcare worker or even a foster mother. This was shown particularly through their connection to the children in their care and the way that they stressed that these children had become their own:

*But when I give the children to growing up, I know that now the children – the children I am taking with me – is **my** children now, is not taking for another people, is **my** children. (Mama Celiwe)*

Celiwe's emphasis on the foster children being 'my' children is heard also from Thandi, who refers to her foster children as 'my kids' and expresses a deep desire to be a parent to them (saying 'I want' five times):

*I'm still love my kids that I'm staying with because I – they – don't have parents. So I want, I want to be a parent and a mother. I want to be the mother. I want to be the mother; I want to be the father to them. So that's what I'm doing. (Mama Thandi)*

Phumeza continues with the focus on desiring to be a mother to her foster children and the joy this brings. She also links this with a sense of religious calling:

*For me, I am the first [only] mother to the young children. When they are here with me, it makes me happy to see their stages [to see them grow up]. I know that this fostering is my job, because even in the church I had a calling to stay with these kids, because I have a mercy [I can sympathize]. (Mama Phumeza, translated from isiXhosa)*

The foster mothers strongly emphasized the role of motherhood and, much like biological motherhood, they say that this is something that will continue even after the youth leave their direct care. This was especially felt for those who had parented the same children for many years. The various roles that the mothers played, and will continue to play, in the lives of youth in foster care form part of the broader framework of a care-leavers' social support network.

For young people whose childhoods have been characterized by the instability that brings them into foster care, healthy attachments to parents or parent figures is challenging. This is important, as previous experiences and attachments pave the way for attachments and relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Many of the youth did seem to have a good relationship with their foster mothers; however, this was not the case for all youth who were interviewed. One participant answered with silence when asked about her foster mother, while another struggled to understand her foster mother's parenting and expressed her frustration by saying, "*Our mothers are so uptight, like we can't do nothing*" (Leah), suggestive of a need for greater independence, as discussed in the first theme.

### Supported Self-Determination

In describing what will happen in the future, as they transition out of care, almost all the participants spoke about how HfH offered them opportunities and support, and that within that supportive context, it also required them to take an active role in shaping their own future. They recognize that, as much as their foster mothers and HfH give them opportunities, they must exercise self-determination in whether and how they take up and use these opportunities. Some also recognize that this give and take builds capacity for self-determination, enabling them to take decisions for themselves and preparing them for the future after care:

*So they said they will not um get that [continued support and opportunities] out of from Home from Home, but they will take us to another place [a halfway house] so that we can be taken care of... But when we... are tough and don't do what um what is right with our lives, so we can't do with it, so we need to be um serious about our lives, so that we can be what we need to be when we grow up. (Lethabo)*

Lethabo is saying that HfH can only do so much for him; then he has a choice to make. He can be 'tough' (like a gangster) and do bad things. Or he can take his life seriously, so that he can become the man he wants to be. It is up to him to take an active role in using the support and opportunities that are offered and to construct and adhere to a personal code of behavior.

Another participant expanded on what was expected of them and the direct relationship between the amount of support offered and their behavior or engagement with the opportunities offered:

*If you have discipline and respect and still are listening to what our mothers are saying, then that's when they will start like supporting us more and more ... it is like that for everyone. But some of the others, they just don't care about anything that is being given here, like opportunities. They don't take it so. (Lindelwa)*

Lindelwa makes a clear distinction between herself and other youth who did not take up the opportunities offered. These others squandered the opportunities they have been given. She sees herself as being respectful and attentive, as taking and using the opportunities she is given. She recognizes that when she does that, she obtains more support and that can help her on her way forward. Her self-determination, therefore, is relational – embedded within the relationship with her foster mother.

The foster mothers expressed this same connection between the support they offer, and more broadly support from HfH, and the young person's self-determination to engage with these opportunities:

*Like they must make sure. Like school. They must go to school. They must be – they must be – they must do – they must be focused. Like if they go to school, they don't focus. Always they take everything easy, neh [not so]? I try to, to say to them, "If you do something, you must be focus," neh? (Mama Fezeka)*

The foster mothers expressed the challenge of parenting youth as they grow through adolescence towards adulthood. They felt they can put opportunities and support in place, but that it is the

responsibility of the youth to take and utilize those opportunities. Ultimately, for better or worse, young people must learn to exercise self-determination.

## **Discussion**

This study highlights various tensions in the experience of young people preparing to leave cluster foster care in South Africa – tensions between independence and interdependence, between physical care and emotional care, and between self-determination and being guided by parents.

The importance of independence is stressed in most literature on foster care (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Independent living programs are widely implemented, even though evaluation studies are generally not enthusiastic about their benefits (Everson-Hock et al., 2011; Yelick, 2017). The pressure to be financially independent, something expressed in literature on aging out of foster care, is felt even at this stage, where many of the youth we spoke to expressed concern about their future, particularly regarding employment, despite it not being an immediate threat. Nevertheless, youth unemployment is high in South Africa, thus young people preparing to leave care are right to be concerned about how they will become independent and survive outside foster care.

Although there was some mention of efforts being made to prepare them for independence, no comment was made on interdependence, which is arguably a less idealistic and more attainable and desirable goal for care-leavers (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014; Storø, 2018; Tanur, 2012). Interdependence is also congruent with the African theory of *ubuntu*, which emphasizes that the self exists only in relationships with others (Moodley, Raniga, & Sewpaul, 2020; Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa, 2019; Van Breda, 2019), though this cultural worldview may be more of an ideal than a lived reality in South Africa (Sekudu, 2019). Interdependence, which involves building youth's social networks and teaching them to access and leverage available resources, is something stressed by HfH, but it seems this has not fully filtered into the lived realities and experiences of the youth. The importance of support during and after transition is necessary for youth to attain the goals that they and those who care for them have set (Van Breda, 2015).

Young people's press for independence, rather than interdependence, may also be a response to the almost complete absence of formal aftercare policy and practice in South Africa (Bond, 2018). For the most part, when young people leave care in South Africa, they must fend for themselves and care-leavers know this. As extended care has been shown in American literature to enable better outcomes (Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014; Miller, Paschall, & Azar, 2017), the fear and possibly the reality of an abrupt change and sudden lack of material resources could be stressful. The pressure for self-reliance and self-sufficiency in terms of providing for themselves, and sometimes

also for family members, can be overwhelming for these youth (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Many interventions elsewhere in the world focus on assisting youth with material resources in the form of housing, grants and employment, and many of these interventions have shown success (Woodgate, Morakinyo, & Martin, 2017). There is some evidence that preventing instability and insecurity with regards to physical resources is protective. However, in the South African context, where such aftercare services are almost non-existent, youth have cause for concern.

In contrast with the expectation that physical care and material resources from HfH will evaporate after leaving care, participants seemed confident that emotional care will continue beyond leaving care – that the parent-child relationship will endure. Research has shown the importance of a social support network and of having role models to look up to and rely on, and these familial bonds will hopefully provide that as these youth age out of care (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016; Woodgate et al., 2017). Having older adults in their lives to assist them with their difficulties, both emotional and practical, is therefore vital (Lee et al., 2014; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007; Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivoski, & Schelbe, 2009; Tanur, 2012; Van Breda, 2015; Woodgate et al., 2017; Zinn & Courtney, 2017). The interdependence that is the result of being part of an *ubuntu* community is achieved through these foster mothers and social workers.

However, the contradiction between ‘no material support’ but ‘ongoing familial connection’ constitutes a tension, and may be an example of Boss’ (2016) theory of ambiguous loss, in which there is a physical termination but a psycho-emotional continuity of the foster parent-child relationship. The ambiguity in Boss’ construction of loss creates an inherent tension, which she terms “boundary ambiguity” – ‘Am I still part of this foster family, or am I out of it?’ These tensions and ambiguity can lead to psychosocial difficulties. Research on ambiguous loss among young people in care has tended to focus on the family of origin (Lee, Cole, & Munson, 2016; Samuels, 2009), but this study suggests that ambiguous loss plays out in similar ways in relation to the foster family. This ambiguity is arguably more pronounced among foster care-leavers than residential care-leavers, because foster care constructs the care relationship in familial terms, which elicits expectations of an ongoing care relationship, while residential care constructs the care relationship as professional, which does not imply a lifelong familial relationship. Paradoxically, the potential disjuncture between expectations of ongoing care and actual care after leaving care could leave foster care-leavers more vulnerable than residential care-leavers, as seen in Mogale’s (2019) study.

Both youth preparing to leave foster care and their foster mothers speak about the opportunities foster children are provided by their foster mothers and by the organization that hosts them, HfH.

And both speak of the prerogative that young people have to take up these opportunities or to waste them, which is the crux of self-determination. Both elements (opportunities and self-determination) have been shown to be important to successful aging out of care (Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017; Salazar, Noell, Cole, Haggerty, & Roe, 2018). It is thus encouraging that these elements are both evident in the family setting provided by HfH and through the programs that HfH offered.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) sheds light onto this dynamic. The capacity of people to exercise self-determination is a result of three interlocking processes: competence, autonomy and relatedness. Competence emerges when people get feedback on the success or shortcomings of their attempts to exercise self-determination; autonomy emerges when people feel that they can genuinely exercise choice in their behavior (rather than being controlled); and relatedness emerges when self-determination is exercised in the context of caring, supportive relationships. One study on care-leaving found that relatedness was the most important enabler of self-determination (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019) and another that mentoring programs facilitated self-determination and its three components among care-leavers transitioning into college (Jackson, Colvin, & Bullock, 2019). The expectation of self-determination can weigh heavily on young people, but this pressure is moderated through the interactions between the young person and their social environment, enabling the development of a healthy and co-supported sense of self-determination and responsibility (Tanur, 2012; Van Breda, 2015; Van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019). Bramsen, Kuiper, Willemse, and Cardol (2019) refer to this as ‘relational autonomy’.

## **Limitations**

This was a small, exploratory qualitative study, with all the resulting limitations regarding generalizability. The first key limitation was language barriers. Though most youth did not speak English as their first language, all were fluent in English. Many of the foster mothers chose to speak in isiXhosa, requiring translation by other members of the focus group, which limited the opportunity for follow-up questions and discussion. Second, all participants were connected to one cluster foster organization, thus the same findings may not be apparent at other cluster foster homes. Third, while this study is interested in aging out of foster care, the participants had not yet left care; thus, the study addresses what they anticipate about leaving care. Follow-up research in a year or two would be required to provide better insight into care-leaving.



## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The themes of independence and self-determination, within the contrasting context of continuity of emotional care and the absence of continued physical and material care, suggest the importance of holding together both support and independence. This has important implications for policy and practice. Current care approaches in South Africa and elsewhere in the world often implement an abrupt transition out of care in which one day the young person is supported and cared for and the next day they are thrust into independence. In South Africa, it seems that foster care has not given adequate thought to this transition. There appears to be an assumption that, because of the family-like character of foster care, care-leaving transitions will naturally follow the same pattern as for young people growing up at home. In fact, this appears not to be the case.

Policy thus needs to ensure that foster care-leavers can continue to access a range of both psychosocial and material supports from their foster mothers after leaving care, as part of an integrated aftercare program. This would facilitate a gradual transition from care into adulthood and independent living, which has widely been regarded as the most appropriate transition for care-leavers (Stein, 2008). Foster parents need to recognize that they take on a more substantial responsibility than merely providing professional care – they do in fact take on the role of parent, with all that parenting implies, including love for children in and after care (Lausten & Frederiksen, 2016; Thumbadoo, 2011). Though the state provides little policy support and no financial support for aftercare for foster care-leavers, foster parents and organizations need to take this up as part of their role as corporate parents (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019).

While still in care, preparation for leaving care programs can increase their deliberate focus on promoting relational autonomy and self-determination, which may strengthen young people's independence muscle. Self-determination theory and relational autonomy both emphasize that the development of autonomy and independence is rooted in supportive relationships and in the receipt of constructive feedback on one's behavior. This is an important, but perhaps neglected parental role, particularly as foster children move through adolescence.

Finally, within the South Africa context, and perhaps in indigenous communities elsewhere in the world, there is need to work on cultivating and stimulating cultural resources that can facilitate resilience and growth among young people in and leaving care (Van Breda & Theron, 2018). *Ubuntu* in particular has important implications for care-leavers (Moodley et al., 2020) in that it emphasizes the importance of community connectedness and mutual care and support. In practice, this implies that foster parents need to nurture the relationships between young people in care and

the communities to which they will return after leaving care. This will assist in creating a culturally relevant network of support and resources that care-leavers can draw on before, during and after their transition from care.

## Conclusion

This small, exploratory study is the first study on care-leaving in the context of cluster foster care in South Africa, and only the fifth study on leaving any category of foster care. The findings resonate with what is already known about leaving residential care-leaving in South Africa as well as leaving care globally, particularly concerning the tensions inherent in striving for independence while still dependent on care, the threat of losing material support in contrast to the continuity of emotional care, the development of self-determination within the opportunities and support provided by the foster care provider, and the challenges of feeling different and potentially stigmatized. The discussion of these findings suggests the potential of theories of ambiguous loss, self-determination, relational autonomy and *ubuntu* for understanding the foster care-leaving journey. Further research on foster care-leaving in South Africa is much needed, with particular attention to the ways in which foster care can provide sustained support to young people as they transition into adulthood.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research ethics committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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**Table 1. Youth participant demographics**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Time in foster care</b>
Khayelitsha	Lethabo	Male	16	13 years, with multiple placements
	Anathi	Female	16	13 years, with the same family
	Buhle	Female	17	Since young, with multiple placements
	Nceba	Female	16	Since young, with same family
	Lindelwa	Female	16	14 years, with same family
Goodwood	Chloe	Female	17	12/13 years, with same siblings but not same foster mother
	Layla	Female	17	Since young, moved into current family 4 years ago
	Mikayla	Female	16	10 years, moved into current family 2 years ago
	Leah	Female	16	Since young, with multiple placements

**Table 2. Foster mother demographics (Khayelitsha)**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Duration and starting date of employment with HfH</b>
Mama Phumeza	7 years (since 18/08/2011)
Mama Vuyokazi	7½ years (since 01/02/2011)
Mama Fezeka	2 years (since 01/07/2016)
Mama Celiwe	3 years (since 01/04/2015)
Mama Thandi	12 years (since 25/11/2005)
Mama Nceba	4½ years (since 11/02/2014)