



Latent classes of older foster youth: Prospective associations with outcomes and exits from the foster care system during the transition to adulthood[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Youth in the foster care system face considerable challenges during the transition to adulthood. However, there is significant variability within this population. This study uses person-oriented methods and a longitudinal dataset of youth aging out of foster care to examine differences in how subgroups of foster youth fare during the transition to adulthood. We identified four distinct latent classes, consistent with prior person-oriented studies of this population, and validated these classes by examining differences on additional relevant factors at age 17. After establishing these classes, we tested their predictive validity by examining differences in outcomes at age 19 in domains relevant to the transition to adulthood, including education and employment, problem behaviors, and mental health problems. Finally, given the importance of extended foster care in promoting better outcomes, we used survival analysis to prospectively examine whether class membership was associated with differences in the rates at which youth left foster care between ages 17 and 19. One large group of youth exhibited moderate behavior problems and left care quickly, while another large group of resilient youth had favorable outcomes and left care relatively slowly. A small group exhibited considerable behavior and mental health problems, but left care more slowly, and a very small group was characterized by a history of pregnancy. Findings suggest considerable variability in service need among older foster youth. Implications for service provision during the transition to adulthood are discussed.

1. Introduction

For youth aging out of the foster care system, the transition to adulthood can be difficult and stressful, as adolescents in foster care abruptly transition from dependency on state-provided care to independence, experiencing a substantial loss of support (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; The Pew Charitable Trust, 2007). Close to 21,000 youth age out of the foster care system yearly (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016), and relative to the general population, youth aging out of foster care have low levels of educational attainment, high unemployment rates and low earnings, poor physical and mental health, high rates of victimization, and high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Courtney & Heuring, 2005; McMillen et al., 2005). However, there is

considerable heterogeneity within this population and many youth exhibit considerable resilience during the transition to adulthood. Identifying meaningful subgroups of older foster youth and prospectively examining how they fare over time is highly relevant, as these findings can inform efforts to better match practice and policy with the specific needs and challenges of older foster youth (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007).

Older foster youth have been the target of many policy efforts, as they are widely recognized as vulnerable and not well-prepared to handle the transition to adulthood, often lacking both social and financial resources and relying on fragmented services provided by multiple systems (e.g., child and adult mental health services, housing services, safety net programs) (Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014; Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; C. Lee & Berrick, 2014). Recent policy efforts (e.g., Fostering Connections to

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Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008) have focused on extending the length of time that foster youth can remain in care, as remaining in the child welfare system has been shown to promote better educational and employment outcomes and protect against negative outcomes (e.g., arrests, risky sexual behavior, pregnancy, housing instability) during the transition to adulthood (Ahrens, McCarty, Simoni, Dworsky, & Courtney, 2013; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney & Hook, 2017; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2011; Hook & Courtney, 2011; J. S. Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014; Matta Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2017).

Extended supports are now available in close to half of states (Cooper, Jordan, & McCoy-Roth, 2013; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015), but even in states where extended care is possible, not all youth choose to remain in care and eligibility requirements often limit the number of youth served (Stott, 2013). In California, the majority of 17 year-old foster youth reported wanting to stay in care to receive additional supports; however, almost one-third reported that they would not want to stay in care after age 18 (Courtney et al., 2014). Unplanned exits, often under negative circumstances, are not uncommon (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Rauktis, Kerman, & Phillips, 2013) and re-entry is not always possible (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011). Youth commonly report desires for greater independence and frustration with the constraints the system places on their choices as reasons for leaving (Courtney et al., 2014; Goodkind et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2008). Examining whether specific subgroups of foster youth differ in their rates of leaving care can inform policies regarding extended supports and efforts to individualize transition planning.

1.1. Person-oriented approaches to studying older foster youth

Person-oriented approaches are complementary to variable-centered approaches and allow for identification of similar patterns of strengths and challenges through the estimation of distinct, homogeneous subgroups derived from individuals' levels on multiple indicators. That is, patterns of indicators emerge and are used to characterize typologies (Courtney et al., 2012). Previous research has utilized person-centered approaches to identify subgroups of older foster youth (Courtney et al., 2012; Keller et al., 2007; Shpiegel & Ocasio, 2015; Yates & Grey, 2012), but the predictive validity of these classes has not been tested. Prospective research is needed to determine whether subgroups differ in outcomes during the transition to adulthood. Similarly, no studies have yet examined whether subgroups of foster youth differ in their rates of leaving care.

In an early example, Keller et al. (2007) used a person-oriented approach to identify four distinct subgroups of foster youth in the Midwest Study at age 17. The largest class (43%), 'Distressed and Disconnected,' was characterized by nonfamily living arrangements (e.g., congregate care), more than five placements, a history of running away from placement, and a high rate of problem behavior. These youth reported high levels of violent victimization and mental health problems; they were the most likely to be receiving services, but had more negative views of the child welfare system. The second largest class (38%), 'Competent and Connected,' had low levels of problem behaviors and grade retention, a high likelihood of employment experience, and were most likely to reside in kinship or traditional foster care, with relatively few placements. These youth reported good social support and more satisfaction with the child welfare system than other classes. The 'Struggling but Staying' class (14%) had high rates of problem behaviors and grade retention and lived primarily in traditional foster care; they reported feeling satisfied with the child welfare system and planning to rely on the system for support. Lastly, the 'Hindered and Homebound' class (5%) had a high rate of parenthood and grade retention, and the lowest likelihood of employment experience. Most lived in kinship care and were in their first placement; they reported high levels of social support (Keller et al., 2007). Other

work with the Midwest Study identified four classes of young adults at ages 23 and 24, specifically 'Accelerated Adults' (36%) who appeared to be relatively successful in transitioning to adulthood, 'Struggling Parents' (25%) with low rates of education and employment, 'Emerging Adults' (21%) who appeared to be delaying the transition to adulthood without experiencing hardship, and 'Troubled and Troubling' (18%) with high rates of criminal justice involvement and psychosocial problems (Courtney et al., 2012). However, outcomes for the subgroups identified at age 17 have not yet been linked to later outcomes and it is unclear how these groupings relate to the groups identified in young adulthood.

Yates and Grey (2012) used latent profile analysis of independent raters' evaluations of competence in a convenience sample of youth who had aged out of foster care (ages 17 to 21), finding a four-class solution. 'Resilient' youth (47%) exhibited competence across domains, 'Maladapted' youth (16.5%) struggled across domains and had more internalizing and externalizing problems, 'Internally Resilient' youth (30%) had some difficulties across external domains (e.g., education, work), but good relational competence and self-esteem, and lower depressive symptoms, and 'Externally Resilient' youth (6.7%), exhibited competence in external domains, but lower relational competence and self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms (Yates & Grey, 2012). Most recently, Shpiegel and Ocasio (2015) used the National Youth in Transition Database to conduct cluster analysis with 17 year-old foster youth using dichotomous indicators (i.e., school enrollment, connection with a supportive adult, history of parenthood, homelessness, referral for substance abuse, incarceration). Youth in the 'Resilient' cluster (39%) were enrolled in school, connected to a supportive adult, and did not have any risk indicators. The 'Multiple Problem' cluster (15%) was characterized by multiple risk indicators, and almost half had a child. The remaining three clusters were characterized by 'Substance Abuse' (19%), 'Incarceration' (14%), and 'Homelessness' (13%) (Shpiegel & Ocasio, 2015).

Person-oriented approaches are subject to dataset specific issues, making replication of subgroups across samples crucial to the validity of conclusions drawn about the prevalence and relevance of identified subgroups. Despite differences in the indicators used in the above studies, all three identified relatively large subgroups of resilient and well-functioning youth, as well as subgroups struggling with multiple problems, and two of the three studies (Keller et al., 2007; Yates & Grey, 2012) identified subgroups with a high rate of parenthood and poor education and employment outcomes, although different in size (5% 'Hindered and Homebound' vs. 30% 'Internally Resilient'). However, none of these studies tested the prospective validity of these subgroups in predicting outcomes (e.g., education, employment, mental health problems) or rates of leaving foster care system during the transition to adulthood. Understanding how distinct subgroups of older foster youth fare during the transition to adulthood will facilitate more individualized and effective services during this vulnerable period.

2. Current study

The first aim of the current study was to test the predictive validity of latent classes of older foster youth by examining associations between class membership and outcomes at age 19. The second aim was to test whether class membership was associated with differences in the rates at which youth left foster care between ages 17 and 19. In order to test these aims, we conducted a latent class analysis to identify distinct subgroups of foster youth at age 17 and then validated these classes by using other baseline data to show that these subgroups were distinct from one another. We chose latent class analysis over cluster analysis because it is a model-based approach that derives subgroups using a probabilistic model rather than an arbitrarily chosen distance measure, as in cluster analysis. After establishing distinct, valid subgroups, we prospectively examined differences between classes in age 19 outcomes and rates of leaving care between 17 and 19.

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