



## Social networks during the transition to adulthood from the perspective of Israeli care leavers and their social workers

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### ABSTRACT

Based on the resilience theory, which highlights the role of one's social resources in fostering resilience (Masten, Obradović, & Burt, 2006), the current study explored the role of care leavers' formal and informal social networks during the transition to adulthood, from the point of view of 50 young adults and their social workers. The themes that arose highlighted the contribution of the care leavers' formal social networks (i.e., social workers, counselors) via their enabling of care leavers' self-exploration, their provision of practical support, and their promotion of care leavers' positive perceptions of the future. Although the contribution made by the care leavers' *informal* social networks was limited, findings indicated the importance of these networks for the care leaver's sense of belonging and normalcy, stability, and need for empathy and understanding. The discussion elaborates on the role of social networks, as a powerful asset for care leavers, during this challenging period. In terms of practice, it is recommended that care leavers continue to receive support from various formal figures in their lives who can assess their needs holistically and promote their daily independent living and future accomplishments. Also, professionals in the field should acknowledge the importance of informal social ties as a resource that can be used to promote care leavers' well-being and sense of belonging, and should consider them a therapeutic tool to be used in their work with this population.

### 1. Supporting care leavers during the transition to adulthood

The term social networks refers to the relationships people rely upon for social support. Social support is defined as the emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental, and material assistance provided by others to either maintain one's well-being or promote one's adaptation to difficult life events (Dunst & Trivette, 1988). As such, it is generally agreed upon that social networks are essential to an individual's personal well-being and social and professional integration (Blakeslee, 2015).

Social networks include formal and informal relational aspects, and are regarded as playing an essential role in a person's ability to gain access to a desired career, housing, and/or social life. They also play an essential role in a person's ability to get through difficult and transitional periods (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Melkman, 2017). One such period is the transition-to-adulthood phase. It is accepted to see age eighteen as the beginning of transition to adulthood. For Israeli care leavers (as for their peers in other countries), it is also the point at which they leave care and begin independent living, separating from many caring and supportive adult figures whom they had relationships in care (Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013). Consequently, social networks are extremely important for care leavers

during this challenging and stressful period, also known as the "emerging adulthood" period.

Emerging adulthood is a complex period during which young people must make significant life decisions in a variety of domains: housing, employment, career, and marriage (Arnett, 2000). Alongside these important practical decisions, during this period most young adults are also struggling with issues of identity exploration and are very much focused on their own needs and plans. In addition, for a number of reasons – increased independence, freedom from time constraints and social control, less monitoring by their parents – they experience greater instability. Overall, this period can be described as one of instability, anxiety, and confusion (Arnett, 2007).

For care leavers who have less relational capital, and/or familial relationships that have been disrupted and also depart from friends and staff, social networks are particularly important, especially during the transition from care to independent living. Yet many earlier studies have shown that care leavers receive little support from social networks (e.g., Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, Sivan, & Davidson-Arad, 2017). Most of these studies emphasized the complexity and problematic nature of care leavers' social networks and characterized them in many cases as being unstable, unavailable, untrustworthy, or fragmented

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(Authors, 2019; Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Courtney et al., 2014; Guttyee, 2019). Little attention has been paid to exploring the potential contribution of care leavers' formal and informal social networks during the transition to adulthood (Guttyee, 2019).

The resilience theory highlights the role of one's social resources in fostering resilience (Masten, Obradović, & Burt, 2006). Therefore, the current study focused on youths' social resources as resilience enablers and explored the contribution of social networks (formal and informal) to care leavers' ability to contend with the challenges and developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. Furthermore, whereas most of the earlier studies investigated this area only from the point of view of the young adults, the current study added the perspective of their social workers. Conducting an in-depth exploration of care leavers' social networks, based on the perspectives of both the care leavers and the social workers, could provide us with a richer understanding of the resources and opportunities embedded in these networks: opportunities which might help this population of vulnerable young adults overcome hurdles and thrive during the emerging adulthood period.

## 2. The role of social networks in increasing resilience

Resilience is defined as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of a successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Masten et al., 2006). Another definition recently coined sees resilience as “the multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity” (Van Breda, 2018a). Therefore, most resilience researchers define resilience as a process rather than an outcome and emphasize the importance of increasing the amount or quality of resources/assets available to youth that promote their resilience (Masten & Powell, 2003). These resources increase the likelihood of positive developmental outcomes including better coping skills, greater achievements, and more social integration. Studies exploring resilience among at-risk youth have focused on different resilience-related aspects. Whereas some researchers focused on youths' individual qualities and personal attributes, others emphasized the role of youths' relationships in the transition to adulthood, as well as their social networks, including their relationships with professionals, mentors, peers, and family (Authors, 2019; Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2016; Gilligan, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). According to these perspectives, resilient care leavers are those who see adversity as inevitable during their life course, believe in their ability to deal with difficulties, and strive to cope with their challenges with the help of their social ties (Masten & Powell, 2003). Expanding our understanding of care leavers' social networks might allow us to enhance their resiliency during the challenging transition to adulthood – a period that is regarded as a window of opportunity during which positive change can be promoted (Masten et al., 2006).

Research on social networks has shown that the existence of a social network, and access to its associated resources, is linked with positive outcomes and higher adaptive resources especially among populations that are regarded as being at risk as a result of their being isolated (Guttyee, 2019). These findings are extremely relevant to care leavers during the complex period of their emerging adulthood, as evidence has pointed to their loneliness and sense of isolation during the transition from care to independent life, especially during the few years after they leave care and through their early adulthood (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Indeed, earlier studies found that care leavers who had better outcomes during their transitions to adulthood were those who reported having more social support in their lives – for example, had at least one stable relationship, maintained ongoing contact with their caregivers, and were better able to make the most of any support that was offered (Stein, 2012). Higher levels of social support were also correlated with a greater sense of well-being after the transition from care (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007), greater academic achievements, better social adjustment (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006), stable financial status, and stability in terms of housing

(Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). In addition, compared with their peers who did not have strong social networks, care leavers who had a strong support network were more likely to pursue post-secondary education, be employed, and have stable housing (Jones, 2012).

## 3. Research goals

Studies on care leavers have emphasized the limited support available to this group of young people. However, less is known about the contribution of their existing social networks to their transition to adulthood, and the role of these networks during this period. Therefore, in this study we sought to expand our understanding of the kinds of formal and informal support care leavers receive, and the way they utilize their relational networks in their journey to adulthood, from their own points of view.

We also explored the social workers' points of view, which have to date received little research attention, and focused on the differences and similarities between their perceptions and those of the care leavers, regarding the role and contribution of the social networks to the care leavers' transition from care. We expected that becoming more knowledgeable about these ideas from multiple perspectives would allow for a broadening of our theoretical knowledge and could lead to a more holistic and integrative picture. Also, the knowledge gained from this study could inform the design and implementation of services by policymakers and practitioners in order to better support care leavers and strengthen their resilience during the transition to adulthood.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

The care leavers came from three different types of out-of-home placements in Israel: therapeutic residential care placements, youth villages, and foster care. In Israel, there are two systems of out-of-home placements. One is supervised by the Ministry of Welfare, and includes therapeutic residential facilities and foster homes. The other is supervised by the Ministry of Education and includes youth villages. Of the approximately 9000 children removed annually from their homes by the welfare system, about 80% are placed in residential welfare settings (therapeutic settings), and about 20% are placed with foster families. Youth in these placements are often removed from their homes because of parental mistreatment, and are coping with extremely challenging life situations such as maltreatment and neglect. These placements are designated for children and youth who have 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”) on a voluntary basis (National Council for the Child, 2011). Each of these out-of-home placements are meant for vulnerable youth who come from underprivileged families, mostly from the geographic or social periphery of Israel. Many of these youth villages also receive adolescent immigrants, mostly from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia (Mash, 2001). In Israel there is no formal policy regarding care leavers after their emancipation in age 18. There are few services for them including transitional housing and counseling in different areas. Most of the services that address young adults are not targeted specifically to care leavers.

Sixty five care leavers and their social workers were approached via the different services they were integrated in (e.g., transitional housing programs, mentoring programs). Only pairs of care leaver-case worker were included. We excluded care leavers whose social worker did not want to participate. Therefore, A total sample of 50 participants were recruited; 25 social workers and 25 care-leavers“

The care leavers sample comprised of Jewish young adults between the ages of 18 and 26 (average age 22), mostly from educational and therapeutic facilities (76%). Of them, about two thirds were young

**Table 1**  
Care Leavers' Characteristics (N = 25).

Demographics	n	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	9	36%
Female	16	64%
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Israel	11	44%
Soviet Union	8	32%
Ethiopia	6	24%
<i>Age</i>		
18–21	15	60%
22–25	10	40%
<i>Former out-of-home placement</i>		
Educational facility	11	44%
Therapeutic facility	8	32%
Foster care	6	24%
<i>Current framework</i>		
During military service/civil service	7	28%
Working	13	52%
Studying	3	12%
Unemployed	2	8%
<i>Accommodations</i>		
With parents	13	52%
In a supervision apartment	4	16%
With partners/alone	5	20%
With a spouse	3	12%

women (64%). Nearly half of the young adults were from families whose two parents were born in Israel (44%), and the rest were from immigrant families from the Former Soviet Union (32%) or Ethiopia (24%). At the time of the interviews, most of the young adults were in mandatory military or civil service (28%) or working in various kinds of low-paying jobs (52%). In terms of housing, half were living with their parents (52%), and the rest were living independently in rented apartments with friends/spouses or alone (48%) (Table 1).

The social worker sample comprised of 25 social workers who worked with these care leavers in different post-care services and programs (e.g., transitional housing programs, mentoring programs). Most of these social workers were women (80%) with bachelor's degrees (76%) who worked with the care leavers for two years or more (78%) (Table 2).

#### 4.2. Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the authors' university. Confidentiality was assured to participants throughout data collection and analysis. The researchers have disguised names of participants and omitted certain personal characteristics to avoid any identifying information.

Thirty young adults were approached over the phone, given an

**Table 2**  
Social workers' characteristics (N = 25).

Variable	n	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	20	80%
Male	5	20%
<i>Education</i>		
B.A	19	76%
M.A	6	24%
<i>Duration of the relationship</i>		
Up to 1 year	6	24%
2–3 years	12	48%
3-more	7	28%

explanation about the goals of the study, and asked for their consent to participate. Individuals who agreed to take part in the study were interviewed face-to-face in a place of their choice. The selection criteria were young adults from therapeutic residential care, youth villages (educational), and foster care, in the period of their early emerging adulthood (18–26), who had spent at least two years in care during adolescence. Among young adults of these ages in Israel, there is some variability in terms of what their daily lives consist of; as such, the sample included those doing military service, those studying, those employed, and those unemployed. We also included a variety of living arrangements among the care leavers (e.g., those living at home with their parents, those living in supervised apartments for care leavers in the community, or those living alone/with roommates). Finally, youth in out-of-home settings in Israel come from a variety of different ethnic groups; as such, the sample included young adults from the most dominant groups in out of home placements in Israel (Israel, Former Soviet Union, Ethiopia).

Regarding the social workers, the research staff approached all of the social workers who were working with the participating care leavers, provided an explanation of the study goals, and asked for their consent to participate in the study. The social workers were interviewed in their own places of work, face-to-face.

Basic demographic information about the care leavers and their social workers was collected before qualitative questions were asked. Both groups were asked about their own personal characteristics (e.g., age, position/occupation, seniority, housing situation, etc.). Two different semi-structured interview protocols were developed for the two groups, consisting of open-ended questions concerning care leavers' transition to adulthood, and focusing on two main themes: (1) the role and contribution of the care leavers' *formal* social networks (e.g., social workers, counselors) to their emerging adulthood; (2) the role and contribution of the care leavers' *informal* social networks (e.g., parents, family, friends) to their emerging adulthood. 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 social workers and care leavers during the interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed; each interview lasted between 40 and 60 min.

#### 4.3. Data analysis

The main method used to analyze the care leavers' and social workers' interviews was theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theoretical thematic analysis is used to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. This analysis allowed the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as in the area of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2001, 2007). Analysis was performed by three readers (the two interviewers and the leading researcher), who interpreted the participants' answers and extracted central themes that expressed their perceptions of the social networks' roles and contributions during the transition to adulthood. 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 stage 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 two groups were compared. To further check the rigour of the findings, a summary report was provided to the care leavers and social workers via email, and their feedback was integrated into the final data analysis.

#### 5. Results

Care leavers and their social workers shared their thoughts regarding the relationship between young adults and both formal and

informal figures, and about these figures' roles in the care leavers' transitions to adulthood. Overall, the findings revealed that the role of the formal social network was much more dominant and central in the care leavers' lives than was the informal one; in all of the cases, participants had a positive association with the formal social network and a sense that it had contributed greatly to the care leavers. In contrast, in most of the interviews, relationships with the informal social network were described as more complex and not always supportive or helpful. Also, the formal support figures contributed in a variety of ways to the care leavers – in regard to different areas and aspects of their lives during the transition to adulthood – whereas the informal figures made a much more limited contribution. In addition, both groups highlighted the same major themes in relation to the formal social network, describing the relationship as supportive in a number of ways including, but not limited to, the provision of practical support, counseling, encouragement, a sense of security, and caring. The care leavers described in much more detail than did the social workers the contribution made by the formal figures to their lives and highlighted different aspects within the relationships that they found to be beneficial. We will describe first the social workers' and care leavers' perspectives regarding the formal social network; subsequently, we will describe their perspectives regarding the care leavers' informal network.

### 5.1. Formal support: Care leavers' and social workers' perspectives

Care leavers and their social workers shared their thoughts regarding the relationships that young adults establish with different formal figures and about these figures' roles in their transition to adulthood. Both groups highlighted the same major themes and described these relationships as supportive in a variety of ways. Three major themes arose from the young adults' and their social workers' descriptions. The first theme was *practical guidance and support* and related to providing access to needed resources and acting as mediators between care leavers and various institutions or figures of authority. The second theme was *adopting new perspectives* and included two subthemes: promoting a positive future outlook and encouraging adaptive coping. Finally, the last major theme was *safe haven* and referred to social workers' provision of a place and time for self-reflection, as well as attentive and caring relationships.

#### 5.1.1. Practical guidance and support

All of the care leavers and their social workers described the formal figures as providing concrete and practical support to the care leavers. This theme was described in relation to different life contexts according to the young adults' needs and to the challenges they faced. The subthemes that emerged within this theme were as follows:

**5.1.1.1. Support via the provision of concrete resources.** The young adults mentioned some formal figures they have meaningful relationship with including their psychologists, therapists, counselors. However, many of them focused on their relationship with their social workers. They described the formal figures as providing support for their concrete needs as well as providing access to tangible resources in different life areas. This type of support included receiving help on the economic front, getting scholarships for higher education, gaining access to work places, and receiving assistance with rent payments. One of the young women (23 years old) said: *"My counselor helped me apply to this educational program and got this scholarship for me."* Another young man (22) said: *"Thanks to the social workers in my neighborhood I was able to land on my feet. They helped me a lot personally and also with money. They made sure I had a place to live, gave me money, and bought me a bed."* Other young adults emphasized the help they received in their career, for example: *"My caseworker told me where to look for a job and she tried to find me a job."* (young women, 21)

The social workers too emphasized the concrete support as an important aspect in the care leavers' relationship with formal figures. One

of the social workers said: *"The support we offer them as social workers is wide-ranging and relates to every aspect in their life: helping them find work, achieve higher education, or open a bank account."* Another social worker who worked with young adults from immigrant families explained: *"With them it always starts with a concrete need that we address. For example, in the case of one of the young women I worked with, I helped her understand her rights and instructed her on how to apply to get an apartment that she could afford."*

**5.1.1.2. Mediation with authority figures and institutions.** Both care leavers and their social workers emphasized the role of the formal social network in helping the young adults realize their rights by communicating on their behalf with different authority figures and institutions. In many cases, the social workers' mediation with these figures/institutions assisted the young adults with their concrete needs, as described by one of the young adults (20) whose social worker negotiated on his behalf with the telephone company: *"In one of our meetings I told my caseworker that my cell phone bill was huge. He helped me right away. We went together to the company and explained that I was doing my military service and that I didn't have a family supporting me. They gave me a large discount. It [having the social worker's help] really helped me with all the bureaucracy."*

Dealing with bureaucratic issues and navigating through different governmental systems was also mentioned by the social workers as a central role in their work with the young adults, and sometimes they served as the "bridge" between the care leavers and other formal institutions: *"I think that we give them knowledge on how to do it, and we do it with them hand in hand. If he needs to fill in formal forms and finds it hard to get them, I will do it together with him...I also referred him to a social service program so that he'll have a place to live independently."* Another social worker added: *"It's important that they be aware of their rights and realize them. In one case, I helped the young adult contact a special program for immigrant students. I also referred him to a support group so that he could experience more positive relationships."*

#### 5.1.2. New current and future perspectives

Both care leavers and their social workers described a formal relationship that encouraged the young adults to adopt a new perspective on life events and more adaptive coping skills and behaviors in the present. Also, both groups mentioned these relationships as promoting future aspirations and higher ambitions and expectations. However, the care leavers described in more detail the contribution made by these relationships. The subthemes that emerged within this theme were as follows:

**5.1.2.1. Encouraging adaptive coping.** Care leavers emphasized the role of the formal relationships in helping them deal with challenges, both by working with these formal figures on new coping strategies and by working on their own autonomy and independent coping: *"The relationship I had with my last caseworker for five years, and now with the current social worker, has given me different perspectives. Sometimes when I cope with something alone, I ask myself what they would say and do. When someone reflects your thoughts and behaviors back to you, or when you hear them yourself, it allows you to understand your life more deeply...it gives me practical tools to handle situations in my life."* (Young man, 24).

The relationships with formal figures were described as offering a new perspective on life that allowed the young adults to better cope with their challenges, as described in this social worker's account: *"I believe that the relationship helps him to prioritize the things he needs to do in his life. I help him think about what's important to do now and what is urgent and how to do it right."* Another social worker described her role in fostering a new perspective: *"I think that we (professional figures) represent the world to them. So if we reflect back to them the things that happen within the relationship between us, it helps them to work on their anger or fears. I use our relationship to build trust and then point out a*

*pattern that is destructive, not healthy, and help him/her look at it and find a better one."*

**5.1.2.2. Promoting a positive future outlook.** Focusing on and promoting the care leavers' perceptions of their future lives/selves was another central theme that emerged. Care leavers described the relationship with formal figures as encouraging them to have higher aspirations and to believe in their abilities to achieve future goals, as the social workers would suggest new opportunities and future possibilities. One of the young women (23) said: *"My social worker helps me to make progress in life. She motivates me to realize my dreams. This relationship allows me to believe in myself and in my abilities and makes me more optimistic about my future."* Another young man (22) emphasized the role of this formal relationship in his regaining the right to dream: *"It helps me to look at my life, think of my future, and know that I can. That I have many ambitions and that I can do this. Plans and desires that I already forgot and preferred not to pay attention to, or even to erase. But they (the professionals) help me with this over and over again."*

Social workers emphasized the role of formal support in elevating the care leavers' future expectations and commitment to their plans: *"The support from his case worker and the scholarship he receives keeps him on the ground and pushes him further. So it's not just keeping your head above water; it drives him to aim higher."*

### 5.1.3. Safe haven

Supportive relationships with formal figures were described by both groups of participants as being a safe, nonjudgmental space that allowed for self-reflection and the exploration of current and future possibilities. They were also described as relationships that allowed for the provision of counseling and guidance in a caring and accepting way which took into account the young adults' needs and strengths. The subthemes that emerged within this theme were as follows:

**5.1.3.1. A place for self-exploration and self-reflection.** The young adults described their meetings with formal figures as a place where they could take a break from their daily lives/struggles and think about themselves and about their current and future life: *"As I see it, my caseworker is like an older brother. With my own brothers, I can't consult or ask for advice. Neither with my parents. He helps me think about my life. He advised me about my work and we meet and think together about my studies too" (young man, 24).* The social workers also emphasized this aspect of the relationship: *"I think that the meeting with me, for example, helps her to pause once a week from all her duties and focus on herself: in what challenges her and why, what she wants to change and how she can create a better future for herself."*

**5.1.3.2. Relationships with attentive and caring adults.** The formal social figures were characterized by both groups as being accessible, as they addressed the young adults' needs in a nonjudgmental manner and with acceptance. As this young woman (20) described her former social worker: *"She left the care placement but we are still in touch. I feel as if she knows who I am, understands my weaknesses, knows my past. She doesn't judge me. With her, I feel that I can be myself and that she will accept me. She helped me build back my confidence."* This quote exemplifies the idea that the caseworker knows the youth as an individual, "sees" her and knows her history.

The social workers described caring on a regular basis for the young adults and acknowledging their strengths as being crucial: *"I believe that the relationships can make a difference only if there is personal contact. When we see them and their strengths, and stand with them when they need us, they see us as people who really care."* Other social workers described the care leavers' relationships with formal figures, especially with formal figures who were part of a larger therapeutic center for young adults, as an island of stability and as a kind of substitute for home: *"There is something in this place (a center for at-risk young women) that gives them a sense of a home to come back to. They know that if they choose*

*not to come, we will still love them and wait with open arms. We will be there for them... even if they do something terribly wrong, we can talk about it... it's like an anchor in their lives."* The "home" image was also selected by the young adults to describe the relationship they had with formal figures: *"My social worker in the welfare agency supports me a lot. It's funny to say but I really feel at home there. I am not ashamed to go there, and I also didn't feel ashamed there when I was the only foster kid in class. This is my situation in life, this is the family I have, and I have no way of changing it. I just know that I saw it as a constructive and good place (young man, 28).*

### 5.2. Informal support: Care leavers' and social workers' perspectives

The care leavers and their social workers were asked about the care leavers' relationships with their informal networks, and the contribution that these relationships made to their transition to adulthood. Overall, both groups described three kinds of relationships with informal figures (i.e., mostly parents, siblings, and friends) including a lack of relationships, unsupportive or harmful relationships and supportive relationships. The subthemes that emerged from the supportive relationships were "sense of belonging" and a "feeling of empathy". The role of informal figures in the care leavers' lives during this period was described in much greater detail by the social workers than it was by the young adults, although the contribution of the informal relationships was seen as being much more limited in terms of type and extent of support. In terms of emotional support and advice, the main figures mentioned were siblings and intimate partners rather than parents and friends. However, both groups agreed on the importance of these relationships for the young adults and highlighted the need to strengthen them. The subthemes that emerged within this theme were as follows:

#### 5.2.1. Sense of belonging

Care leavers and social workers mainly described the relationships with informal figures as ones that provided a sense of belonging, which the care leavers needed for their sense of stability. One of the young men (25), who was an orphan, said: *"My grandmother, who was like a mother to me, died...I have my cousin, she is the only one left. It's fun to come once a week to visit. It makes me feel good to be with a family. It makes me feel confident, and like I belong. They listen to me and take care of me."* Another aspect that arose concerned the care leavers' need to feel connected, to have "roots," as this young man (23) described: *"The relationship with my family helps me in that I don't feel all alone. I need to reach my decisions by myself, but when I need to feel "family," I go to visit my parents and siblings. The importance of the presence of informal figures in the care leavers' lives was also emphasized by the social workers: "She has a family but she chooses not to contact them at this time. I think that knowing that they are there is helpful and significant for her and she can contemplate this in her mind ..."*

A place where one feels one belongs, where there are relationships that offer stability and a "sense of family," was described as one aspect of the contribution made by informal figures, such as parents, friends, siblings, and partners. As one of the social workers described: *"This feeling of having a family is important. Even if she sits with her siblings and drinks alcohol with them. Still it feels like family, and this is one of the factors that strengthens her, that she has a relatively stable home. She has a house to go back to. Her own room...a place to go back to. It's very significant. The sense of belonging is crucial to the young adult's belief in her/himself and trusting that s/he can cope with the challenges and difficulties that exist in the outside world."*

#### 5.2.2. Empathy and shared experiences

In addition to a sense of belonging, the care leavers' relationships with informal figures – in particular with friends – also provided them with a sense of shared experiences. Although this aspect was not mentioned by the social workers, it seemed to play an important role in the care leavers' lives. One of the young women (23) explained: *"The*

*relationship I had with my friend, the fact that she went through the same kinds of things that I went through, we were both in the same place mentally too. We shared similar experiences and we would think about how to grow from there. We could understand each other, things that others would find hard to understand. So it helps – this feeling of empathy. To be in the same boat.”*

Although in many cases the relationships with family and friends were described as unsupportive and even damaging, where there were indeed positive relationships, the contribution was described as one that allowed the young adult to feel “normal,” because he/she had a family and friends and could experience relationships in which he/she felt heard, understood, and unjudged. These aspects were manifested in the words of this 20-year-old young man: *“I don’t know where I would have been without my friends. They know me. Know what I went through in my life, and that my mother abandoned me ...still they are there for me ... they never judge me. Thanks to them I feel a little bit like a normal person. They have their own share of problems, so I feel that they understand me and accept me. I think that without their support I would be in a very bad place. All alone in this world...disconnected. Without anybody to take care of me, appreciate me, and be there for me.”*

## 6. Discussion and implications for practice

Based on the resilience theory, which emphasizes the importance of social resources and assets for the promotion of positive development (Masten et al., 2006), the goal of the present study was to explore the role of care leavers’ formal and informal social networks during their transition to adulthood. Although the social support received from these networks is considered to be an important resource, it is generally agreed that care leavers do not receive such support, or at least not enough of it (e.g., Goodkind et al., 2011). The current study focused on the contribution of care leavers’ formal and informal social networks during their emerging adulthoods via an integration of the perspectives of the young adults and their social workers.

Overall, the study’s findings showed that all of the young adults had supportive relationships in their lives. However, these relationships diverged greatly in terms of their quantity and quality, and in the type of support they offered. Findings suggest that for these young adults, even limited support made a tremendous contribution to their ability to cope with the emotional and practical challenges that typify the emerging adulthood period. Specifically, the themes that arose from care leavers’ and social workers’ descriptions highlighted the way that formal social support promoted care leavers’ independence via the provision of practical and tangible support; it also promoted their positive perceptions of the future via the provision of encouragement and new opportunities. Informal social support, on the other hand, contributed to the care leavers’ sense of belonging and feeling of “normalcy,” as well as to their sense of stability and the need for empathy and understanding.

### 6.1. The varied contribution of formal social networks

The support that care leavers received from formal figures was tangible and moral, and it pertained to different life areas including education and work opportunities. This finding corresponds with earlier studies in which the young adults reported that their carers had helped them to find work and to cope with the demands of balancing work, study and other parts of their life (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015). The contribution made by formal figures in these areas is very important, as many earlier studies have emphasized care leavers’ lower achievements in these domains, as well as the concrete help they need in order to reach their future goals (Courtney et al., 2010; Stein, 2012; Van Breda, 2018b). Both the care leavers and the social workers emphasized the role of formal support in helping the young adults deal with all of the bureaucracy that must be contended with, on the way to realizing their rights. These aspects have also been reported in earlier

studies as being barriers in care leavers’ ability to reach their goals and achieve their expectations (Authors, 2019; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). The findings of this study are therefore encouraging and possibly point to the current social changes in policy, resources, and services designed for at-risk young adults that have gradually taken place in Israel. The formal network’s contribution in this area seems to be of particular importance during the emerging adulthood phase. According to the theory of emerging adulthood, young people view the transition to adulthood as one marked primarily by accepting responsibility for one’s self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2000). If becoming an adult means learning to stand on one’s own two feet, as a self-sufficient person, then the support offered by care leavers’ formal networks seems to help them achieve just that: it encourages them to gradually stand on their own two feet and become independent. This formal support can therefore serve as a powerful asset for care leavers during this challenging period. The importance of this formal network support is further heightened by the fact that for the most part, in this study, care leavers’ informal networks did not seem to offer such support.

In terms of practice, it is therefore of the utmost importance that care leavers continue to receive support from caseworkers (preferred a long term case manager) who can assess their needs holistically and promote their daily independent living and future accomplishments. They can do this both by helping care leavers, in terms of gathering concrete resources, and by mediating with other authority figures/institutions to realize the care leavers’ rights and opportunities.

It has been argued that care leavers often miss out on the chance to move at their own pace, explore their freedom, reflect on their life and future steps, and search for their own identity (Stein, 2012). As a result, they are unable to fully explore potential opportunities, something that is generally expected to occur during this period (Arnett, 2007; Stein, 2012). The current study’s findings showed that care leavers’ relationships with formal figures provided them with a place where they could regain some of that lost time for self-exploration and self-reflection. This is a very important aspect, as alongside the important practical decisions that young people have to make, many of them also struggle with issues of identity exploration and the need to focus solely on themselves and their plans (Arnett, 2007).

Providing care leavers with the time to take a break from their daily struggles, to reflect on their lives, and to explore in the company of a caring and attentive figure their goals for the future, might promote their adjustment and broaden their future opportunities. Indeed, the care leavers and social workers in this study agreed that the formal relationship encouraged the young adults to adopt better coping skills and behaviors, and promoted higher aspirations/ambitions for the future. These findings are reinforced by earlier studies that emphasized the contribution of care leavers’ interactions with formal figures to their coping abilities and positive perceptions of their futures. For example, Bond and van Breda (2018) referred to the concept of “possible selves” and resiliency, and argued that exploring the “possible selves” in a young person’s future might serve to direct their behavior towards achieving desired outcomes and contribute to positive coping, in turn elevating resiliency. Therefore, providing a safe and nonjudgmental environment in which care leavers can reflect on potential opportunities for the future, and dedicate time to exploring them, can serve as a powerful tool in elevating and realizing their future expectations and plans. Indeed, earlier studies found that future-oriented perspectives and the setting of goals for the future were key components of resilience among youth in the general population as well as among at-risk youth (Adelabu, 2008; Aronowitz, 2005; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015, 2016). This finding adds to the current literature on future orientation and highlights the role of formal figures in shaping it in addition to the youths’ family members and self-attribution (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2017).

## 6.2. The contribution of informal networks: limited but significant

As opposed to the kind of straightforward and multifaceted support that the formal network provided for the care leavers in this study, the findings indicated more complicated relationships with care leavers' informal social network figures. These findings correspond with the existing literature which indicates that although care leavers report having relationships with members of their families of origin (for example, parents, siblings, and other relatives), many care leavers also report disrupted relationships with these family members, limiting the kind of support they can provide (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). However, the current study's findings show that the relationships that care leavers have with family members, friends, and intimate partners, however limited, make a unique and differential contribution to them during the transition to adulthood. More specifically, these informal network figures provided them with a sense of belonging and connection, as well as a feeling of stability and a sense of "home" and family (indeed almost half of the young adults were living with their families). These basic elements, which typify the lives of young adults who grew up living with their families and/or did not have any major ruptures with them, are very important for care leavers. Belonging is a fundamental human need defined by lasting, stable, and positive interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). At the core of the sense of belonging is the belief that one is valued and cared for by others consistently. As such, at times of change and/or instability, this type of support is extremely important (Lambert et al., 2013). The support that care leavers' informal networks provide during emerging adulthood, a period characterized by instability, anxiety, and many changes, is therefore particularly valuable. This finding is strengthened by earlier studies that emphasized the role of sense of belonging to youths' outcomes. For example, in their literature review, Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, and Twenge (2007) found that the absence of a sense of belonging was associated with a range of negative outcomes, including aggressive and violent behavior, difficulties with affect regulation and cognitive processing, and social withdrawal.

In addition, although the support of the *formal* social network was found to make an important contribution to the young adults' identity formation and self-exploration, and to their perceptions of their future lives/selves, the study's findings also indicated the importance of the presence of *informal* figures in their lives in regard to these aspects. Support for these findings can be found in the work of Noble-Carr, Barker, McArthur, and Woodman (2014), who saw belonging as a core component of the way young people engage in meaning-making and identity construction and argued that the desire to feel a sense of connection and develop a sense of "home" and "family" are important elements of identity-work.

The informal social network – for the most part friends and siblings – also contributed to care leavers in terms of providing a sense of shared experiences and empathy. One of the interesting findings of the current study was that none of the social workers mentioned these aspects as having made a contribution to the care leavers. In terms of practice, therefore, it is important that professionals acknowledge these aspects as resources that can be used to promote the young adults' well-being and sense of "normalcy," and to consider them a therapeutic tool in their work with this population.

## 7. Conclusions, limitations, and future studies

This study had several limitations. First, the study's sample came from a small group of young adults who were integrated in different services for care leavers. A qualitative inquiry is not designed to be generalizable; even so, one must be even more cautious given the limited sampling that was used in this study. That said, we made our best efforts to include variety of diverse participants in terms of care settings, current occupations, genders, and ages. Another limitation was that the study focused on the young adults' and their social workers' a

descriptions of their social networks and did not distinguish between differences that might have stemmed from care leavers' gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and/or use of services after care. Future studies that explore these aspects quantitatively should provide a more comprehensive picture regarding the contribution of formal and informal networks in the lives of care leavers. Furthermore, we did not distinguish between different life phases; that is, it is possible that social networks play a different role during the first years after leaving care than they do in later years. Future studies that focus on care leavers' social networks up to two years after leaving, and three-to-five years later, might reveal whether changes take place over time.

Despite its limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the field and broadens our understanding of the contribution made by both formal and informal social networks to a defining period in care leavers' lives, and considers the ways in which these relationships serve as powerful assets, resource and resilience enablers despite their inherent complexity. Findings show that formal supports emerged more strongly than informal supports in the experiences of care leavers and their social workers. Also, informal supports, while limited and complex, nevertheless provided important supportive elements. Finally, care leavers and matched social workers had different perspectives on both formal and informal supports of care leavers, suggesting that future studies may benefit from obtaining multiple perspectives on care leavers' experiences.

## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105075>.

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