Future Expectations as a Source of Resilience among Young People Leaving Care

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Abstract

Young adults who leave care enter a crucial period in their lives in which they have to plan their future and make significant decisions regarding many aspects of their adult life (Arnett, 2000). During emerging adulthood, their expectations for the future are especially important and could influence their goal setting and motivation to accomplish those goals. However, little attention has been paid to the importance of future expectations of care leavers as a source of resilience. This paper aims to address the role of future expectations among young people leaving care in the context of resilience theory and emerging adulthood theory. It describes the challenges these youth face in transition to adulthood and the role that future expectations play during this period. Further, it reviews studies that examine the correlations between future expectations, resilience and outcomes, and focuses on two possible personal and environmental resources that can contribute to care leavers' positive future expectations: optimism and social support. In addition, it articulates the possible links connecting future expectations with resilience. Finally, it suggests a unified approach that integrates both environmental and personal components for increasing future expectations and concludes with implications for practice and directions for future research.

Keywords: Care leavers, future expectations, emerging adulthood, social support

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Introduction

Young people who leave care are beginning their journey into emerging adulthood—a period in which they must take on more adult roles and responsibilities, explore participating in social networks, and pursue employment opportunities and additional education (McCabe and BArnett, 2000; Seginer, 2008). Due to lack of family backing, their placement history and socio-economic status (Arnett, 2007; Benbenishty and Schiff, 2009), they enter this significant period disadvantaged, and as a result their outcomes in core areas of adult life are poor (Courtney *et al.*, 2011; Stein and Munro, 2008).

The high number of young people who leave care (e.g. 20,000 across the USA and 10,000 across England annually) and the growing awareness of these young adults' vulnerability have led to changes in policies and the development of services and programmes in different life domains to support their transition from state responsibility to independent living (Collins, 2004; Courtney *et al.*, 2011; Stein and Munro, 2008). Consequently, more studies began to focus on the factors that could contribute to their resilience and successful transition to adulthood. These studies suggest that care leavers' resiliency involves various components including youth's personal characteristics and social support networks as well as their residential setting characteristics and own involvement in different contexts such as school and community (Courtney and Dworsky, 2006; Drapeau *et al.*, 2007; Gilligan, 2001, 2008; Martin and Jackson, 2002; Samuels and Pryce, 2008; Sinclair *et al.*, 2005; Stein, 2012; Sulimani-Aidan *et al.*, 2013). However, little has been written about their future expectations as a source of resilience (Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). These expectations are important because they play a part in their goal planning and motivation to accomplish their goals. Also, they may have an impact on their emotional status before leaving care and on their motivation to engage in programmes designed to help prepare them for independent adult life, and affect their outcomes in adulthood. Earlier studies among at-risk youth found that positive future expectations can contribute to a youth's resilience and serve as a buffer against many negative outcomes (Kirk *et al.*, 2011; Raffaelli and Koller, 2005; Tevendale *et al.*, 2009; Valadez *et al.*, 2005), as well as motivate youth to strive to achieve better outcomes in many different areas of adult life (Arbona, 2000; Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Dubow *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, this paper addresses the potential role of future expectations as a source of resilience among young people leaving care.

In exploring the role of future expectations among care leavers, I present the challenges these youth face in transition to emerging adulthood and review studies that examine the correlations between future expectations, resilience and outcomes among at-risk youth. I then focus on

two possible resources that can contribute to positive future expectations: social support as an environmental resource and optimism as a personal resource. Further, I articulate the possible links connecting future expectations with resilience and conclude with suggestions for increasing future expectations through a unified approach that integrates both environmental and personal components and implications for practice and directions for future research.

Transition to adulthood among care leavers

Emerging adulthood refers to the period from the late teens through at least the mid-twenties, characterised as a complex period that includes many changes in most important life domains. During this period, young people have to make significant decisions in their lives on housing, employment, career and marriage (Arnett, 2000).

Arnett suggested five features that distinguish and are more pronounced in emerging adulthood than in other periods. He argued that emerging adulthood is the age of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and possibilities. As a time of identity exploration, emerging adults are more focused on the self and experience increased independence and freedom from time constraints and social control. On the other hand, they experience less parental support, guidance and monitoring (Arnett, 2007).

Emerging adults who have left care are especially vulnerable during the transition to adulthood. Similarly to their peers, they also must deal with many of the tasks and challenges of this period. However, unlike other young adults, they are usually forced to confront these challenges with little or no support (Benbenishty and Schiff, 2009). Further, due to the extension of adulthood, young people are more dependent and the family has a greater role in providing financial, practical and emotional support. But, for many care leavers, the relationships with their biological family at this time may be missing or stressful (Sinclair *et al.*, 2005). In addition, they enter this complex period with many more stressors and prior and present difficulties such as poverty, maltreatment and instability in their out-of-home placement (Arnett, 2007; Courtney *et al.*, 2010).

Leaving the care system and facing adulthood almost alone, they are expected to assume instant adulthood. They often miss out on the critical preparation stage that other young people are privileged with, and the opportunity to explore their freedom, reflect on their life and future steps, and search for their own identity (Geenen and Powers, 2007; Stein, 2012). Therefore, many care leavers, as a consequence of their pre-care and care experiences, as well as their lack of family backing, are unable to fully explore their opportunities as expected at this period

(Arnett, 2007; Stein, 2012). Their limited personal and social assets narrow their possibilities as adults, and likely have a profound impact on the way they perceive their future and fare in many areas of adult life. Consequently, many studies showed that former foster youth have poor outcomes in most areas of adult life, and especially in the areas of education, employment and risky behaviours (Courtney and Dworsky, 2006; Courtney *et al.*, 2011; Stein and Munro, 2008). These outcomes by all means hamper these young adults in their attempts to make a successful adaptation to adulthood.

Future expectations in emerging adulthood

Young adults who leave care are at a crucial and vulnerable period in their lives. Their hopes and fears are fully experienced and their future expectations might have an influence on their motivation and ability to fulfil their hopes and accomplish their goals. Future expectations/orientation is a multidimensional concept, defined in various ways (Gottfredson, 1981; Markus and Nurius, 1986; Oyserman and Markus, 1990; Trommsdorff, 1993). In this paper, I follow the theory of Hopes and Fears (Nurmi, 1991, 2005; Seginer, 2009), which asserts that expectations regarding the future consist of plans, aspirations and fears concerning probable events in various life domains in the near and distant future. Nurmi (1991, 2005) also argued that the Hopes and Fears include the dimensions of motivation, planning and evaluation. These dimensions are very important, especially among youth in care, who, due to their background, might be less motivated towards achieving future goals, and lack the skills to create and follow their plan without guidance, especially after emancipation.

Thinking about and planning for the future are particularly important in emerging adulthood because of the unique characteristics of this transitional period. As mentioned, this complex period is characterised by many changes in different life domains in which young adults must take on more responsibilities (McCabe and BArnett, 2000; Seginer, 2008). These important developmental tasks all include thinking about the future and planning their future steps. Moreover, the literature indicates that these future-oriented cognitions have a predictive role in young adults' achievements in adult life (Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Messersmith and Schulenberg, 2008; Ou and Reynolds, 2008). Therefore, future orientation and expectations have an imminent role in this distinct phase in the young adult's life course.

Thinking about and planning for the future are challenging and stressful for youth who are about to leave care (Benbenishty and Schiff, 2009). Research in this area is scarce, both with regard to care leavers' future expectations and in comparison to their peers in the general

population (Van-Audenhove and Vander-Laenen, 2015). However, an earlier study showed that future expectations of these young adults varied across life domains (Sulimani-Aidan and Benbenishty, 2011). It seems that the area in which youth in care have the highest expectations is with regard to their family and friends, when most of them think or are sure that they will have a good marriage and good friends. However, they have lower future expectations in two of the key developmental assets of a success life: educational achievements and mental health; more than a quarter do not expect to complete their high-school diploma or continue their post-secondary education and nearly a quarter are aware that their emotional difficulties are likely to play a role later in life (Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). These relatively low expectations are often realistic based on follow-up studies which indicated lower educational achievements (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006; Courtney *et al.*, 2010; Pecora *et al.*, 2003) and a high prevalence of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety compared with their peers in the general population (Courtney and Dworsky, 2006; Pecora *et al.*, 2009).

Future expectations and resilience

Beliefs about the future have recently been empirically linked with resilience—a concept that is especially important when discussing the transition to adult life of youth leaving care. Resilience is a broad concept, usually defined as the ability to adjust properly despite evident distress, and succeed despite the many difficulties and challenges experienced (Luthar *et al.*, 2000). Resilience also characterises people who find the inner strength to recover by themselves or with their social support at times of crisis. According to this approach, resilient young adults are those who see adversity as inevitable during the life course, believe in their ability to deal with difficulties and see the potential to flourish after each crisis (Bandura, 1982; Kobasa, 1979). Therefore, resilience is not a personality trait, but an outcome revealed through behaviour and coping patterns (Masten and Powell, 2003).

Gilligan (2008) asserted that resilience is a modifiable process that can operate differently in one or several aspects in young adults' lives under certain conditions or certain periods. Young adults leaving care in their emerging adulthood are faced with many choices and challenges that will have a significant impact on many aspects in their adult life. Therefore, strengthening these young adults' resilience ahead of and during this period is very important.

Earlier studies investigating factors leading to resilience among youth in care suggest several factors: (i) youth's characteristics (e.g. intelligence, sense of humour, self-awareness, empathy); (ii) social support (e.g. parental support, informal and formal support, mentoring

relationship); (iii) residential setting characteristics (e.g. stability in place-ment, co-operation between biological parents and staff); and (iv) youth's involvement in varied contexts (school performance, community volun-teering, recreation) (Courtney and Dworsky, 2006; Drapeau *et al.*, 2007; Gilligan, 2001, 2008; Newman and Blackburn, 2002; Samuels and Pryce, 2008; Sinclair *et al.*, 2005; Stein, 2012; Sulimani-Aidan *et al.*, 2013).

A few studies have examined care leavers' perceptions of their future. However, they have focused mainly on their degree of optimism towards the future rather than the contents of their future expectations (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006; Jackson and Martin, 1998).

Many earlier studies linked future expectations with better outcomes and concluded that positive expectations can serve as a buffer against negative outcomes and also motivate youth to strive to achieve better outcomes as adults (Arbona, 2000; Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Dubow *et al.*, 2001; Tevendale *et al.*, 2009; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). For example, studies among minority, low-income youth under stress found that positive expectations for the future were related to better social ad-justment, increased self-esteem and well-being, as well as better adjust-ment in school and higher social support (Dubow *et al.*, 2001; Werner and Smith, 1992; Wyman *et al.*, 1993). Other researchers also found that youth with higher educational and occupational expectations had better educational and occupational attainments (Arbona, 2000; Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Beal and Crockett, 2010; Messersmith and Schulenberg, 2008; Ou and Reynolds, 2008).

Positive future expectations were also found to be associated with fewer risk behaviours. Studies found correlations between having fewer negative expectations about the future and less frequent involvement with the law (Nurmi, 1991; Raffaelli and Koller, 2005), and a decreased likelihood of substance abuse and engagement in risky sexual behaviours (Bryan *et al.*, 2004; Tevendale *et al.*, 2009; Sipsma *et al.*, 2012). Youth with higher positive future expectations also showed lower levels of problem behaviours and negative peer influence (Dubow *et al.*, 2001). This aspect seems highly important to investigate among care leavers concerning their higher rate of risk behaviours compared with their peers in the general population (Courtney and Hughes-Huering, 2005).

Moreover, positive beliefs about the future were found to be linked to long goal setting (Catalano *et al.*, 2004), which is especially important for young people who leave care, because of the limited time they have to explore their future possibilities during emerging adulthood.

Considering the fact that future expectations were found to contribute to many positive outcomes, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to the meaning of future expectations as a source of resilience among young people in care. In an earlier study that examined whether higher future expectations among youth in care were associated with better outcomes in their emerging adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan, 2015), it

was found that higher future expectations were positively correlated with outcomes after controlling for both demographic and placement history characteristics. Youth that had higher positive future expectations were more satisfied with their accommodations, reported better economic status and had higher educational achievements after leaving care. Although this was a one-year follow-up study, these findings show the important role of future expectations in the core areas that may have a profound influence on their later lives. The role of future expectations as part of the young adults' resilience was evident, serving both as a protective component (safe accommodation as opposed to homelessness) and as a motivational component to strive to accomplish goals in the future (higher education attainments). Nevertheless, future studies could contribute more by examining the specific role that future expectations play through including more control variables relevant to each of the life domains and revealing the mechanism by which they act (e.g. is their effect direct or mediated?).

Factors contributing to higher positive future expectations

In light of the significant role that future expectations play in future attainment, it seems especially important to learn what the resources are that contribute to higher positive future expectations. The present paper focuses on two such resources: social support as an environmental resource and optimism as a personal resource.

Social support

Social support includes the people with whom an individual has personal, social and family relationships. These relationships can be of four different types, including: instrumental, informative, social and emotional support (Cohen and Wills, 1985).

Youth in care frequently mention three main social support figures: family member (biological parent, siblings), care system staff (foster patents, caseworkers) and peers (Courtney *et al.*, 2014). Each of these members provides a different type of support during transition to adulthood. For example, staff can provide young adults with informative support in the form of advice and guidance to help them cope with future challenges. Instrumental support takes the form of material aid and instrumental needs, and emotional support refers to the feeling that one is significant, appreciated and loved. It seems that youth in care most often report their peers and siblings as a source of emotional support (Courtney *et al.*, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan *et al.*, 2013).

The contribution of social support to the instrumental and emotional adjustment of youth in care has long been recognised as important during transition to adulthood in resilience studies. Its protective role has been manifested in better outcomes such as educational achievements, social adjustment (Cashmore and Paxman, 1996), better financial status and stability in accommodation (Sulimani-Aidan *et al.*, 2013), as well as higher well-being after leaving care (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006; Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007). However, what is its contribution to their future outlook? Do young adults with higher social support also have more positive future expectations? One can assume that social support networks that play an important part in the lives of young people while in care and after would impact their expectations for the future. However, empirically, very little is known about the role of social support in these young adults' future expectations. The only study that examined these variables' correlations found that youth who reported higher support from their mothers and peers had higher positive future expectations. Nevertheless, these correlations were no longer significant when gender and personal variables were entered into the regression model (Sulimani-Aidan and Benbenishty, 2011). Therefore, there is a need for further examination as to the role of both personal and environmental variables in future expectations.

Nurmi (1991) claimed that parents influence their children's future expectations by setting normative standards, influencing interests, values and goals, and by serving as models for coping with multiple developmental tasks. Considering the fact that very little is known about the role of family in the care leavers' future expectations, it would be interesting to learn how these claims are manifested among those families whose personal and social resources are limited, or among those whose frequency and quality of relationships and contact with their parents are poor (Wade, 2008).

Youth in care who live away from their families are mainly supported by residential setting staff whose perceptions and expectations of them could also play an important role in their future outlook in addition to their parents. It could be that, similarly to the 'Pygmalion effect', both parents' and staff's expectations of youth could alter youth's perception of their future for the best. The Pygmalion effect refers to 'the effects of interpersonal expectancies, that is, the finding that what one person expects of another can come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy' (Rosenthal, 2010). Although the original work referred to the positive effect of teachers' expectations on their students' achievements, this concept could be of high relevance to youth in care. Earlier studies showed that staff have low expectations for youth in care with regard to further education and therefore youth do not examine their possibilities in this aspect (Davis, 2006; Jackson and Cameron, 2011; Martin and Jackson, 2002; Merdinger *et al.*, 2005). Hence, increasing youth's future expectations must also include an

examination of staff's expectations of them and educating staff as to the link between their expectations and youth's achievements as a result of their own self-fulfilling prophecy.

Optimism

Optimism is defined as generalised positive outcome expectations (Scheier and Carver, 2001). Thus, a young adult with higher optimism will show more positive feeling and expectations while facing a difficult situation and will tend to believe in his ability to handle and to cope successfully instead of avoiding the situation. As such, optimism can be part of the young adult's personal components that might contribute to resilience as well as positive expectations towards the future. As discussed earlier, resilience re- fers to resistance to environmental risk experiences, or the overcoming of stress or adversity. Since resilience is an interactive concept that reflects in- dividual variations in response to comparable experiences, attention should be paid to individual differences rather than to resilience as a general qual- ity. In this regard, optimism was found in varied studies of at-risk youth as one of the personality factors linked to the ability to overcome adversity and lead to positive outcomes and better adjustment in a range of life do- mains (Ben-Zur, 2003; Song, 2003). Earlier studies found that higher opti- mism was related to positive expectations of future career and family (McWhirter and McWhirter, 2008), better coping with academic demands, lower depression rates and higher well-being (Chang, 2001).

   Youth in care usually have optimistic outlooks on their life and it was found that higher optimism is linked with higher positive expectations for the future (Courtney *et al.*, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan and Benbenishty, 2011). Moreover, higher optimism can serve as a buffer against the many challenges these young adults are about to face with the transition to adulthood. For example, Cashmore and Paxman (2006) found that youth in care with higher optimism about the future showed better re- sults several years after leaving foster-care.

Linking future expectations with resilience and outcomes

Although a handful of studies have established the connection between future expectations and better outcomes, the link between these expecta- tions and resilience is far less understood. Understanding the mechanism that accounts for future expectancy effects could shed light on this sig- nificant process and help with the design of programmes that aim to in- crease youth's resilience through future-oriented interventions.

   One way to understand this link could be through youth's interactions with their care-givers. Just like the expectancies teachers form about

their students impact on students' future achievement (Harris and Rosenthal, 1985; Rosenthal, 2010), adult figures who interact daily with youth in care could alter their future perceptions and as a result their outcomes in and after care. What might be the mechanisms that account for their care-givers' expectancy effects? Brophy and Good (1970) proposed a possible link between teachers' expectancies and student outcomes in a model asserting that the teachers' differential expectancies for their students begin to lead to different treatment such as providing more attention, offering more challenging learning materials and being more responsive. These actions lead students to work harder and develop higher motivation and interest in schoolwork, and, in the long run, the behaviour of these more engaged students will result in improved academic achievement. This theory could also be relevant to youth in care when trying to link future expectations with resilience. Therefore, according to this model, youth's care-givers who believe in their abilities can increase the youth's future expectations by challenging them to aspire higher and at the same time providing persistent support and belief in them. These youth in turn will recognise these high expectancies and gradually their motivation and effort to succeed will increase as well. The change in motivation and behaviour would lead to positive improvements in the youth's performance in care and those changes could also affect their self-concept and the way they perceive their future as adults. Therefore, in the long run, these interactions will affect both youth's resilience and outcomes. According to this model, perception of the future and actual behaviour both in the present and towards setting goals for the future are interdependent.

Attachment literature could also provide a potential framework for understanding the link between youth's future expectations and resilience. According to this literature, parents who are supportive provide their children with a secure base from which to explore their environment and serve as a model for how to handle new situations and stresses (Bowlby, 1988). At the same time, they can be approached for tangible support and for socio-emotional support when needed (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2001). Therefore, by affirming the youth's worth and choices, providing useful information and affirming their choices, they are increasing the positive expectation for the future and fostering their resilience. Since many youth who are placed in care lack the 'secure base' from their birth parents, their communication with their care-givers in residential care is crucial for altering their perceptions of their future and their outcomes in adulthood.

Finally, youth's optimism could also shed light on the way positive thinking about the future relates to resilience. Research on positive psychology concludes that the physical and psychological benefits of optimism likely derive from the relation between optimism and coping. According to this theory, people with an optimistic view of the future

tent to employ more active, problem-focused coping strategies in the face of threat. Also, when active coping appears impossible, optimists are more likely to adopt strategies like acceptance and positive reframing of the situation (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Wrosch and Scheier, 2003). Chang (2002), for example, found that optimism moderated the relation between appraised stress and psychological symptoms so that, under high stress conditions, participants high in optimism showed far fewer symptoms than did those low in optimism. These perceptions and strategies could also reflect the cognitive process related to care leavers' positive expectations, resilience and better adjustment.

Integrated approach to increase future expectations

Young adults leaving care are making an enormously significant transition into a new and exciting phase in their lives: emerging adulthood. Due to the new challenges emerging adulthood presents, their future expectations might go through important changes at this time too. Taking advantage of this precious time window to help these young adults aspire higher and expect more for their futures could play an important role in strengthening their resilience and outcomes as adults.

Nurmi (2005) suggested that, as youth grow, their expectations become more realistic and are based on several components: (i) their interests; (ii) perceived abilities; (iii) individual characteristics; and (iv) opportunities available to them. Based on this view, an integrated intervention approach that seeks to increase care leavers' future expectations should include these four levels and aspire to learn more about the factors in each of these components. For example, as reported earlier, optimistic outlook can be considered one of the individual characteristics leading to higher future expectations that we should reinforce (Sulimani-Aidan and Benbenishty, 2011).

Alongside the individual characteristics that focus on the young adults' inner resources, attention should also be paid to the external resources that are available to them. With this regard, much can be done to expand the possibilities for youth who left care and raise their awareness of them. This aspect could also strengthen their opportunities for the future and perhaps their expectations as a result. Earlier studies that evaluated post-care services to support former foster youth found that they are linked with better outcomes (Collins, 2004; Lindsey and Ahmed, 1999). Expanding the possibilities of these young adults and giving them tools to reach their aspirations by setting realistic goals can encourage them to aspire higher and expect more of themselves and their life.

When considering an ecological approach to foster future expectations among youth and young adults, much attention should also be paid to the role of their social networks, especially to the role of the family that

has been recognised as a vital source of resilience for children and youth (Walsh, 2007). This component is missing from Nurmi's perspective above. However, it is extremely important to integrate the different social networks that care leavers have in interventions that focus on improving their prospects. Earlier studies found that family support is significantly important for these young adults' status after leaving care (Collins *et al.*, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the role of family support should also be considered from the aspect of future expectations.

In summary, an integrative approach to elevating care leavers' future expectations should include both personal and environmental aspects and aspire to strengthen their abilities and skills, as well as making them more aware of the opportunities and possibilities available to them in all domains of their lives.

Implications for practice

Given the importance of future expectations for care leavers, the most important practical implications are that residential care facilities need to add to their interventions components that could strengthen youth's future outlook while in care, ahead of emancipation and after their departure. With regard to youth's internal resources, caseworkers should aspire to widen and strengthen youth's interests and their perspective on their abilities to achieve their goals. Most often, youth in residential care come from families and environments that could not offer them many possibilities to learn about their strengths, abilities or personal interests. Therefore, expanding these aspects is an important component in changing the way they see themselves in the future and increasing their expectations for themselves.

Fostering youth's resilience by increasing their future expectations can also be done through using interventions that teach cognitive–behavioural and social problem-solving skills (such as the PRP (Penn Resiliency Program)). This type of intervention teaches youth to think flexibly about the challenges and problems they are confronted with, link between their beliefs and behaviours, and challenge negative thinking by evaluating the accuracy of beliefs and generating alternative interpretations (Gillham *et al.*, 2002).

Youth's external resources include their social support networks and opportunities that are available to them after emancipation. These two are connected to each other, since a better social network could increase youth's possibilities in adulthood in core areas such as education and employment (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan, 2015). Informal and formal support can help materially and in terms of emotional resilience, which has a significant role in planning the future (Wade, 2008) and achieving

better outcomes in adulthood (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006; Daining and DePanfilis, 2007). Therefore, strengthening youth's existing social support and building new bridges between them and resources in the community could play a significant role in increasing their future outlook.

Finally, designing programmes that increase youth's possibilities in different areas after leaving care such as financial independence and higher education could broaden their possibilities and as a result increase their expectations for the future in different areas.

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