



Case studies of successful transition from out-of-home placement to young adulthood in Korea[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Outcome studies of children in out-of-home care have focused on negative psychosocial issues, and very few studies have addressed personal and institutional factors that affect successful transitions into young adulthood. Adopting a resilience model and using a case study method, this study examines successful transitions of children from out-of-home care to young adulthood in Korea to draw implications for child welfare practice and policies. Five young adults in their 20s and 30s were interviewed between November 2015 and January 2016. Two main themes and six subthemes were identified: Social support and individual factors. Social support included significant others as informal support and formal support as stepping stones. Individual factors were studying as a survival skill, surviving in a tough and formidable world, self-control, and putting the past behind and moving forward. Based on the results, the study presents ways to facilitate smooth transitions to young adulthood which includes promotion of healthy relationships between a child and staff and educational support to help them complete higher education that eventually leads them to stable employment.

1. Introduction

Previous studies have indicated that children in out-of-home care experience a variety of psychosocial problems both during and after their placement in child welfare systems. These difficulties often persist into adulthood impacting a successful transition to independent life and including limited social skills, limited social networks and support systems, and lack of social resources (Anctil, McCubbin, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2007). Studies in the United States and other countries show that children who remain in out-of-home care for long periods of time or exit systems at age 18 experience high rates of dropping out of high school, high involvement in crime, alcohol and drug abuse, and early pregnancy (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011; Blome, 1997; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Jung & LaLonde, 2016; Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Mersky & Janczewski, 2013).

Deficit models and the pathology perspective posit that children in out-of-home care are vulnerable to a host of psychological and social problems (Whiting, 2000). These views thus focus on negative rather than positive outcomes, specifically on maladaptation and developmental difficulties. Resilience models (Stein, 2008) and strength-based approaches (Harwick, Lindstrom, & Unruh, 2017), however, identify

ways that children in out-of-home care successfully overcome a wide variety of life challenges and vulnerable situations. Therefore, a shift of focus from negative developmental outcomes to successful adaptation among children in out-of-home care refocus us on resources or protective factors that resilient children utilize in the process of transition to adulthood (Werner & Smith, 1992). Recent studies, predominately from the US, include education outcomes for young adults who left care at 18 (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Pecora, 2012) and qualitative studies that focus on children's perspectives on their experiences in foster care placement (Harwick et al., 2017; Messing, 2006; Whiting, 2000). A few studies have also examined positive developmental and psychosocial outcomes among these children both during and after their placements in child welfare systems.

In an effort to better understand factors that helped adults succeed both during and after their placements in out-of-home care in Korea, we designed a study to interview young adults who left care, completed college and maintained stable employment at least for three years. The authors selected five young adults who discussed their life experiences during and after placement. Based on theories of resilience and strengths focused practice, these stories provide valuable information to guide practitioners and policy makers seeking to enhance services and

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increase the likelihood of successful lives for children in out-of-home care. Paying attention to their stories is also a way that practitioners and policy makers can show respect to these children (Whiting, 2000).

2. Literature review

2.1. Children in out-of-home care in Korea and independent living programs

In Korea, out-of-home care generally refers to foster homes, group homes, and institutional care facilities.¹ As of December 31, 2014, there were 14,630 children in 278 institutional care facilities (Korea Child Welfare Association, 2017), 2588 children in 476 group homes (Ministry of Health and Welfare [MOHW], 2015a), and 14,340 children in 11,043 foster homes (Korea Foster Care, 2017), making a total of 31,558 children in the child welfare system. Of the children who were newly placed in out-of-home care in 2015, more than 90% were placed in foster homes (mainly kinship foster care), group homes, and institutional care facilities; the remainder were placed in therapeutic institutional facilities, independent living programs, and temporary institutional care facilities (MOHW, 2017). Of the children who were placed in Korea's child welfare system in 2015, 59.4% were cases of parental abuse, unemployment, and poverty and 24.5% of children had been abandoned by unmarried mothers. Approximately 10% of the children had entered the system as runaways or for delinquent behaviors (MOHW, 2017).

Under Korea's child welfare law, children in out-of-home care must leave the child welfare system at the age of 18, although their care can be extended to age 24 as long as they are enrolled in college or a job training program. In 2015, 980 and 140 youth, respectively, left institutional care facilities and group homes because of either the age-18 limit or the termination of their extended care at age 24 (Child Support Center for Independence Living [CSCIL], 2015). In a sample of 1221 young adults who had been in out-of-home care, 64% left placement at age 18 and the other 36% left at 24 having been in placement for an average of 12 years (CSCIL, 2012). Although 1106 youth in foster care left the system in 2011 at age 18 (CSCIL, 2012), little is known about them because independent living programs, particularly for those in kinship foster care in Korea, are one of the most neglected areas of study. What is known is that of the 980 youth who left institutional care facilities in 2015, 28% resided in government-subsidized housing; 61% graduated from a high school, 13.7% were still enrolled in high school, and 14.7% graduated from a college; another 6.4% had either dropped out of college or were on leaves of absence (CSCIL, 2015). Meanwhile, 40% of the 140 youths who left group homes resided in government-subsidized housing, 60.7% graduated from a high school, 20.7% were still enrolled in a college, and 5% had graduated from a college (CSCIL, 2015).

In contrast Korean adolescents living at home have high rates of both high school and college graduation, although employment attachment has become more challenging for young adults. For example, 70.8% of high school graduates in 2015 registered in colleges or universities (Korean Educational Statistics Services, 2017a) and the overall employment rate among college graduates in 2014 in Korea was 64.5% (Korean Educational Statistics Services, 2017b).

Korea's independent living support program, which is equivalent to the same programs in the United States, is designed to help children in out-of-home care prepare for independent adult life and has been a fast-growing area of services over the last decade. In 2006, the Korean government actively implemented a variety of practices and policies that focused on independent living support, such as providing housing, college scholarships, and one-time lump sums to children who leave

care. For example, Child Development Accounts (CDAs), in which local governments provide matching funds up to approximately \$30 USD each month using private donations for children in care, were established in April 2007 so that children would have money in bank accounts when they left the child welfare system. This money can be used for college tuition, housing security deposits, and home appliances. The average amount in CDAs at the time a child exits care is \$9000 USD for those leaving institutional facilities and group homes and \$6000 USD for those leaving foster care (CSCIL, 2016). Another example of government support was the establishment of an independent living support center, which now has a central office and 17 regional offices to provide independent living programs. Furthermore, since 2011, each institutional care facility with more than 30 children is required to hire a worker who specializes in independent living programs (MOWH, 2015b), although this requirement needs to be expanded to group homes and the foster care systems.

2.2. Issues for children residing in the child welfare system

Studies in Korea indicate that removal from home puts children in vulnerable positions because they must face two challenges at the same time: separation from or abandonment by parents or guardians and adjustment to new living environments. Separation, abandonment, loneliness, and subsequent anxiety and depression are common psychosocial issues for these children (Byun, Lee, & Cho, 2012; Jeong, 2002; Kim, 2010; Yoo, Han, & Choi, 2001). They also face social indifference and stigma because they are in institutional care, economic hardship, difficulties in social relationships, and psychological trauma caused by their family relationships (Kwon & Jeong, 2009). Further, unlike general adolescents, they lacked support from or investment by others as they grow and had little chances to learn social and job skills that will prepare them for adulthood (Lee, Suh, Cho, Chung, & Kim, 2007; Shin, 2001), had lower internal locus of control (Han & Lee, 2007) and less socio-economic capitals (Lee & Kim, 2015), which led them low academic achievement and low college attendance that made it difficult for them to transition to early adulthood (Shin, Park, & Kang, 2008). They also experienced frequent job changes due to employment insecurity and poor housing and living conditions (Kang, Shin, & Park, 2009; Lee et al., 2007).

Studies in western countries show similar difficulties. For example, compared with children in the general population, children in out-of-home care are at higher risk for social maladaptation including delinquency and crime, homelessness, mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and exposure to crime and violence (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2001; McMillen & Tucker, 1999); lower school achievement, more academic delays, and lower enrollment in colleges (Barth, 1990; Blome, 1997; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008); less reliable social support systems and resources, which subsequently results in economic and psychological hardships (Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade, 1994; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006) or lack of social and economic capital (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006); lower employment rates and unstable housing (Biehal et al., 1994; Dworsky, 2005; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). Cotê (2006) also indicated that children in foster care were poorly prepared for independent living, had difficulties with constructive coping, and had identity diffusion; thus, they are already behind in transitioning to adult life compared with adolescents in the general population.

Despite a long history of institutional care in Korea, outcome studies targeting children aging out at age 18 or leaving care at age 24 are relatively new, and have mostly focused on negative outcomes, which reinforce negative stereotypes about the child welfare system. In addition, little is known about children who lead successful lives after they leave the child welfare system, although the limited findings show that children who once were in out-of-home care can beat many odds by successfully graduating from college, actively searching for employment, being fully independent economically, and successfully

¹ Although both group homes and residential care facilities are categorized as institutional care facilities in Korea, this study refers an institutional care facility as a residential care facility, which has been known as a traditional orphanage.

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