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# Constructing and reconstructing memory and identity among care-experienced young people in Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

The experiences and outcomes of children who grew up in out-of-home care (such as residential care, foster care, or adoption) are increasingly attracting scholarly attention in both the Global North and the Global South. However, research on leaving care is often atheoretical and descriptive. In addition, in Ethiopia, where this study is rooted, there is concern over the loss of memory and identity among children in care and those leaving care, related particularly to incorrect removal of children and inadequate record keeping. This paper introduces several potentially valuable but underutilised theoretical constructs relevant to care and care-leaving in this context. The study draws particularly on Halbwachs' collective family memory, as well as the notions of sites of memory, fictive kinship, paper orphanhood, manufactured identities, the politics of data scarcity and identity reconstruction. These constructs centre on individual experiences of identity, memory and family, within broader contexts of manufactured identity and data scarcity. The authors explain how these constructs could provide valuable frameworks for future studies for understanding not only unregulated alternative childcare systems, but also the potential experiences of any child growing up in or leaving care.

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## Introduction

Youth transitions are a central focus of youth studies, often focusing on the transition from school to work (Furlong 2012). These developmental pathways manifest in various forms across all societies, driven by individual, familial and social forces. Youth transition studies have emphasised the tensions between agency and structure (Furlong and Cartmel 2006). In the discipline of social work, from which we write, there is a similar emphasis on youth transitions and recognition of agency and structure, typically framed as person-environmental factors or micro and macro levels (Van Breda 2016).

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Youth transitions in social work are most evident in child protection. Children who are determined to be vulnerable due to family, community or social factors may be removed from their families and placed into alternative care, such as foster care, residential care or adoption, including international adoption. In most countries, when these young people reach the age of 18, they transition out of the alternative care system into young adulthood, typically with very few family, state and child protection agency supports. This transition is referred to as care-leaving and is a combination of sociological youth transitions, complicated by the transition from state-mandated care to the necessity of independent living.

In this paper, we argue that their childhood experiences of removal from the family home into one or more alternative care systems, including their removal to other countries, often result in a fragmentation of identity, memory and connection. In the Ethiopian context, young people's experiences of care and care-leaving are exacerbated by limited data collection by child protection agencies and by young people's restricted access to social records after ageing out of care, if their data is recorded at all (Sissay 2019). This is at odds with international legal instructions, such as the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations (2010) Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which mandate children and young people's access to their history and identity. While we recognise the challenges of providing alternative care in resource-constrained African contexts, it is the human right of young people in alternative care to reclaim their identity and reconstruct their memories. This paper endeavours to present concepts that may clarify and even remedy this situation.

Care-leaving research, however, has been critiqued for its lack of theorisation. Stein (2006), a seminal care-leaving scholar, raised concerns some 20 years ago about the 'poverty of theory' in care-leaving research, which was largely quantitative and descriptive. His paper sounded a clarion call that care-leaving scholars have heeded. A recent scoping review (Van Breda and Reuben 2025) examined the theories used in care-leaving research over nine years from 2015 to 2023. The authors found that over half of the studies that mentioned theory were explicitly theory-driven, while a fifth were informed by theory, and a quarter made only sparse allusions to theory. Frequently used theories included resilience, life course, emerging adulthood, attachment, social capital and ecological theory.

However, Van Breda and Reuben (2025) highlighted several gaps in the theorisation of care-leaving, notably the lack of rights-based and critical theories. This publication spurs the exploration of additional theories that have not yet been used in care-leaving research. Expanding into theories that bridge the micro-macro divide is particularly promising, as care-leaving, like youth transitions more broadly, is a close dance between micro and macro levels.

In this paper, therefore, we aim to explore conceptually the potential of six underutilised theories or, rather, theoretical concepts, to illuminate aspects of the care and care-leaving journey that young people, who were removed from their families of origin and grew up in alternative care, experience as they navigate from a protective care system into a typically care-absent society. Our research question asks, what theoretical constructs could illuminate the challenges of identity and memory that many care-leavers experience? These theoretical concepts are (1) collective family memory, (2) sites of memory, (3) fictive kinship, (4) paper orphanhood, (5) politics of data scarcity and (6)

identity reconstruction. We intend to expand the range of theoretical options for care-leaving scholars.

Given the substantial differences in culture, care and care-leaving between countries and regions (Strahl et al. 2021; Van Breda et al. 2020), we focus on just one country – Ethiopia – as we are based in this country, and because the Ethiopian experience may mirror that of other African countries. Because we write from the context of Ethiopia, we primarily draw on the experience of Ethiopian care-leavers. This is, however, not an empirical study of care-leaving in Ethiopia (see instead Takele 2026), but rather a review of novel theoretical concepts that are relevant in the Ethiopian context, and probably elsewhere.

In the next section, we provide a brief account of the Ethiopian context. This leads to an overview of the six theoretical constructs that we cover in this paper, and how they link together into a coherent cluster, followed by a more detailed presentation of each construct and its relevance for care-leaving. We close with implications for the ongoing theorisation of care-leaving and for policy.

## Ethiopian care-leaving context

The United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations (2010) Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, as well as the Ethiopian Alternative Child Care guidelines (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2009) and the Ethiopian National Child Policy (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2017), identify several forms of alternative care for orphaned and vulnerable children, viz. residential care, foster care, kinship care, *kafalah* (under Islamic law) and adoption (including inter-country adoption). All these policies emphasise the promotion of parental care and the prevention of family separation (Strahl et al. 2021; Takele et al. 2021).

Despite this emphasis on family-based care, Ethiopia has one of the highest intercountry adoption rates globally (Hague Conference on Private International Law (HCCH) 2022). This phenomenon is partly fuelled by the misconception that numerous Ethiopian children are in dire need. Additionally, the country's swift adoption processing times enhance its high adoption figures (Rotabi 2010). When families opt to adopt, these ingrained beliefs often overshadow more pressing considerations, such as the child's well-being and adoptability, principles of subsidiarity, necessary preparation, and the ramifications of interracial adoption (Steenrod 2022).

## Overview of the theoretical concepts

This paper reviews the utilisation of six theoretical constructs, viz. collective family memory, sites of memory, fictive kinship, manufactured identities, politics of data scarcity and identity reconstruction. To the best of our knowledge, with the exception of fictive kinship, these constructs have not previously been used in studies on care-leaving.

We start with 'Collective family memory', a theoretical construct developed by Halbwachs (2020). This construct posits that memories are not merely individual, but also collective, in particular, family-based. Memories are constructed by and populated by family collectives, laying down important cultural and family mores that endure into adulthood and are transferred to the following generation. These memories contribute to the construction of people's individual and group identity – the sense of self is rooted in these

formative family memories. Halbwachs posits that collective family memory is common to most families. We suggest, however, that when children are removed from their families, these collective memories are disrupted and undermine their identity construction, that is, their sense of self within a relational context.

'Sites of memory' (Reeves 2018) refer to places or moments in time when a community cultivates a shared memory that becomes a unifying memory for the community. We interpret this concept at the level of children, families and communities to mean that certain places, objects or experiences become centres of gravity for collective memory. Such memories are inherently intergenerational. When children are removed from their families or communities, these sites can fragment, leading to a loss of community anchors.

'Fictive kinship' (Osborne and Leon 2024) refers to the provision of care to children by non-kin, that is, by people who are not related (biologically or through marriage), and includes friends, neighbours, elders, teachers and care workers. While fictive kinship is common in the Global North, where children may be cared for by unrelated foster parents, in Africa, there is a strong tendency to provide care for vulnerable children within the extended family system or by a close member of the community. Although extra-familial family-based arrangements are widely regarded as positive, they undermine collective family memory, formed while the child was being raised by their family. Thus, fictive kin, while having positive characteristics, also fragments children's collective family memory, sites of memory, and thus individual identity.

'Paper orphans' is a term coined by Van Doore (2016) to refer to children with living parents, who are recruited into an orphanage, international foster care or other child protection systems. Third-party agents manufacture their orphanhood – they are in fact not orphans, but documentation is typically fabricated (or manufactured) to provide the child with a new identity as an orphan. When such children are removed from their families at a young age, they develop an actual identity of 'orphan', albeit a manufactured one (viz. a 'manufactured identity').

The 'politics of data scarcity' (our term) begins with the notion of data scarcity, which has been widely reported across nations regarding children in alternative care systems. Historically, and still today, little is done to preserve data on children's early lives, particularly those prior to coming into care. Systems for retaining data that can be accessed by young adults who have left care are frequently limited. We argue that this is not merely an artefact of inadequate data collection, archiving and access, but a systematic failure to ensure data – whether by intent or failure. The result of data scarcity is often that young people who grew up in care are unable to reconnect with their families of origin, finding themselves to be lifelong manufactured orphans.

Finally, we consider the notion of 'identity reconstruction'. The previous theoretical constructs discussed have emphasised the factors contributing to the loss of identity among children raised in alternative care. In this final section, we consider the theoretical conceptualisation of identity reconstruction. The notion of identity reconstruction among orphans or children raised in care has not been previously explored. We thus draw on the conceptualisation of identity reconstruction in a range of other contexts.

In summary, the first construct – collective family memory – provides the foundation of a child raised in their original family context. The next two constructs – sites of memory and fictive kinship – theorise children's experience of being removed from the family and community context into an alternative care context, leading to a disruption of collective

family memory. The next two constructs – paper orphans and politics of data scarcity – refer to structural processes that further disconnect children from their family- and community-of-origin, often involving the ‘manufactured identity’ as a false orphan. The final construct – identity reconstruction – depicts the process that a child, often grown up, could follow to recover or reconstruct their fractured identity.

## Collective family memory

Memory studies have been a topical issue in psychology, sociology and political science since the Holocaust (McCarthy 2024). Among classical scholars of memory studies, we prefer Halbwachs’ (2020) collective memory theory, for its relational and interactionist dimensions. Halbwachs (2020) argues that memory is not merely individual, but also collective, entailing a cumulation or conglomeration of memories of a group, notably the family. As a family interacts over time, shared memories are built and held by all family members.

Halbwachs’ (2020) collective memory framework is accused of ‘presentism’ and neglecting the ‘politics of memory’ (Gensburger 2016, 403). However, Halbwachs views memory as a trait of social groups that places the social individual at the centre of its analysis. For him, memory is group or collective by nature, as the individual is a social entity. Halbwachs views forces of collective memory as follows:

If collective memory derives its force and duration from a group of individuals, these are after all individuals who remember as members of a group. The common memories in this mass are interdependent, and it is not always the same memories that will seem strongest to each group member. We suggest that each individual memory represents a point of view on the collective memory. This point of view changes, depending on the place I occupy, and the place I occupy changes depending on the relations I pursue with other milieus. Thus it is not surprising that not everyone makes the same use of a common tool. In trying to explain this diversity, however, we always return to a combination of influences that are, by nature, social. (Halbwachs, as cited in Gensburger 2016, 401)

Halbwachs’ (2020) definition of collective memory entails understanding the working structure of the individual’s material, symbolic and cognitive social space. In his exploration of memory and identity, Halbwachs (2020) argues that children’s identity begins with the family, when the family gives its child a name and socialises society’s norms through collective memory experiences. Recalling a memory is remembering past lived experiences as a group, not as an individual, as he argues that the individual has no memory independent of the collective or group to which they belong.

Thus, a child growing up in a family of origin develops a collective memory rooted in their early experiences within that family. The naming of the child often deepens this memory by locating the child in their ancestry. This collective memory is therefore robust, withstanding periods of time away from home, such as going to boarding school.

Though Halbwachs (2020)’s theory does not explore the nuances of state removal of children, alternative care and identity, his conceptualisation of memory can be utilised to understand how care-leavers negotiate their identity as a marginalised group in Ethiopia. If we accept Halbwachs (2020)’s concept of collective memory and ask the question of care-leaving and identity, one can see that the identity of care-leavers is a product of the ‘family’ environment into which they were born and the experiences that create them.

However, when children in vulnerable families are removed from their families and placed in alternative care, these collective family memories can be disrupted (Gorin et al. 2024; Hoyle et al. 2018). This is particularly so in the case of adoption, and especially international adoption, where Ethiopian children are often permanently dislocated from their family of origin (Berhanu-MacDonald et al. 2024; Girma 2024; Steenrod 2022). In such instances, we suggest that this can lead to a manufactured orphanhood identity, one that is shallowly rooted in the alternative family care system.

## Sites of memory

Place is an important part of memory – where one grows up feeds into one's collective family memory. The concept of 'sites of memory' (Reeves 2018) provides a helpful way to understand the place where memories evolve. Memories do not float free; they are anchored in places or sites. Moving children from living in their family-of-origin's home to a children's home leads these children to replace their collective memory of family with sites of memory – the orphanage or other place they grew up in (Hayes et al. 2020). These sites of memory may form a layer of memory over the child's collective family memory, based on place rather than relationship, e.g. the orphanage or foster home rather than the interactions with parents and siblings, which may obliterate the earlier collective memory (Edwards 2017; Swain 2015).

Identity thus shifts over time. Children removed from their families and placed in care become less connected to their family of origin, and more connected to fictive kin experiences and sites of memory (Swain 2015). This leads to a shallow sense of identity, without the deep roots those with strong collective memory may have. This is not just personal identity, but also identity as seen by others – without a totem or family lineage, you are not a 'real person' (Edwards 2017). For example, an African young person without a family lineage is often not marriable. This constitutes a form of injustice, based on Nancy Fraser's notion of misrecognition (Kelly, Van Breda, and Frimpong-Manso 2025).

## Fictive kinship

While we have emphasised the centrality of the family of origin, fictive kinship features prominently in Ethiopian life and across Africa. The dominant definition of 'family' in contemporary Ethiopia is based on consanguinity, as over 85 percent of the country's citizens live in rural areas (World Bank 2024). Fictive kinship, by contrast, is a form of child-care arrangement in which orphaned children are cared for by non-relatives, without any blood relationship (Osborne and Leon 2024). In Ethiopia, fictive kinship is commonly practiced, in the form of one's Godfather (የክርስቲና ልጅ in Amharic), who provides a child with spiritual, moral and practical support; yet *tut lij* (የጡት ልጅ) meaning 'child of the breast', which refers to a wetnurse who may breastfeed and even raise a child, comparable to a foster mother; and *Gudifecha* (ጉዲፍቻ), which is a cultural form of mutually agreed adoption arranged between birth and adoptive families for caring for orphans and vulnerable children in a familial care system (Walker 2019).

African care-leaving scholars, such as Francis-Chizororo (2008), reject the use of the term 'orphan' to refer to a child who has lost their biological parents – it is perceived as an insult to the African child. This is because African children who have lost their

birth parents will be taken care of by traditional extended families and larger communities without inscribing the name 'orphan' into these children's psyche (Mafumbate 2019).

These indigenous childcare systems have been in use mainly for the care of children who have lost their biological parents due to human or natural disasters, and the place of care is within an extended kin's home, not in an orphanage or children's home. It is believed that such a care system is vital for providing familial care within one's locality and has proven helpful in the holistic development of vulnerable children. Kinship care fosters children's dignity and identity exploration (Bodja and Gleason 2020).

However, due to urbanisation, poverty and migration in Ethiopia, such indigenous care systems have been eroded (Pryce, Napolitano, and Samuels 2017; Takele and Kotecho 2020). For children without primary or kinship care, family is redefined as the state or as an employee working in an institutional childcare centre on behalf of the state or a private childcare organisation.

Finch (2007) advances 'displaying families' theory to explain such phenomena. For Finch (2007), the family for children in care is best expressed as 'doing families' rather than constructing family using bloodline, as kinship is no longer available in such a care system. However, displaying families undermines children's identity construction; care-leavers begin the never-ending questions of, 'Who I am? Where are my biological parents? And why have I found myself in care, not in my birth family's home?' For a society like Ethiopia, knowing and living with one's biological family is not something that can easily be ignored, as the culture of identity is intertwined with a communal way of life (Bodja and Gleason 2020).

Furthermore, as Van Breda, Takele, and Kotecho (2022) indicate, caregivers hired to serve children in care as their guardians often do not have the necessary educational qualifications to facilitate child development. The National Alternative Childcare Guidelines (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2009) undermine the role of professional caregivers by lowering the minimum requirement for a caregiver to Grade 8 (i.e. a primary school education), further compromising the quality of caregiving for children in care who have diverse psychological and complex social needs (Van Breda, Takele, and Kotecho 2022).

Finch (2007) compensates for the loss of family of origin by replacing it with a group that 'displays' as family, that is, that communicates through demonstrable actions that they play the role of families. This is helpful, but it does not align with early personal family memories and lacks a collective memory based on family experience and memory. Collective family memory conflicts with the newer fictive kin experiences and memories. Moreover, collective family memories can fade over time and become lost, leaving a collective memory vacuum. Such children are historyless (Girma 2024).

### **'Paper Orphanhood': manufactured identities**

We suggest that the atrophy of identity is not merely a result of circumstances, but is engineered or manufactured by various parties for ulterior motives, rather than in the interests of a vulnerable child. In Ethiopia, all children in alternative care are typically termed 'orphans' (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2017). These manufactured identities of orphanhood (Mamalaki et al. 2024; Sanders 2005) seek to advance illegitimate interests at the cost of the child. These include 'paper orphans' (Van Doore 2016,

379), in which a child is documented on paper as an orphan, even though in the real world, they do have parents or family. In Ethiopia, once a child is designated an orphan and adopted by another family, there have been cases where a record of the child's family of origin has not been kept, making them an orphan. A recent study in Zimbabwe (Gwenzi and Ringson 2023) vividly narrates how children with a care background consistently receive the label 'orphan', even when they have a living parent.

On the more benign end of the continuum, defining a vulnerable child as 'orphan' strengthens the hands of concerned individuals, organisations and the state to protect the child from potential neglect or abuse (Van Doore 2016). But on the more unscrupulous end, designating a child as 'orphan' may serve the interests of an international adoption industry and also overburdened families (Cheney and Ucembe 2019). The manufacturing of orphanhood and vulnerability, used to generate profit, fosters the commodification of orphanhood and care (Ringson 2022). There are cases of parents being persuaded to declare their children orphans and place them in care, misled into thinking their children are going to a private school, when in fact they are being internationally trafficked (Cheney 2023).

Journalist Kathryn Joyce writes about the corrupt nature of the international foreign adoption system for adopting orphan children from countries like Ethiopia. She reveals how adoption agencies intentionally deceive adoption parents to send their children for better lives in Western countries:

That increase has also brought stories of corruption, child trafficking, and fraud. Parents began to publicize the stories their adopted children told them when they learned English: that they had parents and families at home who sometimes thought they were going to the U.S. to receive an education and then return. Media investigations have found evidence that adoption agencies had recruited children from intact families. Ethiopia's government found that some children's paperwork had been doctored to list children who had been relinquished by living parents as orphans instead, which allowed the agencies to avoid lengthy court vetting procedures. (Joyce 2011, 2)

Lombe et al. (2019) and Cheney and Rotabi (2017, 95) claim that the 'manufactured' orphan identity is also an emerging industrial complex serving as a powerful source of funding schemes for actors involved in child trafficking, and these actors collect money from generous Western philanthropic organisations and individuals. These actors are also found in Sub-Saharan Africa (Van Doore 2016).

Muwanguzi, CEO of Child's i Foundation, confirms this:

Shockingly, research and my own professional experience have revealed that a significant percentage – 80-90% – of children living in orphanages are not "orphans". Many have living parents or extended family members who, if provided with adequate support, could care for their children. (Muwanguzi 2024)

This production of orphanhood is so prevalent that the Ethiopian Alternative Child Care guidelines (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2009, section 3.1) specify as illegal acts that make a child seem like an orphan when they are not:

The relevant authority shall take a corrective measure when adoption service providing organisations are engaged in the following and other illegal acts according to the law of the land: Misleading/misinforming parents about the purpose and intent of adoption; Using adoption as a source of financial or other gains.

A common consequence of international adoption of orphans is the changing of a child's names from Ethiopian to Western names (Girma 2024). We regard this as an extension of paper orphanhood – manufactured identities, in which an artificial identity is manufactured for this displaced and wrongfully removed child. Internationally adopted children are vulnerable to an insecure ethnic or racial identity (Degener, van Bergen, and Grietens 2022). They also suffer a loss of identity when their ethnic birth names are replaced with strange names. The reclamation of their birth names is an important process of recovery for many youth (Girma 2024).

We suggest that this misrecognition (Fraser 2000) of children as orphans begins with an accusation. Entry into state care starts with the accusation of a vulnerable child (even if they have living biological parents) as an 'orphan', and this designation gives them the label of a 'deviant child', who deserves the state's mercy – saving such a child from abuse. Such naming produces the cycle of 'paper orphanhood' (Van Doore 2016). The state also appears to be a never-ending 'orphanhood production machine', unless ethical governance is implemented over such a brutal industry (Fronek, Rotabi-Casares, and Common 2021; Gallego Molinero, Medina Rodríguez, and Clemente Martínez 2024).

### Politics of data scarcity

A major contributor to the loss of identity among young people in care and care-leavers is the scarcity of data (Petrowski, Cappa, and Gross 2017; Pierre 2021). We use the term 'politics of data scarcity' to indicate that this is not the mere absence of data – an administrative failure – but a potentially deliberate action of blocking youth from accessing or reclaiming their identities. While we appear to live in a time of data surplus, in the case of looked-after children, there is, in fact, data scarcity (Evans et al. 2020). Petrowski, Cappa, and Gross (2017) found a scarcity of data in their study on the enumeration of children in alternative care, based on data from 197 countries. Most countries were unable even to determine the number of children in care, let alone generate information about the child's family of origin and care journey (Gorin et al. 2024; Hoyle et al. 2018). Furthermore, when data is gathered, the quality, accuracy, terminology and bias of the records can have negative consequences for youth when they later seek access to their records (Purtell and Hawkes 2023).

In the absence of accurate data about a child admitted into alternative care, that child is dislocated from their collective family memory and often physically unable later to locate their family as young adults (Gallego Molinero, Medina Rodríguez, and Clemente Martínez 2024; Steenrod 2022). Even in their first admission to out-of-home care, children's familial information is often not correctly registered and its credibility is not verified (Ethiopian Adoption Connection 2023). This is enabled by factors like (a) children and birth parents hiding the truth about their family information to get admission into the care facility (often based on the perception that growing up in care offers advantages over living in a poor family), (b) childcare workers not giving the needed emphasis to a credible recording of family information, and (c) childcare workers prioritising the task of 'rescuing' an 'orphan child' from potential abuse and following a 'saviour' mission.

Ethiopian care-leavers who are searching for their birth families are typically unable to find data about their origins (Ethiopian Adoption Connection 2023). Those who were admitted into care and transitioned into the foreign adoption care system are at the

mercy of the state's political will to disallow these children to do family tracing and identity reconstruction by themselves and significant others (Gallego Molinero, Medina Rodríguez, and Clemente Martínez 2024).

When there is no national data centre, and when agencies independently register the profiles of incoming and outgoing looked-after children, as in Ethiopia, the task of tracing biological or extended families of children in care becomes impossible for children themselves and for those concerned to know the roots of these children (Ethiopian Adoption Connection 2023). Despite living in the age of 'data surplus' (Halpern et al. 2021), these circumstances produce an identity crisis and a constant quest for identity in children transitioning from care into emerging adulthood.

One of the major strategies that such a system implements is misinformation or the production of fabricated data for the so-called 'orphan child' (Van Doore 2016). In their study on the availability of data on children in alternative care across the globe, Petrowski, Cappa, and Gross (2017, 396) explain why it is essential to have national data systems that enumerate the number of children in alternative care worldwide to address this global problem. They indicate that:

It raises awareness of the urgent need to strengthen the capacity of countries to more accurately count, monitor, and report on children in alternative care by improving administrative systems. Such advances are essential to develop evidence-based services and policy responses that aim to (1) reduce the number of children living in alternative care (particularly institutional care), (2) prevent family separation, when possible (while promoting family reunification), and (3), ensure placement of children in appropriate, preferably family-based, alternative care arrangements that meet their best interests, when necessary.

To address these challenges, researchers in the Global North have begun examining how access to social records can help care-experienced children gain agency in reconstructing family-based childhood memories and identities. For instance, Gorin et al. (2024) and Pierre (2021) emphasise the importance of care-experienced individuals' right to access social care records for the reconstruction of identity. They argue that this access is vital for the identity and memory construction of care-experienced children in aftercare, though research on care-leavers' access to social care records and its connection to memory reconstruction is in its infancy.

## Identity reconstruction

Whether an identity, robbed of collective family memory and impinged by fictive kin and institutional sites of memory, can be reconstructed is perhaps uncertain. In our view, there are two main options: to reclaim the facts of one's heritage and identity or to construct a new identity.

The Ethiopian Adoption Connection (<https://ethiopianadoptionconnection.org/>) is a good example of an organisation that facilitates the reclamation of identity, through reconnecting looked-after children and care-leavers with their families of origin. An actual reuniting with one's family of origin or with members of one's extended family can be profoundly healing, providing important touchpoints for one's identity.

It is, of course, possible that a reunification might not produce a positive outcome. A family may not want the grown-up child or may still be unable or unwilling to take up

caring parental or familial roles. This could precipitate a crisis for the young person, who may have nurtured fantasies of a happy family reunion.

In cases where it is not possible to locate one's family of origin, which may be in the majority, the outcome may be frustrating and discouraging. These feelings may be fed by the absence of facts – whether those are positive or negative. Such a young person would need to engage in a personal journey of identity reconstruction based on their own standpoint and the family or fictive kin they have garnered over the years.

An influential theory of identity is that of Stryker and Burke (2000), which posits that one's identity comprises both micro (e.g. personal) and macro (e.g. cultural, familial, racial) components. This links well with Halbwachs' collective family memory, which similarly weaves together personal memories with those related to family and community. Stryker and Burke (2000, 285) write that, 'persons are seen as living their lives in relatively small and specialized networks of social relationships, through roles that support their participation in such networks'.

Working backwards through the constructs advanced in this paper, we suggest that identity reconstruction for children separated from their families begins with gathering data related to their removal and placement in alternative care, followed by tracing and recovering sites of memory related to their fictive kin connections, and ultimately reclaiming collective family memory by reconnecting to their family or community of origin. For some young people, this may also involve recovering their indigenous birth name (Girma 2024).

This suggested process resonates with the approach of identity reconstruction posited by Neimeyer and Anderson (2002), which draws on narrative processes, similar to those of White (1989) and his narrative therapy approach to reauthoring conversations. Reauthoring conversations involve a weaving together of external actions (such as a memory of being with family or community prior to being removed) and reflexive identity questions (a dialectical process of interpreting what that action means for one's sense of self). Reauthoring is both a reclamation of one's self in context and a construction of a new internal sense of self. A similar use of narratives for identity reconstruction is presented by Khan (2023), in relation to prisoners. Khan centres this on 'a reconstruction of biographical events and an individual's future combined with "some degree of unity, purpose and meaning" ... This reworking of identity is developed and sustained over time as individuals formulate stories about their lived experiences' (Khan 2023, 576).

Clearly, more work is needed on identity reconstruction. We suggest that this sixth component is more about a therapeutic process than about a theoretical construct.

## Implications and limitations

This paper aimed to explore conceptually the potential of six underutilised theoretical concepts to illuminate aspects of the care and care-leaving journey that young people, who were removed from their families of origin and grew up in alternative care, experience as they navigate from a protective care system into a typically care-absent society. We argue that this theorisation contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the field of care in at least four fundamental ways.

First, our theorisation of care-leaving, which draws primarily on the understudied Ethiopian context, emphasises the topics of memory and identity, which have been

significantly neglected in studies on care-leavers. We regard this as an important contribution, given that the move into care and later out of care involves significant changes in social and living contexts which directly impact identity and sense of self. For young people leaving care, identity and memory can be critical to their successful transition into adulthood.

Research with care-leavers seldom investigates young people's earliest childhood memories, their sense of identity and culture. Furthermore, while some care-leaving research does track care-leavers' journeys through multiple placements, there is little research on the sites of memory, and how these site-based memories contribute to their current identity. Empirical research could investigate care-leavers' collective family memories and their subsequent sites of memory. Such research could recover memories that have faded into darkness, generating fresh insights into care-leavers' identity and heritage.

Second, this theorisation aligns with and strengthens the rights of care-leavers to reconnect with their origins and to be informed about their biological families, which are recognised as fundamental human rights and responsibilities for professionals involved in alternative childcare systems. For example, the United Nations' (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 7) emphasises that a child's right to know their parents is an obligation rather than a privilege. Furthermore, these conventions collectively define what is now widely recognised as the care-leavers' right to know, framing access to one's origins as a fundamental human right, not a privilege. Consequently, the pursuit of origins by care-leavers is obligatory. Additionally, return journeys, cultural heritage excursions and family tracing are mandated practices that grant care-leavers the right to reconnect with their country of origin, heritage language, birth culture, and ethnic, religious, cultural and familial backgrounds.

Third, the constructs presented highlight how the presence or absence of technology – specifically a national digital registry of children in care and care-leavers – shapes the political dynamics surrounding care-leavers' identity reconstruction and their efforts to locate their families of origin in developing nations such as Ethiopia. Ethiopia, which has over five million orphaned children, has the highest rate of children sent abroad for adoption and comparatively limited intercountry adoption regulations. It has not yet established a technology-assisted national database to register the profiles of its growing care-leaving population. This paper raises an important research question about how these intersectional technologies, a weak legal framework, and the surge in orphanhood and international adoption complicate dominant understandings of care-leavers' quest for kinship, belonging and the right to know their identity and family of origin.

The constructs of paper orphanhood and manufactured identities could significantly shift local, national and international discourse regarding international adoptions, disrupting the view that growing up in the U.S.A. (for example) is essentially better than growing up with one's family in Ethiopia. These theoretical concepts could help refocus those working with orphans and vulnerable children on strengthening families' capacity and income generation to raise their own children, rather than sending them away to alleviate family poverty.

And fourth, we introduce the novel constructs of 'paper orphanhood' and other 'manufactured identities' in the alternative childcare industrial complex, which increasingly affect care-leavers' chances of tracing their family of origin, regardless of their willingness to search for it and achieve emotional stability or closure. It also promotes the

conceptualisation of 'identity reconstruction', involving a weaving together of multiple narrative fragments of lived experience – a topic much in need of further exploration.

These theoretical concepts could add weight to the lobby for improved tracking of vulnerable, at-risk and orphaned children, so that, as they grow up, they are easily able to trace their roots and reconnect with their family and ancestral roots. In addition, the notion of identity reconstruction, which appears to be nascent, could be developed into a robust model of practice for people who have been dislocated from their family- and community-of-origin.

This paper has, however, not tested the validity and utility of these concepts in practice. Further empirical research is required to determine whether and how these theoretical constructs are helpful for studying care-leaving.

## Conclusion

In this theoretical paper, we have raised a neglected topic in care-leaving research, viz. the theorisation of identity negotiation among children in and leaving care. We have introduced several theoretical constructs that we believe could strengthen alternative care and care-leaving research, viz. collective family memory, sites of memory, fictive kinship, manufactured identities, the politics of data scarcity and identity reconstruction. We recommend that this theorisation of care-leaving be further investigated.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Anduamlak Molla Takele**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft; **Adrian D. Van Breda**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

Not applicable

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Not applicable.

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