



Turning points and resilience of academically successful foster youth



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ABSTRACT

In this study, 19 young adults who were removed from their biological parents as children were interviewed about turning points in their lives that led to them to complete a post-secondary educational program or achieve at least junior standing in a four-year institution. The results suggest that a sense of autonomy, social and instrumental support, and access to “safe havens” interacted to facilitate turning-point events in their lives.

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1. Introduction

This study explores how academically successful youth in foster care describe the turning points and second chances in their lives that contributed to their being educationally successful. Turning points have been described as experiences that are perceived as life changing by the person who lives them (Pillemer, 2001; Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012), or as the opening up of opportunities during periods of life transition (Werner & Smith, 2001). Rutter (1996) further described turning-point experiences as involving a marked discontinuity in development that results in a change in the quality and direction of one's life trajectory. Rutter also noted that these experiences do not just have short-term consequences but have the potential to effect change over the long term.

Turning-point experiences are not universal experiences of development but, rather, are seen among certain individuals or groups (Rutter, 1996). Thus, the types of experiences perceived as life changing are varied. Further, they involve both experiences over which the person has control and those over which the person has no control. In addition, they can be perceived as negative (e.g., a loss or death) or positive (e.g., a significant achievement, such as graduating or obtaining a hoped-for job).

The notion that these events are “perceived” as life altering is important because this implies that there are not particular objective events that may be life altering but, rather, it is the process of interpreting and making sense of an event that makes it significant. This subjective or phenomenological quality to turning-point events lends itself to a qualitative approach to research and makes it critical to understand how these youth understand turning-point experiences.

As noted, for an experience to be perceived as significant, the person who lives the experience must interpret the event as altering the flow or direction of his or her life. In addition, some conceptualizations of significance posit a stronger association with future psychological well-being than do others. For example, there is some evidence that those who are able to draw some positive effect from a negative experience were more satisfied with their lives than those who were not (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). In addition, interpretations of an experience that include an individual's redemption or cognitive transformation are more likely to lead to a positive effect (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; Tebes, Irish, Vasquez, & Perkins, 2004).

1.1. Foster youth

There is a significant population of children in foster care in the United States. The federal government estimates that in 2012, approximately 400,000 children lived in various

forms of foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). These children live with individual foster families, in agency-managed group care facilities, or with relatives in “kinship care.” During this same year, an estimated 23,396 of these youth emancipated from the foster care system and began the transition to independent adulthood.

Youth in foster care face many obstacles to achieving academic success and are especially vulnerable as they make the transition from the foster care system to adult independence (Merding, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Pecora, 2012). For example, it has been well documented that youth in foster care suffer from much higher rates of mental illness, educational disabilities, financial insecurity, and poor educational achievement than do youth from the general population (e.g., Havlicek, Garcia, & Smith, 2013; Pecora, 2012; Pecora et al., 2005). Although these negative outcomes are well documented, relatively little is known about those who “beat the odds” and successfully make the transition from foster care to achieve academic success in post-secondary educational programs (Hines, Merding, & Wyatt, 2005; Merding et al., 2005).

Success in post-secondary education is an important developmental achievement that is associated with higher levels of employment, higher income, better health outcomes, and less participation in crime later in life, when compared to those who do not have college degrees (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Youth in foster care lag greatly behind their peers in successfully completing post-secondary education, with college graduation rates of only 2–5% (Merding et al., 2005).

Yet, youth in foster care often receive minimal support in making the transition to independent adulthood and are frequently forced into what Geenen and Powers (2007) call “instant adulthood.” Instant adulthood means that they are faced with an abrupt end of support at a time when they have not yet mastered the educational, social, or economic survival skills necessary to be independent in the community. As Geenen and Powers state, “Youth aging out of foster care are typically not afforded the luxury of a gradual transition into adulthood or the safety net of family if they find themselves unprepared for the challenges of independent living” (p. 1085). This lack of preparation often results in lower educational achievement, higher unemployment, and more homelessness, among other problems (Courtney et al., 2005; Pecora, 2012; Pecora et al., 2005). Although this issue has garnered increasing attention from researchers and policymakers, the transition to adulthood remains an important problem for both this population of youth and society in general.

1.2. Resilience

This study is framed by theoretical and empirical research on the concept of resilience and the phenomena of developmental turning points. Research on resilience grew out of work among adults with schizophrenia and their children (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Based on the finding that many children of seriously mentally ill parents did well

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despite the adversities that they faced, researchers expanded their focus beyond risk factors to a broad set of social and psychological factors that can promote positive outcomes among children faced with adversities, including poverty, abuse, and other stressful life events (Garnezy, 1993; Masten & Curtis, 2000; Rutter, 2012). Researchers have found that, although children exposed to stresses such as neonatal distress, poverty, neglect, and parental mental illness often have more psychosocial problems than do those who are not exposed, the large majority grow up to lead productive adult lives (Benard, 2004; Luthar et al., 2000; Werner & Smith, 2001). Other researchers have noted that the presence of various forms of personal and social competence in children is a better predictor of the absence of problems in adulthood than simply the absence of emotional and behavioral symptoms (Kohlberg, Ricks, & Snarey, 1972, 1984).

The concept of resilience has evolved from a focus on “invincible” or “invulnerable” children (Masten, 2001) who were seen as exceptional or unusual, to a view that the same self-correcting developmental processes are at work in all children (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). Masten calls this quality “ordinary magic” and argues that resilience is a universal and ordinary occurrence, rather than the providence of only a few fortunate or special children. The research on resilience offers a language of strengths (Benard, 2004) that provides an empirical backdrop for various approaches to strength-based practice such as the strengths perspective in social work (Saleebey, 1996, 2001, 2008), solution-focused brief therapy (De Jong & Kim Berg, 2008), and positive psychology (Seligman, 2004).

There is great variability in the definitions of resilience, but most definitions focus on the presence of both adversity and positive adaptation (Luthar et al., 2000). Children also can be resilient in some aspects of life but not others. This variability in resilience has led to the recommendation that researchers must be specific in referring to the domain under investigation. In the case of the academically successful foster youth in this study, educational achievement was chosen as the focus; thus, we use the term *educational resilience*.

Sources of resilience can be conceptualized as two broad categories: personal or phenomenological strengths, and environmental protective factors (Benard, 2004). Personal strengths have been further divided into four overlapping domains: (a) social competence, (b) problem solving, (c) autonomy, and (d) sense of purpose. Environmental protective factors are present in the family, community, or schools and include (a) caring relationships; (b) clear and positive expectations by family members, educators, and community members for achievement; and (c) opportunities to participate and to give back in the areas of family, school, or community life (Benard, 2004; Hass & Graydon, 2008).

The distinction between personal and environmental factors is useful because it provides a model for understanding the breadth and complexity of resilience. It also acknowledges that resilience is not simply a personal quality. At the same time, it is important to understand that the actual lived experience of children is more complex and that resilience reflects the dynamic transactional interplay of the person and the environment. For instance, children with easygoing temperaments might find it easier to engage adults, who then provide needed social support. In contrast, children who have a more difficult temperament or who lack academic or problem-solving skills often find it difficult to “recruit” the needed social support (Benard, 2004). Thus, resilience is, in part, a function of personal, even innate, abilities and skills but is also dependent on the qualities of the social environment.

Research on youth in foster care who were academically successful in higher education is very limited. A qualitative study involving interviews with 14 youth who had been in foster care and were attending university found that the interaction between individual factors (e.g., internal locus of control), social support, and systems (e.g., school and foster care system) that functioned as “safe havens” played an important role in gaining entry into higher education (Hines et al., 2005). This study also found that achievement or resilience in one domain of life is not necessarily reflected in other domains.

In another study involving surveys of former foster youth, Hass and Graydon (2008) found that academically successful foster youth drew significant support from other people and had a strong appreciation for the role that others played in their success. They also found that academically successful foster youth appeared to have a strong commitment to helping others and to giving back to the community. Similar to Hines et al. (2005), this study found that educational resilience did not translate to resilience in all life domains. For example, the youth in Hass and Graydon’s study seemed to lack confidence in their abilities to cope and viewed the world as unpredictable.

2. Purpose of study

The current study is an exploration of how youth in foster care account for their academic success and, from their perspectives, what constituted the turning-point experiences in their lives. To accomplish this, the study uses data from interviews of educationally successful youth that had been removed from their homes as children and placed in foster care. The interviews focused on how these youths experienced turning-point events in their lives. The use of qualitative interview methods emphasizes the meaning making within the narrating of turning-point experiences. Further, turning points provide a window into the process of resilience, as they appear to mark a positive change in the trajectory of adaptation toward resilience and the overcoming of adversity.

Understanding the perspective of youth who have been “in the system” can improve our understanding of how to provide the services that they need to be successful in making the transition to adulthood. The

importance of including youth voices has been emphasized by what Liebmann and Madden (2010) describe as the youth participation movement. The youth participation movement begins with the basic premise that without hearing and heeding the voices of those affected by the policies and practices we create, our efforts to improve the systems designed to help them are doomed to failure. Firsthand accounts by court-involved youth and emerging adults of their frustrations and successes and their analyses of the systems in which they are enmeshed, provide important firsthand perspectives on the nature of the challenges they face and how to address them.

This study supports the youth participation movement by seeking to provide opportunities for “graduates” of the foster care system to discuss the experience of turning points in their lives. In our analysis of the interview data, we seek to provide a firsthand perspective of the turning points that contributed to the educational success of these youth. Our hope is that this will inform our understanding of foster youth and how to support them in being successful in higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Setting and participants

The youth interviewed for this phenomenological qualitative study were drawn from a pool of 44 participants in a prior study who had responded to a written questionnaire that also focused on sources of resilience among academically successful youth in foster care (Hass & Graydon, 2008). All participants were clients of the Orangewood Children’s Foundation (OCF). OCF is a non-profit, community agency in Orange County, California, that provides assistance to foster youth who are making the transition into independent adulthood. With the aim of helping youth to make a successful transition into independent adulthood, the foundation provides several programs that encourage youth to attend college or other post-secondary vocational training. These programs include financial assistance, scholarships, and a mentoring program for high school sophomores. No compensation was provided to participants for volunteering for the study.

This study used OCF’s operational definition of academic success, which is successful completion of a post-secondary educational or vocational program or achievement of at least junior standing in a four-year institution (Hass & Graydon, 2008). The recipients of the initial survey questionnaire also received a form that sought their permission to contact them for a follow-up, face-to-face interview. Nineteen (43%) of those who responded to the initial survey returned the signed permission form and were then contacted by telephone to arrange a time and place for the follow-up interviews. At the time of the interview, each participant was presented with an informed consent form that explained the study and sought consent for audio recording of the interview.

These participants were ethnically diverse (41% identified themselves as Caucasians, 16% as African American, 16% as Latino, 11% as Asian, and 16% as “other”). The majority of participants (77%) were female. Their mean age was close to 22 years, and the age at which they entered foster care ranged from birth to 17 years, with a median age of 11.5 years. A majority had been in either one (52%) or two (25%) foster placements before emancipation. These data are very similar to the data reported in the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, which reviewed case records for 659 alumni of the foster care system and whose authors interviewed 479 alumni in the states of Oregon and Washington (Pecora et al., 2005). Although the demographics in the present study are similar to those of other research on youth in foster care (Pecora et al., 2005), when compared to the larger demographics of Orange County, the location of the data collection, a much larger percentage of those interviewed was female (77% versus 49.9% for Orange County) and African American (16% versus 2%), and a smaller percentage was Latino (16% versus 34.2%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

The 19 persons from this group who volunteered to be interviewed were similar in age to those who responded to the survey questionnaire,

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