Risk and resilience in the transition to adulthood from the point of view of care leavers and caseworkers

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A B S T R A C T

Emerging adulthood is considered a risky and vulnerable period for young people leaving substitute care but a window of opportunity for the development of resilience and positive change. This study explores the challenges and resources in transition to adulthood from the point of view of 50 care leavers and caseworkers in Israel. The findings revealed several shared perspectives of the two group regarding the challenges and assets during this period including: economic hardship and limited support by their families as a struggle, and supporting professional relationships as an asset. While caseworkers focused on the care leavers' low awareness and realization of their rights as a challenge, care leavers emphasized their weak social ties and loneliness as their main challenge. In addition, self-reliance was described as a resource by the care leavers but not by the caseworkers. The study's findings emphasized the importance of belongings, companionship and emotional support care leavers need, and the meaningful role of professional relationships in the transition to adulthood. One of the practical conclusion was helping the care leaves to develop interdependence and relational connections, and at the same time encouraging the caseworkers to see the care leavers' self-reliance as a strength.

1. Introduction

Young people leaving care most often at the age of 18, are in the midst of a transition on the way to become independent young adults. The first years after emancipating can have a crucial impact on their lives as adults (Wade, 2008). During this transition period, also known in the literature as "emerging adulthood", care leavers, like their peers in the general population, must make significant decisions regarding many aspects of their adult life, including housing, employment, career and marriage (Arnett, 2000, 2014). According to the Emerging Adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000), there are several features that are more pronounced during this period: young adults experience instability, feel in between adolescence and adulthood and are more self-focused. At the same time, this is a period of many possibilities and future opportunities. Thus, young adults devote much of their time to explore their identity and future goals.

It is assumed that care leavers are more limited in their opportunities and do not experience the benefits of this period. The time and space they have for self-exploration are constrained because of their relatively limited family support and the need to support themselves financially. They also experience great instability in accommodation and employment and find themselves relying mostly on themselves,

knowing that unlike many young adults their age, they would not be able to lean on their parents when the need arises (Arnett, 2007; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017a, 2017b). Most young adults in western society view themselves as becoming adults once they start making their own decisions and manage to support themselves financially (Arnett, 2000). These milestones however, are achieved gradually over time. Care leavers on the other hand, must assume independence immediately upon exiting care in an abrupt and accelerated transition. They lack both the readiness and the support needed for its successful resolution (Stein, 2006). As a result, they enter this crucial period considerably more vulnerable and disadvantaged than many of their same-aged peers. As opposed to their peers, many young adults leaving care have limited possibilities and opportunities that constrain their plans and hopes for the future (Arnett, 2000; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017b). Also, owing to their traumatic histories and restricted personal and environmental resources, most care leavers are likely to struggle with greater difficulties and risks during the transition to adulthood.

Indeed, many studies have documented the poor outcomes of care leavers in various areas of adult life including education, employment or risky behaviors (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Stein & Munro, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013). Other studies have focused on the needs of and challenges faced by care leavers

during the transition to independent living (Claire, 2006) and on their experiences in the first years following their exit from care (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014, 2017b). In conclusion, these studies suggest that care leavers experience complex relationships with their families, weakened social ties and that they have limited environmental resources to rely on. However, the overall majority of these investigations explored the transition to independence from the perspective of the young adults. Research as to how this transition is perceived in the eyes of their aftercare caseworkers is scarce. One aim of this study is to add caseworkers' point of view and explore the differences and similarities between their perceptions of the challenges care leavers face in the transition to adult life. Evidence suggests that the perceptions of young adults and caseworkers tend to differ (Melkman, Rafaeli, Bibi, & Benbenishty, 2016). It is therefore important to integrate both perspectives when planning services and interventions for care leavers to ensure that their needs are best accommodated for.

Resilience among care leavers has seldom been explored from the point of view of their caseworkers. Therefore, a second goal of this study is to examine caseworkers' perceptions of the resources and assets that help care leavers cope with the challenges of life after care and explore how these compare with the perceptions of the care leavers. Earlier studies have focused on the factors that enable care leavers to achieve favorable outcomes (Gilligan, 2008; Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van de Vijver, 2013). While some researchers focused on individual qualities and personal attributes, including motivation, optimism and expectations for the future, others emphasized the role of relationships in the transition to adulthood, including support from mentors, peers and family (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2016; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Gilligan, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013).

Emerging adulthood is considered a risky and vulnerable period for care leavers because it requires coping with complex instrumental and developmental tasks with little or no parental support, guidance, and monitoring (Arnett, 2000). At the same time, research suggests that resilience can emerge during and following emerging adulthood, and that this period may provide a window of opportunity for interventions that promote positive change (Masten, Obradović, & Burt, 2006). Therefore, the current study aims to explore similarities and differences in the perceptions of care leavers and caseworkers in Israel with regards to factors that may be associated with increased risk (challenges and struggles) or resilience (assets and resources) during the transition to adulthood of care leavers. In doing so, the study may provide us with a more comprehensive and integrated understanding of emerging adulthood among this vulnerable group that would inform the design and implementation of services to better support its needs.

2. Research goals

The current study goals are to explore the perspectives of care leavers and caseworkers in Israel regarding two central aspects of care leavers' transition to adulthood: 1) challenges and struggles; 2) assets and resources. The joint and comparative exploration of the two groups can contribute in several ways. First, it expands our understanding regarding the care leavers' needs and strengths in the transition to adulthood and the caseworkers' needs in supporting them. Understanding these vulnerable youths' challenges and protective factors can promote their successful coping with the period's practical and developmental tasks. Second, it emphasizes similarities and possible discrepancies in the two perspectives. Illuminating such points of agreement and disagreement could assist policy makers and practitioner tailoring interventions that are in line with the youths' needs and experiences.

Finally, the integration of both perspectives, young adults and caseworkers, could help service providers and policy makers gain more understanding about the transition to adult life and the ways to better support these young people and their caseworkers in holistic and productive way.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The sample included 25 care leavers and 25 caseworkers. Care leavers were a convenience sample of young adults between the ages 18–25 (mean age 21.5) who spent at least two years in care. In Israel, there are two systems of out-of-home placements: one supervised by the Ministry of Welfare, including therapeutic residential facilities and foster homes. The other, supervised by the Ministry of Education, includes youth villages. Of the approximately 9000 children removed annually from home by the welfare system, about 80% are placed in residential welfare settings (therapeutic settings) and about 20% are placed with foster families. Youth in those placements are often removed from home because of parental mistreatment and cope with extremely challenging and disrupted life situations including maltreatment and neglect. Those placements are designed to treat children and youth with extreme family problems and adjustment difficulties (Attar-Schwartz, 2008). In addition, every year the Ministry of Education places about 19,000 children in youth villages ("educational placements/facilities") on a voluntarily basis (National Council for the Child, 2011). Each of those out-of-home placements looks after vulnerable youth who come from underprivileged families, mostly from the geographical or social periphery of Israel. Many of these settings also receive adolescent immigrants mostly from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia (Mash, 2001).

Care leavers' were evenly distributed gender-wise (49% male) and nearly half of them were born in Israel (40%) and the rest were from immigrant families from the Former Soviet Union (36%) or from Ethiopia (24%). Since young adults during this life period vary by their primary occupation, the sample included young adults in military or civil service (36%), or employed (40%) In terms of accommodation, half were living with their parents (52%) and the rest were living independently in rented apartment with friends or alone (48%) (Table 1).

The sample of the caseworkers included 25 caseworkers who worked with care leavers whose distribution of former out-of-home placements was matched to that of the care leaver sample. Caseworkers worked in various post-care services and programs (e.g., supervised accommodation or mentoring programs). Most caseworkers were

Table 1
Care leavers' characteristics (N = 25).

Demographics	n	%
Gender		
Male	13	52%
Female	12	48%
Ethnicity		
Israel	10	40%
Soviet Union	9	36%
Ethiopia	6	24%
Age		
18–21	14	56%
22–25	11	44%
Former out-of-home placement		
Educational facility	11	44%
Therapeutic facility	8	32%
Foster care	6	24%
Current framework		
During military service/civil service	9	36%
Working	10	40%
Studying	4	16%
Unemployed	3	12%
Accommodations		
With parents	13	52%
In a supervision apartment	6	24%
With partners/alone	6	24%