

Foreword

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Research evidence concerning the poor outcomes of young people leaving care led in 2003 to the setting up of the International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (INTRAC), bringing together for the first time researchers from Europe, the Middle East, Australia, Canada and the United States – and later from Asian, African and South American countries.

Since it began, INTRAC has provided an opportunity for its members to reach beyond a parochial understanding of young people's transitions from care to adulthood, by sharing research findings and exploring their implications for policy, practice and theory, contributing to a growing body of publications. From the outset, a lively and dynamic development within INTRAC has been the contribution of PhD researchers who established the Community of Researchers in Transition (CoRiT). It is they who have been the driving force behind this book.

Living on the Edge is ground-breaking in many ways: first, in giving voice to new researchers from many countries, including the Global South, who have often struggled to be heard; second, in exploring new and hitherto unresearched questions and topics; and third, in doing this with the use of innovative methodologies and challenging theoretical perspectives.

The introductory chapter sets the context by detailing the arguments for a shift from the current centre ground of the 'leaving care' knowledge bank – which has laid the empirical and conceptual foundations – to the 'edge'. Whilst acknowledging these earlier building blocks, the authors suggest to avoid embracing the new will not only result in recycling existing approaches – 'Haven't I heard that before somewhere?' – it also contributes to legitimising the status quo, and by implication limits the parameters of inquiry.

Enabling young people from care to experience normative transitions to adulthood – gradual, supported and extended – has been an ongoing challenge in the construction of leaving-care law, policy and practice. The difficulties of achieving this in relation to the diverse and often neglected groups of care-leavers 'living on the edge' – who are often diminished or missing in larger general samples of care-leavers – is detailed in the four chapters in [Part I](#) of this book.

These chapters give voice to accelerated, insecure and at times damaging and desperate transitions: to the uncertain adult futures of unaccompanied migrant young people in Spain as they seek permission to remain in

order to be entitled to much needed aftercare services; to Bolivian youth rescued from the streets but returning to the streets on leaving care; to the recognition of ‘street family’ support in South Africa and the need to replicate positive networks in care; and finally to the homophobic and transphobic discrimination and victimisation experienced by LGBTQIA+ young people from care.

The application of established methodologies has set the scientific bar high in terms of rigour, replication, reliability and results – the four R’s. However, by living in a traditional methodological comfort zone, more problematic questions in researching care-experienced groups are often overlooked, as explored in the ‘edgy’ chapters in [Part II](#) of the book.

How to address power imbalances in the research process, including practical ways to reduce stigma, tokenism and re-traumatisation from the perspective of care-experienced and non-care-experienced researchers. How to bridge the gap between the individual experiences of care-leavers and the institutional practices that shape their experiences, by applying ‘institutional ethnography’. How to ensure sampling, recruitment and fieldwork methods can meet the needs of disabled care-leavers; and drawing on care-leavers’ experiences of early parenting, how to balance rigour and empowerment, whilst avoiding tokenism and re-traumatisation.

Sixteen years ago, I concluded my paper reflecting on the ‘Poverty of theory’ by suggesting that ‘linking empirical and theoretical work has the potential to enhance our understanding of aging out of care issues, as well as the theoretical foundations of practice’ (Stein, 2006: 431). The chapters in the third and [final part](#) of this book build upon earlier work in contributing to new conceptual knowledge.

We read of: a ‘habitus of instability’ to explain how care-leavers’ life choices are limited by unstable experiences – which connects with an exploration of the features of ‘stability’ in residential care; how sociological theory and leaving-care research contributes to a better understanding of the higher risk of suicidal ideation and behaviour among care-leavers and its implications for improving prevention; and of the positive impact of ‘informal social capital’ on care-leaver transitions. It is welcome that many of the chapters in Parts I and II are also theoretically and conceptually underpinned, and, as recognised in the concluding chapter, that there is potential for further exploration from the social, political and behavioural sciences.

Living on the Edge makes an important and original contribution to our understanding of contemporary care-leaving. It does so by capturing a symmetry between researchers starting their careers, the ‘edgy’ contributions contained within this volume and the lives of the many care-experienced young people moving on to adulthood in different contexts, circumstances and cultures. Finally, as I mentioned at the outset, this book has come about

due to the commitment determination and skills of early-career researchers. The future of care-leaving research is in very good hands.

Reference

Stein, M. (2006) 'Young people aging out of care: The poverty of theory', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(4): 422–434. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2005.05.005