Social support networks of care leavers: Mediating between childhood adversity and adult functioning

Eran P. Melkman[a],*, Rami Benbenishty[b]

[a] *Rees Centre for Research on Fostering and Education, Department of Education, University of Oxford, UK*
[b] *Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Israel*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Care leavers' social support networks have often been theorized as having a salient role in explaining youths' functional outcomes and the way these relate to their adverse pasts. The goals of the present study are to examine the association between childhood adversity and adult functioning among youth aging out-of-care, and to explore how attributes of their social support networks mediate this association.

The sample consisted of 345 Israeli care leavers (ages 18 to 25), formerly placed in residential or foster care. Standardized self-report questionnaires were administered to assess various attributes of youths' support networks (e.g., network size or adequacy) vis-à-vis three types of social support (emotional, practical, information and guidance), indices of childhood adversity, and markers of adult functioning (adjustment to post-school settings, economic well-being, and housing difficulties).

Structural equation modeling indicated that a significant portion of youths' functioning outcomes was attributable to childhood adversity. This relationship was fully or partially mediated by social support, across the various types of support and outcomes examined. Network size and network adequacy were the most prominent predictors of functioning; the latter more consistently so. Whereas emotional, practical, and information and guidance supports all significantly contributed to greater adjustment to post-school settings and economic well-being, only practical support was related to fewer housing difficulties.

The differential effects of the attributes and functions of care leavers' support networks on functioning outcomes are discussed in reference to social network literature. The paper also presents recommendations for practice and policy with a focus on social network intervention.

1. Introduction

Youth aging of out of the child welfare system, is one the most vulnerable groups of young adults; consistently, they demonstrate poor outcomes across multiple domains of functioning and well-being (Stein, 2006). They are at an especially high risk of experiencing periods of homelessness and financial distress, ultimately relying on public assistance for their daily survival (Courtney et al., 2011; Wade & Dixon, 2006). They are also known to suffer from substantial difficulties adjusting to post-school settings which impede their prospects for social mobility and better living conditions. They demonstrate unstable employment patterns (Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014), high rates of drop-out from higher education (Okpych, 2012), and are over-represented among those not in education, employment or training (NEET; Courtney et al., 2011).

These patterns are not surprising given the disadvantaged personal histories of individual care leavers, often including childhood abuse,

neglect, and other adversities experienced within the biological family or later, within the care system (Pecora et al., 2005). Moreover, youth in-care are removed from their homes and commonly undergo changes of placements and schools, which leaves them with fragmented social networks and limited support resources upon which to rely as they transition into adulthood and independence (Perry, 2006).

Research has looked at the role of social support for youth formerly placed in care (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013). Such research has begun delineating the associations between early adversity and adult outcomes and the role played by social support, as well as by distinct functions (e.g., emotional or practical) and attributes (e.g., network size or adequacy) of the support network, in linking the two (Melkman, 2017; Salazar, Keller, & Courtney, 2011). However, these studies have had an almost exclusive focus on mental health outcomes; largely unexplored are the effects of the various attributes of support on concrete areas of functioning, and the manner by which these attributes intervene in their relationship with early adversity. While there is growing

---

recognition among researchers and policy makers around the world regarding the central role played by care leavers' support networks in promoting their resilience, empirical evidence to support these notions and to guide intervention efforts, is still lacking (Stein, 2012). Therefore, the goals of the present study are to examine the relationship between childhood adversity and functioning (i.e., adjustment to postschool setting, economic well-being and housing difficulties) among young adults formerly placed in care, and to investigate how characteristics of their social support networks mediate this association.

1.1. Childhood adversity and functioning

Extensive scientific literature has documented the negative longterm physical and mental health consequences of early exposure to abuse, neglect and other forms of adversity, such as economic deprivation, drug abuse, or criminal activity in the household (e.g., Anda, Butchart, Felitti, & Brown, 2010; Topitzes, Mersky, Dezen, & Reynolds, 2013). Studies involving youth formerly placed in care have highlighted that both pre-care and in-care experiences of adversity were related to various domains of well-being including depression, loneliness and life satisfaction in young adulthood.(e.g., Melkman, 2017). In contrast, research on how early adversity may affect adult functioning, is only at its outset, and is largely confined to community samples. Such investigations have demonstrated that early adverse experiences are related to lower levels of job performance (Anda et al., 2004), employment (Liu et al., 2013), earnings (Currie & Widom, 2010), as well as a greater risk for homelessness (Herman, Susser, Struening, & Link, 1997). These findings have been partially confirmed in a recent study among a representative sample of care leavers (ages 17–26), indicating that youth who have experienced higher levels of maltreatment or household dysfunction were at a greater risk for homelessness and economic insecurity (Rebbe, Nurius, Ahrens, & Courtney, 2017).

Exploring the factors which mediate the relationship between early negative life events and adult outcomes is an important scientific challenge. Such exploration may yield information enabling to break these links and sever this risk chain (Rutter, 1999). Of special importance is the identification of those malleable factors that can serve as a basis for interventions, and can, in turn, promote resilience in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001). While previous research has testified to the possible contribution of several mediating factors such as academic abilities or commitment to school (Topitzes et al., 2013), research on such factors is nascent and researchers emphasize the critical need for further research (Rutter, 2012). The present research focused on social support as a factor that can asist in understanding the associations between childhood negative life events and performance in various life domains in young adulthood.

1.2. Social support and social networks: main and mediating effects

Social support is the psychological and material resources provided by one's social network intended to benefit her or his ability to cope with stress (Cohen, 2004). The key role of social support in promoting physical, mental and material well-being has been well established (Uchino, 2009; though, the potential of social ties to negatively impact well-being has also been highlighted; see for example, Newsom, Rook, Nishishiba, Sorkin, & Mahan, 2005). Research often distinguishes between the structural and qualtiative aspects of social support. The structural or quantitative aspects of support, such as the size of the network or the strength of ties with its members (measured by frequency of contact) are thought to determine the potential capacity of the social network to link the focal person to varied resources (Marsden, 1990). In contrast, the qualitative aspects refer to the perceived subjective quality of these resources (e.g., satisfaction with support), and therefore reflect the inclination of individuals to make use of their social ties, as well as the extent to which the network adequately addresses their needs. Research among the general and disadvantaged

populations has examined how employment, economic well-being and housing are affected by both the structural aspects of network size and frequency of contact (Calsyn & Winter, 2002; Degli Antoni, 2009; Yakubovich, 2005), and by qualitative attributes of support, such as satisfaction with support or network adequacy (the extent to which it adequately addresses one's needs; Calsyn & Winter, 2002; Degli Antoni, 2009; Liu et al., 2013). Studies which have examined the differential effects of the structural and qualitative, or perceived, aspects of social support, found the latter to be a stronger predictor of outcomes (Uchino, 2009). Importantly, perceived support differs from recevied or actual support, that refers to interactions or actual exchanges of interpersonal support (Kaul & Lakey, 2003). Perceived support has been found to be have a stornger relationship with well-being and avoids the problem of endogenity with received support, whereby individuals receiving more support are often also those presenting greater needs (Uchino, 2009).

Social support can also serve different functions. These have been categorized as emotional, instrumental or practical, and information and guidance support (Thoits, 2011). In contrast, the majority of studies on social support have used global measures that do not reflect these distinct functions (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). These distinctions are essential because various types of support may be differentially related to outcomes in different domains (Bowen et al., 2013). Thus, for example, emotional support is considered to be particularly effective in protecting individuals from the harmful effects of stress on physical and mental health (Uchino, 2009). While emotional support exerts indirect effects on concrete outcomes like employment by enhancing employees' ability to overcome unforseen challenges (Hurlbert, Haines, & Beggs, 2000), when such concrete domains of functioning are considered, the contributions of practical and informational support may be greater than that of emotional support.

Indeed, several studies among disadvantaged populations demonstrated that practical support in the forms of financial aid, transportation, or help with childcare was related to increased levels of employment and earnings and reduced levels of poverty and hardship (Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2005; Turney & Harknett, 2010). Other studies, have highlighted the significance of close ties with people who can help job seekers advance through the hiring process (Obukhova, 2012) or provide temporary housing solutions in times of crisis (Perez & Romo, 2011). Knowledge concerning the effects of information and guidance support is much more limited, though these have been highlighted in research focusing on the role of social networks in explaining people's outcomes in the labor market (see review by Castilla, Lan, & Rissing, 2013). These studies stressed the importance of informational resources in the job-seeking process; specifically information regarding new and attractive job opportunities that was provided by network members (Yakubovich, 2005). In fact, jobs acquired in this manner through network ties were consistently associated with better earning and more stable jobs than those acquired through more formal means such as advertisements for employment (Smith, Menon, & Thompson, 2012). Furthermore, information and guidance from network members were found to enhance learning processes, through which employees develop intuition, knowledge for their roles and understanding of their responsibilities within the workplace (Mollenhorst, Voelker, & Flap, 2008).

The notion that social support may mediate the effects of early adversity on adult outcomes originated in the pioneering work of Cassel (1976). Cassel argued that the disruption of significant social ties produced by stressful environmental conditions might leave the individual with inadequate support, thereby decreasing the abilities of the individual to cope and to adjust. The complex familial circumstances shared by youth aging out of state care, along with a history of longterm care, often leave these young people with impoverished networks to support them in their challenging transition into adult life (Perry, 2006; Rosenfeld et al., 1997). Although placement into substitute care can be seen as a means of placing greater and more positive support