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## THE ROLES OF AGENCY AND STRUCTURE IN FACILITATING THE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION OUT OF CARE AND INTO INDEPENDENT LIVING

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### ABSTRACT

*The vulnerability of young people leaving residential care has been widely noted in the literature, prompting research on the process of transitioning out of care and triggering debates between the roles of agency and structure in youth transitions. Care-leaving research and programmes from the West have tended to give primary attention to structural interventions, centred on the notion of 'corporate parenting'. By contrast, South African research on care-leaving has tended to emphasise the agency of young people in exercising resilience in sub-optimal contexts. This article analyses findings from recent South African care-leaving research on the contributions of agency (particularly resilience at the micro level) and structure (particularly interventions at the macro level) to the successful transition out of care and into independent living. Evidence confirms the importance of considering both agency and structure, as well as the interaction between them.*

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### Keywords:

youth transitions, youth studies, resilience, care-leaving, South Africa, micro-macro

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## INTRODUCTION

The transition from childhood to adulthood is challenging for most every young person. It is a move from dependence, structure and protection to independence, lack of structure and exposure to risk. In South Africa, with its extraordinarily high rate of youth unemployment, this transition is particularly challenging (World Data Bank, 2015). The expectation that adult independence will manifest as employment and financial self-sufficiency, among other things, is not an option for approximately half of young adults. High rates of youth unemployment are compounded by the continuing poor quality education South African children receive (Spaull, 2013) and the high rates of severe poverty among children (Hall and Sambu, 2014). In such a context, the study of youth transitions, a facet of the broader field of youth studies, is much needed.

Yet youth transitions are largely under-researched by South African social workers. *The Social Work Practitioner-Researcher*, for example, has just one publication that refers to youth transitions (based on a search of the journal titles and abstracts on their journal website, which covers the period 2009 to 2015): Ansong and Chowa (2010) write about financial saving patterns among young people transitioning towards adulthood in Uganda. *Social Work/Maatskaplikewerk* has only a few more publications (based on a search of their website, which dates back to 2003): Booyens and Crause (2014) address the economic and employment vulnerabilities of young people transitioning into adulthood; Jordan, Patel, and Hochfeld (2014) discuss the contribution of the Child Support Grant to the transition of young mothers into adulthood; Chideya and Williams (2014) explore the transition of adolescent males into early fatherhood; Collins and Van Breda (2010) discuss the challenges associated with the transition of young people into university; and Pretorius, Terblanche, and Tshiwula (2007) explore the ways relationship violence compromises youth transitions.

Among the vast number of vulnerable young people transitioning into adulthood, those transitioning out of alternative care have received even less attention. No publications on the topic could be located in *The Social Work Practitioner-Researcher*, and only two in *Social Work/Maatskaplikewerk*: Maposa and Louw-Potgieter (2012) review the programme outcomes of young people transitioning out of a children's home in the Western Cape; and Muller, Van Rensburg and Makobe (2003) recount the narratives of a handful of young people transitioning out of SOS Children's Village into young adulthood. There are also two South African articles in international journals: Van Breda (2015) explores the resilience processes that young people who left the care of Girls and Boys Town (GBT) engage in during their journey out of care; and Tanur (2012) explores the transitional support programme offered by Mamelani Projects.

This lack of attention to care-leavers in South Africa is curious given the very large number of orphans and vulnerable children. Approximately one third (35.8%) of South Africans were under the age of 18 in 2012 (Hall, Meintjes, and Sambu, 2014:90). Only a third of these (35%) lived with both parents, and a further third (39%) lived with their mother only. A quarter of South African children (23%) lived with neither parent, a fifth (19%) were orphaned (one or both parents have died), and 7% were maternal orphans (ibid:91-92). In 2014, a little over half a million children (512,055) were receiving the state's Foster Care Grant (Hall and Sambu, 2014:97), accounting for almost 3% of all children. It is estimated that an additional 13,250 children were in registered child and youth care centres in

2009/10, almost half due to abandonment or neglect (Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, 2012:26).

Notwithstanding the lack of South African research on youth transitions in general and the transition out of care in particular, international research on the subject of care-leaving is almost unanimous that this is a particularly challenging transition, and some authors (for example, Mendes, Johnson, and Moslehuddin, 2011, introduction) have referred to them as “one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society”. The reasons for this identification of their vulnerability are numerous: care-leavers show consistently poorer independent living outcomes (such as, employment, financial status, educational attainment, avoidance of crime and substance abuse) than equivalent cohorts who were not in care (Mendes et al., 2011); these children are protected by the Children’s Act until they turn 18, after which they enjoy no protective legislation (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2005); the transition of young people out of care is typically more abrupt and absolute than the transition out of the family home (Stein, 2006); and the reasons that brought these young people into care in the first place leave a legacy of vulnerability that continues into adulthood (Mendes and Moslehuddin, 2006).

Given the vulnerability of all youth and care-leavers in particular, a social welfare response is indicated. Within the literature on youth transitions and services to care-leavers there is a tension between agency and structure (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005:414; Côté and Bynner, 2008:263). ‘Agency’ refers to the role of young people in shaping their own destinies. It is about the power that they hold at a micro level to exercise authority over themselves and to influence their social environments. ‘Structure’, on the other hand, refers to the macro social environment that surrounds young people and the kinds of services, protections and opportunities that are made available to them by society. These two perspectives, which are each embedded in a series of philosophical and political positions, are frequently split in the literature; in effect, they are in conflict with each other. This can be referred to as the ‘agency-structure debate’.

In this article I aim to illustrate, using South African data on young people transitioning from care into adulthood, how both agency and structure, and in particular the interaction between them, are important dimensions of youth transitions. We neglect either at the expense of the young person, and thus ultimately of society. I begin with a necessarily brief overview of the agency-structure debate, drawing primarily on sociological literature. I then draw on five research projects to present evidence of the importance of both agency and structure, and of the interaction between agency and structure. Finally, I conclude with a call, located within social welfare theory and ecological resilience theory, for the harmonisation of agency-structure in theory, research, policy and practice.

## **THEORY OF AGENCY AND STRUCTURE**

Sztompka (1994:xii) describes how, in the 1970s, the field of sociology became split over micro and macro theories of human society. Micro theories include “exchange and rational choice, symbolic interactionism... [and] phenomenology”, while macro theories include “conflict theory, structuralist Marxism [and a] neo-Weberian institutional orientation”. In the 1980s, however, efforts began to emerge to find a synthesis or harmonisation between these poles. In the USA this was referred to as “micro-macro linkage”, while in Europe much the same discussions were framed as “the relationship between agency and

structure” (Ritzer and Gindoff, 1994:3). These debates have become increasingly prominent in sociological theory: “The question of ... the relationship between social agency and social structure is certainly the problematic around which the entire history of sociology is written” (Romanos, 2014:98). However, social theorists appear to be failing to integrate the poles, leading King (2004:12) to declare, “In contemporary social theory, the dualistic ontology of structure and agency is hegemonic. Social reality has been reduced to the agent, on the one hand, and structure, on the other. There is ultimately no social context in contemporary society, just structure and agency”.

Agency most often refers to the individual person (Ritzer and Gindoff, 1994), although some sociologists include collectives of individuals with a common interest. Some go as far as to define an agent as “an organization directly implementing one or more elements of the system of historical action” (Ritzer and Gindoff, 1994:9), which sounds very much like structure. Others accept both individuals and collectivities as agents. Among those who focus on individuals as agents, there is great variation in the extent to which individuals are regarded as free to choose and empowered to act.

Structure has an even wider variety of meanings in sociological literature (Ritzer and Gindoff, 1994). It includes actual social structures, such as political institutions, organisations, bureaucracy, the economy and religious organisations. For some, structure is about social systems – less about actual structures, and more about structured or systematic patterns of relationships between individuals or groups of people. For others, it is about culture.

The debate between agency and structure has, in recent decades, given rise to a variety of integrative theories, one of which is ‘relationism’. King (2004:18), for example, calls for a focus on “a social ontology” that emphasises social relations between people, which leaves individuals neither isolated from social structures, nor subsumed by social structures: “Humans exist in social relations with other humans. The focus of sociology has to be these social relations.” Ritzer and Gindoff (1994:15) argue that the relationship of interest is between agents and structures, not between people. Thus, their concept of relationism would not include the relationship between a person and her friend, but would include the relationship between a person and a social service agency.

Donati (2011:4) argues against an integration of agency and structure and for a shift of focus from agency and structure towards social relations, which he sees as the “object of sociology”. Donati constructs social relations as “the ‘emergent social fact’ of reciprocal actions over time, combining subjective and objective elements” (2011:62). Social relations thus are a phenomenon on their own, with their own properties and dynamics, which transcend agents and structures. It is the “interactive networks” (Donati, 2007:18) between people and structures that are of greatest importance.

Powell’s (2013:187) radical relationism, by contrast, “treats all social phenomenon... as constituted through relations”, including individuals themselves and social structures. Powell proposes to treat structures as being generated by actors, and to regard all human agency as being “produced through the operation of structures” (2013:188). Radical relationism thus sees relations as tying agency and structure together so closely that both agency and structure fold into relations, leaving relations as the only valid social phenomenon. Powell’s radical relationism thus focuses less on people and structures and

more on the interactions between them, because both agents and structures are defined primarily by their relations with other agents and structures. What agents and structures have in common are their relations, which thus become the focus of radical relationism.

The ideas of relationism outlined above bears a striking resemblance to the social work notion of person-in-environment (PIE), which is regarded by most social workers as the *sine qua non* of social work (Weiss-Gal, 2008). Weiss-Gal (2008:65) says that the PIE “approach views the individual and his or her multiple environments as a dynamic, interactive system, in which each component simultaneously affects and is affected by the other.” The PIE is thus concerned with both individual and environment (or both agents and structures), but even more with the reciprocal relationship between them. Interventions aimed at achieving social justice and well-being therefore need to address all three elements in an integrated manner. Good social work should address all facets of the agency-structure debate.

These debates around agency, structure and relationism play out, in more or less explicit ways, in the literature on youth transitions. DeLuca, Godden, Hutchinson and Versnel (2015), for example, reviewed the literature concerning the transition of at-risk young people from school to work and found that the majority of literature adopted either a micro (i.e. agency) perspective or a macro (i.e. structural) perspective – “few models have bridged both macro and micro perspectives” (2015:185). They constructed a person-in-context model of youth transitions with three main domains: individual (including facets such as self-determination and agency), social-cultural (such as family and peer relations, and cultural practices) and economic-political (such as, fiscal and education policies). They argue that all three domains are vital for a holistic understanding of school-to-work transitions and discuss in particular the intersections between the three domains. Using a PIE framework, these authors illustrate the importance of the inclusion of both agency and structure and in addition the importance of attention to the interaction or relations between these domains.

Jeffrey Arnett’s (2004) notion of ‘emerging adulthood’ contends primarily that young people in American society choose to postpone a series of commitments (to work, relationships, politics, etc.) until their late 20s. He presents this transitional period, roughly 18-25 years, as a period of volitional exploration of life options and identity, and in so doing champions the human agency of young people. However, Côté and Bynner (2008) engage critically with Arnett’s notions, showing how structural forces severely constrain the free choices of young people, through a combination of social exclusion, lowered social status and economic recession. It is these structural factors, they argue, rather than human agency, that lead to the patterns of delayed adulthood that Arnett has identified. In the South African context, the structural forces that constrain the opportunities of young people (for example, poverty and unemployment) are far more pervasive and intractable than in the USA, lending even greater weight to Côté and Bynner’s critique of the agency-centred arguments of Arnett.

Brannen and Nilsen (2005) similarly argue that the focus in youth studies on ‘choice’ (an aspect of agency) must be balanced with a recognition of the impact of structure on the life narratives young people. They argue that modern society celebrates the notion that people can (and indeed must) chart their own pathway in life and construct their own reality. However, despite the apparent choices that young people have as they negotiate

their way towards adulthood, Brannen and Nilsen note the numerous ways young people's narratives reveal that their transitions are shaped by structure. Thus the diversity of narratives is not a result only of individualisation, but also of diversity in the structural forces constraining individuals.

The literature on young people leaving care, while infrequently referring to agency-structure theory, is similarly divided. Much of the literature from the North and Australia emphasises the structural factors that make care-leavers vulnerable and the consequent structural interventions required to reduce vulnerability and facilitate positive transitional outcomes (Stein and Verweijen-Slammescu, 2012; Courtney, Lee, and Perez, 2011; Mendes and Moslehuddin, 2006), while by no means ignoring the individual youth and her/his agency. This structural approach is exemplified in the British Government's notion of 'corporate parenting' (Scottish Government, 2013), which has been adopted in both Australia (Mendes, 2007) and the USA (Courtney, 2009). In essence, corporate parenting means that when a child is placed in alternative care, the state takes over the full responsibility to parent the child just as natural parents would. Parental care does not end at age 18, but continues well into adulthood, indeed, for life. Similarly, the state as corporate parent carries a long-term and wide-ranging responsibility for such people.

By contrast, in South Africa the state takes little responsibility for facilitating the process of care-leaving and even less for young people after they have left care (Bond, 2015). Instead, the philosophy seems to be that communities will take care of these young people or that young people will take care of themselves. This stance emphasises agency, rather than structures. People, whether individual care-leavers or the families or communities where they live, are expected to facilitate the care-leaving transition.

Little research has been conducted on care-leaving in South Africa and even less of it has been published. Much of the research that has been done to date has emphasised less the structural factors impacting young people leaving care and more the young people's agency in navigating towards adulthood (Van Breda, 2015; Mmusi, 2013; Meyer, 2008; Muller et al., 2003), though issues of structure are by no means absent (Tanur, 2012; Bond, 2010). All of these studies gave primacy to the care-leavers as actors who experienced personal challenges and who drew on personal resilience resources within typically highly resource-constrained environments to navigate forwards in life, with a focus on individualised issues such as trust, resourcefulness, relationships, attachment and hope.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article aims to explore the manifestation of agency and structure, as well as the interactions or relations that tie these together, in a set of South African care-leaving publications. A secondary analysis of research on the transition of South African young people out of residential care was conducted to determine to what extent the three agency-structure themes (viz. agency, structure and the interaction between agency and structure) emerged in the results. The four care-leaving publications mentioned in the introduction were selected for analysis, viz. Van Breda (2015), Maposa and Louw-Potgieter (2012), Tanur (2012) and Muller et al. (2003). One additional document was included, as it reports on the most recent study conducted on young people leaving care, but not yet published, viz. a research report by Dickens, Van Breda and Marx (2015).

None of these five documents mentions the agency-structure debate, thus it was not possible to merely summarise what these authors had to say about the debate. Instead, a secondary analysis had to be conducted. This involved a content analysis of the results of the documents to identify findings that aligned with the three agency-structure themes. The results sections of the articles were read and the texts allocated to one of the three themes. Results in the five documents related to various aspects of the care-leaving process, primarily transitional outcomes (such as finding work), programmatic inter-ventions (for example, a life skills programme) and resilience factors that enable positive outcomes (like self-esteem). The findings of the secondary analysis were then extracted from the articles and listed under each of the themes to ensure that the coded findings coherently and clearly addressed the theme. Selected findings were identified that best exemplified the way in which the agency-structure debate manifests in care-leaving research in South Africa.

## FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH

### Overall content analysis

Table 1 lists the 72 codes that emerged from the content analysis of the five documents. It is noteworthy that the total numbers of codes per agency-structure theme are the same: 24 codes per theme. This suggests that all three facets of the agency-structure debate are important in the study and theorisation of the care-leaving process.

**Table 1: Content analysis of five South African care-leaving publications**

Article	Agency	Structure	Interaction
Maposa and Louw-Potgieter (2012)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Curriculum vitae</li> <li>2. Realistic expectations regarding accommodation</li> <li>3. Satisfaction with employment</li> <li>4. Satisfaction with income</li> <li>5. Alcohol use</li> <li>6. Drug use</li> <li>7. Attitudes towards alcohol and drugs</li> <li>8. Sexual behaviour</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Career fair</li> <li>2. Community- based activity programme</li> <li>3. Job internships</li> <li>4. Education</li> <li>5. Accommodation</li> <li>6. Health care services</li> <li>7. Mentoring programme</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family relationships</li> <li>2. Community involvement</li> <li>3. Mentoring relationships</li> </ol>
Muller et al. (2003)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Being a role model</li> <li>2. Having goals</li> <li>3. Motivation to achieve goals</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The youth house <i>system</i></li> <li>2. Rules and regulations</li> <li>3. Staff turnover</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Care-givers (house mothers) who are patient, empathic, loving and accepting, who listen and give advice,</li> <li>2. The house mother is</li> </ol>

Article	Agency	Structure	Interaction
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Self-esteem and confidence</li> <li>5. Taking responsibility</li> <li>6. Life skills</li> </ol>	(transiency)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>different from the house system</li> <li>3. Attachment</li> <li>4. Staff turnover compromises attachment</li> <li>5. Change of home environment (structure) enables a change in the sense of self (agency)</li> <li>6. Family relationships (family of origin)</li> <li>7. Establishing their own family (secondary family)</li> </ol>
Tanur (2012)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Life skills</li> <li>2. Agency</li> <li>3. Reflection</li> <li>4. Sense of self / identity</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Structural violence</li> <li>2. Poverty</li> <li>3. Individual Development Plan</li> <li>4. Mentoring programme</li> <li>5. Work readiness programme</li> <li>6. Internship placements</li> <li>7. Community service projects</li> <li>8. Partnerships between service organisations</li> <li>9. Housing</li> <li>10. Financial support</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Being heard by people in the programme</li> <li>2. Relationships with agency staff</li> <li>3. Group relationships with peers</li> <li>4. Rites of passage (structure) to explore and reconstruct the self (agency)</li> <li>5. Maintaining relationships in the workplace</li> <li>6. Relationships in the community of origin</li> </ol>
Van Breda (2015)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Building hopeful and tenacious self-confidence</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Striving for authentic belonging</li> <li>2. Networking people for goal attainment</li> <li>3. Contextualised responsiveness</li> </ol>
Dickens et al. (2015)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-esteem</li> <li>2. Optimism</li> <li>3. Spiritual life orientation</li> <li>4. Diligence in education</li> <li>5. Health</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family financial security</li> <li>2. NEET</li> <li>3. Personal financial security</li> <li>4. Self-supporting accommodation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supportive peer relationships</li> <li>2. Supportive role model relationships</li> <li>3. Supportive teacher relationships</li> <li>4. Supportive love relationships</li> <li>5. Team work</li> </ol>

However, it is interesting to observe the differences between the documents in the relative weighting given to the three agency-structure themes – they are by no means balanced within the documents. Maposa and Louw-Potgieter (2012) is the only document to have

more codes under agency than the other two themes, though this is only one code more than for structure. There are few codes under interaction. Being an outcome evaluation of youth development programme, their article may consequently have emphasised the programme (structure) and the individual outcomes of the participants (agency). Tanur (2012) is the only document to have more codes under structure than the other two themes, though she does have codes under all three themes. This is probably a result of her article's focus her organisation's service programme more than on young people's processes of care-leaving.

The other three documents all have more codes under interaction than the other two themes, and the fewest codes under structure. In the article by Muller et al. (2003) there is just one more code for interaction than for agency, suggesting a primary focus on the activities of young people as they transition out of care, rather than on the support systems and structures available to assist them. Van Breda (2015) has only four codes: three under interaction, one under agency and none under structure, probably a result of the study's use of grounded theory, which emphasises social interactions as a result of its roots in symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2006). And while Dickens et al. (2015) have more codes under interaction, the other two themes follow closely. Nevertheless, structure still has the fewest codes, suggesting an emphasis on human resilience (internal and relational) rather than external structures.

### **Findings in support of agency**

In this and the following three sections, selected care-leaving findings from the five documents related to the three agency-structure themes are presented to illustrate the ways in which these themes operate in the processes of care-leaving as constructed in South African research. The agency findings are those in which young people leaving care, show their capacity to carve out their own futures in ways that demonstrate high levels of self-efficacy.

Maposa and Louw-Potgieter's (2012) study, which has the largest number of agency codes, draws a distinction between a thing in itself and the experience of that thing. For example, they write about accommodation, which is a structural matter, as well as the care-leavers' satisfaction with and realistic attitudes towards accommodation, which is an agency matter. They do the same with employment and income, helpfully distinguishing between structural factors in the environment, over which one might have little control, and personal factors within oneself, over which one does have control. In the care-leaving context, where young people often have little control over their environment (and thus limited agency), this attention to their attitudes towards and appraisal of their environment constitutes the construction of agency. One could further argue that the focus on the interaction between environmental structures and internal appraisal of those structures is what is meant by interaction – this appraisal occurs at the person-environment interface and thus concerns the interaction between agency and structure.

Dickens et al.'s (2015) longitudinal study on young people leaving residential care predicts transitional outcomes 12 months after leaving care using a set of resilience variables measured just prior to leaving care. Among the significant resilience variables was self-esteem (Dickens et al., 2015). Self-esteem is an internally located resilience construct that speaks to one's feelings of worth and adequacy, linking closely with personal agency. It emerges in three of the documents, and perhaps also in a different form in Tanur's (2012)

article (sense of self /identity), suggesting that self-esteem is one of the more important or universal resilience constructs facilitating positive transitions out of care among South African care-leavers. Dickens et al. (2015) found that young people who scored higher on self-esteem at the time of disengagement from care were more likely to report having self-supporting accommodation, greater financial security and better psychological health 12-months after leaving care. These findings support the importance of self-esteem as a personal resilience factor for care-leavers, by demonstrating the variety of outcomes that it predicts.

Other aspects of agency emerging from the five documents are diverse, including expectations of the world (such as expectations of accommodation, hopefulness, optimism), satisfaction or contentment with one's situation (for example, spiritual life orientation), constructive behaviours (regarding alcohol and drug use, sexuality, health seeking), and motivation (such as having goals, taking responsibility for oneself, diligence in studying). All of these can be regarded as aspects of mature adulthood and can be developed through good parenting (whether by parents or other caregivers) and life experiences.

All of these findings foreground the importance of personal agency and resilience among care-leavers living in vulnerable social environments. They suggest that care-leavers exercise agency by drawing on inner resources to strengthen themselves as individuals, despite structural deficits or obstacles. They apply this agential resilience as they transition out of care to overcome the deficits in their social environment and to move ahead in life. In many of these instances, personal agency has an impact on social structure.

### **Findings in support of structure**

Most of the items in the structure column of Table 1 are factors that increase the vulnerability of young people in care (for example, poverty or structural violence), interventions by a social service organisation (such as financial support or the Individual Development Plan) or outcomes of those services (for example, finding work or establishing accommodation). Only family financial security (Dickens et al., 2015) is a resilience factor that is not a service programme.

Tanur (2012) describes a range of intervention programmes that are intended to facilitate and strengthen the capacity of young people to transition effectively out of care. These programmes have been developed in close consultation with young people leaving care, as well those who are now several years out of care. A mentoring programme is one of the more frequently occurring findings under structure (Tanur, 2012). It refers to the provision of purposeful individualised relationships between an adult and a child in care or a young person leaving care. A mentoring programme, while relational, is located under structure, because it is located within the social environment. Moreover, it is system that society can put in place for vulnerable young people, for example, in the form of mentorship programmes, which have become increasingly utilised in care-leaving programmes (Pinkerton, 2011). The actual mentoring relationship however, falls under interaction, because this entails the interpersonal relationship between the mentor and care-leaver.

One of Dickens et al.'s (2015) key predictors of positive post-care transitions was family financial security. This is a structural predictor, because financial security is not a construct located in the actions of an individual, but rather in the economic well-being and security of

a family system. It is, in effect, an inverse proxy for poverty. Van Breda (in press) defines family financial security as a structural variable because it can be improved not through therapy or an educational workshop, but rather through job creation, work-skills development and social security measures. Family financial security was found to predict four independent living outcomes 12-months after leaving care (Dickens et al., 2015): self-supporting accommodation, having good quality accommodation, not being NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) and having greater personal financial security. These four outcomes are also regarded as structural, in that they are located in the social environment and concern the life context of the care-leaver.

Dickens et al.'s (2015) study highlights not only resilience variables that facilitate transitional outcomes, but also the structural vulnerability of this group of youth, against the backdrop of the general vulnerability of South African youth (see also Tanur, 2012, for a review of this structural vulnerability). Fourteen participants in Dickens et al.'s study completed both 12- and 24-month follow-up interviews, allowing a longer-range insight into their transitional outcomes. Using matched 12- and 24-month data, they examined the extent to which care-leavers showed improvements between one and two years out of care. There were no statistically significant improvements, nor did any findings appear, on visual inspection, to be of practical significance. For example, 12-months out of care, seven of the 14 participants were NEET. Twelve months later six were NEET. Thus, during the intervening 12-months, only one participant was able to find work or a studying/training opportunity. Half of those who left care were still unoccupied for two years after leaving care. This is a structural problem, more than an agency problem, requiring macro-structural interventions more than personal development interventions.

These findings point to the importance of structure in the lives of young South African's transitioning out of care. Structural forces can lead children into care by breaking down the family's capacity to care. These structural forces can also compromise the ability of young people to transition successfully out of care and into young adulthood. But structural interventions can enable young people to transition more successfully into young adulthood. Structure is thus important for care-leaving.

### **Findings in support of the interaction between agency and structure**

While agency and structure are presented as two separate and independent features, much of the data in these five documents shows them to be closely interrelated, in alignment with relational sociological theory. In brief, structural resources need to be available in the environment and, in addition, individuals need the agency to identify, access and utilise these resources. Both structure and agency are necessary. Interaction occurs at the interface between agency and structure.

Van Breda's (2015) grounded theory study gave considerable emphasis to relationships, with two of the four codes being relational. While relationships are located outside of the individual, they are not structure, unless they are institutionalised in some way, for example, social workers in a welfare organisation or a mentoring programme. The participants in this study did not refer to such relationships – they spoke only about friends, family and chance acquaintances as the relationships that were pivotal in many of their narratives of getting ahead in life. On the other hand, these relationships are not agency, as they are not located within the individual. Instead, these relationships are best viewed as

interactional – they are located at the interface between person and environment. The care-leavers' narratives emphasised the agency they exercised in identifying and mobilising these relationships: how they identified resourceful people, fostered relationships, showed the *chutzpah* to ask for help, and mobilised and sometimes even manipulated people towards helpfulness. In this way, their care-leaving resilience operated at the interface between personal and environmental resources, between agency and structure, in the way that these young people mobilised the relationships in their social environment.

In Dickens et al.'s (2015) longitudinal care-leaving study, it is noteworthy that the agency-based construct of self-esteem predicted structural outcomes: accommodation and finances. A quantitative study, such as this, unfortunately does not provide insight into the mechanisms of this relationship, but the resilience processes that emerged in Van Breda's (2015) study may well be the social processes that enable a person who has high self-esteem to mobilise accommodation and employment (or other forms of financial support) so that they can get ahead, illustrating a close interaction between agency and structure.

Another resilience variable in Dickens et al.'s (2015) study that was a significant predictor of positive transitional outcomes was teamwork. This variable predicted self-supporting accommodation, not being NEET, financial security and physical health. Teamwork is conceptualised as an interactional resilience construct, that is, "the transactions that enable people to identify and mobilise external resources" (Van Breda, in press). It is neither about agency nor about structure, but rather about the interface between agency and structure, i.e. interaction.

In a number of the documents, interaction manifests less in specific constructs and more in the interaction between constructs. For example, Muller et al. (2003) describe the negative impact of staff turnover in a children's home (a structural factor) on the attachment capacity of children (an interactional factor), which can ripple across time into other relationships. Conversely, they found that the change of environment from family to children's home (a structural factor) created an opportunity for young people to develop a new sense of self (an agency factor). In addition, Muller et al. (2003) distinguish between the youth house system, that is the organisational aspects of the children's home (structure), and the house mother herself, which particularly relates to her caring (interaction). And Tanur (2012) describes how a rites of passage intervention (which constitutes structure) creates a space within care-leavers can explore and reconstruct their selves (agency). All of these findings illustrate the interactions that occur between different components of the agency-structure debate, and serve to demonstrate the centrality of interactional factors in the lived-experience of children in and leaving care.

These findings point to the importance of interactions and relations in the process of leaving care. Some of the variables identified are intrinsically interactions, such as relationships with carers and the ability to work in teams, while other aspects of interaction emerge in the frequent interaction between agency, structure and relationships. This establishes interactions or relations as of crucial importance in the care-leaving journey.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Youth studies literature has tended to present agency and structure as in tension or in opposition to each other. Much of the care-leaving literature from the North and from

Australia has tended to give considerable emphasis to the importance of structure, in the form of increasingly substantial welfare investment in extending and facilitating the transition of care-leavers. By contrast, the small body of South African literature on care-leaving has tended to give greater emphasis to agency, particularly resilience, perhaps because of the extremely limited resources available and the massive scope of the youth problem.

This analysis of South African care-leaving research, however, foregrounds the importance of both structure and agency, and in particular the intersection between them. This appears to lend support to relationism in sociological theory – that the relationship or interaction between agency and structure has greater heuristic value than the bifurcation of agency and structure. This should not be a surprising finding for social workers, as it is closely aligned with both developmental social welfare theory and ecological resilience theory.

Developmental social welfare (Patel, 2005) is a customisation of social development as conceptualised elsewhere in the world (Midgley and Conley, 2010). Social development is classically defined by Midgley (1999) as the harmonisation of social policy and economic development, together with social investment in people that results in an economic return to society. South Africa has taken up this approach, but shaped it to address the uniquely South African history and challenges. This approach “can be described overall as pro-poor and informed by a rights orientation” (Patel and Hochfeld, 2012:691).

An important pillar of South African developmental social welfare is the bridging of the micro-macro divide (Patel, 2005). This is in response to a historical division between micro (individual and family) services and macro (community and policy) interventions. Patel discusses this in relation to social injustice, affirming that we should not debate whether we should be helping individuals who have been victimised (micro) versus whether we should be working to change the systems of injustice (macro). Instead, she says, we should recognise the need for *both* micro and macro interventions. She concludes: developmental social welfare “requires an integration of methods and levels of intervention to address the complex dynamics of change in the changing local and global scenario” (Patel, 2005:110). In the same way, we should not be debating agency versus structure, but rather working on both agency and structure and particularly the interactions between them.

A similar perspective has emerged recently in resilience theory, particularly as conceived by Ungar (2012). He argues that for too long resilience theory has emphasised intrapsychic or personal resilience factors, such as hardiness or grit. He points out that the most rigorous resilience research (such as the longitudinal Kauai study by Werner and Smith, 1982) foregrounded not intrapsychic resilience variables, but relationships, particularly the relationship with an early, stable and loving care-giver. By integrating ecological theory into resilience theory, Ungar (2012:17) conceived “the social ecologies of resilience”, according to which he defines resilience as follows:

“Where there is potential for exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to *navigate* their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their well-being, and their individual and collective capacity to *negotiate* for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways.”

The italicised terms in Ungar's definition – navigate and negotiate – are neither personal resilience factors nor environmental. Instead, they operate at the interface between person and environment. They are interactional or relational, reflecting the ways in which an individual identifies and mobilises resources in the social environment. This aligns very closely with the notions of agency and structure, and particularly the ways in which agency and structure intersect.

In light of this, the Youth Ecological-Resilience Scale that I am using in my research (Van Breda, in press) includes personal (focused on personal agency), environmental (focused on structure) and interactional (focused on the agency-structure interface) variables. The findings from this tool to date show the importance of all three of these dimensions, confirming the necessity to be inclusive and holistic in our approach to the agency-structure debate in both care-leaving and resilience research.

It is similarly important that all those who do research on youth transitions and on care-leaving, employ these conceptual tools (bridging the micro-macro divide, social ecologies of resilience and agency-structure interface, and particularly the notion of relationism) in their research, to ensure holistic and multifaceted research that considers all the factors that influence and impact on human functioning. In this way, attention is given to the power that individuals possess to influence their lives, which humanises people and celebrates their capacities, while at the same time society and the state are held accountable for taking care of its citizens, by co-constructing social environments that are conducive to human flourishing.

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