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‘There are a Lot of Good Things that Come Out of it at the End’: Voices of Resilience in Youth Formerly in Foster Care During Emerging Adulthood

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Emerging adulthood, the developmental stage between ages 18 and 25, presents unique barriers to former foster youth, who experience higher rates of unplanned pregnancy and homelessness and poorer educational attainment than their peers during this time. This study uses interviews with 20 youth formerly in foster care who exhibit better-than-average outcomes to explore contextual

aspects of resilience during emerging adulthood, elucidating how both relational and organizational support contribute to their resiliency. Implications for social work policy and practice are discussed.

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Young people passing into emerging adulthood face challenges under the best of circumstances, but for the 20,000 who age out of foster care in the United States each year, this developmental stage can be particularly challenging (Arnett, 2004; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). While for many of their peers, making experiential decisions and exploring their identities is a “normal” phase of development, youth formerly in foster care now must either stand on their own or lean on supports that are tenuous at best, including family who may have abused and/or neglected them and child welfare systems that can only provide support under specific conditions. It is not surprising, then, that outcomes in their first few years of adulthood are sometimes grim, with narratives of homelessness, unplanned pregnancy, substance use, and poverty dominating the academic literature (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010b; Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014).

Far less discussed is that many of these youth beat the odds and defy these narratives. The voices of youth formerly in foster care are often “conspicuously absent” from the dominant practice of viewing foster youth through a deficit lens (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012, p. 1009). Resilience theory, which posits resilience as formed by a combination of individual traits and contextual factors (Benard, 2004; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), is a useful tool for framing how successful youth formerly in foster care overcome their adversities (Masten, 2018). Burt and Paysnick (2012) call the contextual aspects, including relational and organizational support, “malleable protective factors” (p. 500), as service providers and policy-makers have more direct control over them than individual traits. However, many studies of youth formerly in foster care in emerging adulthood only examine individual and relational components of resilience (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Yates & Grey, 2012).

To fill these gaps, this study addresses the question: What contextual factors do youth formerly in foster care identify that promote resilience during emerging adulthood?

Background

Youth formerly in foster care lag behind their non-fostered peers in many traditional measures of success. An estimated 11% to 46% are homeless at least once before age 26, compared to 4% of the general population (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a). About half experience unplanned pregnancy by age 19, compared to 20% nationwide (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010b; Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013). Only about 58% of youth formerly in foster care complete high school by age 19, compared to 87% of all U.S. youth (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019).

Fortunately, some policy changes in recent years have led to improved outcomes for former foster youth. The 2008 Fostering Transitions to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, for example, provided guidelines and funding for youth to continue to receive child welfare services past age 18. Even small increases of time in care during early adulthood are associated with improved outcomes (Child Trends, 2017; Child Trends, 2019).

Resilience Theory

Despite these challenges, many youth formerly in foster care go on to lead successful lives. Resilience theory is an applicable framework for discerning some of the factors involved in doing well despite challenges (Zimmerman, 2013), positing that “assets” (individual characteristics) and “resources” (contextual resources, including relational and organizational) create resilience by outweighing the impact of risk exposure (Benard, 2004; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

We identified ten studies that use resilience theory to examine youths’ experiences of emerging adulthood. Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) interviewed youth formerly in foster care who were in college, identifying resilience from internal resources (independence and a determination to have a different future) and external resources (social support and relationships). Hass, Allen, and Amoah (2014),

who also interviewed youth formerly in foster care who were in college, similarly highlighted independence and supportive relationships as important factors in achieving academic success in the form of attending college. These two components were also found to be important by Jones (2012), who tested a resilience instrument with 97 youth formerly in foster care. Hass and Graydon (2009) surveyed 44 youth formerly in foster care who were attending or had graduated from college and found future orientation and supportive relationships to be sources of resilience. Two larger quantitative studies (Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach, 2016) found relationships to be the biggest contributors to resilience.

Overall, research on emerging adulthood for youth formerly in foster care is in its early stages (Burt & Paysnick, 2012). Few studies on this population examine better than expected outcomes (Yates & Grey, 2012) or available resources (Hass & Graydon, 2009). The youth voice itself is also often overlooked (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012). Among the reviewed studies, the most common operationalization of resilience was educational attainment. Most mentioned individual aspects of resilience (Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Jones, 2012), all mentioned relational support, and only one mentioned organizational support (Batsche et al., 2014). This study addresses these gaps by asking the youth themselves about their relational and organizational supports and by extending the sample of “resilient” youth beyond a sole focus on those enrolled in college.

Methods

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed to learn about emerging adults’ experiences in the child welfare system (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). Questions included, e.g., “How have the people in your life supported you?”

and “Who do you feel so close to that it is hard to imagine life without them?” Boston College’s Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol. Participants ($N = 20$) were recruited from two programs serving current and former foster youth in 2011 and 2012. One supported youth in college ($n = 10$) and the other youth ages 17 to 22, regardless of their college enrollment ($n = 10$). Any young adult 18 years of age or older and currently or formerly in foster care was eligible to participate. They were recruited through flyers and their program staff, who scheduled the interviews at their program sites. The researchers reviewed informed consent forms with each participant, who then signed them. Participants received \$20 gift cards for their participation. Interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Demographics

Fourteen participants identified as female and six as male, and they ranged in age from 18 to 21 (mean = 19.35 years). About half (45%) identified as Black or African American, 15% as Hispanic, 10% as White, 15% as “mixed,” and 15% as another race (including Cape Verdean, Haitian, and “African/Moroccan”). Of the sample, 75% had a high school diploma or GED, 20% were in high school, and 5% (one respondent) had a ninth grade education and was no longer in school.

The group spent an average of 8.9 years in care. Some 60% of respondents reported having lived in five or more foster homes. All were still connected to the child welfare system, and the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) was providing all but one with financial support in the form of housing, tuition, programmatic support, and in at least five cases, direct payments.

We label our sample as “resilient” as they exhibited better than average outcomes for youth formerly in foster care. They did not self-identify as resilient. However, they attended college at higher rates; only one had experienced homelessness in the past two years, and only one, as compared to about 20% of former foster youth nationally by age 19 (27% by age 21) (Child Trends, 2017). One respondent had a child;

nationally, about 12% of foster youth alums have a child by age 19 (27% by age 21) (Child Trends, 2017).

Analysis

The modified consensual qualitative research (CQR-M) analytic approach was chosen for its rigor and for its usefulness in exploring “inner experiences,” “data derived from short narrative responses to questions,” and sample sizes above 15 (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, & Hess, 2005; Bertsch et al., 2014, p. 177). After thoroughly reading all 20 transcripts, the first author did first-cycle coding by re-reading five transcripts and writing down words and sentences that stood out. She then clustered these codes (Saldaña, 2013), and finally used resilience theory’s main categories of contextual factors (relational, organizational) to drive second-round coding (Layder, 1998; Saldaña, 2013).

Next, the first and second authors coded a selection of interviews separately and then met to create consensus and refine the code definitions; this process was then repeated twice. By the end, they required little dialogue to reach consensus, and both had coded all 20 interviews.

Findings

Factors contributing to resilience are broken down into two broad categories, relational support and organizational resources, below.

Relational—Families of Origin

All respondents were in touch with at least one biological family member, and the majority ($n = 14$) were in contact with at least one biological parent. Perhaps surprisingly, since the youth were removed from their parents’ care due to abuse and/or neglect, about a third of respondents described parental relationships as helpful. Several made comments like Frank, who said that his mother had been the “most supportive and

helpful” relationship in his life. “My mom always wants what’s best for me. She knows what’s best for me.”

Other biological family members, especially aunts and uncles, also provided emotional and social support. Several mentioned advice being particularly helpful. Danny, 19, said:

They been helping me keeping myself stable, like keeping me alert, like knowing what’s right and wrong ... [they] just keep me grounded. Like, sometimes I get over-emotional and ridiculous and they help me with that ... They just talk to me and stuff. Tell me that I am being ridiculous.

Reggie, 19, said he talks to family members “constantly.” He said, “my aunt ... is like my diary ... I talk to my aunt and tell her my life story every day. Everything that’s happened to me. She’s like my mother pretty much.” Sofia, removed from her parents’ care at 12, said “I know that my aunt is proud of me,” and that motivated her to keep striving in school when she felt like giving up. Several expressed that they felt unconditional love from their families.

Relational—Non-Family

Respondents identified other adults in a variety of roles as having been helpful to them during their transition from foster care into adulthood, including fictive kin, chosen family, mentors, teachers, therapists, social workers, and foster parents. These adults often filled in gaps in support from their family of origin. Sofia, 20, described a former director of a youth leadership program as “like my second mom, kind of.” She also mentioned two mentors in her field who encouraged her to pursue her career and provided her with an internship. Irina, 18 and living independently, had a mentor who “helps me on a daily, I see him every single day. When I’m hungry and I don’t have anything, he makes sure he comes and he feeds me. Helps me look for jobs, um, if I need somebody to talk to when I’m having a bad day, he’s always there.” Lydia, 20, described her adoptive parents as providing unconditional love, saying,

“they have been there for me, like, well, everything. They never give up on me.” And Patrice, who was removed from her parents’ care in her teens, said of her current adult supports, “Each one of the individuals have one or two characteristics of what a parent would do and they kinda just fill the emptiness.”

About half of the participants described close relationships with foster parents that involved unconditional love, permanence, and (in some cases) people they could not imagine their lives without. Georgio, who had been involved with DCF since he was “probably about two or three,” said, “the only people who have been really supportive are my foster parents.” Speaking of his foster mother, he said, “not really because it’s her job ... but because she’s come to regard me as her own son, so she’s been super supportive. She’s always helped me out whenever she can.” Many also spoke of foster parents who “pushed” them to get things done. Nia, a 19 year old in her first year of college, said, “If I would never have met her, I probably wouldn’t be where I was because she’s the one who, like, pushed me, like, the hardest.” Marie said:

With the guidance of [my foster parents], I’ve made it, you know, changed my life. Um, I wasn’t planning to go to college at all, actually. Um, but they guided me, they told me I’m going to college (small laugh) and didn’t really have a choice. So (small laugh) I took the chance, made it come true, pretty much.

Of all the relationships mentioned, positive ones with social workers were most abundant. Almost three-quarters of the respondents spoke highly of their workers’ impact on their lives. More than half listed their social workers as very important to them (in several cases, someone they could not imagine life without). Marie, 19, had had the same worker since she was ten, and said, “if she leaves, I wouldn’t know what to do.”

These relationships also involved advice, emotional support, and a feeling of being genuinely cared for, with comments like, “she actually want[s] the best for me” and “she actually care[s] about, like, my future.” Patrice, a 20 year old in her first year of college who spent a quarter of her life in care, said “there are a lot of good things that come

out of [being in care] at the end...like having a support system. Having emotional help.” Reggie, 19, who never mentioned either parent in his interview, said his worker helped him navigate other family relationships and “helped me deal with being in foster care. And, then just being there for me if I needed anything.” Oscar, 20, described his worker as “laidback” and “not like a hardass DCF worker.” He highlighted that this worker gave him “responsibility” and “freedom”; “He’s just a really good guy.” Patrice, 20, said of her worker:

My social worker, she kinda taught me that no matter where I came from, it matters where I am headed. You know, I don’t know how to explain it ... that I can have dreams and goals, like every other person on this planet.

Organizational—Facilitating Family Relationships

Supportive relationships are important promoters of resilience during the transition from childhood to adulthood (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Maintaining and strengthening these relationships builds contextual and relational support as they transition out of the system and into independent adulthood. Respondents were directly asked whether and how DCF as an agency helped with their supportive relationships. About half said DCF had been helpful with biological family relationships, and many said that DCF was also useful in creating and maintaining relationships with other caring adults like mentors and social workers.

Frank, an 18-year-old high school senior, said that his worker encouraged him to “work things out” with his mother. He had gone to foster care when he was 16 or 17 due to their communication issues, and his worker focused on getting them to “work problems out.” He had moved back in with his mother by the time of this interview. Marie, involved with DCF from the age of three, said that her mother had died. Her worker had been attempting to help her make contact with her siblings. Though they were still searching for most of them, she said, “there’s a way I can contact one, thanks to my social worker.”

DCF supplemented Marie's lost family with professional supports that had come to be so close to her she could not imagine life without them. She said her closest adult relationships were with her foster parents and social workers.

Organizational—Instrumental

Marie also mentioned that DCF provided her with organizational resources and support, saying, "everything I need help with, especially financial-wise for school and stuff, they do help." In fact, about three quarters of the sample said DCF had provided at least adequate resources and support, and most participants wanted to remain involved with DCF because of the services it provided. Lydia, 19, said she signed back up for DCF support "because I didn't have nobody helping me out and stuff like that, so it was the best for me to stay." The most prevalent needed services cited by participants were housing, college tuition, and direct payments.

Almost all respondents were in housing provided by DCF (e.g., foster care, college campus, independent living program), and about two thirds ($n = 12$) were attending college, which was paid for by DCF. Lydia, who said she had little family support, said, "having DCF helping me out with school, paying for my school, that's major because without that, my, there is no possibility where I would be able to pay for school. I would have probably had to get loans and stuff and [it] would be difficult for me to pay."

Discussion

In this manuscript, we aimed to understand what contextual factors that youth formerly in foster care identify as promoters of resilience during emerging adulthood. Our findings align with previous work that place importance on relational contributors to the resilience of youth formerly in foster care (Courtney et al., 2014; Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines,

Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Jones, 2012; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). We extend this literature by describing the systemic facets of the resilience process, especially noting the depth and importance of respondents' relationships with their DCF workers.

All 20 of these young adults had at least one caring adult in their lives, including those within and outside their families of origin. Results in this study supported earlier research that found great benefits from the presence of at least one supportive adult (Avery, 2010; Greeson & Thompson, 2015; Osterling & Hines, 2006). Our research supports the robust body of literature that prosocial adult relationships are among the most important factors in the resilience process, especially for youth formerly in foster care whose family relationships have been disrupted (Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach, 2016).

In the current study, most respondents intend to maintain relationships with their families of origin. This finding is consistent with the literature, which relates that it is not uncommon for emancipated youth to reconnect (and sometimes live) with families of origin (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). This, combined with the importance of relationships in the resilience process, suggests that child welfare systems should pay close attention to these relationships while the youth is in care. These relationships were arguably unhealthy at the time of removal, so much so that it necessitated removal of the child for the duration of childhood. Without intervention, it is unlikely that these relationships will be significantly healthier when the youth turns 18 and chooses to reconnect. As such, it is incumbent upon the child welfare system to find better ways to support these disrupted relationships so that youth are better able to navigate them once they are adults.

Perhaps the most notable finding in this work was the way these young adults spoke of their foster parents and social workers. Few studies directly speak to youths' perceptions of their workers (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; De Boer & Coady, 2007; Lane, 2016). Our findings echo existing studies: caring workers can make a great difference in

the lives of youth formerly in foster care who are emerging into adulthood. In this study, almost three quarters of respondents said their social workers were very important, supportive, and helpful in their lives. These were the relationships most often cited as sources of support. Respondents expressed feeling genuinely cared for by their social workers, who provided not only emotional support but also resources like therapists, services, and advice. Foster parents, too, provided unconditional love, advice, and encouragement.

Despite the fact that many of these young adults said they could not imagine life without their workers, many states and agencies discourage or forbid child welfare professionals from maintaining relationships with youth they serve after the termination of their formal relationship. This paper is in line with a growing body of work suggesting that maintaining those relationships is advantageous to youth formerly in foster care (O'Leary, Tsui, & Ruch, 2012). For some respondents, their worker had been the only stable adult in their childhood. Given the kind of connection that is sometimes established in the worker-client relationships, reevaluation of these policies may be warranted.

For now, it is generally understood that these relationships are not meant to be permanent. However, while workers can and should be solid supports for a "season" (Samuels, 2008), it is perhaps more vital for the system to nurture youths' broader network. Youth with strong relational networks tend to have more resilience (Burt & Paysnick, 2012). Indeed, reestablishing and maintaining relationships with support networks "is the strongest and most positive youth development program the child welfare system can offer, and it is imperative that child welfare professionals identify 'promising practice' service models that are effective at achieving this outcome" (Avery, 2010, p. 400). This study provides some examples: youth describe workers who helped them find their families and supported them in navigating these relationships.

Organizational support is generally reserved for those most likely to do well. Respondents understood themselves to be supported by DCF only if they were employed or in school, while those who need it most—who cannot maintain employment or are not interested in

pursuing college—are left without structural supports on their 18th birthdays. This counterintuitive setup is worth reconsideration.

Limitations

We examine emerging adults who were already showing resilience; we did not involve those who were not showing resilience. Having a control group of respondents who were navigating emerging adulthood without formal supports might have resulted in different findings. Similarly, resilient young adults no longer involved with DCF were not engaged in this study. Our sample also had higher than typical educational levels for youth formerly in foster care. This may be because half were in a college-support program, but those in the community-based program also had higher levels of educational attainment than most youth formerly in foster care. Using educational attainment as an indicator of resiliency in this group may have been somewhat problematic; perhaps resilient youth formerly in foster care who are not involved in these formal supports also have higher than average educational attainment due to individual characteristics and not as a result of organizational support at all.

We cannot account for all the factors associated with risk and resilience, such as types and duration of abuse and/or neglect. While the work looks at sources of resilience, causes of resilience are beyond its scope; instead, we aimed to qualitatively examine the experiences of a group of resilient young people to provide insight into the sources of their resilience.

Conclusion

Based on what these young people have told us, youth formerly in foster care can have many, often under-recognized promoters of resilience in their lives. As they named families of origin as important contributors to their resilience, agencies and workers would do well to continue facilitating these relationships, as they are likely to happen with

or without agency support. Many also elaborated on the helpfulness of their foster parents and social workers, who provided both instrumental and emotional support. Reconsideration of official boundaries around this relationship, though challenging, is warranted.

Youth generally report that DCF serves them well. Areas for improvement include providing support without work or school requirements and affording increased opportunities for independence during their late teens. Areas of success include providing housing, tuition, financial, and emotional support.

The child welfare system holds a sacred duty of raising children into adulthood when they are removed from their families. While these youth often carry trauma and complex histories, their futures can, and should, be bright. Though individual traits like personalities and outlooks can be nurtured to a certain extent to tip youth towards resilience, we know from the literature and from these youths' stories that the system itself can also set them up for success. The child welfare system, though flawed, is doing many things right; continuing to build on these is an essential part of its work.

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