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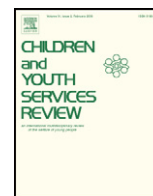
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Experiences of youth who transition to adulthood out of care: Developing a theoretical framework



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ABSTRACT

Adverse adulthood outcomes are well documented among youth who age out of foster care. However, not all youth who age out of care experience deleterious adult outcomes, despite struggling with similar challenges during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Childhood maltreatment, which places youth at greater risk for later maladaptive functioning and psychopathology, may partially explain poor adjustment outcomes in adulthood. Similarly, a history of unstable placements and residing in institutional congregate care settings may also contribute to hardship during this time. However, none of these factors help to explain how some young people aging out of care manage to achieve stability while transitioning into adulthood. This article reviews the literature through the lens of the identity capital framework, and discusses the applicability of this framework to the experiences of youth aging out of foster care.

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1. Introduction

Over 20,000 youth age out of foster care into adulthood every year (Administration for Children & Families, 2011, 2012a, 2013), hard-pressed to achieve independence at an accelerated pace. Shaped by childhoods of abuse or neglect and living in environments away from the care of their parents, young people who age out of care are commonly expected to be self-sufficient at a time when their similar-aged, family-supported peers are not. "Aging out" of care refers to transitioning out of the foster care system at the age of legal majority while still under custody of the state (Courtney & Heuring, 2007). Most current state policies require youth to leave foster care between ages 18 and 21 (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009), leading to considerably more compressed transition periods than what is typically found among the general population. Although not true of all youth who age out of care (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010), low levels of educational attainment, great economic and housing instability, and generally poor adjustment have been well documented among former foster youth in adulthood (Barth, 1990; Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Festinger, 1983; Needell, Cuccaro-Alamin, Brookhart, Jackman, & Shlonsky, 2002).

Comparing pathways to adulthood among youth who age out of care to youth in the general population reveals distinct differences in transition experiences. With social institutions and policies yet to adapt to the

contemporary realities of this life period, families are the primary financial buffers left to absorb increased costs involved in more prolonged transitions to adulthood (Swartz, 2008). This is true across levels of family income, with young adults of both lower and higher socioeconomic status typically receiving some sort of financial assistance and/or ancillary support from their families between the ages of 18 and 34 (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Fingerman et al., 2012; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). In contrast, youth aging out of care often do not have parental financial or ancillary support to safely turn to upon exiting the system. Thus, young people with access to a "parental safety net" are able to prolong the transition, rely on their parents for support, and extend their dependence as needed. Evidence suggests that contemporary young adults, especially in developed nations, are indeed doing so, with transitions from adolescence to adulthood now commonly extending through their twenties and even thirties (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Youth exiting foster care, however, typically have rigid, policy-driven timelines within which they must exit, and few options to extend their transition timeline, or return to care during times of need.

In response, legislative efforts have targeted the needs of older youth in foster care for over three decades (Allen & Nixon, 2000; Magyar, 2006), primarily focused on teaching youth practical skills for living independently, such as finding a job or managing a budget. The efficacy of such independent living skills programs is unclear, however, due to inconsistent program implementation and few rigorously conducted evaluations (Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006). The continued hardship experienced by youth who age out of care suggests that these programs are less than adequate in preparing youth to successfully live on their own.

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In addition to the limited evidence on best practices for youth aging out of care, theory is also in early development (Dinisman, Zeira, Sulimani-Aidan, & Benbenishty, 2013; Smith, 2011; Stein, 2006). Quite a number of studies are available describing the experiences of youth leaving care for adulthood; however, much of the research is descriptive and focused on identifying pragmatic solutions, aligned with the decades of policy efforts outlined above. This article reviews the literature regarding youth experiences of transitioning to adulthood out of foster care. Specifically, the review focuses on identifying research findings that may serve as a foundation for building a theoretical framework around this phenomenon. The terms “transition to adulthood,” “early adulthood,” and “young adult” are used interchangeably to refer to the period of life involving the transition from adolescence to adulthood (broadly defined as beginning at age 18 and continuing through age 30). “Stability” or “stable transitions” will be used to describe youth who remain connected before, during, and after the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In other words, youth who remain housed and engaged in either work, school, or a combination of both, will be considered “stable.” And finally, because the circumstances in which youth age out of foster care are uniquely distinct from that of their peers who transition to adulthood from the care of their parents, the review begins with an overview of contextual factors surrounding youth who grow up in out-of-home care.

2. Unique struggles of growing up in foster care

Young people placed in foster care are exceptional from their peers who grow up in the care of their parents in several ways. First and foremost, family environments that generally lead children to placement in out-of-home care are frequently dysfunctional and chaotic. Normative opportunities for growth and development may not have been available, and it is not uncommon for young people to struggle with the long-term effects of emotional, mental, and physical trauma upon their entrance and duration in care. Second, the subsequent contexts in which foster children reside are often drastically different than those of their non-foster care peers, involving multiple caregivers who may be relatives or strangers, or residing in institutional congregate care settings such as group homes.

Growing up in the context of foster care may also bring its own set of challenges. Placement in out-of-home care often means experiencing loss and separation from caregivers and other loved ones (Havlicek, 2011). Despite abuse and neglect weakening the bond between parent and child, loss of access to relationships with primary figures can have detrimental effects on children (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007; Stovall & Dozier, 2000). Once in foster care, many young people experience great mobility and instability, changing homes and/or caregivers multiple times, rather than staying in safe, stable environments for growth and development. This is especially true for older youth in care. Young people in care may also reside in settings where they have limited opportunities to develop stable attachments with supportive adults, gain real-world experience, or responsibly exercise the autonomy needed to successfully live on one's own (Havlicek, 2011). Although foster care may strive to replicate family environments in which young people can develop and flourish, adverse outcomes typically seen among the majority of former foster youth may stem partly from these challenges to developmental opportunities.

3. A developmental perspective on the transition to adulthood

In terms of whether prior developmental experiences increase the risk for negative outcomes later in life, research on human development indicates that the transition to adulthood can be a decisive period—involving change or continuity—for all youth, regardless of their prior developmental trajectory. Some individuals continue on a course travelled in childhood and adolescence, functioning as before, while others deviate and take a turn in their developmental path, operating

differently than they did in the past (Shanahan, 2000; Shanahan, Sulloway, & Hofer, 2000). For some youth, this life period is a positive experience, adjusting well to their new level of freedom and independence, while others struggle to adapt to the ambiguity and lack of institutional structure characteristic of this time (Côté & Bynner, 2008). Thus, while youth aging out of care may be at higher risk for negative outcomes in adulthood due to their childhood histories, this period also offers a window of opportunity for positive change and experiences, and building stability into adulthood.

4. Identity capital: A framework for understanding the transition to adulthood

To support the development of theory for understanding youth transitions to adulthood, research regarding the experiences of youth in the general population may provide some helpful insight. Côté's *identity capital model* (1997, 2002) suggests that multiple factors contribute to shaping and facilitating pathways to adulthood. The model posits that contemporary transitions to adulthood require certain personal attributes and resources in order to be successful, due to a combined decrease in structural guidance from social institutions (such as communities and schools), and changing economic markets (particularly in post-industrialized societies) in which it is difficult for inexperienced young people to secure gainful employment (Côté, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008). Accordingly, the accumulation of identity capital—or identity-related assets—enables a person to effectively negotiate the challenges and opportunities of adult life (Côté, 1997, 2002). *Identity capital*, as broadly defined by the model, is the investment individuals make towards their identity, or “who they are” (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 147), and these investments are both tangible and intangible.

Tangible resources are those that are “socially visible” and deemed valuable by society, providing entrance and membership into social groups and institutions (Côté, 1997; Côté & Levine, 2002). Examples include human, social, or financial capital. Educational attainment, as a form of human capital, helps to provide entrance into progressively advanced educational institutions, certain employment opportunities, and membership in a particular socioeconomic status or social class. Similarly, employable skills or financial capital enable entrance into social institutions that otherwise would not be possible, such as labor or financial markets. Social capital, as defined by the model, refers to membership in groups or communities. This definition varies slightly from more commonly used definitions, for example, one put forth by Coleman (1988)—a resource embedded in the relationships between persons, which may be employed in the production or securing of other forms of capital. For the purposes of this article, the term social capital is used according to Côté's definition.

Intangible resources refer to personal or internal assets, and more specifically, personal agency and adult identity (Côté, 1997; Côté & Levine, 2002). *Personal agency* is defined as having a level of self-direction, bearing responsibility for one's decisions and life course, and having confidence to overcome obstacles (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Schwartz, Coté, & Arnett, 2005). Without asserting a level of agency, individuals are likely to follow a “path of least resistance” and miss opportunities to actively shape and direct one's life course (Schwartz et al., 2005). Subsequently, personal agency is posited to be key in the development of a coherent and healthy sense of identity (Schwartz, 2007). Simply put, *identity* refers to self-definition, or the ways in which one defines her/himself (Schwartz, 2006). In the identity capital model, it specifically refers to identifying as an adult or with a sense of adulthood (Côté, 1997, 2002; Schwartz, 2007). The development of identity occurs on multiple levels: internally, in the formation of a consistent sense of self and view of the world (Côté, 1996; Marcia, 1980), and externally, marked by behaviors and taking on roles that help to shape others' view of the self (Côté, 1996).

In sum, Côté's (1997, 2002) identity capital model provides a theoretical lens through which we may begin to understand the experience

of becoming an adult, and relevant factors that may contribute to it. Namely, a young adult's identity capital—comprised of both “tangible” and “intangible” resources—may be associated with shaping the experience of transitioning to adulthood. The degree to which one accumulates human (education), social (group memberships), and financial (money and assets) capital prior to transitioning to adulthood may help to influence how the trajectory unfolds after adolescence. A young person's level of personal agency and identification as an “adult,” in turn, may provide internal resources on which to rely during challenging times on the way to and in adulthood.

5. Research regarding youth who transition to adulthood out of care: How do youth fare in accumulating tangible and intangible resources?

Viewed through an identity capital lens, a young person's access to tangible and intangible resources may help to explain why youth who age out of foster care often struggle in adulthood. Unstable and difficult transitions may be due to an insufficient accumulation of human, social, and financial capital before embarking on the journey to adulthood. Similarly, an underdeveloped sense of personal agency or adult identity may not be providing the internal resources needed for support through this life transition.

One of the most recent and comprehensive studies of youth transitioning to adulthood out of care, known as the Midwest Study, followed youth who aged out of foster care in three states: Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin (Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, et al., 2007; Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2010; Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). The study began following youth at their discharge from care in 2002–2003 ($N = 732$), followed up with them two years later ($N = 603$), again when youth reached their early twenties ($N = 591$), and continued through their mid-twenties at six to seven years post-foster care exit ($N = 602$). The outcomes and progress of these youth at each wave of data collection were compared with a separate, nationally representative sample from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The Midwest Study provides a glimpse into the evolving situations of emancipated foster youth as they work to establish adult independence, with the Midwest sample generally faring worse than the Add Health sample across multiple domains.

Yet more than a few former foster youth in the Midwest Study managed the transition to adulthood successfully, evident at their follow up at 23–24 years of age. They avoided homelessness and incarceration, enrolled and progressed in postsecondary education, secured gainful employment, and adjusted positively to adulthood. Many youth throughout the study also reported feeling close to at least one family member, most often a grandparent, and many scored high on a scale measuring levels of social support (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2005). By age 24, of the 584 youth followed through all waves of the study, more than one-half were in stable situations and seemed to have successfully transitioned into key adult roles (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010). Participants at age 24 were categorized into four groups, identified from results of a latent class analysis. Two of the four groups had attained stable transitions, with the first group consisting of the largest distinct class in the sample (36%), referred to as *accelerated adults* (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010). These young people had high rates of high school graduation, college attendance, employment, and children in their care (versus not having custody of their children), along with low rates of criminal convictions. The second group, called *emerging adults*, described 21% of the sample and also had high rates of high school graduation, college attendance, employment and low rates of criminal convictions. The emerging adults differed from the first group in that a majority were not living on their own and did not have children (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010).

Further analysis into research findings suggests that allowing young people to remain in care beyond age 18 may relate to some of the better

outcomes seen among the study sample (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007). Longer durations in care appear to increase the odds of completing higher levels of school, delaying parenthood, and being better prepared to live on one's own (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a, 2010b). It may be that the extended time in care allows for a greater accumulation of different tangible and intangible resources, such as human capital (completing more school), exercising agency (taking responsibility for one's decisions by delaying parenthood), and having a greater readiness to take on adulthood.

Numerous other studies of young adults aging out of foster care are also available, documenting homelessness, low educational attainment, inadequate employment and income, teen and single parenthood, and lower overall well-being among former foster youth (Barth, 1990; Brandford & English, 2002; Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Cook, 1994; Courtney et al., 2001; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; English, Kouidou-Giles, & Plocke, 1994; Festinger, 1983; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Jones, 2011; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Reilly, 2003). These studies range from large-scale surveys to smaller qualitative studies involving in-depth and semi-structured interviews. They take place nationally (Buehler et al., 2000; Cook, 1994) and locally (CA, WA, WI, NY, NV, and TX), all yielding similar indicators of hardship in youths' efforts to establish independence. More positively, and supporting findings from the Midwest Study, the majority of youth across studies also report having a strong connection with at least one supportive adult upon leaving care, and depending on locale, youth report feeling somewhat to mostly prepared for living on their own.

Comparable to the design of the Midwest Study, many of these studies focused on a group of youth as they aged out of care, and documented their functioning in multiple domain areas associated with stability and positive well-being in adulthood. A majority of studies involve cross-sectional views of aged out youth after their exit from care and do not move beyond descriptions of young people's functioning and adjustment. Due to their wide net, with findings that mirror those of the Midwest Study, an in-depth look into each study is not taken here. However, studies that focus on specific domains of functioning and provide insight into the potential salience of Cote's model relating to tangible and intangible resources are reviewed in greater detail below.

5.1. Social capital, social support, and belonging

In the identity capital framework, Côté (1997) identifies social capital as a tangible resource, while also describing the challenge of appropriately operationalizing the construct, which he defines as capital resulting from membership in clubs and groups. Similarly, the goal of permanency—creating a stable, long-term experience of family for young people in care—dominates practice and research in child welfare (Administration for Children & Families, 2012b). Among youth aging out of foster care, social support is commonly examined as a proxy for permanency, with studies finding mixed results regarding a relationship between social support and functioning in other domains (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Perry, 2006; Salazar, Keller, & Courtney, 2011). Results of another latent class analysis of a sub-sample of youth in the Midwest Study identified four distinct classes or groups within the sample, having varying levels of social support and human capital (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). While one group had high levels of both educational attainment and social support, high levels of social support were paired with low levels of educational attainment in another group.

Côté's definition of social capital and child welfare's construct of permanency is slightly separate from social support, however. Clarifying this distinction is important in that while studies indicate youth aging out of foster care increasingly report having some level of social support (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2005), emerging evidence from qualitative research suggests that having a sense of belonging may be a more prevalent challenge for youth in and aging out of foster care (Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Samuels, 2009). Early studies

of adolescents in foster care uncovered reports of youth avoiding closeness with others and keeping relationships superficial in order to keep their status as a foster child private (Kools, 1997; 1999). Feelings of loneliness are not uncommon upon exiting the system, and may be compounded by feelings of not belonging (Mulkerns & Owen, 2008). Among a sub-sample of the Midwest Study, many participants reported efforts to reconnect with their biological families after exiting care, in search of finding a family to which they “belong” (Samuels, 2009). However, based on the experiences of these young people, re-establishing relationships with biological parents did not necessarily result in experiences of connectedness (Samuels, 2009). In another study, youth experienced a lack of acceptance by biological parents after reconnecting with them upon exiting care, increasing their distrust and distance from others (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011). A study of Norwegian young adults who left care for adulthood found that some youth felt more culturally connected to their foster, rather than biological, caregivers, resulting in greater confusion regarding where they belong (Fransson & Storø, 2011).

5.2. Intangible resources: Personal agency among youth in foster care

In addition to tangible resources, several qualitative studies suggest a possible alignment of Côté’s intangible resources to the experiences of youth aging out of care into adulthood (Gaskell, 2010; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Goodkind et al., 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Interviews with young people who aged out of care in the UK uncovered feelings of losing control, becoming disillusioned, and developing distrust in people as a result of frequent and unannounced moves in foster care (Gaskell, 2010), indicating a lack of opportunity to exercise agency. Youth described instances when they tried to influence the nature of the care they received by sharing their thoughts and desires with social workers, only to be ignored and unsupported (Gaskell, 2010). Focus groups with young adults aging out of care in the U.S. have revealed comparable frustrations at being given little opportunity to exercise agency while in care, yet expected to be in control and direct their lives upon exiting the system (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Similar sentiments were found in a qualitative study of a sub-sample from the Midwest Study, with respondents noting that they experienced minimal control over their lives throughout their stay in foster care (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Finally, a qualitative study investigating why youth who had the option to receive foster care services past age 18 were not doing so, found that youths’ desire to exercise personal agency played a significant role in their decisions to leave the system (Goodkind et al., 2011).

5.3. Intangible resources: Adult identity and negotiating the passage to adulthood

As with research regarding personal agency, little research is available on identity development among youth who age out of foster care, and even less specifically focused on adult self-identity. However, some studies do offer insight into youths’ sense of self while in care. Some evidence points to low levels of self-esteem among maltreated children, thought to stem from the internalization of abusive or neglectful experiences (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009; Taussig, 2002). Family dynamics before and after entering foster care, the degree of connectedness maintained with family members, and the experience of growing up in care are also thought to have a lasting impact on development and, ultimately, identity acquisition (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Moss, 2009; Rustin, 2006).

One of the earliest studies on identity involved teens residing in foster care and revealed themes of a “devalued self” and perceived diminished social status from being a foster child (Kools, 1997). Excessive restrictiveness in living arrangements and discontinuity of caregiving contributed to how youth thought about themselves, and many reported wondering if other people thought they “must be crazy”

because they lived in a group home (Kools, 1997). Youth in Kools’ and other studies (Fransson & Storø, 2011) interpreted the status of foster children as abnormal, bad, or damaged, and experienced difficulty in understanding “who they were” due to fragile or absent ties to their family and past, manifested in beliefs that they had few viable future opportunities (Kools, 1997). In a study of emancipated young adults attending college, many spoke of trying hard to fit in and “seem normal” around their peers. However, youth also reported feeling older and different than other students their age, due to their family histories and having had to care for themselves and/or their younger siblings during their child and adolescent years (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005).

A different but related construct to a sense of adult identity, strong self-reliance has been recognized as a theme in a handful of qualitative studies. A sub-sample of youth from the Midwest Study reported trying to be an “ideal foster child,” not requiring a lot of care and taking on the role of provider, rather than receiver, of support in relationships with biological parents (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Surviving without the aid of parental support and resources served as an important source of pride and self-esteem for many young people, and in fact, depending on others or expressing personal vulnerability was seen by some as risks to independence and success (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In another study, asking for help from others was seen as burdensome or shameful, with some youth reporting concerns that others would view them as incompetent if they asked for help (Mulkerns & Owen, 2008). Other young adults indicated asking for help if the assistance related to accessing concrete needs, such as jobs or housing, while commonly rejecting other types of aid, including emotional support (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Young people who felt that they were not on track in their transition to self-sufficiency frequently blamed themselves for their lack of progress, suggesting that strong self-reliance may serve as both a strength and barrier to success (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Focused specifically on the status of parenthood, a few studies suggest aspects of identity development that may be uniquely shaped by being a parent. Although these aspects may accrue to youth both with and without foster care histories, young mothers with foster care backgrounds have indicated early parenting may help to alleviate feelings of inadequacy and offer a new sense of belonging (Knight, Chase, & Aggleton, 2006). In a study of young British parents who aged out of foster care, participants shared that becoming a parent helped lessen feelings of loneliness, rejection, and abandonment (Chase, Maxwell, Knight, & Aggleton, 2006; Knight et al., 2006). Parents also reported finding security, stability, and a sense of accomplishment in becoming a parent. Most participants perceived parenthood as a positive experience that increased their maturity and provided focus in their lives, while a few stated that, in hindsight, they would have waited to have a child (Chase et al., 2006). Similarly, a subset of young mothers from the Midwest Study indicated developing a sense of purpose and belonging from their new emotional bond with their child, unlike anything experienced in relationships with their own parents or foster families. They saw themselves as valued, loved, and depended upon (Pryce & Samuels, 2010). Biological mothers frequently served as anti-role models for young mothers out of foster care, for what not to do as a parent (Pryce & Samuels, 2010; Rolfe, 2008). These mothers also reported feeling pressure to “prove themselves” as good mothers, due to their childhood histories (Haight, Finet, Bamba, & Helton, 2009; Rolfe, 2008).

6. Conclusion: Developing a framework for understanding the transition to adulthood for youth aging out of foster care

Having overcome a childhood of maltreatment, separation from primary caregivers, unstable and multiple living arrangements, and fragile social support networks, youth aging out of foster care face the significant task of entering adulthood with a compromised foundation on which to build. The circumstances within which these youth begin the journey to adulthood is challenging at best, daunting to most, and

involves a system that simultaneously stigmatizes and provides limited support. While studies explicitly examining the identity capital framework in regards to youth aging out of foster care are not available, findings from available research suggest that its constructs may be relevant for understanding the experiences of older youth in care. Having adequate human and financial capital clearly impacts the practical aspects of reaching adulthood. Studies highlighting the importance of stable, supportive relationships are common. Reports of youth frustrated with having limited opportunities for developing and exercising agency while in care are also indicated. Some young people in care may have unique aspects of identity development to resolve as they achieve a sense of adult identity, such as a devalued sense of self or lowered self-esteem and shame from being in foster care. Self-protection in the form of maintaining emotional distance from others is also evident, potentially exacerbating feelings of not belonging, another recurring theme among aged out youth. As a result, a strong self-reliance and reluctance to ask for help is indicated in more than one study. Finally, although early parenthood can increase the likelihood of hardship before and into adulthood, evidence suggests that becoming a parent may also help some young people to develop more intangible resources, such as a sense of belonging and self-worth.

What are the implications for applying this conceptual framework in practice with youth who age out of foster care? Can a level of agency and sense of adult identity be fostered through intervention? Findings from a randomized, longitudinal study examining the effects of an intervention aimed at promoting self-determination suggest that they can—at least in terms of personal agency (Powers et al., 2012). Similar to Côté's definition of personal agency, self-determination is defined as being empowered to make one's own decisions, directing one's own actions, and exercising rights and responsibilities. Powers and associates' found high levels of self-determination among participants in an intervention designed to prepare youth for adulthood while supporting their self-determination. Compared to the control group, youth exposed to the intervention had better outcomes at post-intervention as well as at a one-year follow up. At the one-year follow-up, youth in the intervention group had higher rates of employment and high school completion and self-determination was significantly associated with a higher quality of life. The study targeted youth in foster care receiving special education services and its findings are promising. Additional research is needed to examine the efficacy of such an intervention with the overall foster youth population, and to determine whether higher levels of self-determination are subsequently related to positive adult outcomes.

Shaping the social and physical living environments of youth in foster care can also have an impact, psychologically and emotionally. Research is needed into different contexts that may allow greater opportunities for youth to develop and effectively exercise agency in making decisions over their lives. Indeed, individuals who assert a level of agency are better positioned to actively shape their life course in a desired direction, rather than allowing chance and circumstance to dictate their pathway into adulthood (Schwartz et al., 2005). Nurturing a healthy level of agency may subsequently lead to readiness for adulthood and identifying as an adult when it comes time to exit the system and live on their own. Individuals with a greater level of agency are also thought to be better equipped for handling adversity, and more able to cope with the ambiguity and lack of structure characteristic of the transition to adulthood (Luyckx, De Witte, & Goossens, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2005). Youth with relatively lower levels of agency, however, may require greater external structure and guidance during the transition to adulthood, suggesting that tailoring interventions to meet individual needs may be more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach to preparing youth for independent living. Assessing levels of tangible resources, such as human and financial assets, as well as other needs related to well-being, such as health and mental health, may also be included in tailoring services to individual needs.

A more in-depth examination into the distinction between permanency and social support would also be useful, constructs often used

interchangeably in studies of youth aging out of care into adulthood. Evidence from the Midwest Study and others indicate that youth are leaving care with fairly high levels of social support, yet data analyses indicate mixed findings regarding an association between social supports and functioning in other domains. It may be that social support does not quite capture the construct most relevant during this life period. An earlier study of neglectful mothers found that it may be the nature of relationships and social networks and how they are perceived, rather than levels of social support itself, that are most important in contributing to functioning and well-being (Beeman, 1997). Similarly, a recent analysis of the applicability of social network theory to the outcomes and functioning of transitional age youth in foster care suggests that understanding the nature and functioning of a young person's broader social network may help to delineate aspects of social connection that are most important during early adulthood (Blakeslee, 2012).

Distilling down what may be needed for a successful transition to adulthood to a list of practical independent living skills has had limited impact in addressing the negative outcomes for youth who age out of foster care. A more holistic approach to addressing the needs and experiences of youth during this time may be needed. Knowing how to find and keep an apartment, maintain employment, and manage a budget is certainly necessary for success as a self-sufficient adult. However, research on normative transition experiences into adulthood suggests that stable transitions are facilitated by more than a knowledge of basic living skills. Having a level of agency and sense of adult identity may also contribute to more stable transitions to adulthood. Whether such internal resources are developed may make a difference in how an individual accesses and interacts with external resources to subsequently navigate the pathway to adulthood. Increasing attention to the plight of transitional age youth in foster care is promising, evidenced by more states extending the option to remain in care beyond age 18. Better understanding the layers of preparation necessary for adulthood may help to close the remaining gap, and lead to more youth aging out of care to experience stability into adulthood.

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