



Growing up before their time: The early adultification experiences of homeless young people

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of early adultification among 40 homeless youth aged 19 to 21. Findings from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews revealed the experiences of early adultification among homeless young people. We used both initial and focused coding and the final qualitative themes emerged naturally from the data. Early adultification encompassed the following processes, which were closely tied to prominent descriptions of family conflict and caregiver neglect: premature caregiving, early independence and parenthood. Premature caregiving burdened participants with familial responsibility such as caring for younger siblings prior to their leaving home. Early independence occurred when young people provided for their own needs in the absence of caregiver guidance when they were still residing with family. Parenthood thrust young people into the adult role of caring for an infant once they left home. Early adultification complicated participants' experiences with leaving home by imbuing them with premature independence and familial detachment. Identifying the unique aspects surrounding young people's lives prior to and after leaving home is crucial in preventing residential instability and in alleviating the issues that homeless young adults experience.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 1.6 million adolescents experience homelessness on a yearly basis (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011) and are often at increased risk for numerous negative outcomes, such as victimization (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce, 2004), substance use (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010) and psychological disorders (Stewart et al., 2004) that often correlate with their early family histories and current unstable living conditions. Though some young people are kicked out of their homes (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997), the majority of homeless and/or runaway youth leave home in some capacity as a result of a conflicted family life (Tyler & Bersani, 2008). Related to both their early life experiences and premature departures from home, some young people are thrust into adult roles before they are fully prepared, such as caregiving for dependents at young ages (Burton, 2007; Kennedy, Agbényiga, Kasiborski, & Gladden, 2010).

Adopting early adult roles, or early adultification/parentification, consists of a child or adolescent assuming adult-like traits and responsibilities, which often occurs within a family, such as providing extensive caregiving to parents or younger siblings (Burton, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). Young people who undergo early adultification oftentimes experience elevated levels of stress and psychological strain as they struggle to cope with the burden of greater responsibility (Foster, Hagan, &

Brooks-Gunn, 2008). This is particularly salient for homeless young people given that many of them have left their family residence at an early age and now face additional stressors related to street life (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). No study to date has directly examined the experiences of homeless youth using a framework of early adultification. This is especially significant given that early adultification could be a potential precursor to leaving home as well as an outcome of running away. Understanding the processes of early adultification is necessary as it can increase the risks and challenges these young people already face both prior to and after leaving home.

Though numerous studies have explored the conflicted family backgrounds of homeless young people that can predict their departure from home (Tyler, Hagen, & Melander, 2011; Shelton, Taylor, Bonner, & van den Bree, 2015) and the negative outcomes of youth homelessness (e.g., victimization, substance use) (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2004), few studies have investigated homeless young people's experiences of early adultification, which may occur both prior to and/or after they leave home. Therefore it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how many homeless youth undergo adultification based on its subjective nature. Furthermore, identifying the unique aspects surrounding young people's lives prior to and after leaving home is crucial in preventing future residential instability and in alleviating the issues that homeless young adults experience. The transitional period between adolescence and adulthood, or emerging adulthood, is also key in understanding early adultified young people's lives and how they perceive their own sense of development (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the

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phenomenon of early adultification to provide a more holistic picture of homeless young people's experiences. The findings from this study can potentially help service providers in tailoring programs for homeless youth through a better understanding of their life histories and family backgrounds.

2. Literature review

2.1. Early adultification

Childhood adultification occurs when young people perform the “heavy lifting” in families...with the intent of meeting a specific family need,” typically in the absence of guardian support (Burton, 2007, p. 331). Early adultification occurs when a young person assumes premature self-sufficiency or is forced into adult-like roles within the family before they are emotionally prepared to do so (Burton, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). These roles include acting as a primary caregiver to younger siblings or older relatives or providing critical emotional and instrumental support to a sole caregiver (Jurkovic, 1997). Though some individuals view early adultification as a positive experience (Burton, 2007; Nebbitt & Lombe, 2010), the majority of adultified young people experience heightened levels of stress and psychological strain as a result of these increased responsibilities and expectations (Foster et al., 2008).

Disruptions in family life, such as parental divorce, can drive young people into adultified roles as they attempt to provide emotional support to family members (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001). Similarly, conflicted life transitions, such as foster care, can push a young person into premature adultification (Singer & Berzin, 2015). Early adultification is related to a number of different factors, including family economic hardship, lower parental education levels and childhood caregiving roles (Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Undergoing early adultification leads some youth to enter into adult roles at young ages before they may be fully prepared to do so, resulting in life challenges such as teenage pregnancy (Kennedy et al., 2010) or independence through running away from home (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000). Early adultification is a salient process for young people and it is typically intertwined with wider familial conflict and household strain (Burton, 2007).

Exploring early adultification through the lives of homeless young people can expand understandings of their experiences both before and after they leave home, which is necessary knowledge for service providers in establishing effective interventions. That is, it is important for service providers to know the types of early adult-like roles that young people have already adopted so that interventions can specifically target these areas that may be causing some young people to feel stressed and overwhelmed. Through the premature adoption of adult-like roles, some young people may feel overburdened with and possibly resentful of their newfound responsibilities, which could lead them to leave home. Equally plausible is the fact that because homelessness itself is laden with stressors and issues of survival, young people can also undergo adultification after they leave home, such as in the development of skills that help youth successfully navigate street environments, or “street smarts” (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Finally, young people can become adultified *both* before they leave home and after they leave home, which can create increasingly complex experiences of adultification. As such, it is important to learn more about the phenomenon of early adultification to better understand young people's experiences of homelessness and how adultification processes are shaped by both their family backgrounds and the street context.

2.2. Homeless young adults

Certain young people are at higher risk of running away because of issues related to familial discord (Tyler et al., 2011) and disadvantaged

communities (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Specifically, high rates of childhood abuse and neglect are often precursors to youth leaving home (Thompson et al., 2010; Tyler, 2006), along with home lives defined by poor parenting (Mallett, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005). While it is necessary to identify general catalysts that prompt youth to leave home (e.g., child abuse, psychological stress), pathways into homelessness are often comprised of a combination of several influential factors that create unique circumstances for young people (Mallett et al., 2005). Homeless youths' family lives often lack a sense of crucial social support that is necessary for their well-being (Barker, 2012). Experiences of family conflict can lead to increased stress and feelings of “weathering” whereby young people feel older than their chronological ages (Foster et al., 2008). Homeless young people often report low levels of parental and caregiver monitoring and warmth, which can further contribute to their leaving home (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997).

2.3. Research questions

The present research addresses the following research question: What types of early adultification do homeless young adults undergo? Data analysis draws from responses to the following grand tour interview questions exploring young people's experiences: What was your life like growing up? Who did you live with? How did you get along with your primary caregiver(s)? Why did you leave home? What challenges do you face being homeless? Additional probing questions were asked to encourage young people to expand on particular experiences related to early adultification, such as their family relationships while growing up. The interview questions did not directly ask about early adultification so as to avoid leading participants and to allow them to interpret the questions from their own perspectives. These questions provide insight into young adults' experiences and helped to reveal how the adoption of adult-like roles shaped their lives.

3. Design and methods

3.1. Sample and data collection

Data for the current study were obtained from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 40 (16 males; 24 females) homeless young adults, ages 19 to 21 years, in the Midwest using a convenience sampling strategy (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Age 19 was identified as the lower end of the age range based on the state context where the study was conducted, as 19 is the age of majority and these persons are deemed adults. Interviewers, who had over two years of experience working with this population, approached young people in places such as drop-in centers, shelters, as well as locating eligible respondents on the street in different metropolitan areas such as Des Moines, IA and Omaha, NE. Youth were eligible for the study if they met the age requirement and were currently homeless. *Homeless* refers to spending the previous night with a stranger, in a shelter or public place, on the street, in a hotel room, with friends (because they have no other place to go), or other places not intended as a residence (National Center for Homeless Education, NCHE and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, NAEHCY, 2010). Study procedures were explained and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviewers offered agency services or referrals to all youth regardless of their decision to participate. The university Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Our sample included 24 females (60.0%) and 16 males (40.0%). Thirty-four young adults (85.0%) self-identified as heterosexual, three as gay or lesbian (7.5%), and three as bisexual (7.5%). Ages ranged from 19 to 21 years ($M = 20.17$ years). Twenty-seven respondents were White (67.5%), eight Black (20%), one Hispanic (2.5%), and four bi-racial or multi-racial (10.0%). Twenty-four young people (60%) were unemployed while 16 youth reported working at least part-time. Based on interviewer reports, 95% of young adults who were approached

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