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

Yafit Sulimani-Aidan[a,*], Eran Melkman[b]

[a] Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv, Israel
[b] Rees Centre for Research in Fostering, Education University of Oxford Department of Education, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, UK

ABSTRACT

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%

Table 2
Caseworkers' characteristics (N = 25).

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Female	23	92%
Male	2	8%
Education		
B.A	17	68%
M.A	8	32%
High school diploma	5	17%
Duration of the relationship		
Up to 1 year	14	56%
2–3 years	9	36%
3–more	7	28%
Field of profession		
Social work	14	56%
Education	6	24%
Other fields (e.g., sociology, criminology)	4	16%

women (92%) with bachelor's degrees (68%), mainly with a social work training (56%). About two thirds of them (64%) have worked with care leavers two years and above (Table 2).

3.2. Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the authors' University. The young adults were approached over the phone, given an explanation about the goals of the study, and asked for their consent to participate. The care leavers who agreed to take part in the study were interviewed face to face in a place of their choice.

The caseworkers were approached and interviewed face-to-face in a national learning center for at risk children and youth, where caseworkers visit in order to gain and reinforce their knowledge and skills for working with vulnerable youth through professional courses. Prior to the interview, all caseworkers were provided with an explanation of the study goals and asked for consent to participate in the study.

Basic demographic information about the youth and caseworkers was collected before qualitative questions were asked. Both groups were asked about their own personal characteristics (e.g., age, position/ occupation, seniority, accommodation etc.). Two different semi-structured interview protocols were developed for the two groups. Both consisted of open-ended questions concerning: 1) the struggles and challenges care leavers face during the transition; and 2) the assets and resources care leavers have and need in order to cope successfully in this period. Although the interview guide included a list of questions that provided a structure for interviewers, research staff were given the freedom to go off-script and explore issues that were identified as important to the caseworkers and youth during the interview. Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 min and all were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

3.3. Data analysis

The main method used to analyze all interviews was theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is used to identify patterns and themes and draws upon pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as in the area of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Analysis was performed by three readers (the two interviewers and the leading researcher), who interpreted the accounts of the participants and extracted central themes that expressed their perceptions of the transition to adulthood and care experience, including their challenges, needs, resources and strengths. The readers employed an incident-by-incident coding technique. Accordingly, 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. Finally, the themes that arose from the care leavers and caseworkers were compared with regards to the struggles and resources in the transition. To further check the validity of the findings, a summary report was provided to the care leavers and caseworkers via email and their feedback was integrated into the final data analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Challenges and struggles: care leavers and caseworkers' perspective

Caseworkers and care leavers shared their thoughts regarding the challenges and struggles they believe are part of the transition to adulthood. Both groups agreed about some of the challenges during this period including the limited financial resources and the lack of support from the parents. However, there were several areas that were raised by the caseworkers but not by the young adults, such as low awareness and realization of rights, and some challenges that were more pronounced in the descriptions of the young adults, like their sense of loneliness during this period. We first describe the caseworkers and care leavers' perspectives regarding challenges and barriers during the transition. Then we describe their perspectives on assets and resources.

4.1.1. Shared perspectives of challenges

The majority of care leavers and case workers mentioned the young adults' *economic hardship* as one of their main challenges and in some cases as a barrier to their successful transition to independent adult life. The care leavers described limited financial assets as the most challenging aspect of their lives after care: "…*Economically, ever since I am not in a placement that provides me with food and accommodation, it's very hard. When you don't have a financial backing its tough! I ask a friend for clothes. I manage, but I don't have someone to turn to in these matters*" (young woman, 19). The caseworkers linked care leavers' economic struggle to their lack of aspirations and motivation to strive for higher goals in their lives. It was also identified as a barrier to investment in the fulfilment of care leavers' aspirations, achievement and their potential for social mobility, as one of the caseworkers described: "*They must provide for themselves- rent, food, studies, and family. They are absorbed in their daily war to survive. So they can't invest much time in finding suitable vocational training or higher education*".

Another prominent theme that was described by both the caseworkers and the care leavers was the *limited or lack of support from biological families*. The caseworkers emphasized the inability of families to support the care leavers economically or provide emotional support and advice regarding the instrumental and developmental tasks entailed in the transition to adulthood: "*They are starting this new and challenging period in their lives without their family's support. Their parents themselves are struggling to survive and can't help them*". This quote was repeated in the care leavers' descriptions as well: "*I don't have my parents to support me… to tell me do this or do that…that's what could be good for you. I can't ask for their money or live with them…*" (young woman, 22). Although both groups agreed that families were not a reliable source of support during this period, the care leavers emphasized their own need to support their parents, in some cases emotionally as well as economically, as described by this young man (20): "*I have my own debts and my mothers' debts to pay. Sometimes I think that I can leave home and move to live with my friends but than my mother is sick again and it stops my plans*".

4.1.2. Differential perspectives of challenges

Some challenges were perceived by both caseworkers and care leavers, some primarily by the care leavers, and were described primarily by the caseworkers. Both groups referred to the lack of support from formal and informal adult figures that could offer guidance and

counseling concerning daily challenges and major decisions regarding the future (e.g., pursuing higher education). One of the caseworkers said: "*They don't have supportive adult figures to consult with regarding their dilemmas, with all the junctions they face*". Although the lack of social support is one of the challenges that was described extensively by the young adults and caseworkers- most of the caseworkers focused on the lack of support from family members, while the young adults described in greater details their sense of loneliness and the few new social ties they have formed since leaving care. These experiences of loneliness, lack of belongingness and isolation from non-family figures were a central theme in the care leavers' descriptions: "*I feel that I don't belong anywhere. I am all alone. I work in a residential care placement so I have many people around me… but still I feel very very lonely*" (young woman, 23). Another young woman (29) described her need for meaningful relationships: "*I feel this loneliness day by day. Being alone is hard. I don't talk with my parents and my sister is absorbed in her problems. My roommates are younger than me… in weekends it's the worst…*".

Two themes relating to the challenges of the transition were dominant in the descriptions of the caseworkers but were absent from the accounts of care leavers. The first was related to care leavers' *low self-esteem and low self-efficacy*. This aspect was central in the caseworkers' interviews; many of them emphasized that while attempting to overcome challenges, these young people have little or no belief in their value, competency or potential to succeed in life. One caseworker explained: "*They struggle with very low self-esteem…there are things they won't try even if they have the potential to succeed.*" Another caseworker stated: "*They don't trust themselves and their self-confidence is very low*". In contrast, none of the young adults referred to the lack of belief in themselves as a challenge. The only sense of insecurity care leavers expressed was in relation to education. This was evident in the accounts of half of the interviewees. When describing their fears of not being able to attain desired educational goals, the young people seemed to emphasize their persisting difficulties in this domain and their need for ongoing support. As this young man said: "*My main challenge is with my studies. I am afraid that I will not complete my GED. I had learning difficulties in high school and to face them alone now without the staffs' support, I don't know if I can do it*".

Another challenge that was discussed by the caseworkers but absent from the care leavers' interviews concerned the *young adults' awareness and realization of rights*. A majority of the caseworkers mentioned this the limited awareness care leavers had training programs, services or interventions, such as scholarships for further studies and free psychological counseling, as well as their lack of efforts to take advantage of these rights, even when they are aware of them. For example, this caseworker described their poor awareness of their rights: "*They have many knowledge barriers: they are unaware of their possibilities and the services that are designed for them. They don't know who to turn to in order realize their rights… it's either that they are not aware of their possibilities or that they don't use them…*". Caseworkers saw this as a major impediment to care leavers' success.

4.2. Resources and assets of care leavers in transition to adulthood: care leavers and caseworkers' perspective

The care leavers and caseworkers were asked about the assets and resources care leavers need to cope successfully during the transition to adulthood. Care leavers and caseworkers agreed about the importance of formal and informal supports. However, care leavers placed more emphasis on the role of personal characteristics and self-reliance.

4.2.1. Shared perspectives of assets

Both caseworkers and care leavers mentioned *supportive professional relationships* as an important asset for care leavers in dealing with the challenges of emerging adulthood. Caseworkers identified mentoring as a key resource for care leavers. They described the importance of counseling regarding different aspects of independent living and as a

way of helping the young adults strengthen their abilities, skills, motivation and self-competence. One caseworker said: "*The mentoring we provide is very helpful because it forces them to deal with things and work their way through them. … Once you expect more of them and give them the 'springboard,' they will use the opportunity*". Care leavers also broadly described the role of formal figures in their lives including social workers, professional mentors and former staff members who continue to support after emancipation. Professional figures were characterized as role models who offer emotional and concrete support and encouragement as well as a belief in care leavers' future aspirations: "*my therapist is with me through this transition…even when I don't see her she is in my thoughts. I ask for her advice with everything. She really believes that I can succeed. I will turn to her when I need to decide on things… she knows me… what calms me and when to say a good word at the right time*" (young woman, 19).

Both care leavers and caseworkers elaborated on the various roles and types of support formal and professional relationships provide for care leavers including: concrete support, emotional support, counseling and guidance, friendship and assistance in realizing their rights. A 22 years old young woman described her social worker: "*She believes in me, don't judged me, accept me as I am and listen…she lifted me up, helped me to find scholarship to pay for my studies…came to visit me after I was admitted for cutting myself…like a mother*".

Another asset mentioned by both care leavers and caseworkers is care leavers' *informal relationships*. Both groups agreed about the important role informal supports play during the transition to adult life. Caseworkers emphasized the importance of strengthening care lavers' informal relationships and their use of social ties with close friends, peers, and the community, as a means to learn about new opportunities and to obtain support when making important decisions. The young adults mentioned their parents, siblings and friends as possible sources of support too. However, both groups noted the limited support these figures can provide in dealing with the concrete developmental tasks of young adulthood. A young man (22) said: "*Me and my friend talk a lot. We have a lot of 'motivation talks' with each other…encourage one another and tell each other that it's going to be alright*". This young woman's (23) account demonstrates ambivalence about this type of support: "*my sister is always there for me. This I know-she will be there when I need her, but I don't want to be a burden on her or her family. She is in her daily survival too. So we are there for each other, support one another, but she can't help me with me with everything. How could she? She needs help herself…*".

4.2.2. Differential perspectives of assets

Although both groups- care leavers and caseworkers elaborated on the contribution of formal and informal support is to their ability to successfully cope with the challenges of emerging adulthood, only the care leavers stressed the central role their own *personal attributes* played in facilitating their success. The young adults talked about various qualities that help them cope. These included persistence, independence, and belief in themselves as a motivational asset. Self-reliance was another quality many referred to as a source of motivation and persistence. This is demonstrated in this young woman's (19) account: "*I believe in myself…If I don't believe in it 100% I will fail…so I must have faith or I won't succeed… Maybe there are people who can help me but I'll take care of myself*". Although some caseworkers noted the strengths and positive personal characteristics the young adults had, they did not describe them in much detail.

Some caseworkers did note the importance of a positive future outlook and future expectations. However, such references were often made in the context of assets that caseworkers needed to encourage rather than assets care leavers possessed: "*we have to encourage them to believe in themselves, see their own strengths and think about their future. Expect more of them so that they expect more of themselves in the future*".

5. Discussion and implications for practice

This study explored care leavers' and caseworkers' views of the transition to adult life experienced by care leavers. Emerging adulthood is of particular interest for the study of risk and resilience among young adults leaving care because it involves vulnerabilities as well as new capacities and opportunities that may have an important role in shaping their lives as adults. Exploring perspectives of both the young adults leaving care and the caseworkers who guide them through this transitional period provides a more comprehensive understanding than exploring the perspective of care leavers alone and offers some important implications for practice and policy.

Both care leavers and caseworkers described financial struggles as one of the main challenges during the transition from care to independent living. This finding is not surprising given the limited financial support these young people have after exiting care. Economic hardship and care leavers' daily struggle to survive have been reported previously (Courtney, & Hughes-Huering, 2005; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017b). Low levels of support was another major challenge the two groups noted. Similar findings have been documented by earlier studies (Courtney, & Hughes-Huering, 2005; Geenen & Powers, 2007). This aspect, however, was much more pronounced in the accounts of the care leavers. Whereas caseworkers mainly focused on the lack of family support and the resulting difficulties in dealing with daily challenges and making future decisions, care leavers highlighted the insufficiency of their broader social network- the few social ties they had formed after leaving care and their overall sense of loneliness. The emphasis caseworkers laid on the importance of family support during this period is reasonable. The prolonged time it takes young adults in recent decades to achieve independence and adult status leads to greater and longer dependency on parents in many life domains (Arnett, 2007); an option which is often unavailable for young adults with care backgrounds. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the sense of loneliness and want of social relationships that extend beyond the family expressed by many of the care leavers While youth are in (residential) care and away from their parents, they are surrounded by their peer group and establish close relationships with same age friends. However, the transition out of care and into independence often brings to an end many of these relationships, leaving youth all the more lonely.

These findings shed light on the importance of belonging, compassion and emotional support for care leavers during this transition phase. They are significant given the growing body of longitudinal research that indicates that loneliness is predictive of increased morbidity and mortality and is associated with many negative outcomes including poorer cognitive functioning and mental health and higher levels of psychological disorders and health problems (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). It appears that loneliness could significantly increase the vulnerability of these young people. Youth who leave care depart from a familiar and protective environment and must create new social networks that would support them through their journey to adulthood. A failure to do so may have a profound effect on their lives. According to the Loneliness Model (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), compared with individuals who are socially integrated, lonely individuals are more likely to perceive their social world as threatening, to remember negative, rather than positive social information and to hold negative social expectations. In turn, negative social expectations tend to elicit behaviors from others that confirm the lonely person's expectations, thereby setting in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, lonely people often actively distance themselves from would-be social partners believing that their lack of close social ties is attributable to others and is beyond their own control. This vicious cycle of loneliness is often accompanied by feelings of hostility, stress, pessimism, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Indeed, the caseworkers in this study noted care leavers often show such expressions of low self- esteem, hostility and negative future outlook. Clearly, the salient sense of loneliness shared by many

of the care leavers in this study, suggests that aftercare services should pay more attention to the needs care leavers have for social companionship. Programs targeting care leavers should thus integrate more components that connect care leavers with other young adults while strengthening their existing friendships. Although this aspect exists in some services (see for example, Schwartz-Tayri & Shpiro, 2017), it is usually a byproduct of activities designed to enhance other aspects of independent living (e.g., employment skills or higher education consultation) carried out in the form of group meetings or formal gatherings, rather than being an aim in and of itself.

An important issue highlighted by the caseworkers, though absent from the care leavers' reports was care leavers' poor awareness of their possibilities and rights in different areas as well as their lack of active effort to realize those rights. This could be related to certain features of residential care in Israel and possibly other countries that promote dependence. Residential care facilities in Israel are guided by an integrative educational-therapeutic approach whereby all staff members work together as a milieu in order to provide for youth's emotional, educational, social and functional needs. Staff help youth with their daily routines and chores, provide them with educational and enriching activities, and help them with emotional difficulties, personal problems and conflicts with their peers and their biological families (Grupper & Romi, 2011). It is possible that after being provided with many of their needs for an extended period of time (mean length of stay is nearly three years), care leavers will have poor awareness of their rights. This finding raises concerns because although services for care leavers exist, they are limited. Also, as at risk young adults, care leavers are entitled to various services (e.g., psychosocial services, psychological services) depending on their history or family's history. Therefore, it is important to learn more about the factors that inhibit or facilitate patterns of service use among care leavers. In addition, while youth are still in care, preparation programs need to help youth become more aware of their rights as care leavers and encourage them to realize them once emancipated.

Another challenge that was described extensively by the caseworkers was care leavers' low self-efficacy and their lack of belief in themselves. This was almost entirely missing from care leaver's descriptions of the challenges they face in the transition to adulthood. The one exception was the insecurity and lack of self-confidence they expressed about their ability to achieve higher educational goals. The difference in perspectives is interesting and many care leavers', but not caseworkers' frequently referred to self-reliance as an asset and a resource they have in coping with their challenges. It is possible that care leavers' tendency to be self-reliant, a result of their weak family backing, is somehow related to their feeling that they must believe in and rely on themselves in order to survive. Self-reliance was also evident in earlier studies of former foster youth (e.g., Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Samuels and Pryce (2008) concluded that self-reliance is key for care leavers' independence and motivation to achieve future goals. However, from the perspective of the caseworkers, care leavers' self-reliance and low levels of trust are likely to be perceived as an obstacle in forming a mutual working relationship. It seems that the solution to these opposing perspectives lies in the formal definition of self-reliance proposed by Bowlby (1988) as "*the healthy interpersonal attachment behavior exhibited by young children, especially in threatening situations*". Bowlby (1988) suggested that self-reliance appears paradoxical because the person seems independent while maintaining a host of supportive, interpersonal attachments that afford a secure base and the feeling of security. Hence, self-reliant people respond to stressful, threatening situations by appropriately reaching out to others. Self-reliance is also a characteristic of mature adult personality that maintain interdependence in its social relationships. Self-reliant people form healthy, diverse relationships with others, especially in anxious, stressful, or threatening situations. This definition demonstrates the complexity of self-reliance observed among care leavers. In most cases, these young people did not experience a secure attachment in their lives, but at the

same time were obligated to trust themselves and other formal figures in order to adapt and grow. Thus, it would be useful be to encourage caseworkers to see self-reliance as a strength while also encouraging care leaves to develop interdependence and relational connections (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

6. Limitations and future research

In conclusion, this study contributes to the knowledge regarding risk and protection in the lives of young adults aging out of care. Examining the perspectives of care leavers and their caseworkers deepens our understanding of the challenges care leavers face and the resources that may help them overcome these challenges. However, it has several limitations. First, it was an exploratory study that included only 50 care leavers and caseworkers. Future studies could provide a more comprehensive picture by conducting a quantitative study that includes more young adults and caseworkers. Second, this study included care leavers and caseworkers who work with care leavers, but they were not care leaver and caseworker pairs. Future investigations should seek to compare the perspectives of caseworkers and those of the care leavers whom they mentor. In addition, we did not examine differences between various types of placements. These may be associated with very different family experiences. Therefore, future research with a more sizeable sampling of youth formerly placed in either foster care, or residential educational/therapeutic care, would allow for such comparisons and contribute to our understanding of the unique challenges each groups of care leavers experience. Finally, we did not distinguish between the experiences of different sub-populations within the samples of care leavers or caseworkers. Further exploration could shed more light on the challenges and resources that care leavers and their caseworkers share according to similar features such as ethnicity, gender, and type of post-care program.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors certify that they have 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.

References

Ahrens, K., DuBois, D. L., Richardson, L., Fan, M., & Lozano, P. (2016). Youth in foster care with adult mentors during adolescence have improved adult outcomes. *Pediatrics, 121*, 246–252.

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*(5), 469.

Arnett, J. J. (2007). Afterword: Aging out of care - Toward realizing the possibilities of emerging adulthood. *New Directions for Youth Development,* (113), 151–162.

Arnett, J. J. (2014). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties.* England: Oxford University Press.

Attar-Schwartz, S. (2008). Emotional, behavioral and social problems among Israeli children in residential care: A multi-level analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*, 229–248.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent–child attachment and healthy human development.* New York: Basic Books.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77–101.

Cacioppo, J. T., & Hawkley, L. C. (2009). Perceived social isolation and cognition. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 13*(10), 447–454.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* London, England: Sage Publications, Inc.

Claire, M. (2006). Personal reflections on needs and services for young people leaving care: From local to international to national (1996–2005). *Children Australia, 31*(3), 11–17.

Courtney, M. E., & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out of home care in the U.S.A. *Child & Family Social Work, 11*, 209–219. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00433.x.

Courtney, M. E., & Hughes-Huering, D. (2005). The transition to adulthood for youth "aging out" of the foster care system. In C. F. W. Osgood, E. M. Foster, & G. Ruth (Eds.). *On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations* (pp. 72–90). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Geenen, S., & Powers, L. E. (2007). "Tomorrow is another problem": The experiences of youth in foster care during their transition into adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(8), 1085–1101.

Gilligan, R. (2008). Promoting resilience in young people in long-term care-The relevance of roles and relationships in the domains of recreation and work. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 22*(1), 37–50.

Grupper, E., & Romi, S. (2011). Training workers in social-educational fields. In H. Aharoni (Ed.). *Social-educational work in Israel* Jerusalem: Advance (Hebrew).

Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 40*(2), 218–227.

Mash, G. (2001). *Characteristics of youngsters in youth villages: Research report.* Tel Aviv: Ministry of Education (Hebrew).

Masten, A. S., Obradović, J., & Burt, K. B. (2006). Resilience in emerging adulthood: Developmental perspectives on continuity and transformation. In J. Arnett, & J. Tanner (Eds.). *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 173–190). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

Melkman, E., Rafaeli, T., Bibi, B., & Benbenishty, R. (2016). Readiness for independent living among youth on the verge of leaving juvenile correctional facilities. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 60*(10), 1209–1225.

National Council for the Child (2011). *Children in Israel: Statistical abstract.* Jerusalem: National Council for the Child (Hebrew).

Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger": Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(10), 1198–1210.

Schwartz-Tayri, T. M., & Shpiro, S. (2017). The other side of the bridge: A follow up study of Israeli young adults who participated in a transitional housing program after aging out from care. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth, 34*(3–4), 311–324.

Stein, M. (2006). Research review: Young people leaving care. *Child & Family Social Work, 11*, 276–279. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00439.x.

Stein, M., & Munro, E. R. (2008). *Young people's transitions from care to adulthood: International research and practice.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2014). Care leavers' challenges in transition to independent living. *Children and Youth Services Review, 46*, 38–46.

Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2015). Do they get what they expect?: The connection between young adults future expectations before leaving care and outcomes after leaving care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 55*, 193–200.

Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2017a). Barriers and resources in transition to adulthood among at-risk young adults. *Children and Youth Services Review, 77*, 147–152.

Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2017b). To dream the impossible dream: Care leavers' challenges and barriers in pursuing their future expectations and goals. *Children and Youth Services Review, 81*, 332–339.

Sulimani-Aidan, Y., Benbenishty, R., Dinisman, T., & Zeira, A. (2013). Care leavers in Israel: What contributes to better adjustment to life after care? *Journal of Social Service Research, 39*(5), 704–718.

Ungar, M., Liebenberg, L., Dudding, P., Armstrong, M., & Van de Vijver, F. J. (2013). Patterns of service use, individual and contextual risk factors, and resilience among adolescents using multiple psychosocial services. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 37*(2), 150–159.

Wade, J. (2008). The ties that bind: Support from birth families and substitute families for young people leaving care. *British Journal of Social Work, 38*, 39–54. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl342.