Clothing selection motivations and the meaning of possessions for tweens in a foster care group home

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ABSTRACT

It is important for foster caregivers to understand children's basic and psychological needs in order to provide better life experiences, and minimize the risk and vulnerability they previously experienced. Thus, this study is designed to understand clothing selection motivations and the meaning of possessions for foster tweens and how these are related to their life experiences in foster care group homes. We conducted qualitative in-depth focus group interviews with 18 tweens in a foster care group home in the Southwest region in the U.S. Thematic interpretation was used to analyze the interview data. Six themes emerged from the data including *social acceptance*, *self-expression*, *family connection*, *independence*, *ownership*, and *respect*. Participants expressed their individual character by the clothing they chose and expressed various needs of self-expression and social interaction. We also found that clothing and possessions play an important role in giving meanings to social interactions for tweens in the foster home. Furthermore, the findings of this study emphasize the need for proper education of foster care parents and tweens regarding ownership of property and respect in a foster care group home.

1. Introduction

There are an increasing number of children who experience a foster care placement because of physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse and/or neglect (Leve et al., 2012). Foster care becomes a long-term placement for many children and their needs are varied based on their age (Barth, 1990). Previous research suggests that poor educational support, deficient or inadequate clothing, and lack of life skills resources are the most prevalent grievances with the child welfare system (Barth, 1990). In addition, both children in foster care group homes and foster parents express a critical need for more resources (MacGregor et al., 2006). For example, some foster parents feel they need to fight constantly to provide necessary personal items (e.g., clothing, recreational equipment) for children in foster care (MacGregor et al., 2006). Therefore, it is important for foster caregivers to understand children's basic and psychological needs in order to provide better life experiences, and minimize the risk and vulnerability they previously experienced. Given the limited studies over the needs of foster care children, the purpose of this study is to explore children's experiences in a foster care group home in the southwestern United States regarding clothing selection and the meaning of personal possessions.

Clothing is a tool to express oneself and is considered an extended self that shows one's identity (Ahuvia, 2005). Clothing can also be a therapeutic tool to improve one's self-esteem (Shin and Lee, 2000). In addition, clothing plays a communicative role when people interact with others in the society, as well as a role in self-concept formation (Daters, 1990). Furthermore, as tweens begin to develop an introspective view, the ability to recognize and express their thoughts and beliefs becomes important during this developmental stage (Brito, 2012). Thus, the objectives of this study are 1) to explore foster tween's motivations for clothing selection and 2) to understand the meaning of personal possessions for foster tweens.

The first part of this article consists of an integrative literature review for key concepts of this research including foster care, tweens, clothing and possessions, and Symbolic Interaction Theory. The following section provides a description of the qualitative methodology used in this study to explore clothing selection motivations and the meaning of possessions for foster tweens. We then we state the findings of this study in terms of the themes that emerged related to foster tweens' clothing choices and behaviors. In the last section, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of the recent research, as well as limitations and future directions.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Foster care

Foster care is defined as a system in which a child has been placed into a home of a state-certified caregiver/foster parent (Dorsey et al., 2014). The placement of a child into a foster care setting is arranged by a government social-service department, commonly referred to as child protective services (CPS) (Leve et al., 2012). These settings can be in a private home or residential group home facility. Children enter foster care because their birth families can no longer provide safe, adequate housing. A vast majority of the children in care are removed from their home as a result of experiencing one of the previously mentioned forms of maltreatment (Leve et al., 2012). Additional reasons for placement into care include: exposure to domestic violence, parental drug use/distribution, or incarceration. Children in foster care often experience more housing transitions than are desirable, inevitably decreasing their access to quality educational programs or interventions (e.g., extra-curricular or recreational programs) that help them succeed (Euser et al., 2013). This experience can increase emotional and behavioral disturbances and cause emotional and mental stresses (Clark et al., 1996). Researchers also found that placement characteristics are associated with academic skill delays and school failure for foster care children (Zima et al., 2000). Accordingly, McMillen et al. (2005) report an overwhelming prevalence of mental health diagnoses requiring treatment in older foster children, particularly those over ten years old. Thus, to support their mental health and behavioral health well-being, therapeutic and psychoeducational programs such as group psychotherapy, social skill building, and recreational interventions have been recommended (Clausen et al., 1998).

2.2. Tweens

The word tween is a recent term defining the age gap between childhood and adolescence, ranging from ages 8 to 13 (Brock et al., 2010). The tween age demographic is well represented in foster care (Mech, 1988). In fact, according to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Data Book (2014), tweens make up approximately one third of the age demographic represented in foster care for the state of Texas. Tweens have many opinions and ideas to share concerning what they think and how they feel. Simultaneously, tweens are developmentally unearthing issues of identity and self-esteem in unique ways (e.g., Buckingham, 2008). Therefore, a better understanding of tweens in foster care will help us to provide necessary resources and programs to meet their needs.

Tweens have a unique set of developmental needs. Jones (2002) identifies seven specific needs, including competence and achievement (focus on proving themselves and receiving admiration), self-definition (explore the world and reflect on experiences), creative expression (express interests to help them define and accept themselves), positive social interactions (support, companionship, relationships with adults and peers), structure and clear limits (rules and boundaries for security and to support self-expression), and meaningful participation (express social and intellectual skills and responsibility). It is likely that these needs are influenced by (or influence) a tween's choice of clothing. In addition, tweens are a group of people on the brink of multiple physiological, physical, social, and cognitive developments. For example, tweens are at the beginning of puberty, when physical and physiological changes influence social relationships and interactions. Tweens have a developing sexual identity, influenced by each of the changes described above. The developmental period between childhood and adolescence is not a dormant time, but rather is a time of transition and the beginnings of adolescent identity processes. Thus, although much is known about the developmental needs of tweens, less is known about how tweens in foster care behave related to clothing and how they think about their possessions in the unique foster care setting.

2.3. Clothing and possessions

Clothing is an expression of individual, social, and cultural identities (Kaiser, 1997). Clothing selection can be used to manage one's negative self-concept and emotions (Cosbey, 2001; Dubler and Gurel, 1984). Furthermore, people use clothing to enhance feelings when interacting with others (Cosbey, 2001). For example, fashionable clothing can help people to increase positive perceptions of themselves (Watson et al., 2010). Also, Shin and Lee (2000) found that an individual's self-esteem, emotion, and self-appearance image can be improved by clothing and appearance management. Clothing forms the meanings, also called the functions, of these expressions and identities through symbolic communication. That is, individuals select clothing because it satisfies both basic and communicative needs. As one component of clothing, color has been found to have psychological and emotional meanings (Cohen, 2013). For example, Elliot and Niesta (2008) found the meaning of attractiveness in red clothing. Also, individuals of different ages have different color preferences depending on their environmental and cultural backgrounds (Cohen, 2013). Understanding attitudes and beliefs about clothing is therefore important to understanding human beings and human behavior.

According to Belk (1988), possessions can be explained as one's extended self and provide a strong sense of self. A possession, any object belonging to a person, becomes important when the owner of this object attaches meaning to it (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Specifically, personal values and beliefs are often reflected in one's possessions (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Parr and Halperin (1978) explored how children perceive the social meaning of clothing. They found that children tend to develop more meanings of clothing, from the aesthetic meaning to personality-related meaning, when they get older. In a more recent study, König (2008) supports similar findings. As Friedman et al. (2013) suggested, children need to be able to determine which objects belong to whom, so that they can recognize and respect ownership rights for themselves as well as for others. Also, it is important to understand the meaning of possessions and how meaning is developed because meaning of possessions is related to children's personal characteristics and social interaction (Ramsey, 1987). That is, possessions for children in foster care group homes may have different or unique meanings because they may be able to keep certain or selected possessions from their original homes.

2.4. Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic Interaction Theory is defined as a diverse perspective, but this theory mostly focuses on the origins and initiation of meaning (Hewitt, 1997). George H. Mead first introduced the concept of symbolic interaction and the term was coined by his student, Herbert Blumer (McPhail and Rexroat, 1979). Symbolic interaction explains how meaning arises from social interactions. Meaning is derived from the interaction, not by the context of an individual. Essentially, when individuals and situations interact mutual meanings are formed. Symbolic motives usually play a more important role than utilitarian motives (Coskuner and Sandikci, 2004). For instance, many people purchase and wear clothing for symbolic reasons (e.g., buying clothing for power or status) rather than utilitarian reasons (e.g., buying clothing when existing clothing is worn and not wearable any more). Clothing is more meaningful and active in symbolic interaction approaches as people act toward certain things (i.e., clothing and possessions in this study) based on the meaning these things have for them. For example, luxury goods can provide symbols of status in a capitalistic society (Kaiser et al., 1991). Furthermore, these meanings are related to social interaction and environments (Kaiser et al., 1991). As Blumer (1969) stated in his theory, clothing is linked to personal appearance and collective selection based on the norms and meanings in a society.

Human behavior can be organized by symbolic linkages of psychological and social interactions to identify the self in society (Stryker,