

Peer-Centered Practice: A Theoretical Framework for Intervention with Young People in and from Care

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This paper puts forward a conceptual framework for engaging peers as central to transitional services for care-leavers. The situation of youth exiting care is examined and an evidence-informed approach to supporting care-leavers is presented. Exploring the social networks of youth leaving care provides a mechanism for both supporting the maintenance of ties and fostering the development of weak tie connections that facilitate opportunities for social mobility.

As many as 6,000 youth in Canada age out of government care (foster homes, group homes, and residential treatment) every year to live on their own (from age 16 to 21) (Flynn, 2003). In most, but not all, provinces, meager financial support is available to these youth (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). Compared to children in care, at the same time, across North America and in other industrialized countries, these youth have delayed leaving home, as many young people remain with their families well into their twenties (Arnett, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2012). Young people growing up in care have poorer adult outcomes on a wide range of measures when compared with their community peers, a finding that is observed worldwide and which may in part be a function of their premature move out on their own (Courtney, Piliavan, Grogan-Kayor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Perez, & Keller, 2007); “studies have identified care leavers as experiencing a range of adverse adult outcomes including: early parenthood, unemployment and reliance on social assistance, homelessness, victimization and incarcerations” (Snow, 2009, p. 307). Despite a huge investment in Canada in programs to prepare youth for transitioning from care, documented outcomes for these young people are poor (Reid & Dudding, 2007). Numerous studies have identified the need for more extensive and meaningful preparation for independence, and for the provision of more significant supports post-care (Mann-Feder, 2007; Stein, 2006).

Recurring experiences of marginalization and social isolation are central to the adjustment problems faced by youth exiting from care. This population is described as uniquely disadvantaged, and these young people face the confounding societal stigmas of age, early emancipation, and an in-care identity (Snow, 2008). Once out on their own, they may have few social contacts, and many live lives marked by loneliness, despair, and poverty (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

While research documenting the poor outcomes for youth from care has multiplied over the last twenty years, there has been a conspicuous scarcity of theoretical exploration (Stein, 2006). Helping professionals are faced with the challenging task of supporting youth through the difficult transition to adulthood independent of the care

system. Currently, while it is not often made explicit, the theoretical basis for practice is often stage developmental theories that privilege independence and autonomy as intended adult outcomes. Practice has tended to focus efforts on permanence, early attachment, and providing appropriate functional caretaking. The age-based termination for care challenges workers' ability to support the developmental transitions of emerging adulthood. This paper problematizes the status quo and puts forth a conceptual framework for engaging peers as being central to child welfare practices for youth leaving care as they navigate their transition to adult life.

Cultivating Peer Relationships as a Basis for Practice with Youth Leaving Care

Why Peers?

Results of recent research suggest that moving out to live on one's own is a complex process for all young people—a process that is non-linear and often fraught with ambivalence (Mann-Feder, 2011). Indications are that many young adults who live independently worry about loneliness and search for social support. Parents generally continue to provide functional and expressive supports (attachment, solidarity, nurturance, guidance) for youth who move out of the family home. However, young people on their own look to their peer relationships to provide the learning, the emotional support, and the sense of security they need to successfully navigate the transition to living on their own (Mann-Feder, 2011). This is consistent with research on help-seeking, which indicates that young people generally prefer to find support from peers than from adults (Geldard, 2009).

While most outcome research on youth leaving care has focused on their poor adjustment to adulthood, there has also been some research that has identified resilient graduates of the child welfare system (Hine, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). These successful individuals were those who left care to go on to work or attend school and were able to maintain a permanent address. One significant difference in the lives of these care-leavers is that they could identify

a social support system and at least one person with whom they had a close relationship (Silva-Wayne, 1995). The fact that social support predicts adjustment is a well-established finding in the literature of human development. Having a support network is seen as particularly important in mediating the effects of stress, and is consistently cited as being characteristic of resilient individuals who are able to thrive despite exposure to adversity (Masten, Coatsworth & Douglas, 1998).

Attachment and Child Welfare Practice

Despite a practice orientation that focuses on the attachment needs of children and youth, the fiscal and functional realities of a youth aging out challenges the system's commitment to supporting healthy attachments. The fact of the matter is that workers must support the gradual weaning of youth from supportive relationships as they leave care. Professional caregivers are expected to move forward to new relationships, and funding does not provide for the maintenance of old ties. Many—if not most—child-serving agencies have, through fundraising and other means, made efforts at remaining connected and to provide supports to their alumni. Anecdotally, workers also report maintaining some ties, and young people look for ways to remain connected. Nonetheless, youth transitioning from care face a termination date, and workers need to prepare them for this. Despite the fact that the termination of funding challenges care-leavers' basic survival, a means of supporting connection and interconnection is available to workers: engaging the youth in peer-centered practice. Smith (2011), in her recent call for a relationship-based approach with youth leaving foster care, has underlined the need to shift our focus from independent living to interdependent living. While acknowledging the need for creating a sense of community among youth in care, her emphasis is on cultivating long term connections with adults. She does state, however, that “youth need and benefit from relationships and sharing of experiences with other youth who have been in foster care” (p. 228). Connection to a

strong peer network can compensate for the lack of adult attachment figures for youth leaving care, and can provide a sense of continuity and connection to personal history.

Role of Peer Relationships in Development

The literature on adolescence has long acknowledged the critical role of peers in development (Schneider, 2000; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). There are important skills to be mastered through peer relationships that cannot be learned elsewhere. The finding that peer involvement contributes to the development of empathy, impulse control, and social skills has been established by decades of social science research (Smetana, 2011). Brown and Larson (2009) refer to extensive scholarly work on peer relations, which confirms the importance of social acceptance by peers as an indicator of lifelong adjustment. Social competence with peers has also been identified repeatedly as a predictor of life success (Benard, 1990; Schneider, 2000).

What Do We Know about the Peer Relationships of Youth in Care?

There is a dearth of research on peer relationships of those youth who grow up in the care of the state. This, despite the fact that resilience scholars have asserted that peer acceptance and support, can moderate for the effects of family adversity (Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Lap, 2002). Some young people in care grow up in group settings, in which one of the most salient and obvious features is the presence of other youth. Young people who share many of the same challenges represent a potential source of attachment and social support for young people in care. Access to peer involvement has been identified as one of the positive elements of group living (Emond, 2002). Attending to peer relationships as a strategy is consistent with Positive Youth Development interventions, where the focus of youth programs is on promoting positive adaptation rather than treating pathology (Larson, 2000).

The few studies that have considered friendships among youth in care suggest that peer-centered practice is a fruitful area for exploration with youth in and from care. ONLAC (Ontario Looking After Children: Good Parenting, Good Outcomes), adapted from the UK Looking After Children Model (Parker, Ward, Jackson, Aldgate & Wedge, 1991; Ward, 1995), tracks the progress of children in 23 of Ontario children's-aid societies using a Canadian adaptation of the Assessment and Action Record (AAR-C2) (Flynn, Ghazal, & Legault, 2004). The dimension of peers matched to the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth measure is gathered and should yield some insights into the trajectory of peer relations over the course of a child's placement in state care. In a subsample of the ONLAC study, Flynn, Robitaille, and Ghazal (2006) found that self-rated perceptions of the quality of friendships among youth in care was weakly predictive of placement satisfaction. An Australian study of children in substitute care used multiple methods, incorporated items from the Assessment and Actions Records of Looking After Children protocol, and explored friendship networks. A study with a subsample of 59 children aged two to 18 placed in long-term foster care found that, according to reports by caregivers, 60% of children made friends easily, while 29% were viewed as having difficulties. Fernandez (2006) reported that 61% of girls and 42% of boys had a few or many friends. Interviews were conducted with children over the age of eight years old and revealed that they had been able to maintain friendships. It was also observed that the importance of friendships dominated the interviews. While there is an emerging focus on the role of friendships for young people in care, there remains a need to understand the role of peers in relation to transitional from care and adult outcomes.

Social Capital, Social Networks, and Peer Involvement

Social Capital

The concept of social capital can be traced to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) in France and James Coleman (1988) in the United

States. Capital can take many forms, including structural capital (hierarchy), human capital (labor/agency/attributes), cultural capital (knowledge of language and norms/belonging), and social capital (informational/functional and expressive supports) (Lin, 2001). Social capital can be explored at the societal or group level, examining, for example, how the assets of the collective affects members' life chances. At the relational level, social capital is explored by examining how individuals make investments in social relations and make use of the resources embedded in those social networks (Lin, 2001). Social networks are a form of social capital that generate a range of informational, functional, and expressive supports (Wellman & Potter, 1999).

Social Networks as a Transitional Support

Social networks can be understood on the relational level as an individual's personal community (Wellman & Gulia, 1999) Social network theory has much to offer in terms of understanding the potential contributions of peer-centered practice in child welfare (Blakeslee, 2012; Cotterell, 2007). Social networks act as a medium for building social capital, facilitating the flow of information, and providing resources with a degree of significance and importance and the potential of introducing functional and concrete supports. In addition, they facilitate expressive capital such as emotional supports, a sense of belonging and closeness, and reciprocal relations (Cotterell, 2007).

Social networks can be considered from the standpoint of the individual's position in relation to others or as a complete network. For example, one can map the social network of an individual or of a specific sample group such as care-leavers. The composition, density, nature, and cohesion of the network can all be examined. Individuals can be identified by location and role within a network. Linkages to other networks can be mapped and the bridging roles of individuals across networks can be identified. By understanding the unique map of the individual, practitioners are able to target efforts at supporting existing ties and creating opportunities for the development of new ties. Ronald Burt (2000) has explored the functions of structural holes in the creation of social capital, suggesting

that targeted efforts at bridging ties can help individuals overcome inequity by opening up networks from different socioeconomic and social capital groups.

Networks as Social Capital for Youth in and From Care

Peer networks are a relatively unexplored resource for young people transitioning from care (Blakeslee, 2011). However, youth in care face unique challenges in relation to the establishment of social networks, perhaps due both to their pre-care history and their in-care experiences. In addition to suffering profound and repeated losses due to the severing of parental custody and the loss of kin relations and community networks, young people in care face significant residential instability and repeated relationship ruptures (Havlicek, 2011). These youth are thus out of sync developmentally with their community peers. They face different life challenges and, as a result, find few community supports relevant to their needs (McMahon & Curtin, 2012).

While Perry (2006) found that instability within foster care disrupts social networks, which in turn leads to distress, she did observe in her sample that young people in foster care have stronger network contact with foster parents and peers than with their biological family. She also found that youth in care have on average twice as much direct contact with peers outside of school as with their biological family. However, she also observed that significantly fewer foster care youth reported feeling cared about by their peers when compared with a community sample. Overall, Perry's work demonstrates that stable social networks predict more positive psychological outcomes. Her findings also suggest that for individual youth in care, the presence of more than one of the three networks explored (foster parents, biological family, peers) was necessary to observe a preventative effect against psychological distress.

Peer mentoring programs have been implemented in the broader youth serving sector. Largely these programs match older youth who are deemed to be successful with younger youth who are aspiring to achieve academic, employment or other opportunities. Findings from the education sector stress the reciprocal benefits to mentees and

mentors that result from a peer mentoring model at both the high school and university level (Karcher, 2005). Spencer (2007) indicates that the experience of mutual benefit provided through peer mentoring can actually supplement or expand on supports from young people receive from adults.

There have been some attempts to assist youth from care in developing meaningful peer networks as they transition to independence, although these are only beginning to be documented. One state university in the U.S. has instituted residential camps for youth from care entering college as a means of establishing a peer network (Kirk & Day, 2011). Youth in Care Canada (also known as the National Youth in Care Network) has a long history of youth-led engagement (Andrews & Manser, 2001). The Voyager Project at Ryerson University is a program that supports both access to and retention during post-secondary education (Snow, 2012). Additionally, provincial and agency-based youth-in-care networks exist throughout Canada, and anecdotal evidence strongly indicates that alumni of care benefit greatly through connection with others who have grown up in substitute care.

Challenges to Peer-Centered Practice

The Contagion Fear

Often, when exploring options of peer-centered interventions for at-risk young people, the issue of contagion arises. The basic fear is that young people will be exposed to and will imitate risk behaviors (drug and alcohol use, self harm, criminal behavior). However, the evidence regarding the inevitability of contagion through peer networks is quite mixed.

Some studies cite that engagement in risk behavior by a young person is strongly associated with having peers who engage in similar behavior (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Haynie and Osgood (2005) analyzed data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and found only a modest association of peer influence and a significant relationship to unstructured socializing. The authors acknowledge that these influences do not exhibit

as strong an association as do structural predictors of delinquency such as age, race, and socioeconomic status.

Studies of peer influence on homeless youth have focused on the development of risky health behaviors (Rice, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Mallett, & Rosenthal, 2005). Rice, Milburn, and Rotheram-Borus (2007) explore the role of pro-social peers in homeless youth's social networks. In a sample of 183 homeless adolescents, they determined that most youth were embedded in social networks with peers engaged in pro-social behaviors such as going to school, working and getting along with their family. Few in the sample were embedded in problematic networks, with fewer than 15% reporting friends in jail or gangs. They found that having a larger number of peers engaged in pro-social behaviors reduced the likelihood of HIV risk behaviors and conversely that having problematic peer behaviors increased the likelihood of reporting HIV risk behaviors at the two-year follow-up. Since structural predictors such as age, race and economic factors are predictors of delinquency and of involvement in child protective services, young people leaving care may be more likely to be affected by contagion in absence of interventions that support healthy peer engagement. Therefore, these findings point to the need to support pro-social peer relations for at-risk youth, and to the need for active adult involvement in supporting pro-social engagement.

The Risk of the "Closed Group"

Social network theory also prompts us to be cautious of the creation of "closed groups" (Goffman, 1961; Granovetter, 1983). Ideally, foster children are fully embedded in enduring relationships with their substitute caregivers. However, in situations of foster care breakdown, group home placement or other network disruption practitioners need to support affiliate groups to develop individual skills, foster a sense of belonging and promote interdependent growth. At the same time, however, it is important to guard against groups that have few ties to other networks. While some degree of closure advantages groups by consolidating social capital, those groups that lack ties to other networks limit the flow of information and risk atrophy (Burt,

2001). Essentially, the task is then to promote group cohesion while not limiting outside network connections.

The role of affiliate groups is to support youth in care in developing the capacity to cross networks and build interpersonal skills. By facilitating network ties that foster a sense of belonging, build self confidence, and facilitate expressive supports, groups for care-leavers provide a “home base” for young people as they transition from care (Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009). Creating opportunities that foster social mobility and embed young people within community-based networks should be the primary purpose of the affiliate group. This would include connecting young people with community programs and providing campus and vocational exposure activities to support care-leavers in being able to seize opportunities that enable social, emotional, and vocational growth.

Network theory directs us to encourage network development and support opportunities for growth by allowing for exposure to a range of networks that serve as bridging opportunities that promote skills development. Closed group and elite group formations have a role in terms of fostering a sense of belonging. At the same time, there always needs to be an infusion of resources from other social networks with the primary network functioning as a bridging or connector source. Open and diverse groups should be created to bring together different cultures for the purpose of opening up new networks and opportunities to the young people in care.

Institutionalized Groups and Autonomous Youth Networks

Peer-based programs require staffing and the allocation of funds and therefore most are agency affiliated. Agency accountability and demands for outcomes measures impact on the autonomy of the group and require staffing and other resources to ensure compliance. A central feature of advocacy programs that promote peer networks is that they allow young people a degree of self-determination and autonomy which at the same time challenges the traditional power dynamics of adult-youth interactions in children’s services (Linds, Goulet, & Sammuels, 2010). Youth in Care Canada has maintained

independence; however, without base funding they have struggled to maintain focus while juggling the demands of project-based funding (Andrews & Manser, 2001). As with any participatory engagement process, the degree of independence of the group becomes a central tension and both institutionalized and independent advocacy is necessary to fully realize the participatory rights of young people in care (Shier, 2001).

Next Steps

Developing Networking Bridging Skills and Fostering Opportunities

Many youth leaving care lack the familial supports most of their community peers enjoy, and thus lack adults in their lives to help secure opportunities and assist them in navigating the transitions into young adulthood. Exploring young people's personal social networks and facilitating bridging opportunities through network intervention has promise for improving outcomes. Tracy and Whittaker (1990) developed a social network mapping tool that is useful in understanding an individual's personal communities, or what Lin calls their own "small world" (2001). Additionally, the peer network is a site of intervention that has the potential to support pro-social interactions and foster interpersonal skills development (McMahon & Curtin, 2012). Cotterell (2007) argues that network knowledge is particularly useful to practitioners working with at-risk youth in community settings.

Burt (2001) describes structural holes as the "buffers" between groups, and Granovetter (1973) describes "bridges" as individuals who cross between separate networks. The "buffers" serve to isolate information and resources (social capital) within individual networks. Bridges are advantaged by having access to the social capital of the other network both by increasing their own individual social capital and by bringing information and network ties as capital back to their own network. Burt (1992) noted the brokerage role individuals play between disconnected actors. Child and youth care practitioners have this brokerage role through creating opportunities for young people

to have exposure to diverse networks. Applying individual network analysis to case work and providing purposeful interventions aimed at network bridging is a theoretically informed practice for overcoming the social inequities faced by youth aging out of care.

Creating and Supporting Peer Relationships

Interdependent peer support networks present a milieu in which to foster a sense of belonging, and where young people can master interpersonal skills and gain the confidence necessary to launch into new networks. Investment in agency supported youth transitioning from care groups provide an environment in which to help young people develop the interpersonal skills necessary for peer relationships. The encouragement of young people to join faith and cultural groups is a natural site in which to develop social capital and culturally consistent peer relations. By engaging young people in joining groups such as interest clubs, the arts, or sports, which provide supervised and positive venues in which to expand their social networks, young people transitioning from care are assisted in developing their pro-social peer network connections.

By supporting young people in their peer networks, workers can foster a sense of belonging, and provide a milieu in which to master the interpersonal skills that enable them to successfully interact across a variety of networks.

Directions for Future Research

There is a clear need for more research into the role of friendships and peer networks to support better young adult outcomes. The role of staff in creating a climate where friendships can develop and in fostering and supporting social skills is fundamental to increasing the social capital of young people transitioning from placement. Programs for cohorts of youth leaving care, in which they can take leadership and work together towards future transitions, can lay foundations for the development of social networks well before discharge. There is a growing call to reconsider the focus of transitional

services on independence and to reorient them toward interdependence and interrelatedness (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Snow, 2012). Forming affiliate groups that provide linkages to resources allows for a source of intervention and support for young people transitioning from care. Encouraging peer relationships and strengthening interconnection can combat the sense of alienation and isolation among care leavers. Promoting networking skill development and creating opportunities to cross social networks may be a fruitful means of supporting the interdependence and interconnectedness of young people transitioning from care.

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