



Measuring the support networks of transition-age foster youth: Preliminary validation of a social network assessment for research and practice



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ABSTRACT

Multi-dimensional social support is an important factor in any positive transition into young adulthood, and youth who are exiting foster care ideally receive comprehensive social support from a range of informal and formal sources. Yet the social networks of transition-age foster youth are likely influenced over time by child welfare involvement, which can weaken or disrupt natural support relationships, while introducing service-oriented relationships that are not intended to last into adulthood. To better understand the social support context of youth aging out of care, we can apply social network theory and methods to systematically identify their networks of supportive relationships and explore support provision as a network-based indicator. This paper presents a methodological approach to measure foster youth support networks, and describes these networks in terms of their capacity to provide support as a function of size, composition, and density, and in terms of actual support provision through identified relationships. Such a measurement approach should be systematic and reliable over time, and capture social support constructs relevant to practice with this population; preliminary inter-item and test–retest consistency findings are promising, and the method demonstrates construct and predictive validity in comparison with a measure of perceived availability of social support.

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1. Introduction

By policy, out-of-home foster placement is a social network intervention to connect children and youth to comprehensive resources through a combination of formal services and informal support, including the maintenance of existing connections to family and community. Ideally, these networks are structured in a way that allows formal and informal support providers to monitor behavior and communicate resource needs, much as a functional family network does (Coleman, 1988; Wellman & Frank, 2001). Family-based (or family-like) network functionality likely plays a critical role in providing support and resources to transition-age foster youth (Blakeslee, 2012), and the experiences of many youth exiting care suggest that this is often the case (e.g., Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). However, youth transitioning from the foster care system often experience discouraging outcomes that indicate a lack of adequate resources and support in their social networks following child welfare intervention (e.g., Courtney et al., 2011a,b; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). Recognizing the risk factors faced by many older youth exiting foster care, and reflecting the growing evidence from large panel studies documenting relatively poor transition outcomes (see Stott, 2013, for a recent review), there is an emerging consensus about the critical importance of multi-dimensional social

support and comprehensive service provision as these youth transition to independence (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Courtney, 2009; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

Specifically, there is an understanding that successful foster care transitions likely unfold in the context of both formal services and long-term informal support relationships (e.g., Collins et al., 2010), and for some older youth in care, extended foster placement has likely hindered the development of this ideal support structure (e.g., Blakeslee, 2012; Collins, 2001). The population of youth aging out of care have likely experienced placement instability (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008; McMillen & Tucker, 1999), non-relative foster or group care (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003), and residential treatment (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Thus, a history of social network disruption and a potential lack of long-term relationships during adolescence may also be presumed (Samuels, 2009). In many cases, such network disruption results in sparse social networks (Collins, 2001, 2004; Perry, 2006), disengagement from formal services (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Keller et al., 2007; McCoy et al., 2008), problem behaviors (James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004; McCoy et al., 2008; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000), and other social adjustment challenges that may affect relationship development (Kools, 1999; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008).

Such networks may not be adequate to meet the support functionality we associate with typical family-based (or family-like) constellations comprised of stable relationships that can effectively monitor youth

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well-being and facilitate resource provision (Coleman, 1988; Wellman & Frank, 2001). This may be especially important for youth transitioning from foster care, many of whom experience individual and circumstantial needs that require the support of a network characterized by the presence of both personal and service-providing relationships connected to each other by collaborative interaction over time. This scenario of established and interconnected relationships may be more likely for youth who have had stable out-of-home placements in family-based settings, but we can assume a subgroup of foster youth who have few regularly supportive network members and few collaborative ties between members, which inhibits support provision (Pescosolido, 1992; Stiffman, Pescosolido, & Cabassa, 2004). Because network disruption interrupts the availability of social support (Perry, 2006; Wellman & Frank, 2001; Wellman & Wortley, 1990), and because exiting foster care likely ends many child welfare services and established relationships with providers (Courtney et al., 2001; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009; Samuels, 2008, 2009), it is presumed that many youth exit foster care without the multi-dimensional resources and long-term support that adolescents usually receive through stable family-based networks (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Collins, 2004; Samuels, 2008, 2009).

Though the concept of a “social network” has been applied to describe foster youth access to social resources, this has generally been measured as youth-perceived availability of functional support (e.g., Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Courtney et al., 2005; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Research has also begun to explore the psychological effect of network disruption (Perry, 2006) and the compositional characteristics of youth-identified networks during the transition from care (Collins et al., 2010; Jones, 2013; Samuels, 2008). Further, a growing body of research demonstrates the importance of non-parental adults as sources of multi-dimensional support for older youth in care (Ahrens et al., 2011; Collins et al., 2010; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009), and current efforts are addressing the development of a network of supportive relationships as a primary outcome (e.g., Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2014; Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014).

However, it has been argued that this research field is not yet distinctly informed by social network theory or methods (Blakeslee, 2012). Such an approach can contextualize support provision in a wider social structure by defining and measuring the network ties between an identified set of individuals, which may reflect emergent network processes and properties related to youth outcomes (Wellman, 1983, 1988). For example, the social support a foster youth receives may be related to the overall capacity of the network to provide support, the range of member social categories or the presence of specific roles, or the stability of membership over time, all of which reflect network-level factors extending beyond direct interaction with youth.

This study demonstrates a preliminary application of network theory and methods within a broad research agenda proposed by Blakeslee (2012) to consider network characteristics as an explanatory factor in foster youth transition outcomes. This paper introduces the support network assessment tool used here, demonstrates the reliability of the measurement of two support network constructs—network capacity and support provision—over two time points, and examines the validity of the network-based social support indicators relative to a standardized measure of perceived social support. The following section details these study aims, including the theoretical and empirical considerations that informed the measurement approach.

2. Study aims

The overall aim of this study is to introduce a method to assess social network constructs relevant to support provision to transition-age foster youth. This approach specifically draws on a branch of social network research assessing social support in personal networks (e.g., Agneessens, Waeye, & Lievens, 2006; Tracy, Whittaker, Pugh, Kapp, & Overstreet, 1994; Wellman & Frank, 2001). Generally, personal

networks include a focal person's strong, multi-dimensional ties to family and kin, which are usually relied on for day-to-day support and significant aid, as well as the various relationships which may provide less frequent and context-specific support (e.g. Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). This study defines a youth's personal support network as any formal ties to service providers (e.g., case workers, counselors, etc.) and informal ties to family, friends, and community, which youth identify as supportive. Support provided through these relationships is considered in terms of three standard social support types: emotional, informational, and concrete (e.g., Tracy & Whittaker, 1990).

2.1. Support network capacity

The first goal of this paper is to describe the potential support capacity of these personal networks, in terms of overall *network size*, which in this case is the number of people youth name as providing support in general, *network density*, or the degree of interconnecting ties between these identified network members, and *network range*, in terms of the diversity of member social categories or roles. Structural measures of size and density are important correlates of support provision, where network size reflects support capacity, in that being connected to more people increases potential support (e.g., Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981; Walker, Wasserman, & Wellman, 1993), and more interconnecting ties within a group of people increases the relational “bandwidth” (Kadushin, 2012, p. 105) through which needs can be monitored and support provided to network members. Importantly, density and size are generally presumed to be negatively correlated (Kadushin, 2012)—in that the larger a network is, the less likely that all parties are able to sustain relationships with each other—and this structural pattern may be relevant in the networks of transition-age foster youth. For example, it may be that smaller but more densely interconnected networks indicate strong, multi-dimensional relationships that provide relatively more support per member (e.g. Marsden, 1987; Wellman & Gulia, 1999); this kind of “embeddness” is associated with lasting relationships and reliable support provision (e.g., Degenne & Lebeaux, 2005; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). In this analysis, the *network capacity* construct includes network size in terms of the number of people identified as providing any support, the density indicator of the degree of interconnection between them, and how many of these members represent “core” support relationships that can be described more fully.

On the other hand, the diversity of network membership is another indicator that may influence the support capacity of these networks, given that different kinds of relationships are more likely to provide different kinds of support at different levels—this is also known as network range, or access to diverse information and resources attainable through network members from different social groups (Burt, 1992; Campbell, Marsden, & Hurlbert, 1986; Granovetter, 1973). Specifically, it has long been understood that positive youth development “requires a balance of support from family, formal associations (teachers, counselors, etc.) and informal support systems such as friends and same-age peers” (Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2005, p. 232, citing Cauce, Felner, & Primavera, 1982) to provide a full complement of the various kinds of support that young people may need in different domains (e.g., informational support at school, or concrete support at home, etc.). Network range may be especially important for vulnerable youth populations, who can benefit from comprehensive support coverage through ties to diverse members offering targeted support when needed (e.g., Haines & Hurlbert, 1992). Network range is associated with larger networks, and in a study with homeless and runaway youth, member diversity was predicted by network size (Johnson et al., 2005): the more network members identified, the more likely they were to come from different social spheres.

Here, the presence or absence of network members from different social categories (family, friends, or other) is used as an indicator of

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