

Journey towards Independent Living: A Grounded Theory

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Abstract

The journey out of care, be it foster care or residential care, is a challenge for young people. A number of authors argue that care-leavers are among the most vulnerable groups in society. This is because of a conflation of factors including: a history of suboptimal care; genetic vulnerability; repeated social dislocations as they move from one home to another; instant disruption from care into independent living, rather than a gradual transition into independence; the instant loss of social support, particularly as they graduate out of protection from the Children's Act and social security benefits; and inadequate aftercare services for care-leavers.

Notwithstanding these cumulative vulnerabilities, many care-leavers do make a successful transition out of care and establish themselves in the adult world. Others may not appear to be as successful, but experience warm, supportive, genuine relationships that bring satisfaction and meaning. This study was interested to gain insight into the journeys of care-leavers towards independent living. It was our contention that greater attention needed to be given to the social processes of care-leaving, rather than the static 'success factors' characteristic of much research. Furthermore, it was our hunch that 'success' was more of a process of journeying towards greater success, which we have called 'succeeding', than of achieving certain externally imposed success criteria. And lastly, we anticipated that these journeys might be rather circuitous and not straight or linear, as youths learn, through trial and error, how to be more independent.

In light of that we conducted a qualitative investigation, informed by a constructivist grounded theory design, into the narratives of nine care-leavers, from a residential programme called Girls and Boys Town South Africa, who had been in care for at least 18 months and out of care for four to six years. These nine participants comprised an availability sample from a population of 74 youths, the contact details of whom had been almost universally lost. In-depth, unstructured, interviews were conducted to explore their life narrative since leaving care. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, followed by grounded theory analysis focused on social interactions and processes. A team approach (with three team members) was utilised in this study, from design to report writing, to provide diversity in perceptions and interpretation and to increase the rigour and thereby trustworthiness of the study. The team included a clinical social worker, a research psychologist and an experienced youth care worker and evaluator.

Through the analysis of data, five central social processes emerged as being part of the journey towards independence among care-leavers: striving for authentic belonging; networking people for goal attainment; contextualised observation, learning and action; building hopeful and tenacious self-confidence; and scuppering of façades to achieve authenticity. In addition, we recognised that a more nuanced understanding of 'success' was required and formulated the notion of 'succeeding', where success is used as a verb. Lastly, we gained insights, largely unsought, into how care-leavers transferred learning from GBT into adult life.

Following the thematic analysis, we constructed a modest middle-range theory of care-leaving that best accommodates all of the evidence available to us and that is congruent with our guiding theories, viz resilience theory and ecosystems theory. Based on the tenet that care-leavers are fundamentally seeking the experience of authentic belonging, this theory serves to describe, perhaps explain and potentially predict, the social processes involved in leaving care. We refer to our theory as 'nascent' because we view it as still emerging and requiring further study. Our care-leaving theory can be summarised as follows:

The need for authentic belonging, a genuine experience of being loved and of fitting into a social system such as a family, emerges as central to this theory. Youths demonstrate that in various ways – some more effective, others less so and some heavily defended – they strive towards authentic belonging, which is the underlying definition of success for most. To help them in this striving, which can be thought of as a process of succeeding, they draw on a range of social skills, many taught by GBT and others learned through experience and from other youths in care, to network

people in their social environments to help and partner with them in attaining their goals, particularly their goal of experiencing authenticity in human relationship. Optimally networking people for goal attainment requires care-leavers to rapidly and accurately assess their social environment for opportunities (which can be utilised) and threats (which need to be avoided or circumvented). This requires astute observation of their environments, insight and learning from their observations and then acting upon this learning, to transform opportunities into assets and to neutralise threats. Because their social environments are frequently complex and suboptimal, care-leavers require a great deal of resilience, particularly an unshakable hope and tenacious self-confidence, to believe that they can effect change in their environments and that they really can carve out a better future for themselves. When, however, care-leavers believe that their lives are somehow a sham, when they are co-opted into seeking and accepting superficial notions of success, some youth subvert or scupper their apparent success in order to tap into the deeper authentic belonging that they long for. While these responses appear unproductive and may be interpreted as evidence of programme failure, they are, in many cases, an important part of the journey towards authentic belonging.



This report provides the theoretical and empirical background to the study, an account of the research process, a detailed explanation of and evidence in support of the findings, and a narrative presentation of the resultant theory. Recommendations for youth care practice and research conclude the report.

Introduction

Girls and Boys Town South Africa (GBT) has historically provided residential care to youth in need of care. Within GBT's residential care services, focus has been given principally to providing care for youth while in care and preparing them for independent living. This is in an effort to achieve GBT's mission of *"Creating opportunities for youth to grow and develop into responsible citizens, able to contribute to family and community life in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, equality and solidarity with others"* (<http://www.girlsandboystown.org.za>).

Once these youth leave the care of GBT however, although 'aftercare' planning is done, much of the aftercare service is left to the welfare organisations that made the initial referral to GBT and to the youth themselves. Literature indicates that youth leaving care often receive insufficient support in the transition out of care and into independent living and are frequently left to fend for themselves while adjusting to independence. It seems that the welfare organisations that made the initial referral to GBT, are typically not well equipped to provide the kind of aftercare that care-leavers require. The inadequacy of aftercare for care-leavers may, consequently, compromise the achievement of GBT's mission and therefore warrants the organisation's attention.

This research is concerned about the processes that young people follow after they disengage from residential care at Girls and Boys Town South Africa (GBT) as they journey towards independent living. Of course, all young people eventually leave home and work towards independence; but the journey of young people leaving residential care has been found to be unique in that the less-than-ideal social environments that led them to GBT and to which they now return, may have remained unchanged. One may expect therefore that this journey towards independent living may comprise unique and important features.

Furthermore, the study is concerned with discerning whether there are services or interventions that GBT could provide, while these young people are still in care or in the form of aftercare services, which would facilitate more successful transitioning into independent living. This concern raises further questions about the meaning of the term 'successful transitioning into independent living' – who defines 'success' and what does it constitute?

Aim & Objectives

The aim of this study is thus to identify critical success processes in the narratives of self-defined success among young people who disengaged from residential care with GBTSA approximately five years previously.

The study has four objectives:

1. To define what constitutes 'successful' transition out of care and into independent living.
2. To narrate the life story of young adults transitioning into independent living.
3. To identify key social processes, including factors specific to the GBTSA programme, that facilitate transition into independent living.
4. To construct a descriptive theory of the journey from residential care towards successful independent living.

Literature Review

Introduction to Care-Leaving

As young people move into adulthood they face a multitude of challenges. For youth transitioning from residential care to self-sufficient and independent living, a process referred to in the literature as 'care-leaving', these challenges and changes can be even more profound. The haste with which these young

people must rise to these challenges (Elsley, Backett-Milburn, & Jamieson, 2007) has led Stein (2005) to portray this transition as becoming 'instant adults'.

From the early 1970s small scale studies and surveys have shown how ill-equipped many of these youth are in dealing with life challenges when they leave care (Stein, 2005). Stein (2005) laments that the present statistics about care-leavers makes for "depressing reading": even though many care-leavers reach a measure of success and attain fulfilling lives, many continue to face a struggle-ridden existence. The transitional phase of leaving home is compressed for youths exiting care. This results from diminished family ties and an increased need to be rapidly self-sufficient. Additionally, youth leaving residential care usually do not cope with the pressures of everyday life as effectively as other young people (Gelling, 2009). Several authors have identified the types of challenges care-leavers may experience as including: homelessness, poor health, poverty, substance abuse, early parenthood, and involvement in criminality (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Broad, 2005; Dixon & Stein, 2005; Effective Interventions Unit, 2003). Their transition from a highly structured living environment to a confusing and difficult world is exacerbated by their typically low educational achievement, learning disabilities, limited life skills and additional health, emotional and behavioural problems (Foster & Gifford, 2004b).

Stein (2005) further highlights that in comparison to their peers, care-leavers have to deal with major changes in their lives at a far younger age; such as leaving care, setting up home, and entering the workforce. Realistically though, these changes include being unemployed, living on various forms of welfare, and becoming early and unplanned parents. It is thus critical that care-leavers develop the strength needed to respond to this myriad of challenges, to learn from their past adversities and to cultivate resilience in order to face their future, inevitably marked with adversity. It is vital that those who look after these youth prepare and support them for adulthood (Gelling, 2009). Pinkerton (2011) puts forward that across a range of countries, the strengths and vulnerabilities of care-leavers making their transition to independence have been found to be interwoven into numerous varied dimensions of their lives. Furthermore, an understanding of leaving care as being about the 'whole person' is needed. Thus, the goal of those tasked with ensuring the welfare of care-leavers must be to provide a concerted 'whole system' response (Pinkerton, 2011).

Frances (n.d.) argues that the process of leaving residential care begins on the very first day. She further states that under ideal conditions, care-leavers would leave when they, the staff and their parents agree that sufficient progress has been made and they are ready. Unfortunately this is seldom the case, and even though this departure event is framed as a positive event, the care-leavers depart with mixed feelings. The transition evokes intense and often unpleasant temporary feelings of anxiousness. This disorganizing process for the youth and the parent family can be painful and angry-making, with youth often fearful of leaving the protective residential care setting. These reactions are often influenced by previous experiences with other placements and separations. The longer a care-leaver has been within the residential care environment the more severe the anxiety may be. There are numerous losses that occur when leaving residential care, including, but not limited to, the giving up of valued relationships with peers, staff, therapists and friendships. Furthermore, care-leaving often results in the lowering of living conditions, and the loss of enriched schooling and activities. The emotional fallout of this experience is an uncomfortable mix of anger, confusion, excitement, fear and loss that stimulates renewed behavioural difficulties. This behavioural regression is exacerbated by a fear of rejection as relationships within residential care are typically healthier than those prior to entering care. Often a care-leaver will, when encountering an anxiety-arousing experience, employ tactics that were successful in the past, even though they now have, as a result of the programme, newer and more apt tools available.

The transition from residential care provokes a complex set of emotions, irrespective of the circumstances, which, without the proper preparation, could result in relapses in behaviour or the development of new problems upon departure. A well-orchestrated disengagement from care can assist the care-leaver to rework past losses, achieve closure, employ more realistic expectations and develop an awareness of available support. The departure process must help the care-leaver with managing the separation

experience, prepare for future separations, and resolve previous separation experiences (Frances, n.d.). Pinkerton (2011) posits that there is a clear need for a planned and properly managed preparation process for leaving care. Additionally, he stresses the importance of an early introduction of this process, as well as the direct involvement of the care-leaver in the planning of this process and its delivery.

A Survey of Care-Leaving Literature

A thorough literature search was conducted using the key words 'care' and 'leaving' or 'leave' through a wide range of electronic databases. The search focused almost exclusively on literature published in this century. A total of 182 documents, primarily academic journal articles and books, were located. The majority of these (145) were journal articles and over a third (53) of these were published in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*. It is clear that this one journal is responsible for the wide dissemination of research on care-leaving, as evidenced by the special issue on this subject in December 2011 (accounting for 18 of the 53 articles).

A basic content analysis was conducted of the abstracts of these articles in order to map out the range of topics being addressed within the domain of care-leaving:

- ❖ **SPECIFIC POPULATION GROUPS.** Some of the papers addressed particular sub-populations of care leavers, such as those with mental or physical illness, those in conflict with the law (often in detention facilities) or those who were asylum-seekers. The few numbers here indicates that the majority of papers addressed youth exiting foster care or residential care.
 - **Mental illness** (Anctil, McCubbin, O'Brien, Pecora, & Anderson-Harumi, 2007)
 - **Non-citizens**, including asylum-seekers, refugees and unaccompanied minors (Barrie & Mendes, 2011; Hare, 2007; Simpson, 2005; Wade, 2011)
 - **Physical disability** (Anctil et al., 2007)
 - **Youth in conflict with the law** (Abrams, Shannon, & Sangalang, 2008; Bullis, Yovanoff, & Havel, 2004; Child and Family Services, 2001; Foster & Gifford, 2004a; Inderbitzin, 2009; McElwee, O'Connor, & McKenna, 2007)

- ❖ **CARE-LEAVER OUTCOMES OR PREDICTORS.** Many papers conducted follow-up studies with care-leavers (also termed care 'graduates' or 'alumni') to determine how they were doing. Some made explicit comparisons with young people who were not previously in care. Issues that appeared most commonly included education, employment and housing (or homelessness). Many papers adopted a pathogenic lens, seeking out deficits and failures among care-leavers, but some pointed out the high rates of employment, stable housing, secure relationships and so on. Some papers addressed these same factors as predictors of successful adult living; it was hard to tease apart predictors from outcomes, thus both are included here.
 - **Crime** (Bell, 2002; Benbenishty & Oyserman, 1995; Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007; Wade & Dixon, 2006)
 - **Education** (Anctil et al., 2007; Benbenishty & Oyserman, 1995; Berlin et al., 2011; Berridge, 2006; Bullis et al., 2004; Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; del Valle, Lázaro-Visa, López, & Bravo, 2011; Driscoll, 2011; Dumaret, Donati, & Crost, 2011; Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2011; Lane & Carter, 2006; Marland, 2003; Mendes, Moslehuddin, & Goddard, 2008; Miller, 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; Zeller & Köngeter, 2012)
 - **Employment/economics** (Anctil et al., 2007; Bell, 2002; Bruce & Evans, 2008; Buchanan, 1999; Bullis et al., 2004; Cashmore et al., 2007; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; del Valle et al., 2011; Harder, Knorth, et al., 2011; Jones, 2011; Miller, 2004; Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010; Pecora et al., 2006; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Zeira & Benbenishty, 2011)
 - **Health** (Anctil et al., 2007; Bullis et al., 2004; Lotstein, Inkelas, Hays, Halfon, & Brook, 2008)

- **Housing** and homelessness (Batsche & Reader, 2012; Bell, 2002; Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2011; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Harder, Knorth, et al., 2011; Kroner & Mares, 2011; Mendes, 2002; Miller, 2004; Sale, 2009; Simon, 2008; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Wheal & Matthews, 2007)
- **Interpersonal** relationships (Benbenishty & Oyserman, 1995; Buchanan, 1999; Pettit, Erath, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2011)
- **Mental** health (Akister, Owens, & Goodyer, 2010; Anctil et al., 2007; Berlin et al., 2011; Buchanan, 1999; Dixon, 2007; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler et al., 2011; Lenz-Rashid, 2006; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009; Scott, Munson, & White, 2009; Stein & Dumaret, 2011; White et al., 2009)
- **Pregnancy** (Bell, 2002; Cashmore et al., 2007)
- **Race, culture** and ethnicity (Barn, 2010; Benbenishty & Oyserman, 1995; Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009; Ibrahim, Dickens, & Howe, 2010; Ibrahim & Howe, 2011)
- **Substance** abuse (Berlin et al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Flynn & Tessier, 2011; Frances, n.d.; Jones, 2011; Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Miller, 2004; Narendorf & McMillen, 2010; Wade & Dixon, 2006)

❖ **FACILITATING POSITIVE TRANSITIONING.** Some of the papers in the previous section not only identified outcomes, but also factors that facilitated positive outcomes. Other papers were specifically focused on evaluating care-leaving programmes, which are almost universally divided into three phases (pre-disengagement, disengagement and post-disengagement). Some were not evaluative, but described various programme activities or best practices. The most commonly reported activities were independent living programmes (which most clearly fall in the pre-disengagement phase) and aspects of the continuity of care through the transition (which fall in the disengagement and early post-disengagement phases). In addition, a number of papers addressed care-leaving from a macro perspective, attending to social security, welfare policy and legislation.

- **Continuity of care through transition** (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Child and Family Services, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Lee, & Perez, 2011; DRHCSIA, 2010; Dumaret et al., 2011; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Gaskell, 2010; Gelling, 2009; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Harder, Knorth, et al., 2011; Havlicek, 2011; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2009, 2011; Holland, Floris, Crowley, & Renold, 2010; Hurley, 2002; Inderbitzin, 2009; Jones, 2011; Kroner & Mares, 2011; McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008; Mendes, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Reid, 2007; Rogers, 2011; Schiff, 2006; Stein, 2006a, 2008a, 2008b; Thomson & McArthur, 2010; Tweddle, 2005, 2007; Ward, 2011)
- **Educational opportunities** (Anghel, 2011; Hollingworth, 2011; Jones, 2011; Sale, 2009)
- **Employment assistance** (Mendes, 2009c; Sale, 2009)
- **Family preparation** (Foster & Gifford, 2004a; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Marsh & Peel, 1999; Mendes, 2005; Miller, 2004; Wade, 2008)
- **Independent living programmes** (Abrams et al., 2008; Anctil et al., 2007; Casey et al., 2010; Crawford & Tilbury, 2007; Dinisman & Zeira, 2011; Donkoh, Underhill, & Montgomery, 2009; Elsley et al., 2007; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Goyette, 2007; Hurley, 2002; Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Loman & Siegel, 2000; Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; Messmer & Hitzler, 2011; Meyer, 2008; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; NCERCC, 2009; Simon, 2008)
- **Mentoring** (Avery, 2011; Clayden & Stein, 2005; Elsley et al., 2007; Gilligan, 1999; Mendes, 2009a; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott Jr, & Tracy, 2010; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010; Trethowan, 2008)
- **Resilience** in general (Akister et al., 2010; Anctil et al., 2007; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Daniel, n.d.; Flynn & Tessier, 2011; Gilligan, 1999; Jones, 2011; Newman & Blackburn, 2002; Pinkerton, 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Seita, 2004; Silva-Wayne, 1995; Stein, 2005, 2008a; Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011)
- **Role of carers** (Anghel, 2011; Day et al., 2012)
- **Welfare benefits and policy** (Briheim-Crookall, 2010; Broad, 2005; Broad, n.d.; Centre for Social Justice, 2008; Cimmarusti, 2012; Collins, 2004; Collins & Clay, 2009; Collins & Pinkerton, 2008; Courtney et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; English, Morreale, & Larsen, 2003; Goddard &

Barrett, 2008; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2011; Mendes, 2009b; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Munro et al., 2011; Pinkerton & Stein, 1995; Raghavan, Shi, Aarons, Roesch, & McMillen, 2009)

- ❖ **THEORIES/MODELS OF TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE.** Stein (2006b) notes his concern about the relative absence of theory on care-leaving. Many studies are descriptive and empirical, without formulating theory to explain care-leaving processes. A handful of papers, however, either made explicit use of theory (such as social capital or Bridges' model of transitioning) or began to develop their own theories (particularly those related to non-linear models or patterns of transitioning). None of these, however, are very well developed.
 - **Bridges' 3-stage model** (Anghel, 2011; Dima & Skehill, 2011)
 - **Felt security** (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006)
 - **International / globalisation** (Mendes, 2009b; Munro et al., 2011; Pinkerton, 2006, 2011; Stein, 2006a; Stein, Ward, & Courtney, 2011)
 - **Lack of theory** (Stein, 2006b)
 - **Non-linear models of transitioning** (Backe-Hansen, 2008a, 2008b; Hurley, 2002; Rogers, 2011)
 - **Patterns of transition** (Fransson & Storø, 2011; Jahnukainen, 2007; Lenz, 2001; Stein, 2006a, 2008a, 2008b)
 - **Self-reliance** (Cameron, 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008)
 - **Social capital** (Backe-Hansen, 2008b; Barn, 2010; Elsley et al., 2007; Pettit et al., 2011; Pinkerton, 2011)

- ❖ **RESEARCH ISSUES.** Because our study gives particular attention to research methodology and because this study is the first in a three-phased and proliferating research strategy, we gave attention to the types of research conducted in the available studies. The bulk of empirical research was done by following up on care-leavers at some interval after disengagement – these are not listed below. A handful of studies utilised a longitudinal design, which is important for us because the current study is envisaged as the foundation for a number of longitudinal, rolling cohort studies. However, several of the papers mentioned under 'longitudinal studies' did not use a longitudinal design, but recommended the importance of longitudinal research for the further development of this field. The Midwest Evaluation studies are included, because this is clearly a very large and sophisticated study utilising a substantial data collection tool.
 - **Comparison** with home-leavers (Barn, 2010; Berlin et al., 2011; Berzin et al., 2011; Buchanan, 1999; Cashmore et al., 2007; Lenz-Rashid, 2006)
 - **GIS** (Batsche & Reader, 2012)
 - **Literature review** (Loman & Siegel, 2000; Stein, 2005, 2006a)
 - **Longitudinal studies** (Akister et al., 2010; Bullis et al., 2004; Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Cashmore et al., 2007; Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; del Valle et al., 2011; Jahnukainen, 2007; Jones, 2011; McCoy et al., 2008; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Munson et al., 2010; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Raghavan et al., 2009; Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011; Tweddle, 2005, 2007; Wade, 2011)
 - **Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth** (Batsche & Reader, 2012; Berzin et al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; Donkoh et al., 2009; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Havlicek, 2011; Kroner & Mares, 2011; Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Mendes, 2009b, 2009c; Meyer, 2008; Montgomery et al., 2006; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Naccarato et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2006; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011; Tweddle, 2005, 2007)
 - **Participatory action research** (West, 1996)
 - **Review of methods/tools** (Harder, Königeter, Zeller, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2011)

- ❖ **COUNTRIES IN WHICH DATA WERE COLLECTED.** Data were collected in a diverse range of countries across most continents. The bulk of literature comes from England (and the UK more broadly) and America, with significant contributions from Canada and Australia. To date, only three studies could be

located in South Africa (Barbara Miller’s GBT study, Meyer’s study with eight young adults who had been in children’s homes, and Pinkerton’s study of the South African Youth Education for Sustainability programme, which is a UK-based NGO for mentoring youth leaving care). Given that we looked only for English literature, it would seem that care-leaving is enjoying increased attention globally.

- **Australia** (Barrie & Mendes, 2011; Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Cashmore et al., 2007; Crawford & Tilbury, 2007; DRHCSIA, 2010; Maunders, Liddell, Liddell, & Green, 2004; Osborn & Bromfield, 2007; Thomson & McArthur, 2010; Trethowan, 2008)
- **Canada** (Flynn & Tessier, 2011; Goyette, 2007; Hare, 2007; Mendes, 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010; Mendes et al., 2011; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004, 2006, 2009; Mendes et al., 2008; Silva-Wayne, 1995; Tweddle, 2005, 2007; Ward, 2011)
- **England (& UK)** (Akister et al., 2010; Barn, 2010; Barrie & Mendes, 2011; Berridge, 2006; Briheim-Crookall, 2010; Broad, 2005; Broad, n.d.; Bruce & Evans, 2008; Buchanan, 1999; Cameron, 2007; Centre for Social Justice, 2008; Chase, Simon, & Jackson, 2006; Clayden & Stein, 2005; Dixon, 2007; Driscoll, 2011; Duncalf, 2010; Frampton, 2002; Gaskell, 2010; Gelling, 2009; Goddard & Barrett, 2008; Hollingworth, 2011; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; NCERCC, 2009; Ofsted, 2009; Pinkerton & Stein, 1995; Rogers, 2011; Sale, 2009; Simon, 2008; Simpson, 2005; Stein, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b; Stein & Dumaret, 2011; Wade, 2008, 2011; Wade & Dixon, 2006; West, 1996; Wheal & Matthews, 2007)
- **Finland** (Jahnukainen, 2007)
- **France** (Dumaret et al., 2011; Stein & Dumaret, 2011)
- **Germany** (Messmer & Hitzler, 2011; Zeller & Köngeter, 2012)
- **Holland** (Harder, Knorth, et al., 2011)
- **Ireland** (Collins & Pinkerton, 2008; Gilligan, 1999; McElwee et al., 2007; Pinkerton, 2006, 2011; Pinkerton & Stein, 1995)
- **Israel** (Benbenishty & Oyserman, 1995; Dinisman & Zeira, 2011; Schiff, 2006; Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011; Zeira, 2009; Zeira & Benbenishty, 2011)
- **Jordan** (Ibrahim et al., 2010; Ibrahim & Howe, 2011)
- **New Zealand** (Yates, 2001)
- **Norway** (Fransson & Storø, 2011)
- **Romania** (Anghel, 2011; Dima & Skehill, 2011)
- **Scotland** (Elsley et al., 2007; Newman & Blackburn, 2002)
- **South Africa** (Meyer, 2008; Miller, 2004; Pinkerton, 2011)
- **Spain** (del Valle et al., 2011)
- **Sweden** (Berlin et al., 2011; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2009, 2011)
- **USA** (Abrams et al., 2008; Anctil et al., 2007; Batsche & Reader, 2012; Bell, 2002; Berzin et al., 2011; Betz, 2010; Bullis et al., 2004; Casey et al., 2010; Child and Family Services, 2001; Collins, 2004; Collins & Clay, 2009; Connell et al., 2006; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2001; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2012; English et al., 2003; Fowler et al., 2011; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Goodkind et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2009; Inderbitzin, 2009; Jones, 2011; Kroner & Mares, 2011; Lane & Carter, 2006; Lemon et al., 2005; Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Lotstein et al., 2008; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Munson et al., 2010; Naccarato et al., 2010; Narendorf & McMillen, 2010; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006; Pettit et al., 2011; Raghavan et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Scott et al., 2009; Seita, 2004; Spencer et al., 2010; Unrau et al., 2012; White et al., 2009)
- **Wales** (Holland et al., 2010)

The Resilience Paradigm

This study adopts the theoretical lens of resilience (Van Breda, 2001). Vaillant (as cited in Goldstein, 1997, p. 30) defines resilience as the “self-righting tendencies” of the person, “both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back”. Saleebey (1996, p. 298), drawing on the work of Garmezy, sees resilience as “the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges. It is an ongoing and developing fund of

energy and skill that can be used in current struggles". Rutter and Schofield (as cited in Stein, 2005, p. 1) argue, "Resilience is about overcoming the odds, coping and recovery." Stein further clarifies resilience as being relative to particular risk experiences, "relative resistance as opposed to invulnerability". Similarly, Van Breda (2001, p. 5) states, "An individual's resilience at any moment is calculated by the ratio between the presence of protective factors and the presence of hazardous circumstances."

The implications of these facets of a resilience paradigm for this study is that we are less concerned to gain insight into the kinds of challenges that youths face in leaving care (though this is by no means a matter of *no* concern) than we are to understand how they cope in the face of, or in spite of, these challenges. The resilience paradigm takes challenges and adversity as a given, rather than as the exception (Antonovsky, 1979) and then asks how it is that many people continue to cope and sometimes even thrive (Ickovics & Park, 1998) despite these challenges.

This is the heart of salutogenesis, a particular approach to research that focuses on health (or well-being) rather than illness (or vulnerability). The salutogenic question is, 'Why, when people are exposed to the same stress which causes some to become ill, do some remain healthy?' (Antonovsky, 1979, 1984; Strümpfer, 1995). This approach, in common with the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2008), starts with a fundamental assumption, so deeply embedded in the mind of the researcher/practitioner that it is in fact a paradigm, that people do survive, cope, overcome and thrive.

Much resilience literature has focused on factors that are internal to individuals – personality traits, gender, genetics (Fraser, 2004). The problems with this focus are numerous: these characteristics are not amenable to change and they are often beyond the control of the individual. As a result, they offer little of value to practitioners and programmes. More recent research has given attention also to factors in the social environment, such as problem solving skills, social support and family relations (Van Breda, 2001). These social factors, being interpersonal, are more readily available to change. Luthar (2006), for example, sees resilience as a dynamic process, dependent on the interaction of the youth and their environment, rather than as an individual trait.

The implications of this for the current study is that our unit of analysis is not so much individual youths who have left care, but youths-in-environment, to borrow one of the foundational concepts of social work (Hollis & Woods, 1981). We intend to look for resilience not in the internal functioning of individual youths, but in their interactions with their social environment: with family, peers, welfare, work, church and other social systems.

Van Breda (2011, p. 34) has, moreover, stated, "Resilience has come to be regarded less as a static trait and more as a process that is expressed over time". Much of the earlier literature on resilience has focused on character traits of those who are resilient, such as learned resourcefulness, hardiness, locus of control. Nevertheless, much contemporary research continues to focus on *factors* in a person's life world rather than processes over time. This is understandable because comparatively inexpensive research is cross-sectional, looking at people's lives at a *point in time* rather than as a *process over time*. Inevitably, in this kind of research, one observes relatively static and trait-like factors that are associated with resilience.

In this study, by contrast, we are actively interested in identifying *processes* of resilience, rather than factors or characteristics of resilience. This specific study is cross-sectional. However, it is the first in a three-phased research strategy, in which the second and third phases are longitudinal, prospective, rolling cohort studies, which are much better suited to identifying processes over time. Nevertheless, despite its cross-sectional design, our focus of interest is on social processes, rather than two-dimensional factors, which we intend to elicit through the exploration of narratives.

In summary, the resilience paradigm is pivotal to this study and serves as a conscious and political stand of the study. It has several key implications, viz. that we are more concerned with how youths successfully manage the transition out of care, that we aim to locate these success factors not within the individual, but

in their interaction with the social environment, and that we expect to gain the greatest insight through focusing on social interactions as processes over time.

Method

Study Design

Stein (2006b, p. 422) has stated, “There is a substantial body of international research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, on young people aging out of care, but very few of these studies have been informed by theoretical perspectives.” This study was, at some level, designed in response to this concern. Although it is located within resilience theory, which is one of three theories that Stein (2006b) suggests is suitable for care-leaving research, we believe that this study needs to contribute to theory-building.

A qualitative approach was considered most suitable for theory building, because it allows for more in-depth exploration of the phenomena under consideration. Moreover, the study adopts an exploratory design, because while there is a substantial body of literature on care-leaving, very little of this attends to the social *processes* of care-leaving – much of it is focused on discrete, cross-sectional categories of resilience factors.

Qualitative research provides rich descriptive accounts of social interaction in a context specific setting. Strauss and Corbin (1990) claim that qualitative methods not only describe and explore domains of meaning, but are also used to better understand phenomena that have not been adequately identified. Unlike quantitative research, culture, meanings and processes are valued rather than variables, outcomes and products. What’s more, instead of testing preconceived hypotheses or demarcating the direction research might take, “qualitative research methods are particularly good at examining and developing theories that deal with the role of meanings and interpretations” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 3).

‘Theory’ is a word filled with mystery and often fear. Ezzy (2002, p. 5), however, explains that “theory produced as part of qualitative data analysis is typically a statement or a set of statements about relationships between variables or concepts that focus on meanings and interpretations. ... The qualitative researcher attempts to elaborate or develop a theory to provide a more useful understanding of the phenomenon [being studied].”

Patton (1990) proposes a number of “strategic ideals” in qualitative research which serve to guide, but not absolutely dictate the qualitative research process:

- ❖ The naturalistic setting is used as the source of data.
- ❖ During the research process the researcher acts as a ‘human instrument’ of data collection.
- ❖ Inductive analysis is primarily used in qualitative research.
- ❖ Qualitative research provides rich descriptive accounts, integrating expressive language (voice of participants) in the research text.
- ❖ Qualitative research is concerned with discovering how individuals experience and attach meaning to certain events.
- ❖ Qualitative research focuses on the emerging process of meaning and experiences in data.
- ❖ Qualitative research seeks the uniqueness of each individual’s experience.

Grounded Theory (GT) is the specific research design that was used in this study. Developed originally by Strauss and Corbin (1990) in the 1960s, GT looks rigorously at qualitative data with the aim of generating theory. Within the GT design, theory is generated from the ground up, that is, from observation and data, without being influenced by pre-existing ideas or theory – thus the idea is to start with an open agenda and to allow the data to shape theory (Ezzy, 2002). GT is thus focused on “deductively derived theory” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 8).

Elements that are definitive to GT, and which we endeavoured to follow in this study, include (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 5-6):

- ❖ “Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis
- ❖ Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses
- ❖ Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis
- ❖ Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis
- ❖ Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps
- ❖ Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness
- ❖ Conducting the literature review *after* developing an independent analysis.”

GT is heavily influenced by symbolic interactionism, thanks to the contribution of Strauss (Charmaz, 2006). This theory sees human beings as actively engaged in shaping their own lives, rather than as passive. Moreover, symbolic interactionism foregrounds social processes before social structures – people live and make sense of their lives and shape their lives through processes of interaction with each other. These processes draw on action and language. “Strauss brought notions of human agency, emergent processes, social and subjective meanings, problem-solving practices, and the open-ended study of action to grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7).

Our study was influenced primarily by the approach to GT developed by Charmaz (2006). The main difference is that her approach is rooted in constructivism rather than the positivism of Strauss and Corbin. There are, in our view, three main differences:

- ❖ Charmaz see GT as a process of *constructing* rather than discovering theory – the theory is not already present in the data just waiting to be discovered, rather it is built or constructed by the researcher.
- ❖ She recognises that the researcher contributes significantly to shaping the data themselves – researchers are not objective, neutral and non-influencing players in research, rather we bring our own assumptions and world views to bear not only on the analysis, but also the collection of data and the subsequent theory generation, making our theories interpretive.
- ❖ Charmaz moved away from the strict proceduralised method of Strauss and Corbin to adopt a more flexible and emergent research design that is unique and responsive to the research process.

In addition to grounded theory, the study was also informed by elements of narrative research (Jones, 2004; Moen, 2006; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008). Although narrative theory and research originally focused predominantly on textual narratives (written stories), there has been a growing trend over the past several years to analyse ‘personal stories’ – the life stories or brief story excerpts of real individuals as told to another (Riessman, 2008). Narrative research is located within the broader tradition of phenomenology, but while phenomenology tends to be interested in the essence of an experience, narrative analysis tends to focus on sequences of experiences, involving character and plot, and inevitably time.

The present study is, fundamentally, interested in the narrative of the life journey from care to independence, a period of approximately five years. This macro narrative is made up of various episodes, each of which may tell us something important about: (1) what constitutes success or the absence of success and (2) social processes that facilitate successful or unsuccessful transitioning into independent living.

Population & Sample

The population for this study was defined as all people, aged 21 or older, who were resident at a GBT campus in Gauteng or the Western Cape (the South African provinces in which the research team worked) for at least 18 months and who disengaged from GBT between May 2005 and May 2007 (thus four to six years prior to data collection). Primarily boys, but also some girls, were in care at GBT during this period,

thus our population comprised both males and females. The four to six year interval since disengagement would, we believe, have provided participants with an extended time to reflect and gain insight into their lived experiences as care-leavers, therefore, being able to provide rich and in-depth accounts of this journey. This population comprises 74 individuals, based on GBTS records, from the various campuses.

A sample of nine individuals was selected from the population in two phases. Participants were selected using convenience sampling, and ultimately availability sampling. We focused on care-leavers who were living near to the researchers (Gauteng and Cape Town), who were still contactable (we found the contact details of many possible participants were out of date) and willing and available to meet for data collection. We did not purposively select any particular type of participant. For example, we did not go out of our way to look for boys who had 'done well' at GBT or who were 'doing well' since leaving. We endeavoured to recruit a cross-spectrum of participants.

In practice, however, recruiting the sample proved very problematic. The contact details for the 74 members of the population were mostly out dated – the contact details for only three of the 74 participants were correct. This is most probably as a result of GBT's limited provision of aftercare services (seldom being offered beyond one year), thus once the youth disengage from GBT and any aftercare service is complete, contact is not maintained and contact details rapidly become out-dated.

As a result, only one participant was contacted through the available contact details. The other eight participants were recruited by approaching GBT staff members who still had contact with care-leavers. One participant was located by phoning the ex-employer of the youth's mother, who gave the mother's new telephone number to us, and then asking the mother to put us in touch with her son. We were unable to trace any of the seven girls who were part of the population, resulting in an all-male sample.

It was planned that one member of the research team, Peter Marx, would make the first contact with all prospective participants, because he is the longest employed member of GBT and has had contact with most care-leavers in his role as principal or evaluator over the past years. We believed it would be most ethical for him to make first contact, as he would probably be known to the individuals. In the case of other members of the research team conducting the interview, if the person agreed to participate, Mr Marx indicated that either Ms Kader or Mr Van Breda (we avoided mentioning the 'Professor' title) would contact them. The other researchers then made contact and set up the appointments.

Although this process was followed with most of the prospective participants, in three instances, where making contact with prospective participants was proving exceedingly difficult, other processes were used. One of the participants, for example, recommended someone to Adrian van Breda and spoke to his friend, recommending that he participate in the study; the friend was subsequently contacted by Peter Marx. In a further two instances, a GBT staff member (Hassiem Heuvel) was asked to approach prospective participants with whom he was still acquainted.

Instrumentation

This study made use of an unstructured interview, in keeping with much grounded theory, phenomenological and narrative research. Charmaz (2006, p. 18) states, "The quality – and credibility – of your study starts with the data... A study based upon rich, substantial, and relevant data stands out. Thus, in addition to their usefulness for developing core categories, two other criteria for data are their suitability and sufficiency for depicting empirical events."

The opening question of their unstructured interview was:

I am interested in hearing about your life experiences over the past few years, since you left Girls and Boys Town until today. I am interested in the experiences that you feel good about, that you feel were successful, and what you think helped you to be successful. And I am interested in the challenges or difficulties that you have had, and how you dealt with these experiences, and what you think helped you deal with them.

I am happy to hear your story however you would like to share it with me, but it may be helpful to tell it to me as a story, starting with your departure from Girls and Boys Town and continuing until today.

Following this was a number of prompts for the interviewer, plus a number of closing questions. This schedule is included as Appendix A to this report.

Prior to the interview proper, the researcher explained the background to and purpose of the study, and the ethical rights of the participant. Thereafter, the participant was asked to sign an Informed Consent form and complete a Demographic information sheet (Appendix B).

Use was made of minimal prompts (uha, I see) and furthering questions (Can you give me an example of that? Tell me more about how that person helped you. What was it about that situation that brought about this change?). The interviewers aimed to follow the lead of the storyteller, seeking for a rich and in-depth narration of the life journey into independent living.

Data Management

All interviews were digitally recorded. Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes. The recordings were sent to a third-party, professional transcriber, who produced transcriptions according our specific requirements. Transcriptions omitted ums and ahs, false starts, etc. Thus, a slightly 'cleaned up' transcript was generated.

Interviewers then reviewed the transcript against the original audio recording, making corrections to the transcripts as required (e.g. in places where the transcriber could not hear what was said). Where appropriate, nonverbal elements were added, such as laughter or breaking of eye contact.

Interviewers then stripped the transcripts of all identifying information. All names of people, places (streets, suburbs, etc) and organisations (shops, employers, schools, etc) were replaced with a generic term in square brackets, e.g. [Friend1], [Girlfriend], [Employer2]. In a separate document, these terms were connected with the original names in case of later confusion. This transcript was the one used for further analysis.

To facilitate data quality and consistency, transcript files were numbered in a standardised way across interviewees and stages of analysis. We did all of the analysis in MS Word documents.

Transcripts were structured to have one row (in a table) per interaction between the interviewer and participant. Where responses were lengthy or included clearly different topics, these were split into multiple rows. Each row was numbered to allow cross-referencing from the report to the original data, thereby enabling an audit trail. These transcripts are not included with this report, but application to have access to them can be made to Mr Peter Marx (contact details on the front page).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a standard procedure across interviewees:

1. **Initial coding** was done using line-by-line coding, as described by Charmaz (2006, pp. 42-57), as follows:
 - 1.1. We first read the transcript several times to get the whole narrative and to begin to allow themes to form in our minds.
 - 1.2. We attempted to code almost every line, even if the line was not of obvious significance.
 - 1.3. We followed Charmaz' advice to do this quickly – "speed and spontaneity" - without being anxious about getting it 'right', knowing that we could come back later to edit and refine, and keeping very close to the original text. This facilitated a 'close reading' of the text – listening carefully to what the person said, without yet thinking theoretically or abstractly about the text.
 - 1.4. We formulated codes using gerunds, i.e. verbs functioning as nouns and ending with –ing, e.g. expecting, hoping, leaving, looking and moving. This helped us to focus on actions and processes,

which is what GT wants (linked to symbolic interactionism), rather than topics (which is more in line with regular qualitative research focuses on themes/topics).

- 1.5. Where appropriate, we highlighted (using Word's yellow highlighter pen) key phrases or words in the actual transcript (these served as *in vivo codes*), when these captured the essence of a process or dynamic.
- 1.6. At times, we wrote memos to give flesh to some of these initial codes, but in general we avoided this because it compromised the "speed and spontaneity" principle.
2. **Focused coding** was then done, as described by Charmaz (2006, pp. 57-60), as follows:
 - 2.1. We read several times through our lists of initial codes, which were very specific and situated within the narratives.
 - 2.2. We then identified codes that (1) occurred most frequently or (2) that seemed most significant. We continually returned to the goals of our study: formulate definitions of 'success' and identify the processes that facilitate (or inhibit) success.
 - 2.3. Charmaz (2006, p. 52 & 58) does this by deleting the non-focused codes. We rather highlighted (using Word's yellow highlighter) focused codes, so that we didn't lose anything.
 - 2.4. We then wrote memos on all focused codes, incorporating both narratives about the codes – our understanding of the theme in our own words – and cross-references to the transcript.
 - 2.5. We endeavoured to do constant comparison in three ways:
 - 2.5.1. We compared each focused code with the whole of the data of that interview, looking for links between this particular code and other instances of the data.
 - 2.5.2. We also compared these focused codes with the other focused codes, considering possible relationships between them.
 - 2.5.3. We thirdly compared these focused codes with the data from other interviews, once we moved into the second round of analysis.
3. This version of the transcript was then circulated to the other members of the team for **peer review**.
 - 3.1. We read the transcript together with the initial codes, and added our own codes or comments on codes where appropriate. In many cases, we picked up social processes that the first analyst had missed or saw things in different ways or attributed different meanings to texts. This seemed to confirm Charmaz' constructivist approach to GT, in which meaning is co-created by the researcher and participant, and here also by the research team.
 - 3.2. In similar way, we reviewed and commented on the focused codes.
 - 3.3. In some cases, we proposed new focused codes.
 - 3.4. We continued with constant comparison, but noting similarities or differences between the various transcripts.
 - 3.5. These annotated transcripts were returned to the interviewer, who integrated the feedback into one document.
4. Following these first three steps, which were done separately by the three researchers, we met for a one or two day **team conference**.
 - 4.1. We each presented our interviewees and the focused codes that emerged.
 - 4.2. These codes were written up on flip chart and discussed across participants.
 - 4.3. We endeavoured to identify commonalities across the codes and began to group them into preliminary themes.
 - 4.4. By repeatedly going back to the original data, we endeavoured to ensure that our themes were thoroughly grounded in the data and not just a construction of our own invention based on prior unacknowledged assumptions.
 - 4.5. Through this process, more art than science, we arrived at an initial theory.
5. We did **two rounds of interviews**. In the first round (May 2011) we each conducted one interview, giving a total of three transcripts. Following the team conference and the writing up of a first draft of our nascent or emerging theory, we each conducted a further two interviews, thus an additional six, bringing the total to nine interviews. We met for a second team conference in September 2011.

- 5.1. In our second round of interviews, we followed the same data collection procedure, but were more focused on listening carefully for and following up on the themes that had emerged through the first round.
- 5.2. We were also attentive to listening for anything that diverged from our initial themes and for pursuing these to gain greater insight into the topic.
- 5.3. In our second team conference, we reviewed the transcripts as before, but focused on what of our nascent theory was confirmed in this round, what required incremental revisions and what was entirely new. In the latter two cases, we returned to the first three interviews to check whether these new insights were, in fact, present in the first interviews, but just not constructed in this way.
- 5.4. Through this, we came up with a revised theory.
- 5.5. We also explored the relationships between the themes that had emerged and attempted to integrate them into a metatheory that held all of the pieces together.
- 5.6. Only after this meeting did we begin to search for and read the literature on care-leaving in depth.

The entire project was implemented by a team of three researchers, including the principal investigator (the first author) and the two researchers employed by GBT (the second two authors). In our experience, apart from dividing the workload, the team helped to reduce researcher bias, to bring to light our unacknowledged assumptions or paradigms, to challenge and critique ways of thinking about or making sense of the data, reflect critically on the entire research process from design to report writing, to avoid rushing past the data by deliberating and asking questions, and to foster creativity that comes through dialogue.

Working for Rigour

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that rigour, which is generally taken for granted with quantitative methods, has to be attended to differently in qualitative research. They term this 'trustworthiness', which refers to the degree to which a reader can have confidence in the integrity, rigour, value and worthwhileness of a qualitative study. They advance various procedures for ensuring rigour and trustworthiness, of which we attended to the following:

- ❖ We raised the credibility of our study by **prolonged engagement** with the topic, in order to immerse ourselves in the data and the experience of care-leaving. This was facilitated by our team meetings and by reviewing each other's work.
- ❖ Credibility was also enhanced by the **team approach** and **peer debriefing**, particularly as we worked closely together and developed our research protocols as a team and reviewed each other's work. The team approach helped to keep us 'honest' to each other and to the study.
- ❖ Credibility was, thirdly, enhanced through the use of **multiple theories**, specifically symbolic interactionism and resilience theories, which helped us to continuously look at the data from multiple perspectives.
- ❖ We increased the dependability of the study by using **stepwise replication** in which data were collected and analysed twice. Although Lincoln and Guba do not recommend this method, we found it helpful to collect and analyse data and formulate an emergent theory, and then go out for a second round of interviews to test and refine that theory.
- ❖ Finally, the confirmability of our study is enhanced by careful records that establish an **audit trail**. We continuously returned to our original data and ensured that all theoretical formulations were clearly linked to the data. We kept close track of the steps of the data analysis to show the process by which we progressed from the original interviews to the final report.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical protection of participants was ensured through the following actions:

- ❖ Participants were given the opportunity to refuse to participate. We attempted to be very sensitive to not pushing participants to take part simply out of a sense of obligation to GBT.
- ❖ Participants were seen in a venue of their own choice, either at the GBT office or at their own home or place of work or elsewhere, to allow them to dictate the setting of the interview.

- ❖ Participants were informed in detail about the purpose, procedures and benefits of participating in the study. In addition, they were informed that the study was being conducted by a team.
- ❖ Participants signed an informed consent form prior to data collection.
- ❖ Transcripts were entirely stripped of identifying information, including names of places and organisations, to protect the identity of the participants.
- ❖ All audio recordings were destroyed on completion of the data analysis.
- ❖ Participants were given the opportunity to get access to the results of the study.

Participants

Brief descriptions of the nine participants follow:¹

1. **Andre** is a 22 year old, White male living in the suburbs of Pretoria. He has been employed at the same company for a few years now and rents a room at his parents' house. He is not currently in a relationship.
2. **Brandon** is a 23 year old, White male living in the eastern suburbs of Johannesburg. He is engaged to be married and has a son; the family live in a rented house. He has completed his secondary schooling and has his own business.
3. **Christopher** is a 19 year old, Coloured male living in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. He has been employed at a fast-food restaurant for several months and is temporarily renting a room at his parents' house. He is not currently in a romantic relationship.
4. **Dean** is a 23 year old, White male. He left school after Grade 10 and has been working ever since. At the time of the interview he was running his own, apparently successful business. He had his own vehicle and was renting a house in an affluent area of Cape Town.
5. **Ferdi** is a 23 year old, White male living in the eastern suburbs of Johannesburg. He is married with a two-year old son, is studying for his matric, lives in a rented room on his adoptive father's property and works full time for his adoptive father.
6. **Gary** is a 20 year old, Coloured male living in Somerset West in the Western Cape. He has been permanently employed at a retail store for the past two years and is currently living with his aunt and her family. He is currently in multiple romantically intimate relationships.
7. **Germaine** is a 23 year old, Coloured male living in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. Since leaving GBT he has only been without employment for a few months and was employed at the time of the interview, but was seeking a change. He rents a room in the family home of his ex-teacher who took him in after leaving GBT. He is not currently in a relationship.
8. **Joe** is a 20 year old, Coloured male residing and working in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. He has been working at a taxi rank since the age of 13, but has been a taxi-driver for the past two years. He is currently living with his cousin and is not in a serious relationship.
9. **Thabo** is a 21 year old, African male. He is the only participant to have stayed in a GBT Family Home. He was living with his mother in the southern suburbs of Cape Town, but he was about to move out. He was studying full time for a diploma and held a part time job.

Journey towards Independent Living²

The journey of young people from residential care towards independent living can best be characterised as a struggle, in which they grapple to escape the entropic pull of the past, much like quicksand that ever threatens to reclaim them, and strive to carve out a better future for themselves. The challenges and threats of the past are ubiquitous – drug abuse, patterns of violence, conflict with parents, abusive relationships, hopelessness and poor education. All of these are present in the post-residential care narratives and are ever-present challenges. This struggle is not only against forces external to the young

¹ These names are pseudonyms. In the results section, direct quotations from the participants' transcriptions will be indexed using the numbering of participants provided here.

² We have preferred to use the word 'Journey', rather than 'A journey' or 'The journey' or 'Journeys' or 'Journeying', to capture the individualised and complex nature of this journey that nevertheless has many common elements across individuals. It is also intended to resonate with the notion of a hero's journey.

people, but also against internal processes, their own longing to and enjoyment of having fun, being irresponsible, testing the limits.

Set against these threats is an emerging set of social processes that all work towards helping young persons create a better future for themselves, a better Self, in which they live out and achieve their aspirations. While in most cases this work is a positive striving-towards, there are also elements of a reluctant, heavy-footed dragging towards something that is experienced as grey and boring but necessary.

This is no smooth and uncomplicated journey towards independence! Rather the narratives take the form of an archetypal hero's story, in which the heroes (our interviewees) fight the forces of darkness (patterns from the past that continue to play out in the present) with weapons of skills that they have acquired, perhaps while in residential care, in order to establish a future that expresses their longing for something good and steady. The 'hero' metaphor is supported by their comparison of themselves with others who did not make it, or achieving the unachievable, against all odds.

Success: A Noun or a Verb?

A central, though understated, theme and purpose of this study is to understand what makes for 'success' in care-leavers. Fundamentally, GBT is in the business of preparing vulnerable youth to enter adult world. GBT accounts to its funders and stakeholders in terms of its success in sending youths into adult living. If all GBT youths wind up in jail, the GBT programme would almost certainly be considered 'unsuccessful'. On the other hand, if all the GBT care-leavers are married, live in their own houses, have steady jobs, are financially self-sufficient, contribute to their communities and uphold the values and mores of society, the GBT programme would almost certainly be considered 'successful'.

However, such clear-cut notions of 'success' are problematic in light of the data collected here. Despite having been out of care for several years, a number of the participants are not financially self-sufficient, continue to live with family or other caregivers, do not have stable employment histories and continue to grapple with substance abuse, violence and crime. It would seem, then, that the 'success' rate is not impressive, particularly given that they have had several years to establish themselves in independent living.

And yet, through listening closely to the narratives of our participants, we have developed a deep appreciation for the ways in which they have grown and continue to grow. They have all evidenced remarkable achievements and successes, even if they don't appear to be 'successful'. For some, the mere fact that they have not succumbed to crime or substance abuse is clear evidence of success. The fact that they have ambitions and hopes for the future, and often quite concrete plans to move towards that future, indicates success. So, what does it mean to be 'successful'?

In a process of critical self-reflection, the research team began to question what 'success' meant for themselves. We are all employed, educated, married and live in our own homes. Two of us have reached relatively senior positions in our places of work. But none of us feel that we have achieved success, that we have 'arrived'. We all continue to grapple with various life challenges and regard ourselves as sometimes more successful and sometimes less. We all feel that we are continuing to journey towards success, and sense that that is likely to be a life-long journey.

Based on the narratives of the research participants and critical reflection on our life narratives, we challenge the dominant notion of 'success' as a state, and argue for 'succeeding' as a process. 'Success' is not a noun but a verb, 'succeeding' – of course, this word does not exist in the dictionary, but it captures much more closely what emerges from the data. Care-leavers engage in an on-going, perhaps life-long, process of succeeding, as they journey, albeit not in a straight line, towards success. The 'state' of success is something that they may or may not achieve, and regardless of whether it is achieved, what is more salient is the process of 'succeeding'.

For example, **Brandon** was reluctant to be interviewed when we first contacted him. At that stage we decided not to pursue him, for fear of coercing him into the study. When we did the second round of interviews, several months later, we contacted him again to tentatively ask if he would like to participate in the study at this stage. This time he agreed. Through the interview, it emerged that around the time of our first contact, he had been involved in a serious motor car accident as a result of his drunken driving. Had we interviewed him at that time, he would most certainly have appeared to be ‘unsuccessful’, which may explain, at least in part, his reluctance to participate in the study. By the time we did interview him, he had been sober for some months and was working actively to maintain his sobriety, protect his family and job and ensure a positive future for himself – clear evidence of ‘success’. Just a few months difference in interviewing could have made all the difference in defining Brandon as successful or unsuccessful. What emerges strongly from Brandon’s narrative, however, is his tenacious and rigorously honest effort to live a ‘straight’ life.

Resilience, as a construct analogous to success, was originally regarded primarily as a state, with emphasis particularly on personality traits. Thus a person who had a high sense of coherence or hardiness would be regarded as resilient, or as ‘having resilience’. More recent resilience theory regards resilience as a process and speaks about ‘resiling’ (Strümpfer, 2002) – the noun of resilience is replaced with the verb of ‘resiling’. Strümpfer (2002, p. 4) defines resiling as, “A pattern of psychological activity which consists of a motive to be strong in the face of inordinate demands, the goal-directed behaviour of coping and rebounding, and of accompanying emotions and cognitions.”

In the same way, the narratives of our participants suggest the need to shift from ‘success’ as noun to ‘succeeding’ as verb. This would have significant implications for research on care-leaving, programme evaluation studies and programme activities. It certainly would align success research and programme evaluation with resilience theory and the strengths perspective.

This approach, however, could lead to a collapse of mutually recognised categories. ‘Success’ could then have multiple and quite divergent meanings, such as:

- ❖ The idealistic notion of ‘success’ as earning a hundred million Rands.
- ❖ Our own judgements, as researchers or practitioners, of what these youth ‘really need’.
- ❖ A judgement, in the eyes of society, of what it means to be ‘successful’.
- ❖ A ‘touchy-feely’ notion of success as a narrated journey.

If one pursues this approach, ‘success’ could become so individualised and relative as to be unresearchable except through the most qualitative of methods.

We propose, therefore, that the notions of both ‘success’ and ‘succeeding’ should be held together, even if in tension, to provide a dynamic understanding of the processes of success. On the one hand, the youths in our study had quite distinctive and, in our view, reasonable definitions of success, even when these were not entirely conscious or explicitly articulated. Such definitions of success, as a noun, would be important and helpful in measuring progress towards independent living. On the other hand, youths also had persuasive narratives of ‘succeeding’, as verb, that reveal insights into the social processes that underlie the journey towards ‘success’. These are vital to programme development and enhancement.

‘Success’ as a Noun: Achieving Independence in Adult Life

Key goals generated by our participants included:

1. Completing their education.
2. Holding a steady job.
3. Earning enough money to support themselves.
4. A feeling of security.
5. Having their own accommodation.
6. Purchasing items that symbolise accomplishment.
7. Having a stable family or close circle of friends.
8. Maintaining sobriety.

9. Surviving.

The following vignettes serve to illustrate these goals:

1. **Germaine** describes how he clearly saw his education as an important success indicator: *“I was the first one in the family to finish school”* [7.160]³; *“Seeing that I got matric, I had hope of getting a job”* [7.26]; *“If I could have studied further I would have”* [7.160]; *“They [friends] all fell back, they left school, they dropped out, they got into drugs and I was kind of in the same situation, but I carried on and finished school. Ja [Yes], and I can say it’s probably just me [that ended up finishing school]”* [7.162].
2. **Andre** was proud of holding down his job for three years: *“Basically, what I feel good about in my life, everything. But what I’m most proud of is my job that I’ve got now, my job that I’ve got now. To keep a job, for me it’s very hard to keep a job”* [1.287]. **Christopher** also mentioned holding down a job, since he gave up drugs and alcohol in 2010. After maintaining sobriety, he secured a job but resigned because his ex-girlfriend was employed at the same place. He has been employed at his current job for four months. *“Well, the current job that I’m in now; I’m a waiter at [a restaurant at a casino]. I feel glad that I actually found the job because every day I meet new people; it’s not every day the same people that come to the place. Yes, you do get your customers which are hard... half of them are drunk from gambling the whole day and that. It’s lekker [nice], it’s almost like it...gives me my own time. It’s me, myself and I. I have nobody to worry about or nothing”* [1.52]. **Joe**, one of the youngest participants in this study, indicated a success narrative that centred on a job and then finding a place to live: *“My whole plan was that I’m going to look first for a proper job and then go back home. And then like work, work; work until I find a place for myself”* [1.150].
3. **Dean**’s definition of success revolves almost entirely around money, and lots of it. Although he does appreciate other areas of success, i.e. in his reciting of his academic success while at GBT [4.150] and acknowledging that one day he will have a *“good wife”* [4.246], these are all secondary to making money. This is seen in his decision to leave school because he wanted more money [4.122] and later leaving his part time jobs because, *“the money story wasn’t enough so I moved”* [4.148]. Also, more explicitly in his direct comments on what success for him is, *“I’m going to have to have lots of money. Lots and lots, because that is like one of the most important things that comes out of life. ... Some people say it’s not that important, but I don’t believe that”* [4.246]. Dean even defines his happiness in relation to money, *“Because if you don’t have money you’re not happy as far as I’m concerned. I mean before Boys Town no money, not happy”* [4.268]. When asked if there were any other things that were important for him besides finances in being successful he responded, *“Me, not really. I just want to have everything so I don’t have to struggle”* [4.256]. This last comment may point towards the need that underlies his drive for lots of money – a need to not struggle, a need for security.
4. **Ferdi** sees financial security as key to his sense of being successful. This is, in part, a present desire – to be financially secure at the present: *“I’m not expecting to be a millionaire, but I want to be comfortable”* [5.92]. But he wants this financial security to continue into the future: *“To me it’s just about the future”* [5.92]; *“I don’t want to be 40 odd years and then stressing about this and that. I want to at least know okay, I have some policies here; I have this there, just being sorted”* [5.104]. As a father, this extends beyond just his own well-being to include his capacity to care for his family: *“If my son comes and says he wants this, I want to be able to give it to him. ... Like now at the moment he’s two years old and he’s already asking for stuff and it hurts kind of”* [5.92]. Ferdi explains the opposite of security is to struggle, and specifically in his case to continue the legacy of his father: *“These last few years have been really struggle, struggle, struggle, and I don’t want that. And I also look at how my real dad is living. He tries hard you know. It’s not like he’s a lazy person and that he doesn’t care about life. He really tries, but life has just been throwing him bad whatever you call it. Just he’s been really having difficulties and I don’t want that”* [5.104].
5. **Germaine**’s independence is defined around having his own accommodation. In most of the living situations he was in he was dependent on the parents of friends or a relative to allow him to continue

³ The first number in square brackets refers to the participant (participants were numbered from 1 to 9 in the section called ‘Participants’ on page 14), while the second number refers to the paragraph of the transcript of the interview where the quotation or evidence can be found.

renting at their house, but in this example of when he and a girlfriend briefly hired a flat he describes himself as truly independent: *“So I had my own apartment – just to bring that up... I was independent; I went on my own... We worked in town and lived in the apartment. And if I could have afforded it and could have maintained that lifestyle, I would have”* [7.124]. Germaine describes how he currently is in a stable place because he has a job and a place to stay, but still strives for his own accommodation: *“so it’s kind of a stable place where I’m at, at my life at the moment. But I’m not wanting to live here forever like, under other people’s roof whatever, and I’d also like to get my own place again – my own apartment. Get my own place again and stand on my own two feet again, live a better life”* [7.166]. For **Christopher**, securing accommodation is a significant goal, as he still lives with his father and step-mother, which is a profoundly abusive social environment for him. *“My own place, nobody else is moving in again. I’ve learnt my lesson”* [7.46]. *“I’ve made my mind up that I’m going to go on my own and my target is to make it while I am on my own, and I believe I’m going to make it”* [7.48].

6. **Andre’s purchasing**, with his own money, of a flat screen TV and nice sound system clearly comes with much pride and satisfaction: *“It’s lekker [nice], it’s not top of the range, it’s decent. It helps us enjoy our lives and just after work come here at home and just chill”* [1.96]. He reflects that previously he would steal nice things, but now he purchases them with his own money: *“I would love to have those shoes, I would love to take them now, but I would rather wait for my cash flow that I can buy it and I know this is mine. Everything in this house makes me proud because this is mine. I worked my butt off for this for a crappy salary, but I got it. This is mine. Then I can show the people listen here, I don’t have to steal anymore, why do I need to steal? I work now for my own salary, I’ve got my flat that I pay, I’ve got my TV, my sound, my DVD’s and everything and this is mine”* [1.291]. The flat itself is extremely basic, underdeveloped and in need of repairs – well below the standard of living at GBT. But Andre sees it as his own space – his aspiration for space is modest and achievable.
7. **Brandon** mentions his family as part of his definition of personal success: *“I’m happy with my life at the moment. Good wife, good kid”* [2.29]. He also relates his being a young father as a success indicator – *“Having a son at a young age. So I see it as a lot of advantages in that”* [2.340] – primarily related to his expectation to have a long-term active relationship with his son: *“I can still have a good time with my son when he starts getting older”* [2.342]. **Ferdi** also included his family in various aspects of his sense of success, including saving for his son’s future, e.g. for education [2.104], and going on holidays as a family [2.104]. **Joe** wove his primary and a hoped-for secondary family into his narrative of success: *“My first priority is to get a job, then to start a family, then look for me for a place or maybe stay there by my mother’s house and build like a servant’s quarter at the back”* [2.175]. **Gary**, one of the youngest participants in the study, spoke not about family but about friends as important to his notion of success: *“I’ve got good friends now that supports me. Like I’ve got like this one friend that we dance together, that’s how we met... he’s like my best friend and when I have a situation I always go to him. ...that’s the kind of people that I want to be around with”* [2.50].
8. **Christopher** strives to maintain sobriety: *“The work found out I was doing drugs and they told me to leave. Now, I found another job after that, and when I found the job I joined a group at the church which helped drug addiction, alcohol addiction and that”* [3.12]; *“I left all the drugs and that. I quit drinking... everything...”* [3.16]; *“I was talking to someone when I went to church one Sunday to try to stop my addiction and pull myself onto the right track”* [3.18]; *“I went from being an alcoholic and a drug addictive person to no drugs and once every month or three months I’ll have a beer”* [3.83]. Alcohol abuse featured prominently in **Brandon’s** narrative – it was clearly a source of shame and embarrassment for him and he avoided discussing it in depth until late in the interview: *“Nothing [more about myself] I can think of [to tell you]. No, that’s basically it. The drinking part I don’t enjoy talking about it [he looks sheepish again]. I kick myself after ever time”* [2.288]. He then proceeded to discuss the drinking in depth, saying: *“If you know me personally it’s my only downfall, I know that. Everybody that knows me knows that. That’s why I don’t talk about it [sheepish]. I’m a nice guy and I work hard and my friends say that I deserve every last cent I make, and everyone knows that when it comes to drinking I’m not good”* [2.298]. Brandon experienced substance abuse as a key and devastating flaw in his otherwise competent persona and was determined to maintain sobriety.
9. **Germaine** describes how part of his success is simply surviving: *“Well, my successes on what I’m really happy about is that I’m still here today”* [7.136]. After being asked if he means that he is still alive he

answers yes. He explains that through his motto of *“Not giving up”* [7.138] he has resiled where others *“fell victim to drugs, to gang related, to violence. But I kept a clear head knowing what the gap was. I know what will happen, where it will end up although I can’t say [exactly] what will happen [implying death or enslaved in drugs and/or gangsterism]. But at the end of the day you’re going to go down if you go in that line. So I thought to myself, that’s not the way I’m going to go, I’m not going to fall into drugs, not to fall into gangsterism”* [7.140].

Drawing on these data, then, it should be possible to construct an index of ‘success’ (as a noun) on a continuous (or at least ordinal) scale, that can then track an individual youth’s progress towards greater success and which can be used for programme evaluation. This would be in line with current research on Quality of Life (QOL), which is increasingly moving towards local definitions and nuanced measurement (Collinge, Rüdell, & Bhui, 2002).

‘Succeeding’ as a Verb: Striving through Difficulties Towards Independent Living

It can thus be seen that the young people in this study strive towards largely common goals, which together we have called ‘independent living’, in contrast with the dependence of being in residential care and the negation (negative living) of much of their past. Curiously, their goals are, for the most part, not wild, grandiose, inflated, as goals typically are among adolescents (Van Breda, 2010) and particularly adolescents from poor communities (Yowell, 2000). None envisioned themselves in glorious mansions or being president of the bank or being fabulously rich (except for Dean who envisaged having R100 million). Their goals were wholesome and modest, apparently modified and trimmed in response to their sharp encounters with the reality of life. All experienced being brought low, even hitting rock bottom, confronting the realities of life, like a cold shower – being shocked into sobriety. Through this sobering, goals emerged that are more grounded, more real, more attainable. Early experiences of modest goal achievement, of mastery, serve as catalysts toward the formulation of new goals, mastery of which, lead to further goals, constituting a path of success. Some had achieved or partially achieved some of their aspirations. Others had not achieved and continued to strive towards their goals.

This process of goal formation is illustrated by the following selected vignettes:

- ❖ **Andre’s** conflict with his parents, including threatening his father with a gun, resulted in him being kicked out of home: *“Jis [Gosh], but they were furious, and then they kicked me out of the house for sure. Okay that was a big shocker for me”* [1.14]; *“Literally for 18 and a half months, I became a street kid”* [1.16]. His parents’ action shocked him, sobered him, confronted him with the reality of where he had come to. This realisation led him to occupy a small abandoned house [1.18], which he secured for his protection: *“Locks and everything so that nobody can come in and steal my stuff whatsoever”* [1.28]. This became his home: *“Okay, it wasn’t my house on that time, but it felt like my own small cosy space”* [1.32]. He defended his small space from a drunk and abusive policeman [1.28] and found favour with the man who was in charge of the house, who agreed to let him stay – the man said, *“I’m going to let you stay here provided you help me take care of this house and see that nothing goes with it, no vandalism or whatsoever goes on here”* [1.18]. This illustrates Andre’s setting of modest goals and gradually building himself up. Being in this house led to him establishing a constructive relationship with another police officer, which led to him going to church, which led to him getting a job through someone at that church – a gradual increase in goal formation and goal achievement.
- ❖ **Brandon** appears to have always been driven to succeed. However, while he is able to list several aspects of his life that he would consider to be indicators of ‘success’, he defines the ‘good life’ as *“surviving ... it’s not to work to anything at the moment, it’s just to survive”* [2.31]. He has been self-employed (doing handyman and building contract work) for most of his life since GBT. His business went through a slump, largely due to the recession, and finances became very tight for a while [2.97], so much so that he had to abandon his home and his fiancé returned to her parents [2.11]. In response he began binge-drinking and had two drunk-driving accidents [2.105]. The second accident shook him: *“After the second accident it was – I think it was a month after the first one, I mean that just opened up my eyes – it was a bad accident. ... I hit three trees with my bakkie [small pickup truck]”* [2.109 & 2.111]. This was a very low point for Brandon, and he quit drinking for a year, gradually built his business back

up, found a new place to live and had his fiancé and son return to live with him. It seems to be in this context that he associates the ‘good life’ with ‘surviving’. He is quite focused on the here-and-now, though he occasionally talks about the future. But even then, his hopes for the future are modest – he says he is happy just to be surviving at the present time: *“Happy to be in a small place, wife, kid, little garden, but in a year’s time I would probably see myself doing a bit better financially. ... I’m enjoying it there because the rent is a very good price and it’s basically ours”* [2.195 & 2.197]. His awareness of his vulnerability seems to have contributed his formulating realistic, grounded goals.

- ❖ **Ferdi**, in many ways, is not a poster boy of success. Apart from one job which he held for 10 months, he has never lasted more than six months in one job; he has lived mostly with family and friends; he is currently living off his adoptive father, who has bailed him out of enormous debt and established him in a job, with a car and an allowance; he demonstrates little commitment to himself and his future; he is impatient and impulsive, quitting jobs, wasting bank loans, avoiding life’s frustrations. Notwithstanding this evidence of unsuccess, Ferdi continues to journey towards independent living, showing an enduring, albeit inconsistent, progress. He has always held modest jobs and lived fairly frugally [5.131]. His goals for the future, his definitions of success, are modest – living comfortably, without fear of financial ruin and without worrying about the next meal, securing the future through saving and insurance, and being able to meet his family’s needs [5.92, 5.98 & 5.104]. Despite having worked quite extensively for a security firm, he has no records of that employment and no résumé – he now recognises the importance of building up a work history, references and qualifications [5.113]. Ferdi appears to be, at the time of this study, on the cusp of potentially securing his future, because he has recently married and obtained a driver’s license, his adoptive father has cleared his debts, he is building up a work history in the insurance industry and he is studying towards his matric. If he is able to maintain this pattern, which has only a six-month history, and resist his current urge to impatiently throw it all in and try something else, then he could well establish a more stable and enduring life for himself and his family.
- ❖ **Dean** relates a narrative predominantly exemplified by success, with little clear sense of struggle. He describes one instance of ‘falling off the wagon’ in a positive light, as a necessary part of the learning towards success: *“That’s how I felt, I was out of prison [i.e. GBT] now, there was no more routine, that’s why I fell off the wagon – why I fell off the wagon [he was not explicit about what this meant, but it seems to have involved drug use with younger friends who had a “bad influence” on him]. And then I realised, but actually that is the way to go. It’s like a whole thing – I was still very young so I needed to understand all these things. Because you needed to actually go through it first to understand it. If I didn’t go through the whole Boys Town from the start till the end of Boys Town till what I did after Boys Town to where I am now, I would have never been to where I am in my life now”* [4.214]. Dean here constructs his current success (he had his own business, own vehicle and was renting a house in an affluent suburb) to journeying through these lessons. He draws contrasts between his previous life as a homeless child and his current success: *“I still can’t believe where I was if I look back at myself five years ago, and I can think that boy walking in the road there to what I am now”* [4.186]. And *“It is amazing. Even people that I see still, people that looked at me when I used to walk around in the streets being that little homeless boy. People can’t believe who I have turned out to be today. They can’t believe it”* [4.188].

Five central social processes have emerged that constitute the struggle towards these aspirations, that comprise their hero stories:

1. Striving for authentic belonging.
2. Contextualised observation, learning and action.
3. Networking people for goal attainment.
4. Building hopeful and tenacious self-confidence.
5. Scuppering

Striving for Authentic Belonging

Belonging, some research has shown, is a central factor in assisting care-leavers in the transition to independent living (Ward, 2011). It is the foundational element of the Circle of Courage (Brendtro,

Brokenleg, & Van Brokern, 2002), which is now used throughout South Africa in the assessment of youth in conflict with the law and in diversion programmes. Belonging is best described as the experience of being genuinely connected with others – to experience unconditional acceptance, love and support. Brendtro and Larson (2006, p. 46) explain that the sense of belonging “develops through opportunities to build trust and form human attachment.” In regular families, children develop the sense of belonging through their relationship with their parents. For children in care, however, parental relationships are frequently fractured (Ward, 2011) – children must find those kinds of deeply trusting relationships elsewhere, for example from aunts, grandparents, teachers or scout masters, and often grow up with an inadequately developed sense of belonging. In such cases, our data suggest, these young people engage in social processes of striving for authentic belonging.

The deep longing for a sense of belonging was central to all participants, with the possible exception of Dean. For some, the need is for a warm familial relationship, while others seek this connection in intimate love relationships. Most of the participants had not achieved relationships of trust and belonging. Most of them struggled to establish and maintain these relationships. This was complicated by lack of trust, fear of pain and rejection, patterns of abuse and self-preservation (hidden vulnerabilities). For most, the striving for authentic belonging is not directly communicated in their narratives – and when we asked explicitly about what constitutes ‘success’ for them, few mentioned belonging or relationship. However, the preconscious need can be observed by reading behind the narratives or when they overly protest their lack of need for deep relationship.

The vulnerability of our participants, because of breakdowns in their families of origin, was ubiquitous, with the possible exception of Thabo. Most experienced abandonment by their biological mother and/or unstable, volatile, unsupportive or abusive relationships with their stepmothers or adopted mothers. Thabo was one of the few who had a solid relationship with his mother, though it is clear from his narrative that he had to invest his considerable social skills to develop and secure that relationship.

There is a sense that their status as Boys Town boys is an obstacle in achieving the belonging they seek, and thus to make themselves credible for girls and their parents, they need to achieve independence, demonstrate financial security and establish their credentials before pursuing a relationship. Some participants, therefore, were delaying the striving for authentic belonging while they got their house in order – analogous, perhaps, to the nest-building by weaver birds.

Belonging links with the theory on social capital. Pinkerton (2011, p. 2414) defines social capital as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”. Others state, “Individual-level social capital has been construed broadly, involving in part, access to instrumental and emotional support, skills and information, positive companionship, and various other resources that promote goal attainment and life adjustment (e.g. happiness, educational or occupational advancement)” (Pettit et al., 2011, p. 482). These constructions of social capital do not speak clearly to belonging – they seem closer to a theme we will later discuss: networking for goal attainment.

Pettit et al. (2011, p. 482), however, suggest that social capital may be particularly important during the life transition from adolescence to young adulthood, particularly because of the loss of “institutional structure”, which could, especially for those with less social capital, result in a poor person-environment fit and the disablement of constructive coping. While that paper was written about young people in general, we can imagine that this, notably the loss of “institutional structure”, is highly pertinent to late adolescent care-leavers.

Research indicates that *depth* of relationship (having supportive, committed, enduring relationships) is of greater value than *breadth* (having many close friends) (Pettit et al., 2011, p. 487), and it is here that the link between social capital and belonging comes closer. Depth of social capital was found to predict better educational attainment and less problematic behaviour, substance abuse and crime. “Thus, depth of social

capital may help young adults better cope with some of the challenges (such as becoming angry, depressed, or prone to substance abuse) during a period of heightened vulnerability” (Pettit et al., 2011, p. 487).

Pettit et al.’s (2011) research approach, however, differs markedly from ours in that they were looking at the presence of deep relationships (or the presence of authentic belonging), which treats belonging as a discrete factor, while we are interested in the social process, which extends over time and context, of *striving for* authentic belonging. It is the processes that care-leavers enact, as they pursue the goal of belonging, that we explore here.

Our inclusion of the adjective ‘authentic’ may be regarded by some as redundant, since belonging, by definition, is authentic, deep and trustbearing. However, the literature (eg Brendtro et al., 2002) is clear that many youth, particularly those in conflict with the law and those in care, settle for substitute belonging, in the form of gangs for example, which is really a kind of pseudo-belonging. Because this may be prevalent among care-leavers, we qualify the kind of belonging that we mean, and argue that even in settling for pseudo-belonging, care-leavers are actually striving to achieve authentic belonging. Such relationships are simply not readily available to them. By contrast, some care-leavers deny the need for authentic belonging, taking up a ‘Clint Eastwood’ persona of needing no-one. We suggest that this stance is a defence against a deeper need for belonging, and thus even such negating behaviour is a form of striving for authentic belonging.

The yearning for a sense of belonging is illustrated in the following vignettes:

- ❖ **Andre** made no mention of any long-term relationship after leaving GBT, although he relates instances where he indulges in casual romantic relationships: *“Okay, we [referring to himself and his flatmate] got very sloshed that night and things happened and she is engaged as well, and stuff happened”* [1.68]; *“And then there was also this one girl that I liked. She is nice but I don’t like her anymore”* [1.240]. Not for a lack of trying, he expresses a need to be in a romantic relationship: *“Ja [Yes], that’s a little bit of a problem with me, yes. Managing to get a girlfriend first, yes. Difficulty getting a girlfriend”* [244]. But has not yet found a way to establish and maintain one: *“Every time when I meet someone new I always find a way without me noticing to mess it up. I always, always. But I keep on telling him that’s my bad luck”* [1.251].
- ❖ **Andre** describes his relationship with his foster-and- biological parents as caring, *“My parents cared for me and everything. And I was adopted as well when I was six months old, so this is my foster care parents for the past 22 years now”* [1.14]. Although he reveals that his relationship with his mother [not sure if it his biological or foster mother] is strained: *“My mother and my mother and I are not very good friends”* [1.304]. This is the only instance in his narrative that he makes reference to familial relationships, giving the sense that he is not entirely at ease within his family. His matter-of-fact mention of his adoption makes one wonder how deeply it affects his sense of identity and his feeling of being rooted, since most of these emotions are tied up in his sense of belonging not only within the family, but in the world.
- ❖ **Andre** experienced the tragic loss of a brother at age 8: *“He was my best brother. When I was in Grade 2 I lost him in a car accident... I lost him there in a car accident, and I tried to replace him because I was heart sore and all those kinds of things”* [1.122]. He sees this loss as the reason for his behaviour problems: *“From that age I started stealing heavily”* [1.126]. His need to replace his brother led to what he perceives as the search for authentic belonging: *“The thing that was lekker [good] there in [GBT], the five oaks [guys] of us, we weren’t friends with each other in the school, we made our own friend – kringitjie [little circle] thing. And if we heard that somebody else jumps in we’re going to jump in and we’re going to kill you guys basically. And ja [yes], and it was lekker [good]. I enjoyed that, that backup and everything”* [1.136].
- ❖ **Brandon** describes how part of his success so far is his long-term relationship with his fiancé (who he usually refers to as his ‘wife’) and the presence of his son: *“I’m happy with my life at the moment. Good wife, good kid”* [2.29]. It appears that he is experiencing a sense of belonging, however, his strong desire to formalise their union by getting married expresses a sense of not feeling completely secure in

the relationship: *"I disagree with having to stay so long unmarried"* [2.281]. There is a low-level of awareness that the feeling of unease in his relationship with his fiancé could be tied to his poor relationship with his mother, since her love was conditional and easily taken away: *"My mom's just a difficult person... with everyone. Because my brother and myself over the years it would be, I love the one, not love the other one, and if the one makes a problem then she would swap around"* [2.161 & 2.163].

- ❖ The feeling that he truly belongs, that his existence has meaning and purpose, is reflected in his relationship with his son: *"Having a son at a young age. So I see it as a lot of advantages in that... I'll be close [being a young dad is a positive]... So I can still have a good time with my son when he starts getting older"* [2.340 & 2.342]. The feeling of true belonging is fulfilled in his relationship with his son, cemented by the strong relationship he has with his own father: *"Myself and my dad I'd say we're very – strong relationship"* [2.173]. In describing what he is proud of in life and what constitutes success or the good life, Brandon speaks about his 'marriage', his son, his role as father and their family home [2.29, 2.31 & 2.340].
- ❖ **Ferdi** has a chequered history of family relationships. His biological parents gave him up for adoption due to their social circumstances. His adoptive parents couldn't handle his naughty behaviour and placed him in a children's home at about age 7 [5.59], after which he met up again with his father. He had poor relationships with his grandparents [5.1], but reconciled with them in his first year after leaving GBT. Despite having met up with his father previously, he reports that he had no contact with his father for several years (the whole of high school and his time at GBT) [5.3]. Through his sister's mediation, he reconciled with his father, who arranged a job for him with a security firm. So, Ferdi's first year out of GBT was important in re-establishing relationships with his family of origin. This points to the importance, for him, of striving for authentic belonging with his family of origin, in the wake of some early breaks in belonging.
- ❖ Earlier this year, his adoptive father re-established contact with **Ferdi**, which Ferdi appreciated [5.59]. Despite elements of exploitation of his adoptive father, Ferdi expresses great concern to maintain a healthy relationship with his adoptive father and recognises that his adoptive father's extreme financial generosity complicates the relationship: *"I don't want to work for [adoptive father], and it's just uncomfortable. Personal stuff becomes work and work becomes personal and it just gets a bit involved"* [5.86]. He is, however, quite willing to receive material things from his adoptive parent, and the relationship has an exploitative feel: *"I have been praying for a long time for an opening and I know my adopted father is – he will help me, especially if I tell him I don't have a job, he will. So I quit. And then about a week later I then obviously wasted my loan [laughs], as I knew things are going to get better, so I just wasted it"* [5.62]. This is perhaps related a deep sense of abandonment – the family that agreed to rescue him then dumped him because he was a handful. Receiving financial and material help may serve to cover up some of the brokenness in his belonging, but lack the much-needed authenticity, which is evidenced by the ambivalence of the relationship for Ferdi.
- ❖ **Ferdi** is married with a two-year old son. This family nexus is very important to him, even though the marriage is stormy: *"Me and my wife's relationship is actually beautiful, so just as rough. We met ...obviously things are great, it's love everything. Then things obviously became a bit more serious having a child. Then it was alright, then ... ja, I don't know, things started to get bad. [lots of hesitation] We started to fight more and more and more and it just got worse"* [5.142]. Conflicts were, at times, physically violent. He feels part of the problem was that they got into the relationship very quickly, about a year after he left GBT. But, despite regular fights, he perceives the relationship to be more stable now: *"We got to a stage where we understand each other"* [5.144]. He attributes this growth of maturity in his marriage to some of the interpersonal skills he learned at GBT. His definition of success is intimately tied up with his family. While Ferdi, like others in this study, includes things like TVs, Xbox and holidays in his conceptualisation of success, having a stable and secure family future is much more central than for most. He gave particular emphasis to having short term and life insurance and medical aid and savings [5.98 & 5.104], all focused on ensuring the long-term security of his family. A sense of authentic belonging with a partner and a healthy parenting relationship with his son are centrally important to Ferdi.

- ❖ For **Germaine** a sense of belonging, is being part of a family, a permanent stability, an unconditional love and acceptance, a safety net that will catch him, if or when he falls: *“The most difficult for me is not giving up hope and not having a family to go back on”* [7.150]. The desire for this sense of belonging is strongly expressed in his narratives, with almost every relationship being described as ‘close’: *“Ja [Yes], his [friend he moved in with] parent’s house, which I also had a close relationship with”* [7.64]; *“Some of the Sir’s [youth care workers] liked me and I had like personal relationship with them, I could speak to them and then they will speak to me”* [7.46]. He associates many relationships as familial, for example, he describes his relationship with a boy he met at GBT as: *“So we were like... grew a close relation, we were like brothers, we were always together”* [7.64]; he describes a relationship he had with a drug-lord: *“He actually kind of like took me under his wing... he made me feel like a son”* [7.36]. The relationship he shares with his ex-teacher and her family is the most significant and the most referred to in familial terms: *“It’s like... she [ex-teacher] is like my second mother and her husband is also like my second father, she [ex-teacher] says sometimes, I’m like her own kid also. All she had to do... had to do... was like give birth to me then I would be like their own son”* [7.126]. Similarly, regarding her children: *“They are like my small sister and small brother”* [7.130]. Because of his openness to apparently intimate relationships with others, Germaine comes across as very likable: *“I attach to people quite quickly”* [7.82].
- ❖ From all of this, we see that **Germaine** has a deep need for authentic belonging, which he tends to construct in familial terms, and that he is constantly striving to establish familial relationship with people in his social environment, even high-risk people like the drug lord. This need is rooted in early experiences of being deprived of the kind of dependency that is appropriate in childhood: *“I... currently alone [when he was six and left his mother’s care] – how can I say? I was alone all my life, I had to stand on my own two feet, stand by myself and how can I say? I had nobody to depend or to fall back on whatever”* [7.22]. He associates this early experience of being dislocated from his maternal relationship with his subsequent descent into: *“Smoking weed, doing drugs – scoring a whole of wrong stuff”* [7.22]. In this, we see him forming relationships of pseudo-belonging as a substitute for authentic belonging.
- ❖ **Dean** generally has a defensive stance towards relationships: *“I know friends bring you down. Friends can bring you all the way down till the ground and they will still stamp on you. Even family will do it to you. A family is actually the worst. I think family will do to you first before anyone”* [4.202]. Further, he expresses no desire to see his biological mother: *“No. I don’t see her. I’m not that basically interested”* [4.42] or his family, because of what they put him through: *“I mean what my real family put me through it’s just like – I don’t know what to even think about it. That’s why I don’t even worry. I don’t even worry with them, even if I see him the road, my uncles, my aunties. I don’t even bother if I drive past them”* [4.204]. He does, however, experience his adoptive parents as supportive: *“Yes, I was by them last night, no problem. They support me even up till today. They still support me. Even if I need some money they will even give it to me, they won’t even worry. It’s just like my mother and my father, it’s exactly the same thing like my mother and my father”* [4.198]. Indeed, these seem to be the only people he has a warm, authentic relationship with.
- ❖ Regarding friendships, **Dean** says: *“I don’t have friends of my own age anymore. I cut that out because of bad influence. I now have older friends now that are in business also, so I associate only basically with people that I know”* [4.200]. Here he expresses the residue of a fracturing of belonging with his family of origin, expressed in an emotionally disconnected way of relating to his peers. He tends to see relationships as a path to wealth and success and people as factors of production that help or hinder him in his own goals. This disconnectedness appears to be a defence strategy against his true vulnerabilities and to avoid pain and rejection. He indicates that building wealth is safer and more satisfying than building relationships: *“Everybody is different. The one person – well maybe not want money, maybe he just wants to have a good family and be happy in his family and have a nice mother and a happy father, and live in a happy home. And then me again, I’m past that stage already. If I was supposed to have a happy home then I would have had one. Now I’m going to make my own happy home basically now, which obviously revolves around money”* [4.268].
- ❖ **Thabo** shows a strong ability to develop close and lasting relationships with a number of people. He speaks about the friendships he established at GBT and has managed to remain friendly with. He also mentions having five close friends that he hangs out with currently: *“Like all my mates that I hang out*

with – my closest mates, I have about five of them” [9.248]. He also has a long and stable relationship with his girlfriend: “I knew what I wanted and I found this girl and ever since I’ve been with her” [9.248]. Initially, he was ashamed to reveal his true self to her: “Up until then I had been pretty much ashamed of telling just any old person...that I’m a Boys Town boy” [9.214]. His fear of disappointing her was his motivation to change his life: “I had been going out with her at the time and there was someone I didn’t want to disappoint besides my mother” [9.196]. With the difficulties he was experiencing at home, his girlfriend became his confidant, his anchor, his true sense of belonging: “So she was one of the first people I kind of confided in and said, I am a Boys Town boy, told her about a lot of stuff, so when I talked to her she would kind of understand me kind of thing. So that was good. I mean I think, having no-one to talk to had to be my biggest thing like a problem, because you’re trying to sort things out at home” [9.216]. Her acceptance of who he was and her willingness to stand by him and guide him out of the challenges of his past was instrumental in the path he chose for his future: “I mean I had to make some hard decisions for my life and kind of thing, and she was kind of instrumental in kind of helping me say look, remember what you learned, remember where you come from kind of thing” [9.202].

- ❖ **Thabo** describes his relationship with his mother as rocky at times: “I was gutted. My mom threw a fit when I got back home [from an overseas job that he lost because of drug use]. For like the first two months she didn’t speak to me. It was like silence” [9.147]. However, she remains a very stable and vital part of his life. Their relationship gradually improved when he moved back home after leaving residential care: “My mom was becoming a little bit more relaxed because she was getting used to me being at home” [9.67].
- ❖ **Christopher** appears to have little interest in relationships at present. He speaks without emotion about his abandonment by his biological mother, his abusive relationship with his stepmother and his father’s lack of concern for his well-being. He expresses a poignant longing for authentic belonging, dating back to early childhood: “With my state throughout my life so far, all I wanted for somebody to listen to me. Somebody on my side to talk to. And just to show me that little bit of love. That’s all” [3.142]. But the failure of his primary caregivers to satisfy this need has made him cynical about the authenticity of all parent-child relationships: “I believe that no child will physically go and talk to their parents about a problem or about what’s on their mind, or about how they feel. I believe no child will go and talk to their parents about that” [3.144]. Christopher has come to accept that: “Nobody will always be there for you, not even somebody’s parents. You can’t always run to somebody with a problem” [3.96]. As a result, the only person he can depend on is himself: “Everything I’ve been through, everything that I’ve had to handle, every problem that I have to solve, I did it on my own” [3.84]. He also expresses in his narrative that as an adult, he no longer needs that sense of belonging, that it’s no longer a priority as it once was: “I don’t need it as much” [3.13].
- ❖ Despite his assertions, however, **Christopher** continues to search for such authentic belonging and found it in a relationship with an older woman: “I found it and then the girl’s parents didn’t approve and then I lost it again” [3.44]. This loss, once again makes him feel worthless, rejected and betrayed: “I felt very disappointed and degraded. It’s almost like I was betrayed” [3.32]. After prompting, he admits that he is not completely opposed to having a romantic relationship, but wants full disclosure about his past and the parents’ approval before pursuing the relationship: “If I do decide to go into another relationship anytime soon, I first want to meet her parents. Me and her parents must get to know each other before I go into a relationship now” [3.158].
- ❖ **Gary** has a deep seated need to truly belong. He is aware that romantically he hasn’t found it: “I really want to, but I just can’t find like the perfect girl... That’s why I have so a lot of girls” [6.85]. Instead, he creates a false sense of belonging by surrounding himself with a number of women, almost like a harem. He explains that with each girl he hopes that she might be the one who can satisfy his deep need for belonging, but then he is disappointed: “Now I meet this girl and then she’s like so quiet – I mean she’s like the person I want to be with, and then I see her two or three time and then I’m like, no, she’s not for me. But I don’t tell her listen here, this is not working for me. I’d rather keep her and then go and look for another one and another one and another one, and that’s how I end with maybe four or five girls” [6.85]. He continues by expressing an enduring hope that one day he will find the right one: “It’s not okay, but I just can’t find the perfect girl. I don’t know what to do. There’s a lot of times when I just like break up with all of them at one time. Just call everyone and tell her listen here, no, no, no. And

then I tell my friends like look here, I'm done with girls. Then they are like no, no, no. Tomorrow you're going to have this one and then you're going to have – and then it's just like you said. He knows me by now, I can't have one girl. Maybe when I find that girl... I hope so. Ja I do believe that one day I will find her" [6.92 & 6.93].

- ❖ **Gary** seems to find authentic belonging with his dance crew. It is here that he finds a feeling of being at home, a sense of true belonging: *"Dancing it also makes me happy. I love dancing because I mean, when I was hungry now and there was no food, I put the music on, I dance, I forget about – I would forget that I was hungry. I mean even when I'm sad I dance. When I'm angry, I dance because – a lot style in dancing. You get like lyrical, you just express your feelings – when you're angry just let it all out"* [6.104]. His passion is in dancing, and this is where he feels most authentic and connected: *"I mean, I don't want to like get up in the morning like saying 'Ah, I must go to work again' [speaking about a 9-5 job]. I want to say, 'Ja [yes], today I'm going to work, I can't wait to get to the studio and I'm going teach some of the kids this and that'"* [6.111].
- ❖ **Joe** expresses a feeling of 'unbelonging' and alienation from his immediate family. His siblings and mother have a strong bond, but he is alone, emotionally disconnected from them, an outsider: *"It feels like everyone [in the family] is against me. So now I just think by myself and do my own thing"* [8.84]. Joe experienced a deep sense of belonging at GBT: *"It was more difficult, ja [yes]. Because I told them also there by Boys Town I didn't want to leave because – how can I say? For me it was better there than in the community here at home"* [8.179]. He also finds a sense of belonging with his father: *"My father was – he like me the most and my understanding with him was very good... me and him was very close"* [8.105]. This deep sense of belonging was devastated, however, when he left GBT and, around the same time, by the sudden death of his father. Now he looks for it from his taxi friends with whom he formed a relationship at the age of 13: *"So I still had the relationship with my taxi friends"* [8.56]. He has also been investing in a relationship with his mother, despite their relationship being conflicted, by regulating their relationship through structured visits: *"The reason I moved out is because we argue a lot me and my mother – a lot... It's not that I forget about her, so let me rather just away and come visit her and so on"* [8.130].

Networking People for Goal Attainment

Most of the participants show great capacity to establish networks of people who adopt supportive roles: family members, friends, family of friends, employers, teachers, police officials, clerics and in some instances complete strangers. In many instances, people appear to offer support 'out of the blue', but closer investigation reveals the subtle and skilful ways in which our participants mobilise others towards action that facilitates their own goal attainment. Some participants seem to do this quite consciously and deliberately, while others show very low levels of awareness of how they are networking people for goal attainment.

Regardless of the degree of awareness, it is clear that most participants have developed an advanced capacity to draw others towards themselves in helpful and supportive ways and that this typically helps them get ahead with the business of succeeding. It is probable that they have learned various social skills during their time at GBT which, through experience, they have learned produce positive results in the behaviour of others – these skills elicit warm, friendly, helpful responses – and are thus repeated in various situations and may become ingrained and habitual. It is quite conceivable that this entire learning process could occur at a preconscious level.

Such a skill could, however, range from a rather passive acceptance of an offer of assistance through to a coercive, even violent forcing of someone to give one what one wants. When we first began to work with this social process, we called it 'mobilising people for goal attainment' but felt that the term 'mobilise' implied that this process was too contrived, manipulative and self-seeking. The term seemed very negatively connoted. We therefore selected the more neutral 'networking'. However, some participants have related aspects of such networking that are better termed 'mobilising'. And even within the research interviews themselves, there were moments, with one or two participants, that we felt they were mobilising us.

The realisation of this shadow side to networking prompted critical self-reflection among ourselves, and gave rise to the recognition that networking is a process that we all engage in and that easily ranges from more neutral to more manipulative. An analogous concept that is well-researched is that of 'impression management', which has been defined as, "The processes of adapting to situational demands to create a favourable impression in order to obtain a desired outcome" (Van Breda & Potgieter, 2007, p. 100). Image management, which is similar to social desirability responding, is common throughout life, but particularly in high stakes settings, such as job interviews, where applicants put their best foot forward in order to impress the interviewers and secure an appointment. While, strictly, this could be considered manipulative and dishonest, society does expect us to behave in these ways. Indeed, much socially acceptable behaviour (being polite, not passing wind in public and obeying the rules of the road) can be considered impression management. Thus, Wyte (as cited in Crowne & Marlowe, 1964, p. 11) says, rather provocatively, "When an individual is commanded by an organisation to reveal his inner-most feelings, he has a duty to himself to give answers that serve his self-interest rather than that of The Organisation. In a word, he should cheat."

Despite the ubiquity of impression management, one must question at what point impression management becomes coercive and unethical. When social skills are used deliberately as tools to manipulate others into complying with one's own needs, even to the detriment of the other person, one may conclude that this has crossed from normative social behaviour into sociopathy, where others are viewed not as separate, valid individuals but as extensions of oneself, placed there to advance one's own needs (Sadock & Sadock, 2007). Some narratives conveyed a sense that the participants were consciously using social skills as tools to actively change a situation in order to achieve a desired outcome.

This raises a number of ethical issues for GBT's intention to equip vulnerable young people for life. Is it ethical to teach a range of social skills that may be used in coercive, manipulative and unethical ways? Perhaps what is required is to pair such social skills with insights into values and ethics, so that these skills are used in responsible and socially acceptable ways.

The social process of networking others for goal attainment is illustrated by the various detailed vignettes from our study:

- ❖ **Andre** evidences impressive yet apparently naïve networking skills. He managed to elicit support from 21 people including friends, owners of an abandoned house, police officers, employers, girls, family members and the parents of friends. In the five years since leaving GBT he has secured accommodation in 11 different homes and five different jobs. While this might suggest a lack of stability, it also points to his deftness in mobilising people to support him with shelter and work.
- ❖ **Andre** broke into an abandoned house after a period of homelessness. He is confronted by the owner/caretaker of the house, who one would expect to evict him. Instead, "*And he's like, 'Listen here, you are not supposed to be on this property', and it's a black guy – a very nice black guy and he speaks a very beautiful Afrikaans. He told me listen here, you look like a very smart white kid, I'm going to let you stay here provided you help me take care of this house and see that nothing goes with it, no vandalism or whatsoever goes on here. Now I'm like, okay no it's cool. Then I started staying there"* [1.18]. Unexpectedly, Andre appears to turn the situation in his favour. The "*smart kid*" comment suggests that Andre presented himself in a way that impressed the caretaker, resulting in a favourable response.
- ❖ **Andre** was employed by an industrial company. He describes his job interview, in which he was both honest about not knowing about the materials the company sells, but also demonstrated his openness to learning: "*I went to [interview] and he told me, do you know how hydraulics works? I was like listen here, the thing that I know about hydraulics is zilch. I know nothing about hydraulics. And he was like; if I teach you something will you understand it and 'leer jy vinnig?' [do you learn fast?] And I was like, yes, if you can show me how it's done then I can, do it there's no problem"* [1.56] – his openhearted, guileless manner appears to win him the job. After about two years of employment, he absented himself for a week, received a warning, but stayed away for another week, and got fired [1.86]. After a few months of unemployment, he heard the company had a vacancy, contacted the employer and

negotiated his re-employment, including negotiating to start later so that he would have time to relax before beginning work: *“And he’s [the employer] like, ‘Listen here, when can you come in to start work again?’”* [1.118]. Andre’s relationship with this company illustrates his strong ability to network.

- ❖ **Brandon** has strong interpersonal skills, which, in large part, account for the sustained success of his business. He says, *“When I get a customer I keep a customer, and that is where the trick comes in”* [2.73]. One of the first people he did contract work for, several years ago, is still one of his clients [2.69]. He attributes this stability of his client base to two main factors. First, he does quite a bit of the work himself, because he trusts his own skills more than others – *“I deal with the customer, I know what he wants personally, so I end up doing most of the work myself”* [2.85]. Second, he sees himself as a leader: *“I have got leadership skills”* [2.79]; *“I was never a follower, I rather lead”* [2.81]. He believes that these leadership skills are also the reason his business has survived, when others failed [2.77]. He sees leadership not just as something that he does, but as a character trait: *“I’ve got a good leadership inside of me in general”* [2.247]. These skills were evident while at GBT, resulting in his being voted in as Mayor. In fact, he was, for a long time, eager to achieve that status: *“I mean I could see that the whole mayoral inauguration, having all of that responsibility, it drove me and I knew I wanted to be mayor before I left”* [2.241].
- ❖ **Brandon’s** networking approach is very much about presenting himself in a way that elicits admiration and compliments from others: *“I’m very good and I get a lot of compliments – more compliments, so better I strive to do good quality, because I like getting compliments for what I do”* [2.207]. The interviewer experienced this during the interview – he found himself providing more positive affirmation to Brandon than to the other interviewees. In addition, he experienced strong feelings of warmth towards and support for Brandon, much more than with the other interviewees. It seems, then, that Brandon has developed a capacity to elicit such warm responses and feelings of confidence in others.
- ❖ **Germaine** describes many of his relationships with people as close and often describes them in familial terms. He talked extensively about a relationship he established with an ex-teacher and her family: *“She like my second mother and her husband is also like my second father”* [7.88]. She invites him to live with her and her family after he left GBT and her husband gives him his first job [7.8]. He also managed to gain the support of friends, their parents and even a drug merchant (*“He actually kind of like took me under his wing... he made me feel like a son and all that, because we were quite close”* [7.36]) to secure a job, accommodation and provide protection. He had three different jobs (transferring three times within one of these companies) and lived in seven different homes. The number of jobs and accommodation he secured suggests that he has a strong ability in networking people and that this ability has helped him with succeeding. He describes himself as developing relationships easily: *“I always build intimate relationships... I bond with people very easily”* [7.46]. This trait has influenced his approach to relationships as well as networking.
- ❖ **Dean’s** narrative suggests that he, very much like Andre, has developed an advanced capacity to elicit supportive responses from people since leaving GBT. Although not mentioning many people in his narrative (very much like Brandon), the people who he does mention play a significant part in his succeeding. While Dean was at school, and after leaving school, he managed to secure work as a tiler [4.116] as well as stripping cars [4.146]. Then about four months after getting to know a friend, she indicates that her father is looking for someone to assist him in his business and Dean is offered permanent employment in the father’s business. Dean describes the father as more than a supportive employer, but someone who trusts Dean and has interest in mentoring him: *“I don’t know. That man gave me the factory keys. He told me you open the factory every morning after a month. He told me he’s going to make me a man. That’s what he told me”* [4.232]. After three months working for this man, Dean decides to open his own business, the same business as this man was running, with the assistance of the man’s daughter: *“He actually supports me a lot now also. Even now, there are certain things I still don’t know... And he still tells me and he phones me up”* [4.182]. This rather odd sequence of events all point to Dean having a knack at mobilising other people to support him in the achievement of his goals, perhaps even to their own detriment.
- ❖ **Dean’s** narrative elicited interesting insights thanks to the team approach used in this study. Dean’s interviewer experienced him, during the interview, as amiable, friendly and easy going. In his field

notes, the interviewer wrote, “Dean impressed as mature and confident without being boastful or bragging. It felt like he had been used to being successful in his life already – self-assured... When initially speaking on the phone he impressed me as being immediately friendly.” However, the other researchers, while reading the transcript, experienced Dean very differently. One researcher memoed: “He is quite ‘cold’ in determining how people will help or hinder his goal attainment, and responds accordingly – friends, family, anyone. It borders on antisocial.” This striking difference was discussed in the team analysis of the transcripts. One researcher made this memo during this discussion: “When [the interviewer] reads the transcript [in light of the researcher’s comments], [the interviewer] can see Dean’s calculating approach to relationships. This may point to the level of skilful networking for goal attainment.” This discrepancy was clinched, when, after the interview with Dean was finished and the recorder switched off, “He said something like, ‘Now that I have done something for you, would you mind doing something for me? I would like you to share my card with the campuses that may use catering equipment from time to time and they may then use my business.’” These reflections suggest that Dean, while perhaps exploitative and self-serving in his actions, is highly skilled at conveying a sense of his integrity and creating a feeling of warmth in the people that he mobilises.

- ❖ Since leaving GBT, **Thabo** has managed to secure six different jobs, been accepted into two different courses of study, managed to get bursaries for these courses and be assisted by others on numerous occasions with difficulties he has. In his narrative it is apparent that his strong communication and interpersonal skills – his ability to make a good impression and his Contextualised Observation, Learning and Action skills make him exceptionally able to network with others. For example, when he applied for a job, he found: “*The HR Manager there happened to be a lady that had fostered a Boys Town boy... And she took quite a big liking to me. As soon as I came to the interview I had it in the bag*” [9.73 & 9.75]. Similarly, he secured another job by using his “*gift of the gab... to talk the manager at the time into giving me a job*” [9.113]. He did the same with a police officer who arrested him, who said “*you look like a bright kid*” and cut him a break [9.206].
- ❖ **Thabo** shows a much more conscious and purposeful use of his networking or social skills in order to attain his goals than many of the other participants. He explains how he “*kind of forced*” [9.109] his mother to open a gym contract for him even though she was not keen. He describes himself as having “*enforced my way around the house*” [9.67] with his mother, in response to a difficult reintegration to his home after leaving GBT. At the gym he gets preferential rates, because “*I know all the guys there*” [9.172]. Needing to get a job, his girlfriend “*hooked me up*” [9.156] with a job. After his mother not liking his girlfriend, “*I have managed to smooth things over*” [9.242].
- ❖ **Thabo** displays the highest levels of self-awareness regarding networking for goal attainment. He periodically seems to cross the line towards mobilising: “*You could say look, I’m an ex Boys Town boy or whatever, you could throw up the whole sob story like that whole feel sorry for me... Ja, a few times when I got into trouble. I pulled that card*” [9.208 & 9.212]. Nevertheless, he has a keen grasp of the ethics of using these skills: “*I mentioned that I could manipulate. There is a negative way to it because... after learning that you know how to get to people..., to impress them, or to make them see a certain way or... trust you... and people outside are oblivious to that because they don’t know that you’ve learned these skills... on how you present yourself... It does give a little bit of that [believing you are trustworthy] I would say which negatively... impacts on one’s personality*” [9.264-9.268].
- ❖ **Christopher** demonstrates both his contextual observation and action and his networking abilities in the way he secured his current job: “*I decided to start looking for another job. I was walking around just to get away for the day and I walked into [a restaurant] to have a nice lunch. I saw that the place was quite busy and the waiters were running up and down and that. I asked to see the manager and the manager came to me and I asked him, are you perhaps looking for waiters and he said yes, I am. Are you interested? I said ja [yes], I wouldn’t mind coming to work here as a waiter. And he said well okay, you’re starting tomorrow*” [3.54]. Given that Christopher had not prepared for the interview – “*I didn’t even comb my hair that morning. I didn’t shave that morning, my beard was standing like this*” [3.56] – he most probably impressed the restaurant manager by his initiative and hutzpah.
- ❖ **Gary**’s networking skills are less well developed than some of the other participants. Nevertheless, he has managed to elicit support from his youth pastor: “*She helped me to get into a school*” [6.8], his aunt who provided him with accommodation after he decided he could no longer live with his mother

and stepfather [6.61], his friend who supports him in staying drug free [6.28] and his friend's girlfriend who helped him to attain his licence: "[This friend is] actually teaching me now to drive and so. Then his girlfriend gave me the number that I actually called now the other day to make an appointment for my learners" [6.52]. His decision to leave home is, perhaps, a good example of networking. Gary felt that he could no longer live with his stepfather: "As soon as he has money he will like buy the whole table full of alcohol and then just sit there, play music... people that never come to our house will sommer [just] come there and then drink with him and then he ...maybe like two o'clock in the morning he wants to play loud music and we must actually sit there. How can you live with a person like that? So I just told my mother now, I can't live there anymore" [6.61]. In this example, Gary recognises that his living arrangement with this social system is not helping him achieve his goals in life and that he needs to separate himself from this context and find a social environment that is more conducive to succeeding.

- ❖ **Ferdi** identified 12 people, excluding direct family (parents and wife), who provided him with assistance over a three-year period. These people assisted in various ways with accommodation or finding or giving him a job. In addition, his father, who himself is struggling financially and socially, offered Ferdi accommodation and assistance towards a deposit for a house: "So he said no okay, I can come and stay there, I don't have to pay him anything and he will help to see if he can put a little something towards the deposit, because he is also – he's very, very – not very poor, but he doesn't have extra money" [5.52]. His adoptive parents provided extensive assistance: accommodation, jobs for Ferdi and his wife, a wedding, an education, a car, a fridge, a microwave and food. He also held down 10 jobs. This suggests that Ferdi has a capacity to network with people to assist him in achieving his life goals.
- ❖ However, while other interviewees (such as Andre) seemed uncannily adept at networking, **Ferdi** seems much less competent. Six of these people let him down – one person, who hired him twice, never paid him his salary and exploited him; others were mobilised by Ferdi to assist him in business ventures, but failed to deliver on their expectations; others promised to find him a job, but did not. Despite his obtaining extensive help from his adoptive parents, Ferdi resents the help and is scathing of his adoptive father's generosity. Perhaps Ferdi has not, to the same degree as others in this study, developed the skills of networking people for goal attainment. So, while people do offer to assist, he is unable to maintain their helpfulness or effectively utilise their assistance for the attainment of his goals.

Contextualised Observation, Learning and Action

Networking people for goal attainment, which was addressed in the previous section, emphasises how individuals network, mobilise or persuade people in their social environment to cooperate with their desire to attain certain goals. Contextualised Observation, Learning and Action (COLA), which is addressed here, is also a contextual social process that involves the interaction between persons and their social environments, so as to facilitate goodness of fit in the person-context interface. However, COLA implies recognising threats and opportunities in the social environment and responding in reflective, conscious and purposeful ways that do not jeopardise the individual's succeeding.

The young people in our study have developed a keenly observant eye that is shrewdly contextualised. This is not applied consistently across time and context, and there are frequent examples where there is a lack of COLA. However, there are many times when this potential is well applied, often in crucial and even life-threatening situations, and the care-leavers are thereby significantly equipped in their journey towards independent living.

The participants appear to have a sharp eye, sharper than others, perhaps akin to being 'street smart', that is attentive to and connected with their contexts. In certain contexts, they rapidly assess social situations, noting the dynamics that could threaten them or that could be to their advantage. Frequently, they appear to be wide-awake and vigilant, and able to observe and recognise social dynamics. All relate key episodes in which they learned from the words or behaviours of others. In some cases these episodes triggered pivotal insights and learning. In other instances, they actively observed and learned from the behaviours (both positive and negative) of others, and cannibalised this learning into their own patterns of behaviours. They also showed reflexive learning – being aware of their own mistakes, learning from them, avoiding repeating

them and taking informed action next time. They showed the growth of increasingly responsive action, taking control, setting limits, making goal-directed choices, exercising self-discipline, restraining unhelpful patterns of behaviour and protecting themselves, all within these social contexts.

This social process is crucial, because many of the participants in this study still live within adverse social environments that continuously threaten to drag them into a life of gangs, drugs, violence and poverty. This is particularly true for Gary, Christopher, Germaine and Joe. It is within these highly challenging contexts that they apply these skills of COLA. One might anticipate that the 'average' person would succumb to such environments, but these individuals display a capacity, albeit fragile, to recognise what is going on around them, to stand back and to pioneer their own paths – paths of succeeding.

Through this, we have learned from the participants that it is essential to apply the age-old social work principle of person-in-environment (Hollis & Woods, 1981), which is now articulated most clearly in ecosystems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Waller, 2001). According to this theory, people exist not as isolated entities, but always in interaction with their social environments (family, peers, workplace, welfare system, community and so on). It is impossible to understand a whole person (or to understand a person holistically) except in context. This is most obviously evident in smaller children, who are both dependent on and responsive to their family contexts. But, in fact, this pattern of interdependence between person and context continues throughout life.

The implication of ecosystems theory for care-leavers seems to be that we cannot judge a care-leaver's behaviour (including their level of success and their succeeding activities) without considering their environment. A care-leaver who returns to a high risk, adverse environment and displays limited success may have much greater capacity for succeeding, and in this instance for COLA, than a care-leaver who returns to a conducive social environment and displays equivalent (or even higher) levels of success.

Given that many, perhaps even most, care-leavers do return to less than optimal social environments, it is vital that they acquire the skills to observe their social environments, thereby recognising what is taking place and how the events and processes around them could help or hinder them in their succeeding. Following such observation, which we have previously referred to as a 'keen eye', it is essential that they learn, which involves cognitive processing, applying what they have observed to the implications for themselves, to learning the lessons that life offers. And thirdly, this learning must then be translated into practice, through selecting a course of action that is aligned with their definition of success, and that thus contributes to their succeeding.

It is noteworthy that this competence of care-leavers has not been described in the literature on care-leaving reviewed on pages 3-6. This may be because most research on care-leaving has focused either on discrete factors that predict success or failure, rather than social processes, or on interventions by social welfare, rather than on the social processes that care-leavers themselves implement. Either way, it seems that this finding is new and may, with further investigation, reveal some of the less obvious or discrete skills that youth learn in care and are able to apply in a range of social contexts.

This three-fold process of COLA is observed in all nine participants, as illustrated by the following detailed vignettes:

- ❖ **Germaine** tells how, during the court proceeding to consider removing him from the care of his sister, he assessed that it would be better for him to go to GBT and informed the court that that was his preference [7.162]. He explains further that he had heard from friends that had been there of the benefits of GBT in accommodation and being able to finish school [7.164]. In this way, he shows himself to be open to learning from others and reflective and thoughtful in his approach to living his life.
- ❖ **Germaine** tells how in befriending a 'drug merchant' he received many benefits, i.e. he was protected, nurtured [made him feel like his son] and earned additional money. But when this person approached him to work for him more formally, even with the lure of numerous material gains, he knew he needed to get away from the situation: *"At the end of the day he wanted me to work for him, and I knew that's*

the time I had to get myself out, so I disappeared” [7.136]. “And all that sounded nice [car, money, rings, clothes] but I knew at the end of the day what’s going to happen, because I saw how he treated his people. I saw how they got beaten up.....gun pointed and all that” [7.140]. Here we see Germaine engaging with risky behaviour, but at some point observing that this was becoming too risky and taking action to withdraw, which he did successfully.

- ❖ **Germaine** describes how, even though he was living with a good friend and his family, he relapsed into doing drugs on the weekend with this friend. But when the friend’s drug addiction became “too hectic”, he needed to leave: “But he got too hectic and he like stole a whole lot of my stuff and we ended up fighting and stuff. So at the end of the day I sat down and thought where can I go?” [7.80]. Here again we see Germaine flirting with risky behaviour, but also setting limits on the extent of that behaviour, and exercising a capacity for critical reflection.
- ❖ **Andre** describes how, after his parents threw him out and he was living on the streets or in the abandoned house, a good friend confronted him: “And he told me in my face, you are a fucking hobo and I smelt like one and looked like one and everything, all that kind of nonsense” [1.22]. While Andre often reacted aggressively to such confrontation, he listened to this ‘hobo’ comment: “That really changed my point of view of myself, and I decided listen here, I need to make a plan here. I went and started to go and look for jobs and everything” [1.22]. He later explained why this comment hit home: “When I was at college my dad used to come and fetch me in the afternoons, and then there’s this... guys on the street corners begging, and my dad told me, I don’t want to see you like this one day. And when [my friend] told me you’re a fucking hobo then I got that flashback and he changed my mind” [1.315]. Here we see Andre’s attentiveness to what others say to him, and taking their challenges seriously, and acting on them.
- ❖ **Andre** describes how, while living at GBT, he listened carefully to what the other boys said about their lives and about how they had survived: “All the other boys had different backgrounds and they had different ways to survive. And then you can find out listen here, let’s say that boy’s father is an alcoholic, how did he survive? Then I can find out, okay listen here, he survived that way. For if that situation should happen to me, how would I survive? What should I do and all those kind of things. So basically it’s a very big network in Boys Town. If you know how to use that network in the right aspect then you can survive basically anything” [1.208].
- ❖ **Andre** describes similar observation and learning in his current job as a salesperson in an industrial company. He would “...check what the other sales person does. Steal from him using your eyes and make it your own, you see. Without him noticing whatsoever, and that is basically what helped me” [1.220]. Andre then shows his sharp eye by linking his own learning processes across contexts: “What I realised is, listen here, that is what I did in Boys Town – that is what I did in Boys Town just to survive” [1.220].
- ❖ **Christopher** lives in a profoundly abusive social environment. He has experimented with various ways of coping in this environment, thereby demonstrating his contextual sensitivity. He has discovered that the most effective method is to emotionally disengage from his parents: “I started ignoring it [his step-mother’s abuse]. I would start coming home from work, make me something to eat and go to the room” [3.24]. He provides detail about what he does to cope: “Like say for instance tonight I walk into the house, which would be like half past five, six o’clock. I go to my room; I go fetch my coffee, sugar, something for me to eat. I go to the kitchen and I’ll make me sandwich or something. Then I go back to the room and then my stepmother will be screaming and shouting on me from left, right and centre and 130 kilometres down my throat. And I’ll be lying on the bed with my phone in my hand busy on MXit or on Facebook. And it’s like I hear a little voice in the background but I’m ignoring it. Because it doesn’t pla [bother] me anymore because I’ve been hearing the same thing since I was four and a half, and really it does not pla [bother] me no more” [3.104].
- ❖ **Brandon**, in comparison with some other GBT leavers, has experienced a relatively smooth and steadily improving life situation. However, his drinking, which is clearly something he feels quite embarrassed about and ashamed of, is problematic. He has had four drunk-driving accidents, which have had serious financial implications and threatened his relationship with his fiancé, who is not acculturated to this type of drinking [2.135]. About two years ago he crashed two cars (first his fiancé’s and then his own), about a month apart [2.109], while drunk. The second one was particularly bad – he crashed into three

trees, and the day after he threw up blood [2.109-2.113]. After that, he said to himself: *“I basically said ja [yes], no, I can't do this anymore”* [2.113], attributing this to a weighing up of the costs of his drinking, particularly to his fiancé and son [2.115], to himself [2.117] and financially [2.119]. He quit drinking for about a year [2.123]. These self-challenges sobered him up for a time. However, alcohol is a tenacious substance, and he began binge-drinking again: *“When I start then I can't stop. I enjoy it too much”* [2.290]. Three months prior to the interview he had another accident, but this time someone else was in the car with him and was injured: *“It opened up my eyes more to the possibility of hitting of someone else, and I wouldn't be able to live with it”* [2.326]. Brandon has demonstrated a less than optimal capacity to observe and learn from life; nevertheless, recovery from substance abuse is typically episodic and involves ups and downs (Amodeo & López, 2011), and his narrative points to key moments where learning has taken place and resulted in genuine, if not enduring, behaviour change.

- ❖ **Brandon's** first job after leaving GBT was with his fiancé's brother and lasted about four months. He indicates that he observed dishonesty in her brother's business practices and confronted him. He got fired. When asked if he thinks he could have handled the situation differently, he said he was happy with it, because: *“I wouldn't have probably been so independent today if I didn't. I mean we probably may be still be together. Only bakkie [small pickup truck], tools, odd customers and that”* [2.63]. From early, he demonstrates a sharp eye for detail by noticing the business irregularities and a willingness, albeit impulsive and immature, to act on what he saw. Furthermore, he is able to recognise how this incident facilitated his journey towards independence – from here on he worked for himself as a handyman and contractor.
- ❖ **Ferdi's** reading of his social environment does not appear to be as well developed as some of the other participants in this study, which may in part account for his difficulties in some social situations. Nevertheless, he relates two incidents where he demonstrated openness to learning from the events around him. The first took place while he was still at GBT. He visited a friend during the holidays and woke up one night thinking, because of the way the room was set up, that he was in prison: *“I really thought I was in prison. I could hardly breathe and I thought no, it can't be. Then I looked out the window and I see green grass, I see the cars and I started looking at it – a little bit more normal. I switched on the lights and it was just [the house]. So I suppose that ... scared me a bit, but made me realise that that's where I'm heading. If I'm that scared when I'm still quite a bit away from it, how is it going to be if I end up there?”* [5.168]. He does not claim that this transformed him: *“I don't think it had like an immediate [effect on my behaviour], but I realised okay, as the guys wanted to do stuff wrong I was just like ja [yes] okay, whatever, you guys do it”* [5.170]. While before this incident, he was drinking and destructive at GBT, after this he was more open to the support, encouragement and interventions of the GBT staff and was able to take up leadership roles in GBT.
- ❖ **Ferdi** relates a recent fight with his wife, which escalated out of control, largely due to his tendency to avoid conflict and then to boil over [5.151]. He ended up smashing her cell phone and threatening to chase her out of the home. After hours of fighting, he withdrew and began to reflect on his life [5.153]. *“And then I just thought about it. I was lying there in bed and I was thinking about [another person who was isolated because of his erratic behaviour]. And I thought to myself what I had then and what I have now, I've worked way too hard to get where I am. Maybe I haven't bought everything in my house, but I've been on a long road to get where I am. And I just thought 'no', here because of a stupid fight, I'm going to lose my son, I'm going to lose my wife; what did I work for to get here”* [5.154]. This new perspective, taking stock of his current context and learning from the experiences of others, which required him to be self-critical and vulnerable, helped him to engage directly with his wife; they talked through and resolved the conflict.
- ❖ **Ferdi** has been learning from his life experiences about building up a career. While he believes he has always been fully committed to his jobs: *“Everywhere I've been I've done my best. I have believed in being the best”* [5.106] – he is recognising that his lack of patience and his expectation that he should get quick promotions and salary increases have compromised him. *“I just suppose I've never understood how bosses work. They need you to prove yourself, and six months is not proving yourself. I mean a lot of people work the best for six months and then they just go downhill. So I've never really had the patience. ... But it's just after two months, three months, I know that I've proved myself or if I feel that I have, because they will tell me, you are doing well. ... And then [if they don't promote me] I'll just get*

tired and then decide no, it's fine, I'll rather move on. So I have got my thing there a bit mixed up. I should at least make it three years and then move up or whatever. But ja [yes], I'll say it's changed especially now that having a child has become more of a reality" [5.107]. He feels he has learned the importance of staying in a job, building up a track record, getting a qualification and gaining credibility. "So I do regret just being impatient and stuff" [5.115].

- ❖ **Gary** demonstrates sharp observation skills that have enabled him to reflect and learn from his life experiences. He "started smoking tik [crystal methamphetamine] in Boys Town and luckily they sent me to rehab" [6.37]. He says: "I just decided to stop and said no, this is not for me, because I saw what it was doing to me and the people around me" [6.40]. He mentions craving for tik sometimes, but will never smoke it again, because: "When I see my old friends that like motivates me to not do drugs, to not do the stuff because I see how they look and I'm like that's bad" [6.44]. As a result of this, Gary expresses strong resolve in his acting upon this learning: "I tell myself I'm never ever going to do again, even if my life depends upon it" [6.36] and "You have to swim against the river. You have to tell yourself, I'm not going to do this... When I say no, I say no. I just walk away, I go home" [6.42].
- ❖ **Dean** has acute observation skills within specific situations where he can learn things that will advance his movement towards 'success'. He seems to be constantly on the alert to learn something through observation that will be to his benefit, and was able to cite several examples. He describes how he has applied the 'strictness' he learned at GBT to the running of his business: "Obviously when somebody is strict you obviously know yourself that you also have to be strict, like I have to be strict in business now. I can't just let people walk over me. Imagine like the person tells me he is going to pay me next week and then next week comes and I have no money, then how do I eat? So you've got to be strict in that way to tell them, you either pay or you go and find a new – get somebody else to render your service" [4.24]. Similarly, Dean relates how he took specific note (made notes) of things that he believed were important for his success, for example, he indicates that he listened carefully to the teaching he received at GBT on 'Money Management', while others did not [4.30]. Also, he describes how, when he was employed by his friend's father in the catering equipment business, he memorised measurements and other details of the work in order to be able to start his own business [4.170-4.174]. Dean describes how even the 'negative' experience of 'falling off the wagon' after leaving GBT, brought for him realisation that the things he had learned at GBT, like a stricter, more disciplined life, need to be applied [4.214]. It seems that then began to apply these lessons to his life, even referring to how he had learned from talking to the kitchen staff at GBT.
- ❖ **Thabo** shows a well-developed sense of recognising an opportunity and responding to it. While some of the other participants have applied their COLA skills towards entrepreneurship, Thabo seems to exemplify this capacity. He was working out at a particular gym and recognised that this is an opportunity to get a job in the gym and regularly approached the manager to employ him, eventually getting the job [9.113]. Later, while working at the gym he noticed an advert for work overseas and pursued this keenly, getting the position [9.117]. Although about to go overseas for this job, he still applied for a university course, just in case things didn't work out for him [9.152]. After his return from overseas, he did take up that university course. In his first year, he saw and responded to the opportunity to motivate for a bursary [9.156] – initially he said: "I don't know how that happened" [9.162], but then said "I wrote a motivation everything, did everything" [9.164]. Later, although involved in full time study and not yet graduated, he saw an opportunity to apply for a position in his field, which he pursued and was offered the position [9.184].
- ❖ **Thabo** has observed that people respond empathically to him when they learn that he was a resident of GBT: "I'm ashamed to say this, but saying you are a Boys Town boy could get you out of a lot of trouble" [9.206]. He has since consciously used this learning on a number of occasions to get out of trouble: "Like you say – you could say look, I'm an ex Boys Town boy or whatever, you could throw up the whole sob story like that whole feel sorry for me" [9.208].
- ❖ **Thabo**, like others, shows times of poor COLA, which ends up surprising and disappointing himself as well as others. For example, where he shoplifts [9.186] and is eventually caught and arrested [9.204], in not meeting his contractual expectations at a Hotel Management course and being fired [9.95], or in using drugs when he knew of the strict attitude the people offering him the overseas job had to this [9.137]. In all these cases where he "messes up" [9.95], Thabo does also recognise it as having messed

up and responds by summoning his resources and pulling himself up. The most emphasised example of this was after being arrested for stealing and the arresting officer and his mother give him some advice and he describes it as a turning point and an “*epiphany*” [9.212], where he needs to make use of the opportunity he has been given through what he has learned at GBT and not throw that away.

- ❖ **Joe’s** social environment is extremely challenging, with drugs being readily available and gang fights being a daily occurrence. This could be an explanation for his generally poor COLA skills within specific situations. In this way, Joe, who is one of the youngest participants in this study, is a negative case for COLA. For example, Joe acknowledges he has an aggression problem that was controlled when he was on Ritalin, yet he still made the decision not to take the medication knowing the consequences: “*The time I was here I wasn’t so aggressive like the time I was at home, the time I finished with Boys Town. So the time I didn’t use that pill I was very aggressive every day, and someone can just touch me or so, so I sommer [just] get angry or so*” [8.67]. Furthermore, he relates that he is more aggressive when he is drunk: “*I get more aggressive when I’m drunk*” [8.73]. Yet, when asked about his drinking habits he admits to binge drinks every weekend: “*Like every weekend. Not drinking in the week*” [8.75]. Although he recognises the negative relationship between aggression and Ritalin and alcohol, Joe continues to engage in risky behaviour.
- ❖ Nevertheless, the building blocks of COLA are there, in that **Joe** does observe and learn from his context. For example, he admits that if he had money readily available he would be tempted to buy drugs: “*That’s why I tell my cousin don’t give me money, rather buy me stuff: clothes, shoes, anything*” [8.85], because “*If I have the money and I see this wrong friends and they buying stuff, then I would also want to buy and do that stuff*” [8.87]. Here he recognises his vulnerability and makes at least some attempt to action on that insight. But if he has money, he seems unable to constrain his drugging: “*Where I live there is only negative people and I go and talk to them, they don’t come to me. I go to them and if I have money I might also want to do those wrong things*” [8.89].

Building Hopeful and Tenacious Self-Confidence

All the participants evidenced a growing sense of hope for the future and a self-confidence that was tenacious in the face of adversity. What impressed was not just the presence of hope and confidence, but the ways in which they worked to build hope and confidence. This does not emerge from the data as an inborn personality trait, as is often described in the resilience literature. Rather, it seems to be a learned skill that evolves over time and often through encountering adversity. In many ways, then, this social process is a key example of resilience in action – through challenging life experiences, these participants work to build up an enduring sense of hope and a tenacious belief that they have the ability to overcome the odds.

Some young people invested much energy during the research interviews in trying to convince the researchers of their capacity, skill, ability, knowledge, virtue. It was at times difficult to discern whether they were endeavouring to persuade us or themselves of their capacity. Yet it is clear that they work hard to develop confidence in their capacity and in communicating this to the world around them. For some, this self-confidence is strongly grounded in hope – hope that things will get better, that life will work out, that they will achieve their goals, as they journey towards the future. For others, there is a tenacious, committed, never-give-up attitude that continues to strive and strive and strive, regardless of the challenges encountered. All of these seem to lead primarily to a building of self-confidence – a belief in their ability to create a better life for themselves, or a better self for their lives.

This social process is well-accounted in the narratives of the study participants, but brief phrases capture the essence of this theme:

- ❖ “*Never give up on life*” [7.138]
- ❖ “*I got up by myself and carried on*” [3.98]
- ❖ “*I will get there*” [5.106]
- ❖ “*You have to swim against the river*” [6.42]
- ❖ “*I’m going to go far in life*” [4.236]
- ❖ “*I’m still building and I will get there one day*” [9.236]

These processes seem to be rooted in an underlying belief (seemingly an assumption, paradigm or worldview) that one can always recover from failure. This was not articulated explicitly by the participants, but speaks through the various narratives provided below. Theoretically, one may associate this belief with the construct of ‘learned resourcefulness’, which is the resilience counterpart to ‘learned helplessness’ and which is described as “an acquired repertoire of behaviors and skills (mostly cognitive) by which a person self-regulates internal responses (such as emotions, cognitions, or pain) that interfere with the smooth execution of a desired behaviour” (Rosenbaum & Ben-Ari, 1985, p. 200). While this definition emphasises the cognitive skills aspect of learned resourcefulness, which was not obviously present among our participants, the paradigmatic or assumptive aspects of learned resourcefulness do manifest. We see, in the care-leavers, an assumption that recovery is always available to them as an option in responding to adversity. Thus, rather than experiencing the adversity or challenge as overwhelming or debilitating, resulting in the loss of hope and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007), they are certain that if they apply themselves they will be able to master and overcome the adversity, and perhaps even transform it into an opportunity for thriving (Ickovics & Park, 1998). A history of experiencing that they are, in fact, capable of rising above adversity, reinforces and entrenches this certainty.

While we did not overtly pursue, in this study, a line of questioning into the origins of these social processes in their experiences at GBT, some participants indicated that their time in GBT fostered a sense of confidence, being toughened up, being validated, being convinced of their potential. They reported how this capacity builds a sense of personal agency – that I can change myself and my environment through my behaviour – which brings with it power.

In reflecting on the GBT programme, the research team considered that the overall approach of GBT to youth development may contribute to this kind of resilience. One of GBT’s mottos is that there is “No such thing as a bad child, only bad circumstances.” GBT thus endorses a fundamental faith in the capacity of all youth to grow and learn, despite their social environments, a view that is consonant with the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2008). Youth are encouraged to strive towards and expected to attain leadership positions within GBT’s peer group system of self-governance. There is an expectation that youth will, from time to time, fail or mess-up. This is not pathologised, but rather expected and built into the GBT programme. There are always second, third and fourth chances, which convey the message that GBT youth workers will never give up on you, which may be internalised as ‘I always have the potential to succeed’. Even when youth mess-up, they can immediately halve the negative consequence of the mess-up if they can demonstrate, during the disciplinary confrontation, what they could have done better. Furthermore, after these ‘mess-ups’ have occurred and been confronted, youth care workers are trained to exercise heightened awareness of when these youths’ behaviour represent positive approximations of the expected behaviour and are expected to praise youth for such behaviours. It is, other words, an expectation of youth care workers to more actively observe and respond to youths’ positive behaviour after they have ‘messed-up’, than in more neutral situations. So, there is an active development by GBT of the capacity to get back up again, and rewarding of the quickness of the getting up, hence a building of resilience.

Given that resilience (particularly in the popular definition of ‘bounce-back-ability’) is a social skill learned through facing life’s challenges, the regulated experience of living in GBT and the purposive engagement by youth care workers with youth who experience failure is likely to lay a foundation of learned resourcefulness and self-efficacy, of hope that things can get better and of self-confidence that “I can change my life”. If sufficiently pervasive and consistent, such experiences could lay a highly tenacious level of hope and self-confidence, which could endure well beyond the boundaries of GBT.

This social process is illustrated as follows:

- ❖ **Germaine** regularly refers to “*not giving up*” as being at the heart of his success. He compares himself against friends and family who he implies have taken the easier paths and slipped into failure or worse. In some instances he refers to this commitment to his goals as being an innate ability, that he is “*hardwired not to give up*”, and on other occasions he indicates that he learned a lot from his

experiences at GBT to assist him with this. It also comes through strongly that this commitment is fuelled by hope: *“That’s my motto, never give up on life”* [7.138]; *“No, I don’t give up on my goals, that’s one thing. In life...even though I can be rock bottom I will never give up”* [7.52]; *“I could have given up easily, I could have told myself stop this struggling, stop trying to be good and stuff, why not just mingle in with the rest of the group, go back to drugs and all that. So keeping a clear head and staying strong and not giving up hope, I believe is one of the most difficult things”* [7.150].

- ❖ **Andre** demonstrated a tenacious belief that things can work out during one of the most serious crises in his history. His conflict with his parents escalated to the point where he pointed a gun at his father demanding the keys to his scooter. His parents kicked him out, *“My dad told me, ‘Listen here, the day that I can see in your eyes that you have changed, that’s the only day that you will be my son again’. And he literally had written me off there”* [1.16]. Andre was shocked by this tough love and begged to be let back in, *“Night after night I sat here in front of the gate to plead to my dad, listen here, just give me another chance. But he gave me already too many chances before, and I keep on messing it up – I keep on messing it up”* [1.16]. But then, in the face of despair, *“I decided no, this isn’t going to work for me”* [1.16]. He realised he needed to make his own way and through a period of living on the streets was able to find himself accommodation and begin to establish his own life. This narrative, a key period in Andre’s life, demonstrates the dogged belief that he can make it, despite the odds.
- ❖ **Christopher**, despite the challenges of drug addiction, poor education, unfortunate romantic relationships, and conflicting and abusive family relationships, has managed to remain hopeful about his future as he journeys towards independent living: *“Well the positives that I’ve experienced are that a person does have will power. You can make up your mind to do something or not to do something. Like I’ve made my mind up that I’m going to go on my own and my target is to make it while I am on my own, and I believe I’m going to make it. I know as well I had my downfalls, I’ve learnt from my mistakes and ja [yes]. The mistakes I made I will not make again”* [3.48]. Christopher recognises how the ups and downs of life have contributed to his resilience: *“Since I left Boys Town I’ve learnt a lot. I fell totally down, but I didn’t stay where I fell. I got up by myself and carried on”* [3.98]. This ‘getting up and carrying on’ is central to the social process of building hopeful and tenacious self-confidence.
- ❖ **Brandon** has constructed a life narrative about himself that locates his skill and ambition in childhood: *“Anything I’ve done I’ve done it properly. My dad taught me how to work with my hands from a small, young age”* [2.79]. They did not have a lot of money as children, and Brandon was always eager to earn extra pocket money. *“So I started from young, and I would always enjoy it working with my hands”* [2.203]. He relates replacing a clutch at age 13 and earning R500 [2.203]. It seems that he learned early that quality work elicits affirmation and recognition from others, something he seems hungry for, *“When I get compliments – when I weld and other people watch me weld, like my friends are now, ‘you know what you’re doing. I can weld, but you know what you’re doing’ ... they are always impressed, give me compliments”* [2.211 & 2.213]. This drive for recognition through accomplishment was key while at GBT, because such behaviour leads to positions of leadership within the peer group system [2.261]. He indicates that he was instrumental in raising the standards at GBT: *“If I go there and visit and there’s one of the old staff members they literally said come back for a week. The system started dropping a little bit and I got it back up to the original standards when I arrived there, and a lot of the staff members said, since I left that the whole system started dropping standards”* [2.247]. This pattern of performing and being affirmed has continued through to the present and is the foundation of his hope, tenacity and self-confidence. When asked how he got his first job, he says his fiancé *“probably bragged to her brother about me, like I work hard, because if you know me I work very hard”* [2.43]. He says that even during the recession, when work was not going well, he was still delivering quality: *“I was still doing good quality work; it was just not having the work to do the good quality. That I think hit me a little bit”* [2.129]. Even during the research interview, the interviewer found himself providing much more affirming feedback than he usually would, seemingly facilitated by Brandon’s nonverbal eagerness for positive responses from others.
- ❖ **Ferdi** has confidence in his abilities and potential, even if his history does not always substantiate this confidence. After a few jobs did not work out, he decided to start his own IT company [5.20]. He recruited clients: *“They liked me more [than his competitor] because I didn’t lie to them. I did not say, okay I will be there in 10 minutes then come in three days. So when I went to them and I told them I was*

starting my own company, all of them – it was about 50 clients – had said okay, it's great they want it. I was more expensive but they said it's fine. So they said as soon as I am ready I must just come there" [5.24]. In the end this did not work out, as his partner first pulled out [5.28] and then his two attempts to secure capital failed [5.34]. Nevertheless, this episode, despite not working out, demonstrates Ferdi's belief in his ability to start his own business, a belief that he has not relinquished despite failure.

- ❖ **Ferdi** is perpetually hopeful about the future, that things will get better: *"I want us [family] to be on our own. ... I want to get a flat where it's just more secure. ... But it will change – I know it's going to get better; it's just to be patient"* [5.88]. He acknowledges some of his growth points, but remains optimistic about his capacities, *"I must say I'm a very impatient person, because I believe I do my best in every job. ... I think the only place I'm not doing my best is now where I am now. ... I don't really enjoy it at this point. So I will get there, but everywhere I've been I've done my best. I have believed in being the best"* [5.106].
- ❖ **Gary** is quietly confident and positive about his future. He experiences a relatively supportive and steady work and living situation. He represents himself as someone who is content and happy with how his life is progressing and hopeful that with hard work and passion he will achieve the success goals he has for himself: *"A career, something I want to do. I mean, I don't want to like get up in the morning like saying. 'Ah, I must go to work again'. I want to say, 'Ja [Yes], today I'm going to work, I can't wait to get to the studio and I'm going to teach some of the kids this and that', or just go to the studio and record music, make music, just sing my heart out or rap or whatever. Like that makes me happy, so ja [yes]. I can see myself one day, doing something like that"* [6.111].
- ❖ **Gary**, who has a shy and polite demeanour, displays a gritty, steely determination in certain areas of life, which gives evidence of how he actively builds his tenacity and self-confidence. For example, regarding giving up his drug habit, he says: *"I tell myself I'm never ever going to do again, even if my life depends upon it"* [6.36] and *"When it comes to that now, you have to swim against the river. You have to tell yourself, I'm not going to do this... I say no I say no. I just walk away, I go home"* [6.42]. Similarly, when Gary talks about his dancing, he lights up with energy and passion. Not everyone supports his dancing, including his mother and aunt, yet Gary says: *"If someone says, 'no you can't dance', I'll just like laugh at them and say – then just think to myself, no, you just think that I'm cool, or you're just jealous"* [6.106].
- ❖ **Dean** impressed as genuinely confident and positive about the future. His current work and living situation was certainly not one struggling for survival, but epitomized someone who was comfortable and happy about where he was and hopeful in meeting the extreme financial success goals he had for himself: *"For me? I must have at least about 100 million [Rand] to be successful"* [4.252]. This goal did not seem to be arrogant or a fantasy, but one that he honestly believed in and was planning for: *"There's three tenders at the moment and we will see what happens from there"* [4.254]; *"But now today I can tell you I am smiling about everything. All that hard work. I still put in 110%, because I believe if you don't put in that, what are you going to get out?"* [4.194]. Dean recognises that he has not yet achieved 'success': *"No I'm far from the top. I'm only at the bottom still. I just feel that from where I've been I reach the top. I mean at my age I've got lots of things going for me, more than most people would have in their life I think"* [4.244]. He concludes the interview in a way that typifies his confidence about his anticipated success: *"The story is not finished yet. I've still got – I'll tell you my story in another five years"* [4.270].
- ❖ **Dean** constructs an archetypal hero story that centres on his being somehow special or different from others. He compares himself against other youth at GBT who did not listen to the teaching with regard to money management like he did [4.30]. He again compares himself against less successful youth at GBT, who he saw as being too 'soft' and became negatively influenced, while he was not [4.64 & 4.68]. He believes that people talk about him as a hero, thereby bolstering his self-narrative of being exceptional: *"It is amazing. Even people that I see still, people that looked at me when I used to walk around in the streets being that little homeless boy. People can't believe who I have turned out to be today. They can't believe it"* [4.188]. He cherishes particular things people have said to him during his life: *"They told me I've got something ja [yes], and I'm going to go far in life"* [4.236]. At the end of the interview, Dean concludes: *"You see, everybody is different; that's why I know I'm the exception, I know why"* [4.268].

- ❖ **Thabo** impresses as a very self-confident young man and this is no more succinctly put than in his comment of how he sees himself: *“I am a confident, self-assured young man and I mean I'd like to think I'm intelligent. Most people get along with me – I'm a people's person, I am very social and ja”* [9.234]. This confidence and hope is reflected throughout his story and not just because (at time of interview) he was at a successful space/time in his journey. For example, Thabo was prepared to challenge his mother and her parenting with what he had learned at GBT, even when faced with hurtful accusations from her that he was trying to be “white” [9.47, 9.49 & 9.51]. Thabo believes in what he has learned and perseveres with Mom to the point where he eventually believes he made some breakthrough with her: *“I started teaching her some stuff, not in the Boys Town manner which was really like steps, but in a roundabout way where, if we'd have an argument I'd instead of trying to disagree appropriately right then or five minutes later, I'd wait until the next day”* [9.67]. This same confidence, particularly interpersonal confidence, is also seen in his preparedness to approach new opportunities like, speaking with the gym manager for a job even when this was not advertised [9.113]; in writing motivations for bursaries [9.156 & 9.164]; in being prepared to apply and go for a job overseas [9.119]. Thabo did not require much deliberation or outside motivation to pursue these opportunities, as might be the case for others his age. His hutzpah shows in that he even applied for opportunities while busy utilising others. This tenacious self-confidence enables Thabo to weave his negative life experiences and personal failures into an overall narrative of hope and success: *“I mean without them [hard life experiences] I wouldn't be the person I am now”* [9.232].

The Scuppering of Façades to Achieve Authenticity

The narratives of several of our participants contain examples of them engaging in self-destructive behaviour. At times, this appears as a regression towards adolescent, irresponsible, fun-loving behaviour. At times, there is a sense that they were quite aware that their behaviour was self-destructive, but they did it anyway. At times, the behaviour is so obviously ‘stupid’ that the researchers feel sure that the participant must have done this deliberately, for some reason. The question is, why?

It does not make sense to deliberately harm one's life. Unless one believes one's life is not real – that it is a veneer: false, fake. If that is the case, one might reasonably, perhaps even responsibly, harm that life in order to break through the veneer to reach what is true. We decided to call this behaviour ‘scuppering’, which is a nautical term referring to the deliberate and intentional sinking of one's own vessel, or metaphorically to deliberately spoil something. Deliberately scuppering one's own vessel does not seem reasonable, unless, for example, someone else was threatening to use it for some nefarious purpose. In such a situation, scuppering could be regarded as wise and insightful.

We should be clear that we are here *interpreting* a pattern of behaviour that emerges regularly in the data (Charmaz, 2006). There is a distinction between the behaviour that we have observed and our interpretation. Behaviour is simply behaviour. But an interpretation is a narrative that explains the purpose and meaning of the behaviour and which is layered over (or perhaps under) the behaviour. We cannot be entirely certain that this interpretation is valid. However, we believe that it is a reasonable explanation of the behaviour evidenced and that it has some support from theory. This interpretation is thus a theory that we are constructing to explain the evidence that we readily observe.

So in the context of the lives of the young people since leaving GBT, we see numerous examples of where they seem to have chosen certain directions/paths in life and are successfully following these, when they suddenly seem to spoil or scupper these plans, i.e. *they sink their own ship*. Although the actual spoiling of the plans does not seem to be a consciously deliberate act, the behaviour they engage in to scupper their current life journey often appears to be illogical. This aspect of the scuppering does prompt one to consider that there is some level of intentionality in the act, albeit unconscious or preconscious. The crux of the intention is to break through fakeness or façades to achieve a greater degree of authenticity, being honest with oneself about what is not okay in one's life.

By way of brief examples (detailed narratives will follow shortly):

- ❖ **Joe** goes off Ritalin, because he does not feel like he is himself, he doesn't feel real. But the 'real' Joe without Ritalin is not socially functional – he's angry and not going anywhere in his life. The happiness of Ritalin covers the truth of his unhappiness.
- ❖ **Thabo** rises to the challenge of getting accepted into an overseas job, but once he is there, he is confronted with the hollowness of the achievement, that it is not a true reflection of what is inside, so he scuppers it to show the unreality of it.
- ❖ **Ferdi** impulsively quits his job, then immediately takes and blows a bank loan. In so doing, he dumps the façade that he is an independent adult, when really he feels like a dependent child, needing unconditional love and care from his parents.

Traditional models of transitioning typically assume a linear, predictable process of moving from care to independence, often comprising three stages (Rogers, 2011): (1) separation, where the youth leaves care; (2) margin, where the youth is between worlds, dislocated from the family of origin (or place of care) and the adult world; and (3) aggregation, where stability is regained because the youth has now settled into the adult world. It is during the middle stage that youth are regarded as most vulnerable, because of the between-worldness that leaves them rather unanchored. It is here that youths are at greatest risk of, for example, engaging in criminal behaviour.

Backe-Hansen (2008a), however, explains that marginalised youth, such as care-leavers, frequently follow a non-linear path from care into independent living. Youth workers will agree with Kroner (as cited in Hurley, 2002, p. 1) that, "We expect our youth to make a lot of mistakes until they get it right." This in-between period of mistake-making is now recognised as being highly individualised, with youths moving back and forth between dependence and independence, as they experiment with different ways of being in the world (Rogers, 2011). "Whereas previous transitional stages were considered to be predominantly structurally defined, the transitional experiences of young people are now guided by personal agency as much as structural factors ... and are highly fragmented and chaotic rather than linear" (Rogers, 2011, p. 414).

Backe-Hansen (2008a) identifies a number of variables that influence non-linear transitioning of care-leavers, including: the absence of social constraints that would otherwise shepherd a youth down a more regulated and less chaotic transitional path; having to deal with multiple transitions simultaneously, often with less support and at a younger age than those graduating out of their family of origin; social exclusion, which may both cause and result from non-linear transitioning, mediated by less successful attainment of education, employment and housing; and less access to social supports.

Backe-Hansen (2008a, pp. 1-2) explains that care-leavers' non-linear transitioning involves "unpredictable situations and outcomes, independently of whether a young person manages to achieve positive outcomes at a later stage." Thus, she argues, it is quite possible for a youth to follow a non-linear path, which during the process appears self-destructive and contrary to the intended goal, but which, ultimately may help the youth achieve that goal. This notion opens up the possibility that these behaviours might, in fact, be *necessary* to the achievement of the outcome, rather than merely a nuisance that side-tracks an efficient transition. Perhaps, as strategic family therapy has recognised (Haley & Richeport-Haley, 2003), it is sometimes necessary to proceed from one dysfunction to another dysfunction before being able to progress to functionality. Given the massive challenges faced by care-leavers, perhaps a non-linear route is the most viable path towards clearing away the debris and complications of a life of vulnerability.

Our data suggest that in many instances youths are actively seeking to live lives that are authentic and real, particularly against the backdrop of many experiences of woundedness and abuse in their past. While at one level, their behaviours are certainly destructive to self or others and undermine their transition towards independent living, at another level, their behaviours serve to express authentic and typically unheard experiences. Scuppering appears to be a largely unconscious attempt to strip away the façade of life and to establish greater authenticity.

Not all of the participants evidence scuppering behaviour. Gary and Christopher, as two of the youngest participants with the shortest time out of care, do not relate examples of self-destructive behaviour, although Christopher provides a poignant example of his life prior to going into care. Germaine's only scuppering narrative occurs while he was in care at GBT. Dean's story suggests that he has all the ingredients needed to scupper, but has not yet done so. The clearest examples of post-care scuppering come from Ferdi, and to a lesser extent from Andre, Brandon, Thabo and Joe.

These variable findings lend credence to the necessity of longitudinal research to fully perceive and interpret the social processes involved in care-leaving. It would, for example, be interesting to see whether Dean does in fact scupper his life over the next year. Cross-sectional research, even from a narrative perspective as in this study, is limited by being retrospective.

The social process of scuppering façades to achieve authenticity is illustrated most powerfully and persistently in Ferdi's narrative, which thus enjoys considerable focus:

- ❖ **Ferdi's** narrative exemplifies the process of scuppering most clearly, though he evidences almost no insight into the dynamics behind his regularly self-destructive behaviour. A number of rather complex scuppering episodes emerge. First, regarding his time at GBT, he describes how his first year involved a great deal of acting out: *"Breaking and drinking, anything that I could do wrong I did wrong"* [5.168]. He then had an experience that *"scared me a bit"* [5.168] and triggered a new way of thinking about living his life at GBT and resulted in a reduction of acting out. This was reinforced by a Youth Care Worker who expressed belief in him: *"He cared more. He pushed me, or he believed in me – I'd say that"* [5.170] and gave him leadership responsibilities in the Peer Group System (PGS) [5.172]. The turnaround was significant for Ferdi, who began to consider staying at GBT until he finished his schooling [5.173]. However, on his return to GBT the following year, he discovers that the PGS leadership system has been suspended (probably due to a lack of leaders returning from the previous year) and experiences this as a great injustice: *"I mean I had worked really hard. I believe I tried my best and here all of sudden I get back after the December holidays and there's no leaders. Here I have to be as low as everybody else, and all the ones that are doing everything wrong I have to be there"* [5.173]. His response was extreme and even though the staff encouraged him to persist and achieve leadership status, he refused: *"I said no, it's not even worthwhile. I have worked, I know I have changed, I don't need to prove to anybody here and then I became bad again. I just did everything possibly wrong because I knew I was able to leave there"* [5.173]. This narrative, hardly an atypical reaction from a vulnerable adolescent, seems to capture much of Ferdi's subsequent life narrative. He has a strong feeling that life owes him more and when life seems unfair or difficult, he rapidly scupperes it. Perhaps in this case he felt that continuing to seek leadership status at GBT was fake, people pretending that his life was okay and that he could make something out of himself, when in fact, he felt deeply abandoned by both his biological and foster parents, and here also by GBT. The authenticity he seeks to expose is that his life 'sucks' and people have not looked out for him.
- ❖ After leaving GBT, Ferdi experimented with several jobs before getting a position in a security company that paid very well and that he enjoyed: *"[It] was very, very good – it was nice. I enjoyed it – I loved it"* [5.4]. But one morning he felt *"too lazy to go to work, so I was in bed"* [5.6]. His colleagues kept phoning him, *"So I thought oh well, I've quit. [laughs] So I told them no, I am already working for the other place – I didn't have the job yet but anyway"* [5.6]. In fact, although he had been offered a job at another company, he turned them down because they were offering almost *half* of what he was currently earning, so at various levels this is a highly irrational decision. The reckless, almost arrogant way he expresses himself in this narrative, suggests latent anger. This severe anger and the violence that it inspires in him is seen in examples later in the interview, particularly in his sadistic account of wanting the opportunity to beat someone, anyone up [5.162], his offhanded account of threatening and assaulting a woman [5.40] and the level of anger in conflicts with his wife [5.136 to 5.144]. This underlying need to express his pain is perhaps what feeds the need to scupper, because it seems to offer him opportunities to inflict some pain in order to express his own. The normalcy of life lacks authenticity for Ferdi – it feels pretend. Holding down a stable job and relating to others in nonviolent, respectful ways are experienced, at some level, as playing a socially acceptable role, not as an authentic

expression of what is inside. What appears to be authentic for Ferdi is deep-seated rage over the unfairness of his life history. When he behaves in irresponsible, reckless, socially unacceptable ways, despite the negative consequences, he experiences this as at least authentic and honest.

- ❖ Sometime later, he starts to feel unhappy about having to struggle in life (in terms of socioeconomic well-being): *"I started getting a little bit hassled"* [5.57]. At the same time, he got in contact with his paternal grandfather, who he had not seen for many years and towards whom he has fond feelings. As they were planning to meet up, Ferdi suddenly decided to quit a job he had held for nearly a year, confident that his adoptive parents would catch him: *"So it was kind of like a stupid thing but it was something that I had to do. The next day at work I just thought, I know them, they [adoptive parents] are very well off, ...I know they will help me. So I quit [laughs]. And on top of that the same day, or the day before I made a loan at the bank, not a lot of money, it was about R3 000 and the next day I quit my job [laughs]. I just decided no, I have had it to here"* [5.60]. He continues, *"I have been praying for a long time for an opening and I know my adopted father... will help me, especially if I tell him I don't have a job, he will. So I quit. And then about a week later ...then I wasted obviously my loan [laughs] as knew things are going to get better somehow, so I just wasted it [laughing]"* [5.62]. The self-destructive behaviour in this narrative entails quitting a secure job and simultaneously taking out and wasting a significant bank loan. This is all narrated with much laughter, suggesting a cavalier attitude. This is underpinned by a naïve confidence that his adoptive father, with whom he'd had little contact during this period, would rescue him. Here, one senses that the scuppering serves to reveal his authentic need to be taken care of (the references to his grandfather, to prayer and to his adoptive parents are particularly revealing) and that life somehow owes him because it has not been fair to him.
- ❖ The point raised earlier that participants are largely unconscious of their scuppering motivations appears most closely when the interviewer challenges Ferdi on two occasions. In the first, the interviewer challenges him on career: *"Most of the jobs that you have had have been really low paying or short. [he laughs and agrees] You know six months sounds about the longest. So where are you at now in your thinking that's going to get you there?"* [5.105]. Although Ferdi offers a lengthy explanation, his responses are quite contradictory, for example: *"So I'd say I want to stick. I think I might still jump around a bit from business to business, but I'm not going to make the mistake of leaving before I have some qualifications"* [5.111] and *"So I think I'll definitely stay in insurance. Well actually I might move a little bit"* [5.113]. In the second, the interviewer challenges Ferdi on his resentment towards his adoptive parents for being so generous towards him. Ferdi's response evidences his limited insight into the dynamics of this relationship: *"So it's just kind of like, they're helping but they're not helping. I appreciate – I don't, not for a second do I regret anything they gave me, but as well – I don't know... I've got a bad attitude towards it, I'll say. But, it's not like I'm not grateful for it, I mean I am very happy for everything, and hopefully I'll be able to take everything they've given me and turn it into my life being a success. So – ag, it's just at this stage – it's this point, it's just a little bit difficulty. It's like kind of confusing and stress".* It seems the interviewer exposed Ferdi to a contradiction related to scuppering that he recognises but cannot explain. The possible explanation is that, although the financial and material support is valued, it is also a 'slap in the face', because what he really wants is unconditional love, acceptance and belonging. The substitution of these experiences with financial and material support thus elicits anger and resentment.
- ❖ Although this kind of scuppering occurs throughout Ferdi's narrative, one incident occurred recently that is the only instance of his recognising the scuppering and purposefully circumventing it. Ferdi describes how, even though he and his family have relatively good security now as compared to earlier times, he still experiences heightened levels of stress [5.150] and then describes an event a week prior to this interview, where this stress results in a tremendous fight (including violence [5.153]) with his wife, where she is about to leave him and he would lose his son too: *"all those things that I was keeping quiet about started coming out"* [5.151]. But then, rather than continuing with the scuppering, Ferdi finds space to step back and reflect: *"And then – and I just thought about it. I don't know, I was lying there in bed and I was thinking"* [5.154]. Some vision of a previous, more seriously threatening event, helps him see his current life situation in a positive light and realises he must not scupper what he has: *"I said [to his wife] no. Sit here, let's just finish this. I said okay I'm sorry, I know the way I was, was wrong"* [5.154]. This response results in an opening up of the relationship and a fresh assessment of his

life: *"I must say, from where our relationship has been to where it is now, I think it's just as good as my life. I've had serious problems in my life and finally it's looking good"* [5.156]. This is the only interaction in Ferdi's narrative that shows him recognising and redirecting his scuppering of an otherwise successful path. The event is so recent that we are unable to assess if this was just a passing moment or a powerful turning point.

Other significant scuppering incidents follow:

- ❖ **Andre** was living a relatively materially comfortable life with his parents, but then 'messes this up' through using drugs and stealing from them. After he gets kicked out of the house he lives with friends where he avoids taking advice to look for a job, but continues to be involved in 'drinking, drugs and women': *"I love my drink. I love my brandy and coke, I love going out to parties and all those kind of things, just to enjoy myself, to get away from the life that I have now"* [1.52]. This last phrase is telling, in that it suggests some insight into the function of his scuppering behaviour – the reckless partying serves to get away from his life, which in some way does not satisfy. When Andre gets further into material trouble he gets accepted back by parents, but then messes up even further by eventually threatening his father with a gun and is 'permanently' kicked out. Andre describes what could be seen as his understanding of the scuppering of the reliance of living at home and needing to move out. *"But he gave me already too many chances before, and I keep on messing it up – I keep on messing it up"* [1.16]. This last line captures the imperative of scuppering – this is not just accidental behaviour, but has a compulsive quality to it.
- ❖ In **Andre's** scuppering narrative, it helps to know that he was adopted at 6 months of age, and that the parents he refers to here are his adoptive parents, or who he refers to as his *"foster parents"* [1.14]. Andre appears to have had doubts about his sense of belonging in his adoptive family and precipitates a series of crises in which he tests the limits of their tolerance and love. Once he crosses the line by threatening his father with a gun and is finally thrown out, the authenticity of the parent-child relationship has been enhanced – he knows where he stands, knows where the boundaries are, knows that he is still loved within those boundaries. This enables him to start a new and much healthier, though not uneventful, life. Knowing that he can no longer rely on their responsibility to provide security for him, Andre goes about fashioning out a life for himself where he can personally provide those securities for himself. Although there are moments of messing up in between, he responds fairly responsibly on the path of independence. He later redeems himself with his parents and is currently renting a room on their property.
- ❖ **Andre**, in another scuppering episode, stayed away from his stable job, which he liked, for two weeks because he was *"lazy"* [1.82] and didn't feel like going to work. *"I got fired because of my laziness. If I decide I don't want to go work, I'm too lazy, I don't want to work then I stay, I put my phone off, nobody must bother me, and I did that for a week"* [1.82]. He eventually went back to this job and later in the interview goes to some lengths at describing how much he actually likes this job, but almost inexplicably risked this job to the point of getting fired. To understand why, it is useful to explore this *"laziness"* he talks of because there appears to be more motivation behind these actions than mere laziness. At a later point in the interview [1.122], Andre describes how his experiences would help him in being a father to a child of his. In this passage he explains that his involvement in the *"stupidity"* of his life, i.e. drugs and stealing, was because he was trying to replace his brother who died when he was eight: *"I did it because of stupidity. The stealing and everything, stupidity. I tried to replace to my brother okay. He was my best brother"* [1.122]. Here Andre links his reckless behaviour (losing his job, being lazy, drugs and crime) with his deep grief over the loss of a brother, in the context of being adopted. This may be the closest example of Andre actually saying that he needed to scupper his life through 'stupidity' in order to recognize his need for belonging. This need for belonging is further emphasised when he strongly expresses how much he liked the belonging or group identity while at GBT, even though it was in a negative context to threaten others at his school [1.136]. In this passage he uses the word 'lekker' four times to describe how he liked this feeling. Later he also describes this time while at GBT as the *"best years"* of his life so far [1.230]. Here again, a foundational theme in Andre's narrative, belonging, seems to underlie a scuppering behaviour, his sabotaging of his job.

- ❖ **Brandon** has engaged in periodic self-destructive behaviour through his use of alcohol. The first instance was while he was in GBT. On the brink of becoming Mayor he was caught walking out of a bottle store with a case of beer, which resulted in the loss of all privilege and status at GBT [2.320]. Then about two years ago, he crashed two cars, about three months apart, both while under the influence [2.109]. Ten weeks prior to the interview he had a third car accident, also under the influence, in which his passenger was injured [2.326]. (He mentions four car accidents [2.304], but only three were explicitly described and linked to drinking.) This pattern of reckless behaviour, about which Brandon was excruciatingly ashamed, is in stark contrast to the rest of his narrative: having held leadership positions at GBT, being a married father and running his own business with a span of employees under his management. At one level, his substance abuse could simply be an emerging alcohol addiction (his father is an alcoholic [2.292], making him genetically vulnerable). On the other hand, his drinking may reveal that his independence and leadership is a façade, not a currently authentic expression of who he is, but rather his attempts to conform to societal expectations to be mature and responsible. Perhaps his natural charm and charisma have led him into positions of responsibility that he does not feel ready for; and responsibility begets responsibility, so the demands just get greater, not less. From time to time, he unconsciously sabotages the responsibility to express his authentic need to be dependent and cared for, rather than independent and giving care.
- ❖ **Christopher's** description of his life before GBT provides a strong example of scuppering in order to draw attention to the fact that the world must wake up and notice him and his awful situation. He goes to some length in describing how often he used to get into fights at school, even with the principal and vice principal [3.134]. This must be one of the loudest pleas of help a youth can make. It resulted in a scuppering of his life with family and within 'normal' youth processes like school. This scuppering resulted in his being removed from an abusive home environment and placed at GBT. Thus, his apparently self-destructive behaviour at school, which appears dysfunctional, in fact helped to strip away the façade that his life was okay and revealed the awful truth of an abusive family. This scuppering was effective in changing his social environment, which has helped him journey closer towards being a well-adjusted young adult. His removal to GBT also satisfied a deep need to be attended to: *"I don't need it as much now, but that time when I had the problems and that, yes, I needed it a lot because I needed a lot of attention, somebody to sit down and talk to me. Not to talk to me but to listen to what I've got to say. To listen where I come from and that. That's what Boys Town did"* [3.142]. The contrast between his experience with his family and his experience at GBT also revealed to him the cold but authentic truth that his parents have no interest in him, which he has generalised to all parents: *"No parent will sit down and listen to their child"* [3.142].
- ❖ **Thabo's** journey is epitomised by peaks of success and troughs where he seems to scupper his journey towards success by 'messing up' through engaging in behaviour that seems so at odds with the young man that one is faced with in the interview. For example, his academic results deteriorate sharply in the first year after GBT where he almost fails the grade. Although they pick up in the following years they don't get to where they were, and he can no longer get into studying law at the university he wants, as he had always planned [9.65 & 9.67]. A turning point happens when he is arrested for stealing: *"So I got arrested and ja. Then I was thrown into a cell whatever, mom got really crazy and that was kind of a turning point for me"* [9.203] and he realises he needs to make some tough decisions about his life. Later, after getting himself into hotel school he scuppers this opportunity through not attending class and completing tasks [9.95]. He then comes to his senses and once again *"I had to dig deep"* [9.107] and sources new work. He later seeks out and secures an opportunity to work overseas and is ecstatic about this, but scuppers this within one month of starting by testing positive for drugs [9.143]. He returns to South Africa and manages to get numerous other opportunities and life improves: *"It was a kind of pickup; I got back on my feet again"* [9.154].
- ❖ In all of these incidents, and others, **Thabo's** scuppering behaviour is followed by introspection, which is not seen much in the other participants: *"I had to look deep in myself and kind of draw and find what I wanted to do with myself, like in terms of my future and stuff like that and that was difficult"* [9.196]. He refers a few times to himself as having to get over himself: *"So it wasn't a problem of that I didn't know what I was doing wrong, or I didn't know the difference from right and wrong. I knew fully well, but it was just getting over myself and my own problems kind of thing to say look, you need to get on*

the straight now" [9.212]. Being equipped at GBT with knowledge and skills was not sufficient to overcome his tendency towards scuppering. Scuppering is significantly deeper and less accessible to consciousness and ego management: *"I struggled with myself even though I had learnt that stuff. I had all those skills, I still struggled with myself"* [9.262]. This does seem to suggest that, while he certainly has the ability to impress people and achieve success through the social skills he has acquired, there are scars of his past that remain. Possibly, as with Ferdi, when things are going well and he is not in crisis, the scars and vulnerabilities are brought into sharper relief and thus are catalytic to the acts of scuppering.

- ❖ **Joe** explains that one of the main reasons for his admission to GBT was his aggression. GBT put him on Ritalin, a treatment for ADHD, which he reports calmed him down a great deal [8.64]. He indicates that he did not get into trouble and even had ideas of completing school. But just prior to leaving GBT he took himself off Ritalin because *"I'm not myself... I feel like a zombie"* [8.66]: *"So I sommer [just] started not using it any more. I decided myself because after I drink the pill I am quiet – like the pill made me quiet every day. I didn't feel lekker [good] about it, so I just started leaving the pill"* [8.64]. He then got expelled from his school for aggression (stabbing another pupil [8.56 & 8.93]) and has since never returned to his schooling. Throughout this narrative, Joe displays clear insight into how being on Ritalin regulates his aggressive behaviour and that he is far more aggressive off the medication [8.67 & 8.117-8.118], but also that the Ritalin leaves him feeling not himself. Discontinuing the medication is clearly not in his interests in terms of anger management, which has a wide range of life consequences and the Ritalin may be assisting with other aspects of his functioning as well, however he scuppers the medication because it leaves him feeling not himself, thus inauthentic.
- ❖ **Joe** relates a narrative that does not fit with our conceptualisation of the purpose of scuppering (to break a façade to achieve authenticity), but which on the surface looks like scuppering. After his father died, shortly after disengagement from GBT, moved out of his mother's home to live with a cousin [8.34]. He had had a good relationship with his father, so the loss was very painful: *"Since he was gone also everything changes for me. It feels like everyone is against me. So now I just think by myself and do my own thing"* [8.84]. On the other hand, he had and still has a poor relationship with his mother: *"Me and my mother is not coming lekker [well]"* [8.34]. His mother's home (where his siblings still live) is *"a very quiet neighbourhood"* but his cousin's neighbourhood is *"very rough... is mostly gangsterism"* [8.111]. The loss of his father seems to have severely threatened and potentially positive future for Joe, but his decision to move from a more secure to a highly volatile neighbourhood scuppers any remaining chances of succeeding. The severity of his living environment leads Joe to live a life centred on survival, not thriving. It is thus small wonder that he shows a lack of energy or drive for pursuing the goals he communicates like getting a 'proper job' or being a relationship with a girl – he is too busy surviving. In this instance, scuppering of a good living environment for a dangerous one seems to allow Joe an escape from the deeper pain of loss and lack of belonging. On the surface, this does not appear to draw Joe closer to authenticity, but it does more authentically represent the crisis that he is experiencing internally. In time, this process of exposing himself to this crisis may prove to be the scuppering which indeed brings him to greater belonging/authenticity. In the meantime, Joe's scuppering (his immersion in this crisis) dulls the truth and pain, through displacing his attention onto a more pressing, urgent need, and thus does serve an important function in his life right now.
- ❖ **Germaine** mostly describes his life after GBT as one in which he remained level headed and 'sensible' while the others (friends and family) seemed to scupper their lives. He describes himself more as flirting with risky behaviour like doing drugs casually and working for a drug merchant for a while, but being able to extricate himself from the situation. He describes himself as being able to recognize when these risky situations became too risky. The only reference to behaviour that reflects the scuppering of an otherwise successful journey, comes in his description of his life while at GBT. Germaine describes how he became successful within the Peer Group System and was made a leader on a few occasions [7.46, 7.52 & 7.170], but then scuppered this journey towards becoming Mayor, by being mischievous: *"Sir spoke to me, they said that's what I can be that's how they can see me, but in the time you're a teenager, you want to have fun, you want to catch the crap and all that. I sometimes got misled, but I knew what I was doing. At the end of the day I knew what I was doing"* [7.52]. Here Germaine mentions how the youth worker believed in his ability to become Mayor, but that although he was aware that he

was sabotaging his chances by getting involved in 'catching the crap' he still did it because it was fun and he got misled. It is not immediately evident from the interview how Germaine's scuppering broke a façade to achieve greater authenticity. However, as highlighted under the social process of 'Striving for Authentic Belonging', Germaine (more than other participants) directly emphasises his desire for a sense of belonging – the frequency with which he describes relationships as being familial in nature points more to a wish or desire than to the objective facts of the situation. If we accept this need for authentic belonging as Germaine's central need, then while at GBT he was developing a 'veneer' of success in his life through taking responsibility and demonstrating good leadership skills, the scuppering of this path is now necessary to highlight for others that all is not okay, that there is a greater but underlying need that requires attention.

- ❖ **Dean's** narrative does not contain instances of scuppering. He describes a short period after leaving GBT where he felt he found it difficult to adapt to the freedom and lack of structure which he had been used to at GBT, where he "*fell off the wagon*" [4.46]. The rest of his description of his life is focused on how he has steadily made a success of his life even emphasising how his future is bound to be very successful, with an emphasis on financial wealth. However, Dean seems to have the ingredients that could result in a scuppering incident later.
- ❖ For all **Dean's** apparent clarity, confidence, success and uniqueness, there is also an inconsistency in the way he expresses his feelings regarding close relationships which leads us to speculate that this is an area of significant vulnerability to him and his future success. He dismisses the need for close personal relationships in a number of places: "*If I was supposed to have a happy home then I would have had one*" [4.268]. In this exchange he shares that he is meant to make money, not to have a family. In another exchange regarding his definition of success, Dean emphasises material success, and when the interviewer asked him about personal relationships, Dean offhandedly mentioned: "*Obviously to have a good family and then children and so forth*" [4.258], after which he said he had no plans to start a family and provided extensive justification for why [4.260]. His materialism, set against personal relationships, is frequently and strongly worded: "*I'm going to make my own happy home basically now, which obviously revolves around money... Because if you don't have money you're not happy as far as I'm concerned... no money, not happy*" [4.268]. On the other hand, he expresses substantial, if suppressed, conflict over family relationships: "*What my real family put me through its just like – I don't know what to even think about it. That's why I don't even worry. I don't even worry with them, even if I see him the road, my uncles, my aunties. I don't even bother if I drive past them*" [4.204]. Elsewhere he speaks about not being bothered about his mother – "I don't see her. I'm not that basically interested" [4.42] – in a way that conveys that he really is bothered.
- ❖ **Dean**, then, relates an approach to life in which he has experienced considerable pain in his relationships with his family of origin, but denies that pain, and in which he has heavily invested in material wealth as the route to happiness. This schism and sublimation of affection from relationships to wealth, seems to be a formula for scuppering. At some point in the future, Dean may recognise that wealth is a façade that leaves him deeply unsatisfied. Foreseeably, he could sabotage his career in such a way that he experiences poverty and struggle, so that he can perceive more clearly his authentic need for real relationship, a need that is presently too painful to bear.

Learning from Girls & Boys Town

Some of the social interactions described by participants suggest the transfer of skills from GBT into independent living. We did not actively seek to answer a research question on what skills they learned and how they have used them. This study was not a programme evaluation and we were concerned about eliciting socially desirable responding, as participants might feel subtly obligated to overstating how GBT had helped them achieve success.⁴ Instead, we collected narratives about their lives independently of discussion about GBT, and afterwards endeavoured to identify places where the skills and social processes they described may have been learned at GBT.

⁴ A separate study is currently being conducted to describe and subjectively evaluate how care-leavers apply the GBT skills into independent living.

- ❖ **Christopher** commented on his step-mother's childish behaviour, when she was verbally abusing him. *"When my stepmother tells me that [I haven't seen my biological mother in 14 years] I ask her, 'Why are you trying to be childish now?' because throwing the past up in my face it doesn't get to me anymore"* [3.20]; *"Whenever my stepmother starts screaming and cursing me, I ask her, 'Are you trying to be childish or not, because what you're doing now is very childish'"* [3.56]. This technique of commenting on her behaviour appears to have been effective in partially neutralising his step-mother's behaviour, or at least in reducing its negative impact on him. This may be as a result of Christopher developing the skill to observe behaviours in others more specifically through his exposure to the manner in which the teaching of social skills occurs at GBT, i.e. Youth Care Workers are required to specifically describe the appropriate and inappropriate behaviours youth engage in.
- ❖ **Andre** described a conflict with his employer in which he deescalated the conflict through the use of a slow, quiet, calm voice: *"And he started yelling at me all those kind of things. And the thing that I learned at Boys Town is the eight basic skills. I forgot most of them but I still remember a little bit. It's like, if somebody is cross and screaming at you, keep your voice calm and all those kind of things and he's going to calm down. I didn't swear at all in the SMS. I told him listen here, I can't come in, unfortunately not. Okay we're going to speak tomorrow. We sorted that out and everything"* [1.118]. A crucial skill that is taught to all youth at GBT is 'Anger Control Strategies' and these always include showing youth how calm, quiet voice tones can deescalate situations. Much effort is also placed into showing youth how these calm responses are in fact a mature and 'strong' rather than weak response. This type of response to aggression or strong emotion is also a skill which is very necessary for youth care staff to learn in order not only to be more effective with the youth, but also ensure a less difficult job for themselves. These skills are therefore also well role modelled by staff and thus likely to be part of the skills that youth may well develop best at GBT.
- ❖ **Brandon** succeeded in being made Mayor of a GBT campus. This accomplishment is a central element of his narrative, affirming the leadership skills that he believes he always had [2.81]. On arriving in GBT, with an expectation that it was a school of industry, he was immediately taken by the fact that the place was run by the Mayor and his Councillors – that was *"cool"* [2.233]; *"The mayor tells the staff members that boys are going to do sports, or – you know, it was nice if a boy needed a reprimand and he had been in the court basically"* [2.235]. He felt driven to become a mayor, but his misbehaviour, mostly drinking [2.320], compromised his chances. After falling short twice, he became particularly determined to succeed: *"I wasn't getting caught the third time"* [2.245]. Indeed, he did make Mayor and, from his narrative, it is clear that this meant a great deal to him and significantly raised his sense of self-worth and potential to succeed in life [2.247]. The inauguration ceremony [2.257], Mayoral chain [2.261], having your name and photograph posted for posterity [2.267], all contributed to the heightened sense of competence. This honour is something Brandon carries into adulthood, even several years after leaving GBT: *"But being in the mayoral position and that, I would say it boosts you when you leave. I mean it's a nice achievement, and I know there's a lot of people that if you'd go to look for work or whatever and they know you were mayor of Boys Town; they know it's a good achievement. If you can become mayor, he's a very good person type thing. You know, it's not just anybody that becomes mayor, it's a long process and you would get selected for your leadership"* [2.271]; *"I was mayor of Boys Town, and it's an achievement. I would actually say that some people get a little bit more respect for you knowing that you were first of all from Boys Town and second of all, if they understand the whole system, that you were mayor"* [2.273].
- ❖ **Ferdi** says that he learned a great deal from his time in GBT, although he suggests that some of what he learned was not 'taught' as such, but rather are skills learned through the way things are done at GBT. In the context of his marriage, in particular, these social competencies emerge, notably, the willingness to talk through conflict. *"But our relationship was very bad. There was times when I don't think we would have made it, and then – just like – I suppose it's Boys Town that taught me, it's just how to talk things out – one thing they never actually taught me, but I learnt it somehow there. So we've managed to work through it"* [5.146]. He continues, *"There is a whole bunch of stuff that I know I learned, not that I remember it, but I know I learned it. Ag you know, everything, and if it wasn't for Boys Town I'm sure I would have been a lot worse"* [5.162].

- ❖ **Ferdi** indicates that GBT taught him alternative ways of handling conflict, other than fighting. He learned, for example, that walking away from a fight is as much a demonstration of courage and ‘manhood’ as fisticuffs. *“When I was there I thought this is the biggest waste of time, I need to get out of here. In Boys Town I had a huge problem with fighting especially with the friends I had, we weren’t really scared of anybody so we would fight with everybody and anybody, and I’ve noticed since I’ve been out of Boys Town, in five years I’ve only been in one fight and that was that woman that I hit. And I’ve noticed that that’s – okay, except for my relationship, but in general getting into a fight – I mean I’ve had how many few times that I should have been in a fight, but I’ve been able to walk away from it”* [5.161].
- ❖ **Ferdi** reports that he has learned the technique of giving constructive feedback from GBT: *“There are other ways to resolve [conflict]. Just in general skills that I learnt at Boys Town. I mean I’m trying to teach my wife the skill about if you need to say something bad to somebody, you don’t just go and say ‘oh you’re fat’. You start off by saying two nice things and then you say the negative thing, and then in that whole process of thinking about two nice things, the bad thing that you wanted isn’t even that bad anymore but it changes. So I explained that to her and I explained to her about communicating, body language is important”* [5.162]. This example also points to a central principle in all of the GBT programmes being ‘strength based’ or focussed on recognising positive aspects in order to create change. Staff are thus trained to recognise strengths in youth and, even when they address negative behaviour in youth, there is a requirement that they begin this interaction by empathising or complimenting the youth on something.
- ❖ **Ferdi** seems to have experienced the opportunity to be in leadership roles and the mentoring relationships within GBT as formative. After a period in which his behaviour was out of control, Ferdi realised during an experience while on holiday that GBT was not a prison, but that if he did not sort himself out he would end up in jail [5.168]. This new perspective combined with a new youth care worker who gave him the attention he needed, *“He cared more. He pushed me, or he believed in me”* [5.170]. He continues, *“So he pushed me and he told me that I can do it and not just saying I can do it, he then made me the leader of the house, so it gave me that responsibility, knowing that okay it’s on me. And so slowly but surely he just pushed me more and more towards it, and then I went, I became a leader. I can’t remember what I did wrong, but then I wasn’t a leader anymore. And he just said, no well just do it, you can still do it. So ja, I suppose that’s also what helped me change. I mean just having him believe in me”* [5.172]. What is significant about the youth care worker’s actions, is that he put his faith in Ferdi into action, but not just telling Ferdi he can do it, but actually making him do it. This faith in action is central to Ferdi’s growth in confidence.
- ❖ **Gary** describes how the skill of weighing up the pros and cons, which he learned at GBT, has helped him to assess the advantages, the disadvantages and the consequences of a situation: *“It’s like, you have to think before you make a decision and that’s I do all the time. Like someone tells me look here, come we do this then I would stay quiet and then just ask myself look here, what’s the consequences going to be. What are the advantages in that – disadvantages? What I actually ...learned at Boys Town it’s like ...ja [yes]. And then I’d just ask myself what you can get out of it and stuff like that”* [6.42].
- ❖ **Dean** highlights the PGS as significant in his learning. While the PGS is not a ‘skill’, it is a central part, if not the most distinctive part, of the GBT programme: *“You must actually let the boys – some of the boys control all the other boys, because they won’t easily listen to you [the interviewer] as where they would listen to me, because they know you can’t lift your hands – I will lift my hands... As a social worker... obviously he can’t do that. Now where I can go do that. I mean I can lay down the law easier because I can lay a stricter law down”* [4.82 & 4.84].
- ❖ **Dean** mentions learning the skill of choosing appropriate friends and implementing this after he left GBT: *“Ja [Yes], to cut off bad influences in my life. Not friends, bad influences. Because at Boys Town also there’s lots of bad influence. So I knew from then also already. If I want to do that I’m going to get this, so it was also part – it is from Boys Town. I mean they told me also I must cut, you must have bad friends. The [youth care] worker told me, you mustn’t have. Obviously your friends – he told me your friends will bring you down”* [4.206].
- ❖ **Thabo**, who is probably the most socially adept of the participants in this study, attributes his social skills to GBT, though does not mention specific skills. For example, in relating why he got a job

overseas, he says: *“I go back to attributing that to the stuff I learnt at Boys Town. I mean because, to kind of operate in that kind of country club environment they need a certain type of person, and I mean someone who can follow instructions, someone who is diligent who can do the job. Someone who can check back because they need to know things are done. You know just small skills like that... when people hire you, they look for someone with good social skills, and obviously you need to be able to do the job, but the social skills part is what's most important when you're going to be working with people”* [9.121 & 9.129].

- ❖ **Thabo** also explains that the multicultural nature of GBT was important to his development and gave him skills that have proved helpful. For example, he learned to speak Afrikaans: *“Small things like that which to this day when I will put on my CV; someone will interview me and say, ‘Really, Afrikaans?’ Because they will hear my English and say okay no you're fine, and then they will test me and then I will say yes, ek kan Afrikaans praat. Dis nie a problem vir my nie [yes, I can speak Afrikaans. It's not a problem for me]”* [9.236]. Similarly, he learned to play rugby, which he sees as helping him to acculturate to a White culture.
- ❖ **Thabo** is, however, critical of the lack of aftercare: *“It was like ‘Yay, you're leaving now. You've done everything, you're perfect’. Because before I left I almost got onto an achievement [top level of GBT social skills system] and obviously now I knew how to manipulate everything to go my way and stuff, so there was a kind of a naivety from the house parents and just the support kind of staff that this person is going to do well, because we taught them and he's a clever dude”* [9.260].
- ❖ Alluding to an elderly character in the film *Shawshank Redemption* who committed suicide after leaving prison, **Thabo** explains at length the importance of aftercare: *“I feel like, if Boys Town had been around in that period I would have been a lawyer today [laughs]. I would have done a lot of things. I mean my life might not have gone in the way it's gone now. I mean not to say that I'm ungrateful or whatever, I mean life is great. But just putting in place those structures to be able to use what you've learnt a bit more effectively. It just would have been nice – it just would have been nice and that didn't happen. Things got a bit tough. So I'd say, I kind of had a slow start but my start would have been a bit better if there was a bit more after care, things like that. And just in terms of reinforcing what we learn, there wasn't much of that. Because I mean, when you leave its just oh, you were here at Boys Town, now we have a party, you're gone. You don't have the skills book to look back at; you don't have anything sort of”* [9.250].

A handful of participants indicated that the GBT skills work well at GBT, but not outside. This is primarily because the GBT skills seem contrived or artificial in regular social settings. It is much like counsellors who, with their friends, ask, “So how does that make you feel?” This raises important questions about the transferability of skills from the GBT social environment to the ‘real world’ out there where these young people now live.⁵

- ❖ **Joe**, when asked if he had used the skills he learned at GBT, replied: *“Here in the outside? Most that I use, but like if I'm with my friends then ...it's like for them – then I'm like a joke for them or so, because the way I am. If they're rude to me I'm not rude back to them because they can't understand. I said the stuff that I learned in for the time for the three years that I was there, why must I just come out now and just throw it away, and what was the reason I was there then for?”* [8.181]. He seems to experience a conflict – on the one hand he regards these skills as actually helpful and the fruit of his investment of time at GBT, but on the other hand these skills make him the object of ridicule among his peers. What is the use, he asks, of skills that he can't use in the world?
- ❖ **Thabo** explains how hard it was for his mother to adjust to the kinds of social skills Thabo had learned at GBT: *“We would disagree a lot, and I mean, with the skills that I had learned at Boys Town, she totally couldn't understand because I mean I had a different way about me after I left, because I knew skills that she didn't know, even though she had been involved in some workshops. Like when we disagree – I mean I still remember disagreeing appropriately, where you say to the person, okay, I understand how you feel now, but this is how I feel and then you would agree to disagree and then you*

⁵ This point is the central focus of the previously mentioned research project on the application of GBT skills by care-leavers.

make amends and then you go your separate way. But with her it never – I didn't make sense to her because she was used to a certain type of parenting and I was used to being a certain type of child you could say" [9.13]. This point was so important, he continued talking about it until 9.67. Perhaps the lowest point was when: "She'd say to me look, you're not white. I'm a black parent, this is how things go in a black household and I mean that's... [Thabo bangs his hand on the table a few times]" [9.47].

Several participants mentioned the structure that they experienced at GBT as significant, but in some cases the transition out of a highly structured, regulated, protected and contained environment to the real world, which is, for many of them, unstructured, chaotic and dangerous.

- ❖ **Joe's** description of GBT is one of structure and support. His comments suggest that the environment allowed him to excel academically and improved how he related to other people: *"Just with the stuff that I learn there. And like the time I was in school, if I need to have a project to do, so all the stuff is there. I mustn't go look far for stuff or so, or go to a library, so everything was just there for me. And then the study time I was studying. I didn't struggle with school work or so anything" [8.177].*
- ❖ **Dean** similarly attributes much of his success to the structure he learned at GBT: *"Somebody laid down the law and I got into a routine, like this is how you must wake up in the morning to go to work. The same like you must wake up in the morning to go to school. It is all the things Boys Town do for you personally which the other guys don't see. I mean they tell me, you must be up half past six or it was six o'clock. You're going to eat half past six and you're going to be at school eight o'clock. You apply it to your life – your Boys Town life, you can apply it to when you leave Boys Town" [4.148].*
- ❖ **Thabo** articulates that the transition from care to home was difficult in terms of the loss of structure (which he associates with comfort): *"It was different being out because I mean, I had lived such a structured life being fed at a certain time, having all luxuries at a certain time – like being comfortable. I was really comfortable at Boys Town, so going into my mom's custody was a bit different because things were volatile between me and mom, because I hadn't been at home for what... for four years" [9.9]. Using different terminology, Thabo continues: "I had a lot of freedom which I didn't know what to do to kind of manage... That was my biggest challenge... Because I mean, our time was really structured [at GBT]" [9.188-9.194].*

The shadow side of these social skills should not be overlooked, even though it emerged only explicitly in Thabo's narrative:

- ❖ **Thabo** explains that in moving out of GBT back to his mother's home he would *"throw the [GBT] skills book at her" [9.45]* and that he *"force fed my mom the skills I had learnt [laughing sarcastically]" [9.43].* He explains, *"I'd kind of enforced my way around the house to say you know, like I'm here now, you're not going to get rid of me [laughs]. Like you know, you have to get used to it, and whatever changes you need to make that's what you need to do. I think a lot of that I was able to do also again through the skills I had learned [at GBT], because I mean I started being able to better articulate myself" [9.67].* He says, *"I kind of forced her to open a contract for me at the gym" [9.109].* In applying for a job overseas, he consciously used the GBT skills: *"I knew the MO. I'd get to interviews and I'd smack the Boys Town book at them. Like with any difficult questions they would ask me, I had basically replied in Boys Town lingo kind of thing... I kind of found a trick to it to being able to speak that way" [9.125 & 9.127].* Thabo explains how one could get out of trouble with the law by saying, *"Look, I'm an ex Boys Town boy or whatever. You could throw up the whole sob story like that whole 'feel sorry for me'" [9.208].*
- ❖ It is not necessarily the fact that **Thabo** uses these skills to get ahead (presumably that is what they are there for), but the language he uses to describe his use of these – throw, force, smack and trick. These are all coercive terms, applied to the kinds of skills that are designed to foster well-adjusted and functional young adults. Thabo himself recognises that his use of these skills is manipulative: *"Now I knew how to manipulate everything to go my way" [9.260].* He goes on to express some disquiet with his use of these skills: *"I mentioned that I could manipulate. There is a negative way to it because I mean, after learning that you know how to get to people kind of thing, well to impress them, or to make them see a certain way... and people outside are oblivious to that because they don't know that you've learnt these skills... It does give a little bit of that [a false impression of one's trustworthiness] I would say which negatively kind of impacts on one's personality" [9.264-9.268].* Perhaps the crux of this last

extended comment is that people may begin to feel that they are being 'worked' or manipulated, which turns one's positive social skills into something shadowy.

A Nascent Theory of Care-Leaving

In the preceding pages, we have identified and analysed five central social processes that have emerged through our grounded theory analysis of the narratives of care-leavers. Transforming these themes into a theory requires us to go a step further. In alignment with our use of *constructivist* grounded theory as our research design, we draw on the insights of an interpretive (rather than positivist) conceptualisation of theory and theorising. This approach "calls for the imaginative understanding of the phenomenon... [and] assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126). As much as interpretive and constructivist theorising is shaped by the way research participants construct their own realities and through a process of partnership between researchers and participants, theory is ultimately constructed by the researcher. "The theory *depends* on the researcher's view" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130) and therefore high levels of reflexivity are required, which can (and in our case have) be facilitated by the use of a research team. Within this framework, a theory involves pulling the pieces together into a cohesive whole with a clear centre or axis.

We propose that the central social process in this study, that is, in the journey of care-leavers into independent living, is ***Striving for Authentic Belonging***. Almost all young people in care have, at root, a fracturing of belonging – they have been neglected or abandoned or abused or bereaved or disappointed. In many cases, youth in care have experienced multiple care settings, often migrating from foster home to foster home, into residential care, and perhaps into a correctional facility. In all of this, a deep wound is laid that can be thought of as the loss of belonging. Such belongingness can, and frequently is, covered over by pseudo-belonging, such as becoming a member of a gang. But this is not authentic and most young people recognise this, at least at some level. What they are really after, as are probably all of us, is an experience of authentic belonging – to feel like you really matter to someone and have a place in the world that belongs to you.

The notion of ***Success*** and ***Successing*** are synonymous with ***Striving for Authentic Belonging***. In practice, most people strive for a multifaceted success, including an interesting career, nurturing family, community ties, financial security and longevity. However, it can be argued that these are primarily satisfiers of an underlying need, an argument which is consonant with Max-Neef's (1989) *human scale development* which posits nine universal needs that are met through a wide range of individual and contextually-relevant satisfiers. One of the needs in Max-Neef's model is a need for 'affection', which is virtually identical with our notion of belonging. While not dismissing Max-Neef's other nine needs, we suggest that belonging is a central need among care-leavers because this is, in many ways, a key area of poverty in their life histories. Therefore, successing, which we have conceptualised as the process of working towards success, is in fact a process of working towards authentic belonging or in other words ***Striving for Authentic Belonging***.

The social process that seems most contingent to ***Striving for Authentic Belonging*** is ***Networking People for Goal Attainment***. Networking concerns the ways in which care-leavers seek to garner support as they strive towards their goal, which is, as stated, the experience of authentic belonging. Given that belonging is relational, not something that one can pioneer independently, it is inevitable that a young person must first draw others towards her or himself in such a way as to experience supportive, helpful, affirming and caring responses. Such responses, if sustained over time, may eventually constitute the experience of belonging. If, on the other hand, a young person lacks social networking skills, they will not draw people towards them, resulting in a sense of further alienation and aloneness, or will engage with people in destructive and ultimately self-defeating ways. Thus, having strong interpersonal skills and engaging in a process of building networks with others, is essential to achieving the goal of authentic belonging. There is, however, a risk here. If the youth's networking skills are contrived or manipulative, people may start to feel used and exploited, which would rebound on the youth. Thus there is again a need for authenticity in the utilisation of networking skills, rooted in ethics and values.

The social process that seems most contingent to **Networking People for Goal Attainment** is **Contextualised Observation, Learning and Action (COLA)**. While networking is an inherently interpersonal process, **COLA** is primarily an internal process that takes place within social contexts. Networking skills need to be undergirded by an astute eye that is able to rapidly and accurately assess the threats and opportunities in a social environment. Unless a young person is able to observe in this kind of way, they will be blunt or blind in their networking endeavours. In addition, the learning component of **COLA** entails observing how others succeed in the networking endeavours, how others attain their goals. In this way, **COLA** is the brains behind the networking operation, guiding and informing, nuancing and contextualising the networking processes. Strong **COLA** skills could, for example, warn a young person of when they are being too manipulative in their use of networking skills, helping them to modulate their behaviour in such a way as to attain their desired goal of authentic belonging.

COLA is governed by two main factors, one internal and one external. On the internal side, **COLA** is governed by the **Building of Hopeful and Tenacious Self-Confidence**. On the external side, **COLA** is bound by the social context in which young person find themselves, or chooses to place themselves. For young people to continue with the non-linear process of succeeding, with all of its challenges and intricate complexities, a robust, tenacious sense of hope, self and confidence is required. Youths need to be sure that they have the capacity to effect change in their lives and a conviction that things can work out for them, that their future can be better, that they can satisfy their deepest needs. This hope cannot be overly externally located – they cannot have confidence that other people will rescue them, because this is not guaranteed, and indeed their histories belie this hope. Rather, their hope needs to be located within their own sphere of influence – their ability to effect their own change in their social worlds.

On the other hand, however, there are certain external constraints on **COLA**, which need to be considered and catered for in the way youths engage with the world around them. Certain **social environments** are not conducive to authentic belonging and no amount of hope, self-confidence, observation or networking may be sufficient to achieve the experience of authentic belonging. In such cases, a youth may need to either readjust her/his expectations or change social environments. Furthermore, the ways in which all of these social processes are expressed in the world are culturally dependent. Not all cultures and contexts will welcome the same kinds of behaviours and skills. At the most basic level, what worked at GBT may not work in a youth's community or family. Assertiveness from a girl in GBT may be acceptable, but within a patriarchal environment may result in violence. Thus, there are boundaries to the range of social processes that youths can engage in during their journey towards success.

So far, all of this looks ideal and wonderful. But this is an idealistic picture of the social processes involved in the transition out of care and into independent living. The true picture is much less linear and predictable. Indeed, we have seen that most of these journeys are non-linear, fraught with ups and downs. Frequently the youth's **Striving for Authentic Belonging** is subverted by the realities of the world, by drugs, alcohol and crime, by the lack of financial security, by unplanned pregnancies. There are a host of factors that can side-track a youth from the pursuit of authentic belonging, which results in the experience of fake belonging. Such belonging can satisfy for a time, but ultimately many youths will recognise it for what it is: a façade. When this happens, usually at a largely unconscious level, the youth may **Scupper the Façade to Achieve Authenticity**. In a sense, authenticity will out – the need for authentic belonging is so deeply engrained, that it may go to extreme lengths to be satisfied, even if this means sabotaging an apparently good life. At some level, these youths appreciate that it can be better to be authentically unhappy than to have pseudo-happiness. The **Scuppering of Façades to Achieve Authenticity** serves to redirect a misguided youth to their central bliss, viz. the authentic belonging.

Figure 1 serves to capture this theory diagrammatically.

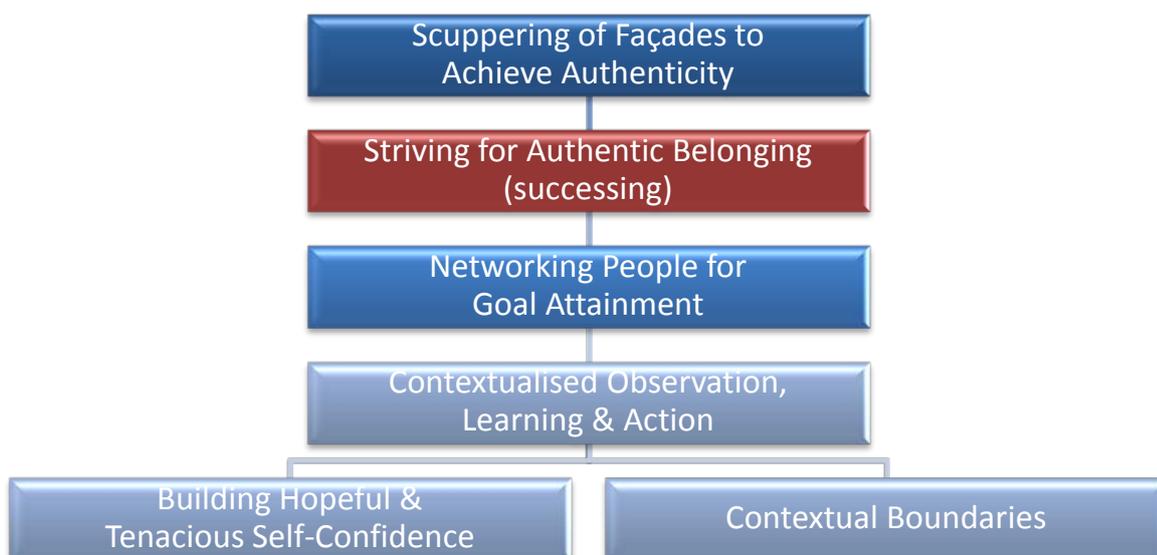


Figure 1. A Theory of the Journey Towards Independent Living

Recommendations

What are the **programme and practice implications** of the theory of the social processes entailed in the transition into independent living? We suggest the following:

- ❖ Greater attention should be given by social workers and youth care workers to **youths' need for authentic belonging** while still in care. The fractures in belonging prior to coming into and through the process of being placed into care are vitally important to address in counselling, both individual and group. GBT's investment in team building and relationship forming among the youth is essential. But in the preparation for disengagement, it is pivotal to foster a conducive home environment for youth to return to.
- ❖ This relates to the need, identified repeatedly in the care-leaving literature, for **aftercare services**. Clearly, other NGOs and the public welfare system are unable to provide adequate care to GBT care-leavers. Alternative secondary care networks need to be established. It is quite possible that a form of distance-mentoring may prove effective – regular phone calls (perhaps monthly to start and then three-monthly after a year) from a trusted youth care worker to each care-leaver may help to buffer youth as they exit care and strive to establish relationships of authentic belonging outside. While some form of aftercare, such as suggested above, may well be the practice with more potentially difficult disengagements, even very successful youth at GBT need some aftercare service, as poignantly described by Thabo [9.250]. This again points back to the focus of care staff needing to be tuned in to youths' need for authentic belonging. When youth are successful within the GBT facility, taking personal responsibility and even leadership positions for example, youth care workers and social workers may assume that they will make a successful transition out of care and into independent living. However, inadequate attention to belonging, especially in preparation for leaving a crucial source of belonging within GBT, can serve as a catalyst to 'messing-up' or scuppering a succeeding path for young people.
- ❖ The skills taught to GBT residents appear to be advantageous and youth seem to use these after leaving care. However, greater attention can be given to how to **transfer these skills** from the GBT environment into other social environments that may be less receptive to these ways of interacting. The cultural aspects of many of these skills should also be attended to, particularly as GBT becomes more racially integrated. A central principle within the model of care that GBT ascribes to in working with youth is the generalisation of skills to other settings. The information offered by these participants strongly suggests that greater emphasis needs to be given to this principle.
- ❖ Another hallmark of the GBT model of care is that of the importance of the **internalisation of skills**, where the skills learned are clearly linked with healthy beliefs and values so that they are not

manipulated for antisocial motives. It became clear from the interviews that these young men had not clearly made this link and that greater focus needs to be placed in this area. Youth need to recognise the ethical and value base of these skills, so that they are used in respectful ways that do not violate the dignity and rights of others in the pursuit of their own agendas.

- ❖ COLA, which seems to be widely developed in the care-leavers, indicating that these skills are already being learned though perhaps not formally, is central to succeeding. More focused attention could be given to **developing COLA** by helping youths debrief carefully instances where they encountered particular challenges, when they handled such situations both well and not so well. Situational analysis skills could be systematised, thereby strengthening the capacity of youths in care to identify and analyse threats and opportunities around them.
- ❖ The building of hope and self-confidence comes through the quality of relationship that youths have with care workers, and specifically in the confidence that workers show and demonstrate towards youths. GBT as an institution is encouraged to take risks in placing youths in positions of **responsibility and leadership**, and to demonstrate genuine trust (which means taking genuine risks that could, at times, go badly) in youths. This must, of course, be regulated and youths must be protected, but not to such an extent that they are protected from authentic experiences of being trusted with things that matter. This aspect is central to GBT's Peer Group System and that of 'Positive Peer Culture', which is practiced in numerous other youth care residential facilities worldwide. With the ever increasing legislation and accountability placed on care givers to provide environments that are safe and limiting risks to youth in care, cognisance needs to be given to the way this increases the 'risks' that those working with these youth need to take in order to demonstrate genuine trust. It is quite possible that the pressure of sticking to legislation and avoiding legal recrimination might result in these effective systems of developing teenagers' hope and self-confidence into independence being diluted and becoming ineffective, akin to a school prefect system.
- ❖ Almost all the youths in this study described '**messing up**' while they were in care with GBT. Such instances of failure are mines of opportunity for growth and development. One aspect of these opportunities that could be further strengthened is to explore with the youth what façade was broken in order to achieve what kind of authenticity. This may be most appropriately done by a social worker in a counselling context. By recognising the psychodynamics of their scuppering behaviour, youths may be able to develop more constructive ways of breaking façades and achieving authentic belonging. It is important that all who work with youth fully understand 'messing up' behaviour as scuppering. Too often we see youth care workers interpreting 'messing up' as evidence of why youth cannot be helped or why they need to be removed or referred for other forms of assistance. A plethora of labels related to these scuppering behaviours is often regurgitated, mostly in order to relieve the care workers' pain in dealing with the youth. However, if truly understood as a means to break the façade in order to reach greater authentic belonging, the notion of scuppering will obviate the numerous simplistic solutions which are given to these disturbing behaviours and result in a deeper, exploratory and respectful helping response.

Many of the above recommendations for practice, emanating directly from the life stories of young men who have spent significant time in care at GBT, highlight principles of youth care practice that are already well established in theory and in GBT's programme. This suggests that many of these recommendations for practice can be encapsulated into the concept of **implementation of the programme**. The recommendation here is therefore to address the difficulties care staff seem to have in the implementation of sound youth care principles.

Regarding implications of this study for **further research**, we recommend the following:

- ❖ Greater consideration needs to be given to the operationalization of programme outcomes, that is, to the conceptualisation of 'success'. The dual focus of success as both a noun and a verb should be incorporated into studies, and research (including programme evaluation studies) that attend only to success as a noun should be handled with a degree of suspicion.
- ❖ GBT should, in light of published care-leaving outcome studies and Quality of Life (QOL) methodologies, develop a set of outcome indicators that can be used to monitor the succeeding of youths leaving care.

If such indicators were measured periodically with a cohort of care-leavers, one would be able to monitor success as both noun and verb, by providing (respectively) cross-sectional descriptions of youth at certain points in time and longitudinal data on the (hoped for) improvement in success indicators over time.

- ❖ Longitudinal research, with a cohort of care-leavers, is strongly recommended to verify and deepen the results of this study. Cross-sectional narrative research has inherent limitations in that participants' memories are often inaccurate, resulting in the loss or distortion of details and nuances, which is less likely with regular data collection over time. Furthermore, key turning points that may be blurred over retrospectively, can be identified and interrogated in prospective longitudinal research.
- ❖ Further research is recommended into care-leavers' use of GBT skills in adult life. Clearly, from this research, there is quite a substantial transfer of learning from care into adult life. However, some care-leavers indicate that skills that are appropriate to the GBT environment may not be appropriate in other social settings. Furthermore, care-leavers frequently did not mention specific skills, but rather highlighted more subtle forms of learning, particularly associated with the Peer Group System (thus peer-to-peer learning) which requires much more focused investigation.
- ❖ The construct of scuppering has great promise but requires further investigation. If care-leavers tend to scupper their apparent successes in order to deal more effectively with their need for authentic belonging, as emerges in this study, then this would have very important implications for practice. Research that digs down more deeply and purposefully into examples from care-leavers of 'self-induced failure' would shed important light on a counterintuitive pattern of behaviour.
- ❖ There appears, within the GBT programme and in light of this study, to be a disjuncture between programme and practice. We suspect that this failure to fully implement established principles of good childcare practice may, in fact, be the norm across child and youth care facilities. Further research on this is required, to identify the difficulties or hurdles to programme implementation. This may enable the youth care sector to cut through a theoretical façade of excellent practice, bringing the truth of care provision into sharper relief. This will enable more practically effective solutions to the improvement of the field of child and youth care.

Conclusion

Research on care-leaving has burgeoned over the past several years. Much of this research has investigated the outcomes of care-leavers, showing them to be, in many cases, more vulnerable than those leaving home. Some research has endeavoured to identify key factors that facilitate successful adaptation. A few studies have formulated transitional models outlining the stages youths go through as they leave care. Many emphasise key interventions, programmes and policies that will help to facilitate the transition out of care.

Few, if any, studies have, however, endeavoured to identify the social processes that youths navigate when leaving care and as they establish themselves as independent adults. And few have endeavoured to formulate theory to describe and perhaps even explain or predict patterns of care-leaving. This study has ambitiously endeavoured to do just that.

Through the in-depth analysis of the narratives of nine Girls and Boys Town care-leavers in South Africa, five primary social processes have emerged. These care-leavers, drawn from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, who were in care in a number of different GBT projects, and who have been out of care for several years, provided unique and rich accounts of their journey towards independent living. Through a grounded theory analysis, central patterns of social processes emerge which are applicable across all nine participants. From this we constructed a theory of the process of care-leaving, which is underpinned by broader theories of resilience and ecosystems.

The need for authentic belonging, a genuine experience of being loved and of fitting into a social system such as a family, emerges as central to this theory. Youths demonstrate that in various ways – some more

effective, others less so and some heavily defended – they strive towards authentic belonging, which is the underlying definition of success for most. To help them in this striving, which can be thought of as a process of succeeding, they draw on a range of social skills, many taught by GBT and others learned through experience and from other youths in care, to network people in their social environments to help and partner with them in attaining their goals, particularly their goal of experiencing authenticity in human relationship. Optimally networking people for goal attainment requires care-leavers to rapidly and accurately assess their social environment for opportunities (which can be utilised) and threats (which need to be avoided or circumvented). This requires astute observation of their environments, insight and learning from their observations and then acting upon this learning, to transform opportunities into assets and to neutralise threats. Because their social environments are frequently complex and suboptimal, care-leavers require a great deal of resilience, particularly an unshakable hope and tenacious self-confidence, to believe that they can effect change in their environments and that they really can carve out a better future for themselves. When, however, care-leavers believe that their lives are somehow a sham, when they are co-opted into seeking and accepting superficial notions of success, some youth subvert or scupper their apparent success in order to tap into the deeper authentic belonging that they long for. While these responses appear unproductive and may be interpreted as evidence of programme failure, they are in many cases an important part of the journey towards authentic belonging.

This theory has important implications for independent living skills programmes, for managing the transition of youths out of care, and for aftercare services. Further research is required on this theory and on a number of key points that emerge from this theory.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Talk through the orientation page.

Sign the consent form.

Complete the demographics page.

Switch on recording device. Do a sound test, to check the adequacy of the volume and setting.

Opening the Interview.

I am interested in hearing about your life experiences over the past few years, since you left Girls and Boys Town until today. I am interested in the experiences that you feel good about, that you feel were successful, and what you think helped you to be successful. And I am interested in the challenges or difficulties that you have had, and how you dealt with these experiences, and what you think helped you deal with them.

I am happy to hear your story however you would like to share it with me, but it may be helpful to tell it to me as a story, starting with your departure from Girls and Boys Town and continuing until today.

Facilitating the Narrative.

Ideally, the narrative will unfold naturally. Listen intently for the following elements of the narrative.

- ❖ We need to hear the story itself, in some detail. If this does not come through clearly, you may need to ask questions like:
 - *Please tell me a bit more about that particular experience.*
 - *Can you give more some more detail about that experience?*
 - *When did that happen? Where were you living then?*
 - *Who else was in your life when that happened?*
 - *When you say _____, can you give me an example of that?*
- ❖ We need to hear reflection on what made the experience challenging or successful:
 - *Can we reflect on that experience for a bit?*
 - *What was it about that experience that was difficult for you?*
 - *What was it about that experience that makes you feel good about yourself?*
- ❖ We need to hear reflection on how they dealt with the experiences:
 - *How did you try to deal with that difficult experience?*
 - *What do you think may have helped you be successful in that experience?*
- ❖ We need to hear reflection on the learning from the experiences:
 - *What have you learned through that experience?*
 - *What does this experience tell you about yourself?*
 - *What have you gained from this experience?*

Remember that through our listening, we hope to learn about:

1. Personal constructions of the notion of 'success' in relation to moving from residential care into independent living.
2. Key factors that facilitate or inhibit 'successful' transition from residential care into independent living.

Closing the Interview.

When it seems that the participant has finished, ask:

- ❖ *Is there anything else that you can think of that might be helpful or important about your story from GBT until now?*

If necessary, ask about the GBT contribution:

- ❖ *What, if anything, did GBT do to help you with your journey over the past few years?*
- ❖ *What, if anything, did GBT do to help you become the person that you are today?*

Some closing down questions:

- ❖ *In closing, when you look back over the years since you left GBT, how do you feel you have grown the most and learned about yourself?*
- ❖ *You have shared a lot with me today. Thank you for that. What stands out for you from everything you've said as most important about your life story?*
- ❖ *How have you experienced this conversation today? What has been good about it for you? What aspects of it have not been so good?*

Clarify the way forward:

- ❖ *So, after we are finished, I will have this recording transcribed into writing. There are two other interviews also taking place by the other two researchers, so we have three participants in total at the moment.*
- ❖ *Then our team will begin to read and listen so that we learn from your story.*
- ❖ *We'll be meeting towards the end of June to do some of this work together.*
- ❖ *It is possible after that, that I may want to speak with you again. But as I said at the start, if you don't want to speak again, that it okay.*
- ❖ *The research will continue into next year – you are part of the first round of this study – so we will probably not have results to give you until next year.*
- ❖ *Is there anything you want to check out with me before we wrap up and switch off the recorder?*
- ❖ *Thank the participant for their contribution to this study and to our ability to provide support to girls and boys at GBT.*

Switch off the recorder and exit.

Write a thank you letter to the participant within the week.

Appendix B: Introduction, Informed Consent & Demographics

Introduction

Girls and Boys Town is going around the country listening to the stories of young people who left Girls and Boys Town a few years ago. We hope to learn more about the journey from being a resident in GBT into adult living. We are interested in understanding some of the main experiences you have had in the past few years since leaving GBT. We'd like to hear about the experiences that you feel good about, that you feel were successful, and what you think helped you to be successful. And we'd like to hear about the experiences of challenge or difficulty that you have had, and how you dealt with these experiences and what you think helped you deal with them.

Through listening carefully to your story, we hope that we might be able to understand better what it is like to leave GBT and so to support other young people in the future as they, like you, leave GBT.

This interview will take an hour or so. We can take a break along the way if we feel we need a break.

I am working in a team of three. We are each doing interviews and we will be analysing the data together, as a team. We are all part of GBT and are doing this study for GBT.

I will be tape recording the interview. This is so that I can be sure that I hear everything you say accurately, just as you said it. It will also mean that I don't have to take detailed notes during our discussion. The recording will be transcribed into writing and your name will then be removed completely from the written transcription, so that there is no way of linking that document to you. The original recording will be destroyed after it has been transcribed and after the analysis of the interviews has been completed.

In that regard, I want to assure you of your anonymity in this research project. That means that your name (or any other information that could help identify you) will be included in the research report or any publications that might come out of this research. If, at some stage, we want to distribute part of your story more widely, we will come back to ask you about that first. Nothing with your name on it will be released beyond the three researchers without first asking you.

I may need to come back to you within a few months of this interview to collect more information or to clarify something that we discuss today. This might be face-to-face or via telephone or even email. You do not have to participate in that interview if you do not want to.

If you would like, we will provide you with feedback on the results of this study when we are done.

Do you have any questions or concerns about this project or about your participation in it before we continue?

Informed Consent



Girls & Boys Town South Africa – Evaluation & Research
 8 Lonsdale way, Pinelands, 7405. P.O. Box 38555, Pinelands, 7430
Tel: 021 200 1922 **Fax:** 021 531 5431 **Hotline:** 0861-58-58-58
Chief Executive Officer: Lee Loynes
Email: wctr@gbtown.org.za **Website:** www.girlsandboystown.org.za

I, (full names) _____

acknowledge that I understand the following information regarding the research project called ‘the journey into independent living’:

1. This study is about my life journey from when I was in residential care with Girls and Boys Town South Africa until today, looking in particular at my challenges and successes.
2. My participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I can withdraw from the study or end this interview at any point, if I so wish.
3. Neither my name, nor information that might reveal who I am, will be included in the written transcript of the interview or in the research report. My participation is anonymous.
4. The research is being conducted by a team of three researchers (Adrian van Breda, Peter Marx and Kashiefa Kader), who will have access to my name and interview. This team is bound by the same confidentiality as the person who is interviewing me.
5. The original sound recording of this interview will be destroyed after the interview has been transcribed into writing and the analysis of the interview completed.
6. If Girls and Boys Town wants to use part of my story in any other setting, I will be approached to provide consent to that. This falls outside of the scope of this project and this consent form.
7. I will receive no payment, other than actual expenses if necessary, for my participation in this project.
8. The researcher who conducts this interview might request to meet with me again in the next few months or speak to me by phone or email, if further information or clarity is needed. I understand that I do not have to participate in these follow-up interviews if I choose not to.

In full understanding of the above and having had any of my questions about the study answered by the researcher, I give consent to participate in this study.

Signature (participant)	Signature (researcher)
Date	Date
Name	Name

I would like to receive access to the results of this study when it is completed	Yes	No
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If yes, provide email and/or postal address and telephone number:

Demographics



Girls & Boys Town South Africa – Evaluation & Research
 8 Lonsdale way, Pinelands, 7405. P.O. Box 38555, Pinelands, 7430
Tel: 021 200 1922 **Fax:** 021 531 5431 **Hotline:** 0861-58-58-58
Chief Executive Officer: Lee Loynes
Email: wctr@gbtown.org.za **Website:** www.girlsandboystown.org.za

Interview Code ⁶				
Date of interview	2011	M	D	
Place of interview				
Gender	Male		Female	
Age				
Population group	'African'	'Asian/Indian'	'Coloured'	'White'
Year of leaving GBTSA				
Highest Level of Education				
Employed?	No	Yes, full time	Yes, part time	
Studying?	No	Yes, full time	Yes, part time	
Current living arrangement				

⁶ Interviewer first name, followed by the number of that interview, eg Adrian1 for Adrian's first interview.