



The subjective well-being of young people aging out of care



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the subjective well-being (SWB) of young people aging out of public care in Israel, identifying the individual, social support and institutional characteristics of young people on the verge of leaving care that predict their SWB one year later. The results were obtained from two waves of a longitudinal study with young people who aged out from residential settings in Israel. Shortly before they left care 272 young people completed a self-administered questionnaire and 234 of them were interviewed a year later. Overall, their SWB was fairly positive. Specifically, positive relationship with the mother contributes to a better SWB, and learning difficulties reduced SWB. Gender and country of origin also showed a significant effect. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening the young people's relationships with their biological parents while in care and emphasize the need to provide additional support for those with learning difficulties. The findings also help identify sub-groups of young people in care with greater need for support both while in care and afterwards.

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1. Introduction

The transition from childhood to adulthood is one of the more challenging life tasks in modern society (Arnett, 2000). This life task is even more difficult for young people growing up in foster families or in residential care. When the responsibility of the state ends due to age restrictions, many young people aging out of care experience abrupt move from a protective and supportive environment to independent living (Stein, 2005). They frequently lack the support received by most young people growing up in industrialized Western countries who continue to depend economically and emotionally on their parents (Arnett, 2000; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Instead, many young people who age out of care are compelled to face this complex life task on their own (Courtney et al., 2011; Wade, 2008). Indeed, international research has presented a gloomy outlook in the major life domains for these young people. Their educational achievements are low and they are prone to becoming homeless, unemployed, showing anti-social behaviors, and lacking money (c.f. Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Reilly, 2003).

There is a growing recognition that measures of nonmaterial subjective well-being (SWB) are also needed to fully assess the condition of a population or of complex social realities (Casas, 2011). Measuring SWB is particularly important when dealing with vulnerable populations like children in care, as these measurements can provide accurate information on the children's feelings and satisfaction (Altshuler & Gleeson,

1999). Although the SWB of young people aging out of care may be diminished by the challenges of leaving care and the transition to adulthood, this outcome has been a rather neglected area of policy, practice and research (Dixon, 2008) and hardly any research has been carried out on factors possibly contributing to better SWB. Furthermore, there are very few longitudinal studies identifying factors operating on young people on the verge of leaving care that predict their outcomes afterwards (Harder, Kongeter, Zeller, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2011). The current study attempts to narrow this information gap. Individual, social support and institutional characteristics of young Israelis on the verge of leaving care and their SWB one year afterwards were examined, aiming to identify factors during care that predict SWB outcomes.

1.1. The SWB of young people who age out of care

The attempt to better understand quality of life and informed policy decisions benefits from using objective indicators (e.g. income) along with nonmaterial subjective measurements (Casas, 2011; Cummins, 2000). The importance of subjective indicators of well-being stems from the understanding that objective life conditions do not necessarily match the person's appraisal of these conditions, as individuals react differently to the same circumstances and also differ in what they enjoy and find as important (Cummins, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

SWB is defined as a person's cognitive and affective evaluation of his/her life as a whole (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2011). SWB comprises two main components, affect and life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999). The affective component is based on two dimensions of emotional experience: positive affect (e.g., happiness and joy) and

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negative affect (e.g., sadness and distress) (Ben-Zur, 2003). The life satisfaction component refers to satisfaction with specific life domains or to general satisfaction with life (Diener, 2000). Research on SWB is based on the understanding that the absence of negative aspects in a person's life does not necessarily indicate that s/he is doing well (Park, 2004). Furthermore, research on SWB in terms of life satisfaction and positive affect shifts attention away from psychopathology and risks and emphasizes the positive aspects of human development (Casas, 2011).

Adults' evaluation of their life satisfaction and positive affect has long been in use for assessing individuals and making cross-national comparisons (Diener et al., 2011) and was recently recognized as an essential dimension for understanding children's and adolescents' well-being (U.N.I.C.E.F. Office of Research, 2013). Furthermore, studies on adolescents and youth, although lesser in scope, found that life satisfaction and positive affect are important indicators of a healthy development (Park, 2004). These components are also related to a broad range of other important outcomes, such as low risk-taking behavior (for review see Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009) and adaptive functioning (for review see Huebner, 2004). However, research concerning young people who age out of care focus mostly on objective indicators such as income, living conditions and employment (Dixon, 2008) with almost no research on their SWB.

The few studies that have examined SWB among young people who age out of care report mixed results. Some studies show that SWB decreased over time while others found the reverse. For example, in the large-scale longitudinal Midwest Study of young people who age out of care in the United States, 75.0% of the young people at the age of 21 reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their lives as a whole (Courtney et al., 2007). This rate decreased to 62.8% at the age of 26 (Courtney et al., 2011). Findings from a study on 47 young people who aged out of care in Australia showed somewhat different findings as their overall happiness declined a year after leaving care in comparison to their happiness a few months before discharge (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996) but slightly increased four to five years later (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007).

1.2. Factors associated with the SWB of young people who age out of care

The most consistent finding in the few investigations of factors contributing to the SWB of young people who age out of care is that a strong social network, before or after leaving, is positively linked to SWB (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Dixon, 2008; Reilly, 2003). Being in trouble while in care (e.g., due to offences or truancy) is related to poor SWB a year after aging out of care (Dixon, 2008). In addition, self-esteem has long been recognized as an important contributor to SWB in the general population (e.g. Diener & Diener, 1995). Consequently, its effect on the SWB of young people aging out of care was also explored.

1.3. The Israeli context

Out-of-home placement in Israel differs somewhat from that in other Western countries. Due to historical and social processes, the vast majority of placements are to residential settings and not to foster families (Zeira, 2004). There are two systems of out-of-home placements in Israel: welfare settings supervised by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services and educational settings overseen by the Ministry of Education. Young people are placed in welfare settings based on professional discretion and/or court decisions due to a range of family and child problems. Of the 9000 children removed annually from home by the welfare system about 80% are placed in residential settings and only about 20% are placed with foster families (National Council for the Child, 2011). According to the intensity of care needed, residential settings comprise remedial, rehabilitation or post-hospitalization institutional settings (Attar-Schwartz, 2009). In this study only young people from remedial residential settings were included.

The other type of placement, overseen by the Ministry of Education, is voluntary. This system places children to residential settings only and host about 19,000 children annually (National Council for the Child, 2011). These settings were created to respond to the challenges of massive waves of immigration to Israel, aiming to support and enhance assimilation of mostly adolescent immigrants into Israeli society. Since the 1990s, these settings are receiving adolescent immigrants mostly from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia (Zeira & Benbenishty, 2011). Today, in addition to immigrants, these facilities host adolescents who come from underprivileged families, mostly from the geographical or social periphery of Israel (Mash, 2001). Some of the facilities are called 'mixed' settings because they host adolescent entering from both the educational and the welfare placement systems.

1.4. The research goals

Based on the differential influence of diverse ecological environments on the development of a child or a young person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), factors predicting the SWB of young people aging out of care relate to three ecological levels: individual, social support, and institutional characteristics, each level showing a distinct proximity to the individual. This perspective is consistent with Stein's (2005) suggestion that in identifying the factors that contribute to the outcomes of young people who age out of care, it is not enough to simply focus on factors at the individual level, but rather look for factors in different environments. Such perspective also allows shifting from a narrow point of view of personality-based factors to a broader understanding that environmental factors are also critical to the functioning of adolescents and youth (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In the current research the individual level comprises the young people's personal characteristics and qualities; social support refers to relationships with peers, family and carers; and institutional characteristics involve the type of setting.

Because so little is known about factors predicting SWB in young people who age out of care, only exploratory goals can be set. This study aims, firstly, to explore the SWB of young people one year after aging out of care. Secondly, it aims to identify characteristics found at the three ecological levels—individual, social support, and institutional—when the young person is on the verge of leaving care that predict his/her SWB one year later.

2. Method

2.1. Population and sample

This study presents data from a longitudinal study in Israel. Young people for the study were recruited from 26 residential care settings in Israel and were followed one year later. First, the institutions were selected and then all relevant young people were approached. All 19 remedial welfare settings across the country, in which there were young people about to age out, and the three mixed settings in Israel were included. Four educational settings were selected based on the convenience of their geographical location. Of the 281 young people, who were about to age out of care in the selected settings, nine (3.2%) declined to participate. Participants gave their informed consent to be contacted a year later and provided contact details. Four young people (1.8%) declined to be contacted again and 16 (5.6%) declined to participate when contacted a year later. In addition, 18 (6.6%) young people were not located. Thus, of the 272 participants in the first wave 234 (86.0%) took part in the second wave. This response rate is considered good in this population (Williams, McWilliams, Mainieri, Pecora, & LaBelle, 2006).

The 272 young people in the first wave were almost equally divided between the three types of residential settings, 38.2% in educational settings, 30.1% in welfare settings, and 31.67% in mixed settings. The average age was 19 (SD = 1.00) and 60.7% were young men. Only a

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