



Do they get what they expect?: The connection between young adults' future expectations before leaving care and outcomes after leaving care



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the future expectations of young people in out-of-home placements in the last year before leaving care and the association between those expectations and their outcomes after leaving care. The study examines the hypothesis that care leavers with higher future expectations will have better outcomes in the areas of housing, educational achievements, economic status, adjustment to military service, and life satisfaction. The study was conducted through 277 interviews with the young adults at their last year in care and 236 interviews a year after they left care. Higher future expectations while in care were positively correlated with satisfaction in accommodation, economic status and educational achievements and adjustment to required military service after leaving care. These findings emphasize the role of future expectations as a source of resilience and motivation. They also illustrate the importance of designing programs that address care leavers' self-perception and future outlook and offer preparation in concrete areas as the youth transition to adult life.

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1. Introduction

Young adults are often preoccupied with the way their life may be when they become adults (Nurmi, 2005). Emerging adulthood is a complex period characterized by many changes in residence, employment, education, and romantic relationships. It is a time of identity exploration, focusing on the self, increased independence, and freedom from time constraints and social control. However, it is also a time of decreased parental support, guidance, and monitoring (Arnett, 2007). Thinking about and planning for the future are exciting and challenging for many young people. However, those who are about to age out of care could find this to be particularly stressful. Factors contributing to this stress include lack of family backing, their socioeconomic background, and current life circumstances (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009). During this period, the extent to which care leavers expect certain events to occur might influence their goal setting, planning, behavior, and developmental paths. Yet, despite the effect their future expectations might have on their adult lives, there is surprisingly limited literature about expectations among this population.

Every year in Israel, several hundred Israeli youth reach the age of 18 and leave the residential care system. As in other countries, care leavers in Israel face many challenges during their transition to adulthood, especially in the areas of education, employment, and risky behaviors (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, &

Nesmith, 2001; Mason et al., 2003; Shimoni & Benbenishty, 2011; Stein, 2006; Weiner & Kupermintz, 2001). Their limited personal and social assets limit what they can achieve as adults and likely have a profound impact on the way they perceive their future in many areas. Although many studies have investigated care leavers' situation as young adults, no studies have focused on their future expectations while they are in care and the association between those expectations and their outcomes after leaving care.

There is empirical support for the role of future-oriented cognitions in young peoples' attainments later in life. For example, adolescents' educational expectations were found to predict their educational outcomes (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Ou & Reynolds, 2008), and occupational expectations were found to predict occupational attainment (Armstrong & Crombie, 2000). The study described here examined the future expectations of young adults who are on the verge of leaving care and the correlation between those expectations and the care leaver's outcomes a year after leaving care in the areas of housing, educational achievement, financial status, military service, and overall life satisfaction. The study also examined whether care leavers' expectations for the future predicted their outcomes after controlling for their demographic variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, family status) and placement history (e.g., total number of placements and total length of stay in the current placement).

1.1. Future expectations among adolescents and young people at risk

Young adults who leave care are at a crucial point in their life. As they leave care, planning for their life is especially important. Although

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future expectations are important during all parts of the life cycle, they are especially critical in times of crisis and transition (Nurmi, 2005; Seginer, 2008). Care leavers' future expectations may influence their motivation and ability to accomplish their goals. In turn, this could impact their success immediately after leaving care and later as adults. Young adults' expectations are especially relevant when they leave care because that is a time of developmental transitions. During that time, young adults take on more adult roles and responsibilities, usually through a variety of means, including exploring participating social networks, pursuing employment opportunities, and pursuing additional education (McCabe & Barnett, 2000; Seginer, 2008).

Although little attention has been paid to the importance of future expectations for care leavers as adults (Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011), research does suggest that those expectations are important. Studies of at-risk children and adolescents identify having positive future expectations as an important protective factor linked to positive psychosocial outcomes, resiliency, and lower rates of risky behaviors. For example, several studies have found that positive future expectations were linked to improved social and emotional development, particularly among minority and low-income youth (Werner & Smith, 1992; Wyman, Cowen, Work, & Kerley, 1993). Other studies found correlations between having fewer negative expectations about the future and frequent involvement with the law (Nurmi, 1991; Raffaelli & Koller, 2005). Having positive expectations for the future was also found to be a protective factor for children under stress and to be related to social adjustment and well-being in general (Wyman et al., 1993). Dubow, Arnett, Smith, and Ippolito (2001) found that having a higher level of positive expectations for the future was related to exhibiting fewer problem behaviors, being resistant to negative peer influence, being more involved in school, and having better social support. Other studies found that positive future expectations were associated with greater academic achievements (Arbona, 2000; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) and a decreased likelihood of substance abuse and engaging in risky sexual behaviors (Bryan, Aiken, & West, 2004; Nurmi, 1991; Tevendale, Lightfoot, & Slocum, 2009; Sipsma, Ickovics, Lin, & Kershaw, 2012; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Positive beliefs about the future were also found to be linked to long-range goal setting, better social and emotional adjustment in school, and increased self-esteem (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004).

Young adults leaving care must deal with many different challenges, such as finding a job, finding an apartment and achieving financial independence. However, unlike young adults who are no care leavers, they are usually forced to confront these challenges with little or no support from their families (Benbenishty & Magnus, 2008). Consequently, their future expectations might play an even more important role in meeting these challenges. The aim of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of the role of these future expectations in care leavers' future outcomes.

1.2. Young adults' outcomes and achievements after leaving care

In this study, we focused on the correlation between care leaver's future expectations and their outcomes in the areas of housing, educational achievements, financial status, adjustment to military service, and overall life satisfaction. These areas were chosen because many studies have shown that outcomes in these areas play an important role during the transition from care to independent living.

1.2.1. Housing

Stability in housing has been shown to increase well-being in those who leave care (Courtney et al., 2001). Young adults in Israel often experience more stability while in care than young people in care in other countries (Stein & Munro, 2008). Therefore, they face a big change when they leave care and transition to independent living. In Israel, most care leavers return to live with their biological families. Others live on military bases or in an apartment provided by the military; the

rest rent apartments on their own or with roommates. Studies indicate that many young adults who leave care experience instability in their accommodations or homelessness (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Pecora et al., 2003; Stein, Pinkerton, & Kelleher, 2000; Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013). Although a very small number of care leavers in Israel experience homelessness, they do experience instability in their accommodations and are not always satisfied with their new housing (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013).

1.2.2. Educational achievements

Academic achievement is a key developmental asset that lowers the risk that adolescents will engage in risky behaviors (Kirk, Lewis, Lee, & Stowell, 2011). Care leavers have poorer educational outcomes than young people in the general population (Shimoni & Benbenishty, 2011). Obstacles to care leavers' success in achieving better educational outcomes include multiple placements, disrupted schooling, and no emphasis on education by their caregivers. Other obstacles include care leavers' self-perception and future outlook, lower self-esteem and lack of aspiration or motivation towards pursuing high education (Stein, 2012).

1.2.3. Financial status

Financial independence is associated with positive outcomes in adult life (Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005) because it enables young people to cope with daily challenge and pursue their future goals (Benbenishty & Magnus, 2008). Many care leavers have difficulty achieving financial independence. They are less likely to have a job and often earn low wages when they are employed (Courtney et al., 2011). In many cases they assist their biological family financially and owe debts by the time they leave care (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013).

1.2.4. Adjustment to military service

Military service in Israel brings with it many demands and stressors. However, completing military service is considered an important aspect of normative functioning (Golan, Sharhabi, & Wander-Schwartz, 2002; Weiner & Kupermintz, 2001) and related to better integration into civic society. Like other young adults, care leavers in Israel are expected to join the army at the age of 18, after completing their high school studies (although those with mental or physical disabilities can be discharged by the army). Prior studies show that care leavers are less likely to join the military than their peers, and that many of those who do join the military face multiple difficulties adjusting during their service. For example, they are more likely than their peers to be absent without leave. As a result, care leavers are sometimes brought to trial in a military court or spend time in a military jail (Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013; Weiner & Kupermintz, 2001).

1.2.5. Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is an important component of well-being and reflects the care leavers' subjective perceptions of their lives (Diener, 1984). High life satisfaction might lead to better adaptation to life after care by buffering against the effects of stressful life events (Huebner, 2004; Park, 2004). Studies that have examined life satisfaction among young people who age out of care found mixed results. Some studies reported decreased life satisfaction over time, but others found care leavers' life satisfaction increased. For example, Courtney et al. (2007, 2011) found that 75% of the young people aging out of care at the age of 21 reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their lives as a whole. However, this fell to 63% at the age of 26. By contrast, a study of 47 young people who aged out of care in Australia found that overall life satisfaction declined a year after leaving care but increased slightly four to five years later (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996, 2007).

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