



Social support and interdependency in transition to adulthood from child welfare services



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the need for social support in transition to adulthood for youths in the child welfare service, focusing on what support they need and from whom they can get such support. We have conducted individual and focus group interviews with in all 43 adolescents that are, or have been, in contact with the child welfare service in adolescence/young adulthood. The interviews are transcribed and analyzed by doing initial longitudinal analysis, and thematic analysis inspired by the main structure in Systematic Text Condensation (STC).

Through the analyses we have highlighted four different categories of social support that the youths need; practical support, emotional support, affirmational guidance support and participation support. Our findings indicates that such support is necessary, but not always available for youths transitioning out from the Child Welfare System, as many of them lack an informal network of adults that can support them in their transition to adulthood. Several of them consequently need continued support from employees in the Child Welfare Service, which for many of these youths seems to represent a crucial source of social support. One of the challenges seems to be that the youths urge of independency together with the expectations of independency from the Child Welfare Services, makes youths end the contact with the Child Welfare Service too early. The simultaneously need for social support and urge for independency makes it relevant to discuss this in light of the concept of interdependency; which emphasizes the importance of connections and social relations as not only normal but also necessary. This underlines the need for more flexibility and a gradual independency; in contrast to the “sudden adulthood” that many youths transitioning out of child welfare seem to experience.

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1. Introduction

The object of this article is to explore the individual process for youths transitioning out of the child welfare system, either from care¹ or from assistance measures,² and to study what social support the youths need in their transition to adulthood. Several studies show that adolescents in the child welfare system are especially vulnerable in the transition to adulthood (Stein, 2006; Stein & Munro, 2008; Storø, 2012; Thomas, 2007). In Norway, where this study is conducted,

many researchers point to that youth that have been in the child welfare system often have a more challenging transition to adulthood than other youths and that many youth face challenges regarding education, employment and housing, compared to youths who have not been in contact with the child welfare system (Backe-Hansen, Madsen, Kristofersen, & Hvinden, 2014; Clausen & Kristofersen, 2008; Kristofersen, 2009).

Researchers have argued that lack of social support and safety-net-like relations is one of the main challenges for youths transitioning to adulthood from the Child Welfare Services (Barry, 2010; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010; Paulsen, 2016a). Many youth aging out of care are discharged from the child welfare system and into young adulthood without adequate resources and support (Blakeslee, 2012). Adolescence is a vulnerable period in life, often characterized by moving back and forth between dependency and independency (Bynner, 2005; Rogers, 2011), and this tension is one of the key questions in the research on transitions from adolescence to adulthood. We choose to focus on the concept of “interdependency” to illustrate that youths transitioning out of the child welfare service are neither independent nor dependent, but rather *interdependent*, meaning that they are embedded in meaningful relationships and communities (Furlong,

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¹ Care (in Norwegian *omsorgstiltak*) refers to when children are taken into care by the Child Welfare Service, they are placed in either foster homes or institutions.

² Assistant measures (in Norwegian *hjelpetiltak*) refer to assistance provided by the Child Welfare Service when a child is in particular need of assistance due to conditions at home or for other reasons. The object of the assistance measures is to contribute to a positive change to the child and his/her family, by either care-changing or/and compensatory assistance measures. In many families the assistance measures can be extensive, and families often receive different measures at the same time. Examples of various types of assistance measures are advice and guidance, a personal support contact, a respite home, respite measures at home and various parental supports.

Cartmel, Biggart, Sweeting, & West, 2003). The concept of interdependency takes into account that no one is truly independent or self-sufficient, but that “*all youth need the ongoing support and a safety-net found in family or family-like connections*” (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003, p. 265), and social support may therefore serve as one important part of interdependency.

Social support refers to the *qualities* in the relations in the network, which means that there is mainly a focus on the interaction between the participants in the social network. Social support may be derived from formal sources such as professional social services and from informal sources such as family, friends or peers (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). The importance of both informal and formal support, such as social, emotional, financial and practical support, in the process of leaving care is made clear in European research (Hedin, 2016; Stein, 2008), but it is not always available (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014). Hedin (2016) discusses that a lack of informal support may be what Singer, Berzin, and Hokanson (2013) identify as “holes” in the type of support, such as informal network members who provide sufficient emotional support but not as much instrumental and appraisal support. If informal support from a youth's biological family, for example, is lacking during this phase, then formal support from the social services becomes more urgent (Stein, 2012). The theories regarding social support also take into account that relations are not necessarily supportive, but that some relations can also be a burden and create problems.

1.1. The complex process of transition to adulthood

Rogers (2011) describes a shift away from youth transitions being understood as a linear process toward conventional goals. Instead, it is now argued that youth transitions tend to be highly chaotic, often involving nonlinear and fragmented movements between dependence and independence, as also pointed out by Bynner (2005). Such switching between family support and independence can be described as a nonlinear transition (Furlong et al., 2003) or yo-yo transition (Biggart & Walther, 2012; Storø, 2012; Tysnes, 2014). Biggart and Walther (2012) describe this as complex processes in which youths seldom see themselves as either adolescents or adults, but rather *on the way* to adulthood. Hellevik (2005) and Tysnes and Kiik (2015) use the concept “extended childhood” to describe the first period after the youth has moved away from home but is still supported by his or her parents economically, emotionally and/or practically.

This movement between dependency and independence is common in the youth population in general. On the other hand, youths transitioning out of the child welfare system seem to experience an “instant adulthood” and are not given the opportunity to experience such a gradual transition into adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Paulsen, 2016b; Rogers, 2011). Rogers (2011) describes that for these youths “instant adulthood” not only includes the requirement to live independently but also removes them from the personalized and emotional support they may have received while in care. In line with this, Cashmore and Paxman (2006, p. 232) argue that whether youths exit care in consultation with the child welfare system or through an unplanned discharge, they approach independence “with fewer resources and less support, and at an earlier age and in a more abrupt way” than youth in the general population. Young people leaving care do not receive the same support that good parents would be expected to provide for their children (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006) and some are not getting the adequate support (Stott, 2013). Propp et al. (2003) describe that while some sources of social support may be available to some emancipated foster youth, such as supervised independent living programs, support groups, friends, relatives and mentoring programs, others receive messages from both the child welfare system and from relatives that self-sufficiency is more important than relying on others.

Furlong et al. (2003) show a great deal of evidence that happy, healthy, successful adults are not independent but instead have extensive social support. Propp et al. (2003) argues that there is a need for

redefining and rethinking the expectations of independency. They state that clearly, for anyone to be successful there must be a balance between the socially constructed terms of self-sufficiency and dependence. Rather than viewing these concepts as “either-or,” those who are helping youth in this transition need to have a “both-and” approach to really achieve the balance, and in that matter the concept of *interdependency* can be useful.

1.2. Lack of safety-net and social support

Several researchers point out that youths transitioning out of the child welfare system don't have the necessary safety net when facing the challenges of independent living (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Stein, 2006; Storø, 2008). Barry (2010) stresses that supportive social networks, family and friends are crucial for young people in the transition to adulthood, but many of these youths face independence alone and isolated and lack a functional social support network that they can rely on during the transition from child welfare to adult independence (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Paulsen, 2016a). Höjer and Sjöblom (2010) find that youths are worried about how to deal with housing, economy and work, and they also see youths who are afraid to be isolated and without emotional and practical support after leaving care.

Collins, Spencer, and Ward (2010) argue that social support is needed by everyone, and that supportive relationships might be particularly useful to vulnerable youths to enhance resilience and decrease the probability of poor outcomes. Social support protects individuals against adversity throughout the lifespan and is especially salient during times of intense social change, such as during the transition to adulthood (Lee & Goldstein, 2015). Researchers have only recently started to explore the role and meaning of social support in the lives of foster youth leaving care (Curry & Abrams, 2014), and according to Lee and Goldstein (2015) the knowledge about social support for youths transitioning out of the child welfare system has only been examined to a small degree. They state that little attention has been given to these youths' source of support (support derived from a specific relationship), and that such research is essential to understand its meanings and mechanisms, as well as its changing implications throughout development.

According to Curry and Abrams (2014) the struggle for many emancipated foster youth are that they are drawn between the desire to maintain and create connections with family and peers and the desire to be self-sufficient. The youths in the study conducted by Cunningham and Diversi (2013) described an intense pressure to achieve self-reliance immediately upon emancipation and were told by their relatives that achieving adulthood entailed being independent of support from others. Samuels and Pryce (2008) argue that the rigid self-reliance many aged-out youths have can be a source of resilience, but on the other hand it may prevent them from creating connections with people who could provide positive support.

2. Methods

The study is based on qualitative interviews with 43 adolescents between the ages of 17 and 26 years, 13 girls and 30 boys. We have used a combination of focus group interviews (5 groups with 23 youths in total) and individual qualitative in-depth interviews (with 22 youths). Two of the youths have attended both focus group interview and individual interview at their own wish. At the time of the interview 21 of the youths had no assistance from the Child Welfare Service. Most of these had ended the contact with the Child Welfare Service around the age of 18 and the rest around the age of 20.³

³ In Norway the legislation states that youths that receive support from the child welfare service before turning 18 years has the *possibility* to receive support until the age of 23, if the youth consent to this. The Child Welfare Service has no duty to give support until 23, but the decision to end before his shall be made “in the best interest of the child”. The child welfare services are also required to provide a written decision if they refuse to offer measures to the youths in this period, and then the youths have the opportunity to complain this decision (Fransson & Storø, 2011; Paulsen, 2016a).

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