



Assets and pathways in achieving future goals of residential care alumni

Yafit Sulimani-Aidan*

Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University Israel, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv, Israel



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ABSTRACT

Thinking about and planning for the future are crucial in emerging adulthood. The goal of this study was to explore the assets and pathways in pursuing the future goals of 25 care leavers in Israel. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes including the young adults' professional figures, informal network and personal characteristics. The findings indicate that care leavers utilize their reliance on themselves in order to move towards their goals. In addition, their parents' struggles in life are perceived as a motivator in seeking a better future for themselves. The discussion addresses the role of formal and informal figures in care leavers' transition to adulthood and the importance of allowing them to receive the support of familiar professionals in order to build connections and introduce them to new opportunities.

“It's me. That's all there is. I'm my own barrier and my own savior. It's really, really, really up to me. Because I'm different from all the others that have their parents' support. So everything, everything is up to me.”

(young woman, 22, foster care alumna).

1. Transition to adulthood among care leavers

Emerging adulthood is characterized as a complex period that includes many changes in most important life domains. During this period young people have to make significant decisions in their lives on housing, employment, career and marriage (Arnett, 2000). Arnett suggested five features that distinguish and are more pronounced in emerging adulthood than in other periods. He argues that emerging adulthood is the age of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities. As a time of identity exploration, emerging adults are more focused on the self and experience increased independence and freedom from time constraints and social control. On the other hand, they experience less parental support, guidance, and monitoring (Arnett, 2007).

Emerging adults who have left care are especially vulnerable during the transition to adulthood due to their prior risk factors and stressors (Arnett, 2007; Courtney et al., 2011), and because unlike other young adults who receive their parents' support, they are usually forced to confront these challenges with little or no support from their families (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009). Also, due to the extension of adulthood, young people are more dependent and the family has a greater role in providing financial, practical and emotional support. However, for

many care leavers, relationships with their biological families at this time may be missing or stressful (Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005).

Leaving the care system and facing adulthood almost alone, they are expected to assume instant adulthood. They often miss out on the critical preparation stage that other young people are privileged with, and the opportunity to linger, explore their freedom, reflect on their life and future steps, and search for their own identity (Stein, 2012). As a result, many care leavers are unable to fully explore their opportunities as expected in this period (Arnett, 2007; Stein, 2012). Their limited personal and social assets narrow their possibilities as adults, and likely have a profound impact on the way they perceive their future and fare in many areas of adult life (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Shimoni & Benbenishty, 2011; Stein & Munro, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013).

Despite extensive research that highlights these young people's poor outcomes, evidence has emerged supporting these young peoples' resiliency – indicating that some of them fare better during the transition to adulthood (Stein, 2012). Therefore, more studies have begun to explore the factors that can promote their successful transition from care to independent living (Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). However, they focused on objective outcomes and achievement that are defined as “milestones” in adulthood by the society rather than on these young peoples' own subjective expectations and goals for themselves.

The literature supports the role of planning, goal-directedness, and future orientation, as key components of resilience during emerging adulthood (Masten, Obradović, & Burt, 2006), indicating the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: yafitsu@post.tau.ac.il.

importance of exploring the process and factors that promote them. Therefore, this study aims to explore care-leavers' perceptions regarding the assets and pathways they have in their attempt to realize their expectations and pursue their future goals. Specifically, their protective and promotive life experiences, resources, social networks, strength and abilities, from their point of view.

2. Resilience in the context of emerging adulthood

Resilience is a broad concept, usually defined as the ability to adjust properly despite evident distress, and succeed despite many difficulties and challenges the individual experiences (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Baker, 2000). Resilience also characterizes people who find the inner strength to recover by themselves or with their social support at times of crisis. According to this approach, resilient young adults are those who see adversity as inevitable during their life course, believe in their ability to deal with difficulties, and see the potential to flourish after each crisis (Bandura, 1982). Therefore, resilience is not a personality trait but an outcome revealed through behavior and coping patterns (Masten & Powell, 2003).

Young adults who leave care are entering their emerging adulthood. Although they depart from their known environment and experience insecurity, they also might have the opportunity to follow their own new paths with the experience, insights and few assets they gained. Therefore, emerging adulthood holds particular interest for the study of resilience because it may afford important changes in the young adults' capacity and opportunities that may play an important role in altering their choices and ultimately their life course.

Earlier studies that explored resilience among at-risk youth found different factors highlighting varied processes that may play a role in resilience. While some researchers focused on the individual qualities and personal attributes, including motivation, self-efficacy, optimism and expectations for the future, others emphasized the role of relationships in the transition to adulthood, including the support of mentors, peers and family (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2016; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Gilligan, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). Although scholars disagree on factors leading to resilience and the outcomes that represents "positive adjustment," they agree that resilience can emerge during and following emerging adulthood and that this period may provide a window of opportunity for intervention to promote positive change. Also, that the assets these young people acquire in adolescence provide a foundation for better transition to adulthood. Finally, scholars agree that the conditions for changing their life course depend on a conjunction of both individual traits, social supports, and contextual opportunities (Masten et al., 2006).

3. Research goals

This exploratory study aims to explore care leavers' point of view of their assets and pathways while striving to reach their future goals and aspirations during emerging adulthood. Specifically it aims to: 1. understand the life experiences, protective and promotive factors that can promote the realization of the expectations of these vulnerable young people during this defining period is important; 2. learn more about the assets and resources these young people do have while struggling to put their goals into action.

This information could provide us with greater insight as to the resources and pathways that might strengthen the chances of these young people to reach their goals as independent young adults. In addition, this information could help policy makers and service providers gain more understanding of their own strengths and the ways to better support these young people and enhance their abilities, assets and possibilities. These could lead to promotion of their resilience and outcomes in adulthood.

Table 1
Young adults' demographics ($N = 25$).

Demographics	n	%
Gender		
Male	12	48%
Female	13	52%
Ethnicity		
Israel	11	44%
Soviet Union	8	32%
Ethiopia	6	24%
Age		
18–21	14	56%
22–24	11	44%
Occupation		
During military service/civil service	7	28%
Working	9	36%
Studying	4	16%
Volunteering	2	8%
Unemployed	3	12%
Accommodations		
With parents	13	52%
In a supervision apartment	6	24%
With partners/alone	6	24%

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The sample included 25 young adults who were emancipated from three main types of out-of-home placements in Israel: therapeutic residential care facilities, youth villages, and foster care (Table 1). The Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services supervises therapeutic residential care facilities and foster care. The Ministry of Education supervises educational residential settings called youth villages. Of the approximately 9000 children removed from home annually by the welfare system, about 80% are placed in residential welfare settings (therapeutic settings) and about 20% are placed with foster families. In addition, every year the Ministry of Education places about 19,000 children in youth villages on a voluntarily basis (National Council for the Child, 2009). Each of those out-of-home placements cares for vulnerable youth who come from underprivileged families, mostly from the geographical or social periphery of Israel (Mash, 2001). Many of these settings also receive adolescent immigrants, mostly from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia (Zeira & Benbenishty, 2011).

Almost half of the participants (48%) were young men and 52% were young women, with an average age of 21.5. Almost half (44%) were born in Israel, 24% were immigrants from Ethiopia, and a third were immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (32%). Two thirds were alumni of residential care settings and a third were emancipated from foster care homes. Their average length in care was 3.5 years (Table 1).

The young adults were in different frameworks (e.g., military service, employed) and accommodations at the time of the interview. Two thirds of them were either in their mandatory military or civil service or working (64%), and half lived with their parents (52%) or independently (48%).

4.2. Procedure

After obtaining approval from the ethics committee of the authors' university, the research staff in collaboration with the placements leaders selected a purposeful sample of young adults between the ages 18–25 who left care one to six years previously. First, the young adults were approached over the phone. They were given an explanation about the study goals and asked for their consent to participate in the study. The participants who match the research criteria and voluntarily agreed to take part in the study were interviewed face to face in a place

of their choice (25 out of 40 that were approached). The selection criteria were: young adults in their early emerging adulthood (18–24), who spent at least two years in residential care settings. We chose young adults from three type of out-of-home settings that are most common in Israel. Also, since young adults in this period vary by their main framework, the sample included young adults in mandatory army service, further studies, employed or unemployed. In addition, we chose young adults from different accommodations (e.g., living at home with their parents, living in supervised flats for care leavers in the community, or living alone/with partners). Finally, since youth in out-of-home settings in Israel come from different ethnic groups, the sample included young adults from the most dominant groups (Israel, Former Soviet Union, Ethiopia).

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, consisting of open-ended questions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 min, during which the young adults were asked to describe themselves (background, occupation, age, etc.), and were asked about their aspirations for the future, plans, goals and the assets and resources they had in order to realize them.

4.3. Data analysis

The chosen method to analyze the interviews was theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is used to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. Using this analysis allowed the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as in the area of emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000, 2007) and resilience theory (Masten and Powell, 2003). Analysis was performed by three readers (the two interviewers and the leading researcher), who interpreted the young adults' answers and extracted central themes that expressed their perceived assets and resources in trying to live up to their expectations and reach their future goals. The readers employed an incident-by-incident coding technique, in which every portion of the interview transcript was read and coded for important themes. This was followed by a focused coding process, during which the incident codes were re-read and analyzed in order to identify larger themes (Charmaz, 2006). During these phases, the readers analyzed the interviews and then met to discuss themes and resolve any discrepancies by discussion. Finally, after the code of the assets and resources had evolved, readers sifted through all the data again, using a focused coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The ensuing coding created three main categories with various related subcategories. Further, a quantitative analysis was conducted of the recurrence of themes separately for the main themes in order to illustrate the frequency of the themes that arose. Finally, to further check the validity of the findings, a summary report was provided to the young adults via email, and their feedback was integrated into the final data analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Assets and pathways in achieving future goals

Young adults were asked to describe the resources they had in order to achieve their future goals. The analysis revealed several themes and subthemes, including their own challenging history, their past and current informal and professional support, and their personal characteristics. The subthemes that emerged within these themes were as follows:

5.1.1. Informal pathways: family

A third of the young adults (9; 36%) mentioned their family, especially their parents, with regard to their expectations and future goals.

5.1.1.1. Parents' history and status. Many of the care leavers referred to their family history and current status as a motivator to pursue their

future goals. Their parents' struggles in life and low socioeconomic status were mentioned as a reminder to the young adults they should seek a better future for themselves:

"The thought of my family and all the trauma at a very young age, it doesn't leave your thoughts. A very nervous dad and no money, and a family that is always stressed out. That's what holds me. What drives me to succeed" (young man, 22, foster care alumnus).

Another young woman emphasized the need to follow a path that is different from her parents': "I think I have the will power to achieve what my father couldn't achieve...and create a different life for myself than what I had as a child. Like a better life, to raise children in a better place so that they won't have to go through what I had to" (residential care alumna, 22, studying for B.A.)

5.1.1.2. Family's support. Few young adults mentioned their parents and siblings as a source of support to them in achieving their future goals. However, those who mentioned their family indicated the limited support they received from them:

"I have my brother, who pushes me higher, and my home. Although there are a lot of troubles there and it's always a mess, at least I have somewhere to sleep if I need to" (young man, 22, youth village alumnus, living in a supervision apartment).

Another young woman talked about the gap between her parents' desire to help her and their limited ability: "Financial support could really help me... my parents don't have the money to give. When I visit home my mother, god bless her soul, she gives me \$25, but you understand that it's not enough, right?" (23, works in a residential care facility).

5.1.2. Informal assets: friends

Relationships with friends whom they share similar challenges with emerged as another source of support in the young adults' pursuit of their future goals (6; 24%), although less frequently:

"We (the friend and the young adult) have a lot of 'motivation talks.' We just sit together and talk. Encourage one another and tell each other that it's going to be all right. Just do this and do that."

(young man, 21.5, residential care alumnus).

"I live with many of my friends. They are always with me and they are like family. They would help me and 'turn every stone' for me. It feels like family".

(young man, 22, foster care alumnus).

Romantic partners were also mentioned as figures that enable the young adults to cope: "My boyfriend. He is a king. If it wasn't for him I don't know where I would be today. He helps me a lot. Gives me money, talks to me when I break down" (young woman, 22, therapeutic residential care alumna).

5.2. Formal assets: past and current professional support

Almost half of the young adults (11, 44%) described relationships with professional figures such as social workers, mentors and therapists as a main source in supporting them to achieve their goals and follow their expectations mostly from their care setting. Within this theme both concrete support and emotional support were mentioned. In terms of their motivation and process to pursue higher future goals, former and current professional figures were mentioned as role models and supportive figures that encouraged them along their challenging way and pushed them to believe in themselves and their future aspirations. This theme was evident in the interview of a 22-year-old woman who left therapeutic residential care and is studying for her B.A., speaking about her caseworker:

"I'm about to leave (the supervision apartment) and I have been there since I was 18...at first I had meetings twice a week, and in the last two years only once in two weeks, because I feel much stronger. You just come and talk about what you need and feel and it strengthens

my belief in myself and in my abilities... You see? Now I really think I can make it without the support and it's a fact – I do succeed! I take care of the household and my car and study.”

Practical support from professionals was also mentioned as an important source in pursuing future goals: “My social worker helps me to get ready for job interviews. Overall, she helped me stick to my routine and arrange my life. She helped me get into a fitness trainers program. I hope it works. If it does, it could really open a lot of options for me” (young man, 25, residential care alumnus).

Another young man emphasized additional aspects of the support from caseworkers in achieving future goals: “Social workers know more. They have the connections. They know more about the law. More than me... in that way I can learn to know right from wrong and what to do next” (young man, 25, therapeutic residential care alumnus).

5.3. Personal characteristics and abilities

The majority of the young adults described their own personal characteristics and abilities as a main resource that they could rely on in achieving their future goals (14; 56%).

5.3.1. Self-reliance and self-belief

These were mentioned in different ways, most often as a source of motivation and persistence. As described in the interviews with these two young adults:

“I will manage. I always do. When I want something, I find a way to get what I really want. I will fight for what is important to me. Finally, I will get there. As long as everything is ok with my father and my little sister. I don't worry about myself”

(young man, 19.5; youth village alumnus).

“I'm the kind of person who gets what he wants. If I really want to, I can try harder and become something”.

(young man, 20, therapeutic residential care alumnus).

In some cases, their need to rely on themselves seemed to force the young adults to believe in themselves more. This connection is evident in this 19-year-old woman's words: “I believe in myself. I can succeed with who I am. If I don't believe in it 100% I will fail. You must have faith. Otherwise, you can't succeed. I make good out of bad. Maybe there are people who can help me with that. But I'm not sure. I'll take care of myself. You don't want to believe in me? Then don't...”.

The young adults' belief in their abilities led them to a positive future outlook – a sense of optimism and self-reassurance despite their many struggles: “I feel that I have the power. I had many setbacks and I always got up. During those times I'm afraid that I won't be able to, but eventually I always get up. It takes a lot of self-belief and looking forward – in a positive way” (young man, 22, youth village alumnus). In some cases the young adults explained their goal-setting and self-belief as an inner strength they possessed. For example, in the answer of a 19-year-old woman who emancipated from foster care: “I have a lot of power in me to succeed. I really want to see myself in a place I wish for myself. That's what gives me the strength. It's the power inside me.”

5.3.2. Personality traits

Specifically, most of the young adults focused on their personality traits that could help them reach their goals rather than their abilities or earlier achievements, as can be seen in the answers of these young adults:

“I'm stubborn. If I want something, I don't give up. I fight for it”

(young woman, 20, youth village alumna).

“I'm very independent. Once I set my mind on something, I do it and succeed. I'm stubborn”

(young man, 20, therapeutic residential care alumnus).

To sum, three main themes arose as an essential assets in the

transition to adulthood including the young adults family and friends, past and current professional support and own personal characteristic and skills.

6. Discussion and implications for practice

Emerging adulthood in western societies holds new challenges and possibilities for at-risk young people as they try to negotiate this complex period in their lives. With the limited opportunities and assets that care leavers possess, their way towards adult roles, responsibilities and goals is a winding one (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, many of these young people will struggle on their ways and others will not fare well. In order to improve the chances of these young people to succeed during the transition to adulthood, it is important to understand how successful transitions to adulthood do occur, and what the assets and pathways are that support this transition. This study adds to the existing literature on the factors that promote resilience among youth leaving care, specifically in relation to the young adults' own hopes and plans for the future.

The main themes that arose reinforce the importance of both their existing social networks and their own attributes in pursuing their future goals. However, the young adults' descriptions of these components revealed their complexity for them, especially in relation to the availability of supportive figures and the extent of support they could offer the young adults during this long and complicated transition.

6.1. The role of formal and informal support

The role of care leavers' families and especially their parents was found in earlier studies as an important factor influencing their outcomes and adjustment after the transition to independent living (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015; Wade, 2008). These studies highlight the role of the parents' support in the young adults' achievement, indicating a process in which young adults who get their parents' emotional and concrete support fare better and have higher expectations than those who do not. However, this study revealed another aspect in the process that might lead to those outcomes, in which the young adults' future motivation and goals are driven by their parents' poor history and status. In this process parents represent a “mirror” to the “possible future” of the young adults, in which they would like to see a different reflection of themselves. Emerging adulthood in this case serves as a “window of opportunity” to choose their own paths, different from their parents'. This finding points to another role of the young adults' parents in their positive orientation towards the future as “mirroring figures.” In this process parents play a significant role regarding the young adults' expectations and pursuit of goals, not by their support, but rather by their mirroring of their life narrative and painful history that drives the young adults to achieve better in life in order to avoid their parents' fate. One practical conclusion that arose from this finding is integrating this component when working with young adults by helping them to realize the role of their family in this period.

Similar to family members, the role of friends during the transition to adulthood was also evident in earlier studies (Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007). Although few of the young adults in this study emphasized the supportive role of their friends in their challenging paths towards realizing their future goals, earlier studies showed that during emerging adulthood peers may have a bad influence on the life course of care leavers (Stanton-Salazar & Urso-Spina, 2005; Authors, in press). Therefore, more research is needed in order to understand the circumstances in which peers support those young adults' paths to their future or impede them.

In addition to their informal networks, the young adults in this study mentioned the importance of professional figures in supporting them to achieve their goals and to live up to their expectations. Although the young adults mentioned their friends' emotional support in their future goals and possibly their parents in a few cases, the

majority of them did not mention those figures as “active agents” in supporting them in pursuing their goals. Professional figures, on the other hand, were described as providing both emotional and concrete support. Thus, former and current professional figures are perceived as supportive and encouraging adults who boost the young adults' motivation and process to pursue higher future goals. Similar to informal figures, professionals also encouraged them by challenging them. However, in addition to their motivation and belief in the young adults' future aspirations, they also offered new connections and opportunities. This finding reinforces the assumption that care leavers need continuing professional support during the transition to adulthood (Nollan, Horn, Downs, Pecora, & Bressani, 2001; Pecora et al., 2003). This conclusion strengthens in light of the unique features of this period, which includes both concrete tasks, such as further studies and financial independence, and emotional-cognitive developmental tasks, such as identity exploration (Arnett, 2007). In order to explore the possibilities and utilize this period to the fullest, the support of parents and friends is important but not enough. Therefore, it is important that young adults be offered the opportunity to receive the continuing support of familiar professionals during the transition from care to independent living and throughout the early emerging adulthood years. Residential care leaders should design programs that assign specific professional figures while youth are still in care that their role is to support the young adults after they leave care. Specifically, in helping them to adjust to new frameworks, realize their rights and offer emotional support.

6.2. Personal qualities

The majority of the young adults in this study described their own personal characteristics as a main resource that they could rely on in achieving their future goals. Self-focus characterizes emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007). However, for these young people it seems that the focus on their own qualities is a necessity rather than a choice. Their tendency towards “self-reliance” was also evident in earlier studies on former foster youth during the transition to adulthood (e.g., Samuels & Pryce, 2008), and was found to be perceived by the young adults as a key factor to their independence and motivation to persist towards their future goals.

The care leavers tendency for self-reliance could be explained by the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988), which posits that children's early attachment to their primary care giver allows them to build up expectations in the form of an internalized representation or “working model” of relationships and the way they perceive their environment. These expectations, in turn, could influence the child's self-esteem and possibly reliance on others. However, Attachment Theory also posits that several opportunities exist to change the “impaired” working model over time. These possibilities include a significant life-changing experience, such as an experience of a secure intimate relationship. Thus, for youth in residential care, a positive and meaningful figure, such as a mentor, may compensate for earlier disadvantaged attachment relationships (Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001) and possibly strengthen their ability to rely on others.

In this regard, it is important to notice that although the young adults perceive self-reliance as an asset, caseworkers identify their self-reliance as a potential barrier when working with them (Authors, in press). One possible explanation for this gap could be that these young people's self-reliance plays as a double-edged sword that helps them to survive and motivates them to rely on themselves in order to reach their goals, but at the same time narrows their willingness to trust and rely on professionals for assistance and guidance. Therefore, the challenge of professional is to help these young adults use their self-reliance as a source of resilience and at the same time encourage them to develop interdependence and relational connections (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) that can guide them and open new possibilities that they need in order to expand their horizons and reach their goals.

Another self quality that was raised by the young adults was their

belief and optimism towards the future. The role of positive beliefs about the future was found to be linked to long-term goal setting (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004) and better outcomes in adulthood (Arbona, 2000; Armstrong & Crombie, 2000; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). Therefore, it is important to nourish these positive future-oriented cognitions, as they play a role of self-reassurance and an incentive to persist despite the challenges and struggles in their lives.

7. Conclusion, limitations and future studies

Emerging adulthood holds particular interest for the study of risk and resilience among young adults who leave care, because it involves vulnerabilities as well as opportunities and new capacities that may play an important role in altering their chosen paths and life course. This study reinforces the role of individual attributes, relationships and opportunities as resilience components during this period in leading at-risk young people to better futures.

In her model for positive change during emerging adulthood, Masten et al., 2006 claimed that positive adaptation and resilience in this developmental window involve the conjunction of capacity to change, adult support, and opportunities. It seems that the young people in this study utilize their hopes and motivation for their future and the existing support of family and professionals in order to move towards their goals. However, they need to be provided with more opportunities by their environment to realize their plans for the future.

Although this study contributed the unique perspective of the young adults as to their assets and perceived pathways in realizing their future expectations, future research could add more in depth information by expanding the investigation and research protocol. For example, this study, this study not distinguish between the experiences of different groups. Further exploration could shed more light on the assets and pathways that care leavers share according to similar features such as ethnicity, gender, and type of setting. In addition, there was no distinction between the status of these young adults in terms of their social support network, occupation, or education. Learning more about the status of these young people could broaden our understanding as to unrecognized or new assets that promote these young people's aspirations and successful transition into adulthood.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they has NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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