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Why Youth Leave Care: Understandings of Adulthood and Transition Successes and Challenge Among Youth Aging Out of Child Welfare

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Abstract

Child welfare policies and practices are changing to allow more youth to remain in care beyond age 18. Yet, the majority of youth do not stay. Given recent evidence suggesting that remaining in care may be beneficial, there is a need to understand why youth leave. Using data gathered from in-depth interviews with young people aging out of care, this paper explores this question, relating it to youths' understandings of adulthood and the successes and challenges they face during their transitions. We find that youth leave care because of misunderstanding and misinformation about the requirements for remaining in care, as well as because of a desire for autonomy and independence. Specifically, many youth equated adulthood with independence, and thus felt that they needed to leave care to achieve adulthood. Unfortunately, these efforts to be independent often hinder youths' development of supportive relationships, which they reported to be one of the greatest challenges in their transitions. Based on these findings, we conclude by challenging the conflation of adulthood and independence, as well as of childhood and dependence, calling for connected autonomy as a goal for child welfare involved young people of all ages.

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1. Introduction

Youth “aging out” of the child welfare system are experiencing two simultaneous transitions — one from the care, protection, and supervision of the child welfare system to a position of autonomy and responsibility, and the second from childhood to adulthood. The latter transition has become increasingly complex in the last 50 years, as the period of transition to adulthood in the U.S. has extended and traditional markers of a successful transition have shifted (Furstenburg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). Scholars have labeled the period between ages 18 and 25 “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000), which reflects the fact that most Americans do not expect their children to complete the transition to adulthood until they are at least 23 (Shirk & Strangler, 2004). Consequently, many youth are receiving increased financial and social support during this period, especially from their parents. Youth aging out of the child welfare system, however, cannot rely on such support.

The notion of emerging adulthood has influenced child welfare policy and practice (Courtney, 2009). Based on a recognition of the fact that youth aging out of child welfare cannot depend on familial support, federal legislation has been enacted that has increased the funding available to state and local child welfare systems to provide independent living and other services to youth aging out of the system (e.g., the Independent Living Initiative enacted in 1986 [P. L. 99–272]) and has extended the time period in which these services may be provided (the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 [P. L. 106–169]). In addition, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P. L. 110–351) provides federal money for states to allow young people to remain in care up to age 21. This

builds on the policies of states and counties that are increasingly allowing young people to remain formally involved in child welfare beyond the age of 18 (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009), which recent research suggests may be of some benefit (Courtney et al., 2005). Yet, most youth do not remain in care, even when that option is available to them (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009). For example, in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, 80% of youth leave the system within six months of their 18th birthdays, despite the continued availability of services and supports. Why do youth leave? This is a question that has not been well explored. This paper uses data gathered from in-depth interviews with young people aging out of care to examine this question, relating it to youths' understandings of adulthood and the successes and challenges they face during their transitions.

2. Background

Recent research has examined the experiences of youth aging out of the child welfare system, finding that they generally do not do as well as youth not involved in child welfare across a range of outcomes, such as educational attainment, employment, public assistance receipt, criminal justice involvement, and material hardships (e.g., Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Given that between 25,000 and 30,000 youth age out of the U.S. child welfare system each year (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009), addressing these discrepancies and identifying needed supports and services have assumed increased urgency among child welfare professionals and researchers. A key finding from one recent study – the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) – indicates that youth who stay in the child welfare system beyond age 18 generally fare

better than those who exit at 18 (Courtney et al., 2005), at least in the short term.¹ This suggests that engaging youth in the child welfare system as they transition to adulthood may provide needed supports and services. However, most youth do not remain involved with the system. Although the majority of states allow for continued involvement under some circumstances, there are very few youth aged 18 and above remaining in care (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009).

2.1. Why youth leave care

Recent research suggests that youth do not always leave care as planned (McMillen & Tucker, 1999) and that youth experience confusion about the process of leaving care (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). This work has also shown that youth often leave care under negative circumstances and most youth are not discharged because they are ready for independence (McCoy et al., 2008; McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Instead, many youth are automatically exited when they turn 18 (or 19), while others, once they have the option to leave care, refuse further services and/or return to their biological families.

Why do young people leave when laws increasingly provide the possibility for continued support? Because the option to remain in care is relatively recent, this is a question that has not received much scholarly attention. The only published study reporting youths' reasons for leaving care was conducted by McCoy et al. (2008). This mixed-methods longitudinal study included 404 Missouri youth who were 17 years of age at the initiation of the study. In later interviews, youth who had left care (n = 212) were asked whose idea it was for them to leave care, if they had wanted to leave care, and why they left care. Close to half reported that it was

¹ More recent data from the Midwest Study suggest that these differences are not sustained over time (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). This can be interpreted as an indication that many youth need support even beyond age 21, which most youth outside of child welfare receive from their families (Settersson, 2006).

their idea; however, just as many said that it was their caseworkers or judges who suggested it. Many youth said they did not understand why they had been discharged from the system, and some indicated that they had not wanted to leave (although 90% said that they did want to leave).

The youth who said they wanted to leave care were asked why. The most common reason was related to dislike or frustration with the system, followed by a desire for independence, a failure of the Children's Division to provide services, and a desire for change in circumstances (McCoy et al., 2008). That many older youth are unhappy or frustrated with the system is a common finding. McMillen et al. (1997) reported that many youth in independent living programs initiated discussion about the difficulties of remaining in care, which they related to the intrusive nature of programs and to the way people were making decisions for their lives. Similarly, Greenen and Powers (2007) found that youth transitioning out of care and into adulthood reported frustration that they had little self-determination while in care and desire for their opinions to be heard and respected, both of which are related to all of the reasons youth reported for leaving care in the study by McCoy et al. (2008).

McCoy et al. (2008) findings provide valuable insight into young people's care-leaving experiences and decisions in a context (Missouri) in which there is no automatic discharge from the system at age 18. Perhaps because of this, only 58% of their sample had left care by their 19th birthdays. By contrast, Pennsylvania law requires that youth be discharged from care at age 18 unless they file an affidavit requesting continuation of care with proof that they are "engaged in a course of instruction or treatment" (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009, p. 43). As a result, over 90% of youth in Allegheny County have left care by 19. These varying policies suggest a need to explore youths' experiences and decisions to leave care in multiple contexts.

2.2. The equation of adulthood with independence

Youth aging out of child welfare are experiencing a dual transition — from the care of the system to a position of autonomy and from childhood to adulthood. The transition to adulthood in American society has become increasingly complex, marked in particular by an extension of this period and the addition of what Arnett (2000) argues to be a developmental phase between adolescence and adulthood which he has termed “emerging adulthood.” Despite disagreement about whether emerging adulthood is, in fact, a distinct developmental phase, researchers generally concur that it is taking Americans longer to achieve adulthood, and that our notions of what makes someone an adult have changed. In two surveys, Arnett (1997, 2001) found that Americans, both young and middle aged, endorse items related to individualism (e.g., accepting responsibility for one's actions, making independent decisions, and being financially independent) as the most important indicators of adulthood, which were cited much more often than things like marriage, parenthood, and full-time employment. Furstenburg et al. (2004) also found that financial independence was central to American notions of adulthood, which, along with completion of education and full-time employment, was cited much more frequently than marriage or parenthood as an important indicator of adulthood.

Thus, as Magyar (2006) argues, adulthood today is associated with assuming responsibility for oneself, whereas in the past it was associated with assuming responsibility for others (e.g., spouse and children). This work also makes clear that in the neoliberal context of American society, adulthood is equated with independence, particularly financial, but also, as Arnett's (1997, 2001) work indicates, making independent decisions and taking responsibility for one's actions and their consequences. For many youth in the child welfare system, these ideals of independence have extended to the relational realm, where they feel a need to be

emotionally independent to protect themselves from further violations of trust (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). However, there is evidence that well-adjusted adults are not emotionally independent but rather interdependent, that is to say, embedded in meaningful relationships and communities (Furlong, 2003). Yet the neoliberal ascendance of the individual has linked visions of successful adults inextricably with notions of independence. Thus, as Sarri and Finn (1992) argue, “the certainty of the autonomous individual polarizes the concept of dependence and independence and delegitimizes the notion of interdependence” (Sarri & Finn, 1992, p. 224).

Children are considered dependent by nature (Fraser & Gordon, 1997; Sarri & Finn, 1992). Further, because youth involved with child welfare are formally labeled “dependent,” it is understandable that young people might feel they need to leave the system in order to become adults. Given the difficult experiences that lead to many young people's child welfare involvement, it is not surprising that the young people aging out of care interviewed by Samuels and Pryce (2008) espouse a notion of survivalist self-reliance. Yet, their research did not explore specifically how these ideals of independence relate to the young people's understandings of adulthood. Thus, we do not know how young people in care, and in the process of aging out of it, define adulthood. Is their ability to be self-reliant/independent an important part of what makes them feel like adults? How do such beliefs affect their decisions to leave? And how do these beliefs affect their experiences as they transition out of care and into adulthood?

2.3. Transition challenges and successes

As they transition out of the system and into adulthood, young people experience a variety of challenges and successes. While challenges have been a frequent focus of the literature, its focus is often on challenges as conceptualized by the researchers (but see Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). Citation of percentages of youth experiencing

difficulty in finding work and housing and furthering their education, though, cannot reveal the meaning these experiences have for them nor what types of obstacles they find most difficult to navigate. Further, while research frequently focuses on challenges, there is very little examination of youths' successes (but see Hines, Merdinger, & Syatt, 2005), particularly from their perspectives. Including youths' perspectives in attempts to understand their transitions is an essential component of efforts to ensure that youth aging out of child welfare are no longer “among the most excluded groups of young people in society” (Stein, 2006, p. 423).

3. Methods

3.1. Research questions and framework

To elicit young people's perspectives, we conducted in-depth interviews with youth who had aged out, or were in the process of aging out, of care. These interviews were designed to provide data to address the following three questions:

- Why do many youth leave the child welfare system at age 18?
- How do youth who are “aging out” understand the transition to adulthood?
- What are the successes and challenges associated with this transition?

We conducted this research from a critical, interpretivist perspective. That is to say, we began with the epistemological assumption that understandings of the world are dependent on one's positionality within it, which is one of many reasons why it is essential that we elicit young people's perspectives on the experience of aging out of child welfare and into adulthood. Their voices, of course, are mediated through us, the researchers — in this case White social work researchers, all of whom have MSW degrees and extensive experience working with youth in both research and practice contexts. We work in the tradition of the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991, 1998) with the goal of both understanding and

explaining young people's experiences. Like Burawoy (1991), we were “interested not only in learning about a specific social situation...but also in learning from that social situation” (p. 5). Thus, our focus is not only on describing young people's experiences, but also on making sense of them to extend existing theory around emerging adulthood and its relationship with the concept of independence. Specifically, as we discuss subsequently, we bring a critical perspective to the equation of adulthood with independence, and, by extension, childhood with dependence, to challenge the child welfare system to rethink the frameworks under which services are provided.

3.2. Data collection

Following approval from the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board, youth were recruited in three ways: 1) from independent living meetings organized by the Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Department of Human Services (the broader agency under which the local child welfare department, the Office of Children, Youth, and Families [CYF] is housed), 2) from a local agency providing drop-in educational and workforce assistance to transitioning youth, and 3) through local contacts to ensure the inclusion of youth disengaged from services. Trained interviewers, all of whom had MSW degrees, conducted individual and small group interviews with youth in the summer and fall of 2008. Interviewers took field notes after each interview, discussing the process and interactions not captured on the tape, as well as reflecting on emergent questions and findings. The principal investigators also held debriefing sessions with the interviewers during which we discussed challenges, findings, and future directions.

Group interviews were single sex and all consisted of four or fewer youth. Combining individual and small group interviews allowed us to maximize our understandings, given the

different types of data elicited in these different contexts (Pollack, 2003). Individual interviews provided detailed personal stories, while small group settings altered the power differentials between interviewer and interviewees and generated a context facilitating conversation among young people and the emergence of critical perspectives on their experiences. Interviews lasted between 30 min and 2 h. Questions focused on current circumstances, experiences exiting the system, past experiences in the system, understandings of adulthood, and challenges and successes in the dual transition out of the system and into adulthood. Youth were provided with snacks during the interviews and compensated \$25 for their time.

3.3. Sample

We interviewed a total of 45 youth (11 in individual interviews and 34 in focus groups ranging from 2 to 4 participants). Youth ranged in age from 18 to 23, with an average age of 19. In terms of gender, 58% of the youth we interviewed were young men, and 42% young women. We did not intentionally oversample young men (in fact, as revealed by analyses of administrative data, young women are slightly overrepresented among the overall population of youth aging out in Allegheny County; Shook et al., 2010), yet it may be that they are more likely to participate in the settings in which we recruited youth. This could be related to the fact that a number of young women who have recently aged out of care have young children of their own, for whom they are likely to have primary care responsibilities. Many of these young men also have young children, yet they were less likely to be their children's primary caregivers.

Like the overall population of youth aging out of the child welfare system in Allegheny County, the majority of youth we interviewed were African American (77%), while 11% were White, 7% Biracial, and 4% Latino/a. These percentages are similar to the racial breakdown of

youth in the population of youth aging out in Allegheny County, of whom 64% are African American, 30% White, 5% Biracial, and 1% of other racial/ethnic groups (Shook et al., 2010). The most notable difference is perhaps the underrepresentation of White youth in our qualitative sample, which could be related to the fact that youth were recruited in the city of Pittsburgh, while White youth are more likely to be found in the out-county area. In the remainder of this section, we provide additional information on the sample of youth that we interviewed, focusing on the ages at which they left the child welfare system, their current living, working, and school situations, pregnancy and parenthood, and congregate care and justice system involvement. In the findings and discussion section, we discuss how some of these other experiences in work and school, as parents, and with congregate care and the justice systems are related to the research questions we set out to address.

3.3.1. Age exiting the child welfare system

Almost half of the youth we interviewed (46%), left the child welfare system right around their 18th birthdays. An additional 13% left between their 17th and 18th birthdays, indicating that approximately 60% had exited the system within days of turning 18. One third of the youth we interviewed (33%) remained involved with the child welfare system beyond their 18th birthdays, although almost half of this group stayed less than a year, indicating that less than 20% of our sample was still involved with the system at age 19. Finally, three of the youth we interviewed (7%) were unsure if they were still formally involved with the child welfare system. We discuss this uncertainty and confusion in detail subsequently.

3.3.2. Current living arrangements

Almost one third of the youth we interviewed (30%) were living with their biological parents and/or step-parents at the time of the interview. Approximately one quarter (24%) were

living alone or with their own children. The next largest group (13%) were living with other family members (including aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and older siblings), and 9% were living with romantic partners. Almost as many (8%) were homeless, with half of this group reporting that they stayed different places each night and the other half that they were currently staying in homeless shelters. Just 7% of the youth we interviewed were living in group homes or independent living facilities, while 4% were living with foster parents. Another 4% were living with non-relatives (one with a roommate and one with his girlfriend's parents). These living situations are similar to those found in other studies of youth aging out of child welfare (e.g., McCoy et al., 2008; McMillen & Tucker, 1999).

3.3.3. Work and school involvement

In terms of employment, just under one third of the youth we interviewed (30%) were employed, while 15% were looking for work at the time of the interview. Current jobs included food service, retail, cleaning, factory work, security, painting, and landscaping. Many of the youth also reported engaging in illegal activities (such as selling drugs) to make ends meet. Part of the reason that so few youth were employed is that many were engaged in school. One fifth (20%) were still in high school, while another 20% were working towards their GED. Thirty-five percent already had a high school diploma or GED; however, an additional 20% had not graduated from high school and were not pursuing a GED. Some 20% of the sample was engaged in higher education — more than half of these in community college, almost as many in vocational/technical school, and just one youth enrolled in a 4-year college.

3.3.4. Pregnancy and parenthood

More than one third (35%) of the youth we interviewed mentioned having or expecting children, with 9% reporting that they had more than one child. This echoes findings of other

studies of youth aging out of care, which also find high rates of young parenthood (e.g., Courtney et al., 2010). As discussed subsequently, 4% of the youth reported that their children had been removed from their care by the child welfare system, a concern expressed by many of the young people with whom we spoke.

3.3.5. Congregate care and justice system involvement

Approximately two thirds of the youth we interviewed (65%) had spent time in a group home or residential placement while involved with the child welfare system. More than one quarter (26%) reported some type of justice system involvement. Both of these figures are congruent with administrative data from the broader population of youth aging out of care in Allegheny County, 73% of whom have spent time in congregate care and 36% of whom have had justice system involvement (Shook et al., 2010). Based on the descriptive information presented in this section, we conclude that our sample of youth, while by no means random, is fairly representative of the overall population of youth who have recently aged out of care in Allegheny County.

3.4. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed through an iterative process involving coding of all transcripts, memoing around emergent findings, and discussions among research team members. Coding was guided by the three research questions outlined previously. Responses within each category were grouped inductively to fully explore the range of perspectives and experiences. We presented emergent findings from our analyses to service providers and youth who aged out of care (including some who had participated in the interviews and some who had not). These presentations served as member checks, confirming the credibility of our understandings and explanations (Anastas, 2004).

In the following section, findings are organized into three broad themes — why youth leave care, understandings of adulthood, and successes and challenges in the transition. Quotes from youth are used to provide evidence supporting our interpretations. Themes are linked in this discussion, and, together, they provide a detailed explanation of how normative constructions of adulthood, as interpreted and internalized by both youth and their service providers, contribute to youth leaving care and shape their experiences upon doing so. The final section of this piece discusses theoretical implications and how policy makers and service providers can better help youth address the challenges they face.

4. Findings

4.1. Why youth leave care

As previously reported, most young people leave care in Allegheny County in the period immediately surrounding their 18th birthday, despite Pennsylvania law which permits them to remain involved in the child welfare system up to age 21 provided they are engaged in school or treatment (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009). In analyzing youths' responses to questioning about their reasons for leaving care, we found that young people's reasons for leaving the child welfare system can be divided into two broad categories: 1) misinformation and misunderstanding and 2) desire for autonomy and independence. We discuss these reasons in depth, using quotes from the youth to illustrate our points.

4.1.1. Misinformation and misunderstanding

Youths' misinformation and confusion comes in the following four forms: some did not know that staying involved with the system beyond the age of 18 was a possibility, others felt forced out of the system, many had misunderstandings about the conditions that must be met

to remain involved, and a few were not sure whether or not they were still involved. We discuss these different forms in detail in this section.

Many youth reported that they were unaware, when they turned 18, that they could sign an affidavit to remain involved with the system. For example, one young woman said, “When I was in the system, no one told me about the consent form stating that even after age 18 I could be involved and receive services, so I do feel cheated.” Other youth described having their cases automatically closed at their 18th birthdays. As one young woman explained, “When I had turned 18, my caseworker was nowhere to be found. So when 12 o’clock hit, they was like, ‘Oh well. We are closing her case.’ So on Monday I was at home, and I was like, what am I going to do?” Thus, she did not feel that anyone ever explained the options to her.

Other youth felt that they understood the conditions for remaining involved, but were forced to leave the system, despite their attempts to meet the requirements for staying involved. For example, one young man said, “I messed up my grades and [the community college] made me take two semesters off...so that meant they closed my case.” Thus, because of the requirement that youth must be in school (or treatment) in order to stay involved, he had his case closed. A young woman explained that she was similarly required to leave, although she wanted to remain in. She said, “I stayed in. But, then I went to a shelter and they don’t do shelters. Like a homeless shelter. They don’t do those. ...Then they had to drop, like, stop my case ‘cause I ended up in a homeless shelter.” So, again, the stringent requirements for remaining involved mean that some youth who would like to continue the support they receive from the system are not able to. Finally, one young woman said, “When I had the baby, [my caseworker] told me I need to pick between school and work. He said, ‘Either you are going to work and pay for everything your baby needs or you are going to go to school and your baby don’t

have nothing.” Thus, he was essentially telling her that if she chose to stay in school and keep her case open, she would not be a good mother. As discussed subsequently, being a good parent was very important to many of the youth; because of her caseworker's lecture, then, this young woman felt that she must leave the system in order to be a good mother to her child.

As is apparent in some of the stories of youth who felt forced out, some youth had misunderstandings about how the system works. For example, one young woman said, “I only know one person who stayed in and that's 'cause she had a son. Soon as her son was born she got her own apartment. CYF stopped. I think they'll go just to a certain extent. I don't think that they're gonna help you out the whole way.” Another left because, in her words, “I didn't want my child involved in CYF. ‘Cause once your child is born in CYF, your child is there ‘til 18.” As these quotes illustrate, there was particularly a lot of confusion about what happens if you have a child while you are still involved with the system.

We also heard from some youth who were unsure whether or not they were still involved with the child welfare system. When asked if they were still receiving services, youth sometimes were unable to explain if the services were offered through the child welfare system or through local agencies providing services to youth who had already left care. There was great ambiguity and notable confusion with several youth. For example, one young woman had recently turned 18 and had a baby. She could not answer questions about either her own or her baby's status with regard to the system, despite being asked multiple times in a variety of ways. She finally said, “I'm not really sure what's going on with them.” From our own challenges with communication in some interviews, we recognize that this confusion and misunderstanding is not always because youth were not given accurate information, although it clearly was not given in a way that she understood. Whatever the reason, though, there remains a great deal of

confusion over policies and procedures for remaining involved with the child welfare system beyond the age of 18.

4.1.2. Desire for autonomy and independence

In addition to misinformation and misunderstanding, the other primary reason that youth left the system is a desire for autonomy and independence. This theme has two components. The first is related to the developmentally appropriate and expected desire for control over their own lives found among virtually all young people of these ages. The second is focused on their desire to be free of system constraints, particularly the rules and operation of congregate care programs, and a feeling, among many, that their developing autonomy and wishes are not respected by system actors.

Many of the youth who explained their decisions to leave the system in terms of a desire for greater control over their lives felt that they were ready to make it on their own. For example, one young man explained, “One caseworker talked to me about staying on.... She told me to stay when they probably wanted me for the money, but I didn't stay because I wanted to better myself.” This quote also illustrates a misunderstanding about the system – that “the system” will make money if they retain him in it – a misconception which a number of youth expressed. This misunderstanding is particularly ironic, given that keeping youth in the system can be, in fact, quite costly. It reflects, nonetheless, a feeling among many youth that system actors do not really care about them but are just in it for the money. While some youth thought they could make it completely on their own, others thought they would receive help from family. As one young woman reported, such expectations were not always met. She said, “I left because I thought my mom was the kind of person that she'll be able to accept me, you know, instead she didn't.”

Other youth discussed more generally their desire for control over their lives as related to their decisions to exit the system. As one young man said, “[I was] tired of living under someone else’s conditions. I got fed up.” Similarly, a young woman said, “‘Cuz I didn't like having a structured, a structured life. I didn't like anybody telling me what I couldn't do.” Another young woman described her thoughts about why youth leave, “I think the real reason why people don't stay in [the system] ‘til they're 21 is because they want freedom, they want to be able to have a chance to do things on their own.” As further illustration, another explained her dilemma, “I want to stay and go to school just ‘cause they'll pay for it, but I can't stand being in the system. I want to be out on my own.” Like this young woman, many of the youth revealed a tension between wanting help but not wanting to be told what to do. Such conflicting desires are normal for all young people; unfortunately, the stakes are higher for these youth, as they do not have the option of returning to the system once they have left.

In terms of their desire to be free of system constraints, some youth wanted more say in where they would live, as well as assurance that they would have a voice in what happened to them, something many youth discussed at length. For example, one young woman said “Yeah, [my caseworker] did [talk to me about staying in system], but I was like ‘Nah, I don't want to, because I've been in so many placements, you all might come take me again.’” Analyses of administrative data from Allegheny County reveal that youth living in group homes and residential institutions tend to leave care earlier than those in other living situations (Shook et al., 2010). This is a finding that these qualitative data are able to help to explain, as numerous youth discussed their dislike for congregate care settings. For example, one young woman said, “They just told me whenever I was of age I could ... sign my affidavit or [leave], and I didn't want to stay so I left. ... I didn't like being [at the group home].” Unfortunately, there is evidence

that youth in such settings are the least prepared (when compared with youth in foster homes or scattered-site apartments) for living on their own (Mech et al., 1994).

Many youth felt they were old enough to not have to live by someone else's rules, especially those of congregate care settings. One young man said, "When I turned 18, they kept begging me to stay in placement [but I heard that] if you didn't go back in time they'd put out a warrant for your arrest and I was like 'forget that.' I'm a grown man, and you're gonna tell me I got a curfew?" Similarly, another youth, when asked about his knowledge of the possibility to remain involved with the system beyond age 18, said, "Yeah, I heard about that. You can stay until you are 21. I chose not to. I didn't feel like staying there until I was 21. There are curfews and you can't talk on the phone very much, and you got to find a job, and when you get off of work you got to go to school and then be at the crib, clean up. You can't go outside to walk around or talk on the phone, you can't have any cell phones. ...There is no privacy in the group home and they have to know where you are 24/7." Many youth, in fact, referred to such institutional settings as prisonlike, saying, for example, "I don't like being on lockdown."

We heard not only a dislike for the structure and rules of the institutions, but also a sense that the rules were often arbitrarily enforced. For example, one young man said, "One staff will tell you the basics of the rules, and then another staff will tell you his own set of rules, and then another staff will tell you another set of rules. And when you do the real rules, that staff will say, 'Those rules are wrong. You are getting your level dropped because you are not doing what I want you to do.'" The levels to which he referred are related to their progression through the programs; additional privileges are accorded when they move up a level. However, when youth feel that their ability to gain privileges is subject to the whims of staff members who often play favorites, it is a difficult situation in which to remain. Youth

discussed other treatment by staff in these settings, many citing dislike of restraints. They also mentioned how unfair it was to be housed with justice system youth who had done something wrong, while they were there through no fault of their own. Finally, they disliked that in many congregate care settings, youth are not permitted to attend “regular” school, but instead must attend “special” schools operated by the programs.

In addition to not feeling listened to or respected by staff in congregate care settings, many youth felt similarly disregarded by other system actors. They noted that they were not often consulted when major decisions were being made about their lives, and, when they were, felt that their wishes were often disregarded. For example, one young man said, “Like anytime [caseworkers] want to, they can really take you off...they don't really listen to you.” Another reported, “They told me, you know, to keep myself in the system so they could help me or whatever, but they wouldn't even try and let me change my caseworker. I asked if I could change her and they said no.” This young man chose to leave the system after being told his caseworker could not be changed. Similarly, one young man said, “[If people had treated me] with a lot more respect, I probably would have stayed, you know.” Thus, many of the youth we interviewed did not feel that service providers respected them or their opinions on what should happen to them while involved with the child welfare system.

4.2. Understandings of adulthood

As the previous discussion makes evident, many youth choose to leave the child welfare system at age 18 because of a desire for autonomy and independence, which is directly related to how they understand the meaning of adulthood. We asked youth about what makes someone an adult, and the main thing they said was “being able to take care of yourself.” There are multiple origins of this understanding of adulthood. First, it has cultural

roots, in that it is congruent with American culture and the neoliberal context in which most Americans define adulthood similarly (Magyar, 2006). It also has developmental roots, in that this is a developmentally appropriate attitude. Youth of this age often want independence and need to prove to themselves that they can do many things on their own, although when they are older may be more willing to acknowledge a need for help from others (Erikson, 1968). This definition also has important experiential roots for many of these youth, who have learned that they have to take care of themselves. As one young woman said, "I can't depend on anybody to help me with anything."

This understanding of adulthood led to a sense among many youth that they are not children, but not adults either. In part, this is related to the fact that many of the youth feel like they had very limited childhoods, if they had them at all. Before they were removed from their homes, many were taking care of themselves and younger siblings. Thus, one young woman said, "I wish I could feel more like a kid sometimes." Another said, "I've felt like an adult since I was 12. I never really had a childhood. ...There is no way you can take me back to a place I've never been." This experience of never having a childhood, and of having to be responsible for oneself and one's siblings, is what makes being involved with the child welfare system, where they have very little autonomy, so difficult for many youth. As a young man said, "We come from really hard experiences...and you come out of it, you don't want to be told nothing. So as children we already have these feelings as though we're already grown, but then we have all these years of being told what to do and that causes a lot of problems."

Others waivered, at times feeling like an adult but at other times not. For example, one young man said, "I'm a man, but I'm not." A young woman recognized that this is a process that does not happen overnight, or on one's eighteenth birthday, saying, "I'm evolving into an

adult.” This reflects Arnett's (2000) concept of emerging adulthood, which recognizes that the transition to adulthood is a gradual one. Finally, some highlighted the contradictory messages they often receive from society; for instance, one young man noted that “I'm only treated like an adult when I do something bad.”

In many ways, then, these youth are in between childhood and adulthood, illustrated by their expression of contradictory feelings and messages, as well as a sense, among many, that they not children anymore, but not yet adults either. Youths' responses to a question about what makes someone an adult illustrate their contradictory feelings, as well as the conflicting messages they receive from society, about adulthood. For example, one young man said, “Being 18 in the eyes of the law makes you an adult, but honestly being able to take care of yourself, being able to provide for yourself.” This demonstrates a recognition that the legal definition of adulthood is not necessarily the same as a social one. Many youth referred to the notion of being “grown”. As one young woman said, “An adult, yes, I am, but I'm not grown. I think an adult is when you hit 18. But whenever you're grown, you have your own things. You provide for yourself. You don't ask nobody else to help you. You can do things on your own. You don't have to depend on nobody else ‘cause you already know you have it.” One young woman's story illustrates the societal pressure to be independent as it conflicts with her own sense of not being ready to be on her own. She said:

Last year I ended up getting pregnant. At first, [my foster parents] didn't want me to live with them because they have little daughters and didn't want them to think it was okay to have kids when you are young like me, so that part was hard. ... They told me I could [stay], but as a mother I don't really want to stay, ‘cause I got the baby and ... I just feel like I got a son now and I have to get out on my own and do for

him instead of, I mean, I love the help, it's just I feel like I am supposed to do it. ... It's just a feeling that I have, but I am not ready to live by myself. That is why I still live with them. And I don't know nothing about a baby for real. ... I pay bills. I got a cell phone. I do stuff that grown people do, but that don't make me grown. I don't feel grown. ... I still live with my aunt, she still tells me what to do. ... Having a baby didn't make me feel grown. Turning 18 didn't make me feel grown either. ... Yeah, usually people say, 'I am 21. I am grown.' But just because you are 21, don't make you grown.

What would have happened to this young woman if she was not able to stay with her aunt and uncle, who were her foster parents? Many of the youth who stayed in the system beyond 18 were living in foster homes rather than in congregate care settings. What happens to those in congregate care settings, who have no biological family towards whom to turn, when they age out of care? How do they deal with the numerous challenges they face in their transition out of the system and into adulthood? In the following section, we turn to a discussion of both the successes and challenges in this transition, from the youths' perspectives.

4.3. Successes and challenges in transition

When asked about their greatest successes in their transitions out of the system and into adulthood, youths' responses were focused in three areas — surviving, assuming “adult” responsibilities, and continuing their education. Simply surviving was the most frequent response. As one young man said, “My biggest success is surviving until 19.” In a group interview, a young woman said “that I'm still alive,” to which another young woman responded, “And that I ain't give up. ... I'm still standing.” Similarly, one young woman said, “I am proud of me 'cause I made it through whatever I went through. When there was a problem,

I made it through. Whenever I struggled or something, I made it through, so I am really proud of me for real.”

Others cited experiences they had managed to avoid as among their greatest successes, including not getting into trouble with the law and not becoming a teen parent.

On the other hand, becoming a parent and having a healthy baby was something that other youth noted as among their greatest successes. Many youth also cited other “adult” accomplishments, such as obtaining a job, their own apartment, or a driver's license. As one young man said, “My biggest success was being able to pay my bills and still have money in my pocket and buy what I want.” Finally, many youth mentioned staying in school and continuing their education as their greatest success. For example, one young woman said, “Graduating high school and, as my parents wanted, not becoming a teen mom.” At the same time, for some of the young women who have babies, motherhood has provided motivation to stay in school. As one young woman responded when asked about her greatest success, “Being so far in high school. ‘Cause, like, my aunt, and my uncle, and my brother was the only people that graduated from high school and went to college. So like everybody after my aunt and uncle, they just only made it to like the 9th grade, the 10th grade like, but didn't go back to school. So being so far in high school is a big thing for me. Everybody thought, oh, I am having a baby, I wasn't going to come back. I am going to make it. I am making it a priority to go back to school.”

One youth, however, when asked about his greatest success, said “nothing.” Thus, while their responses demonstrate the strength and perseverance of many of these youth, they also begin to illustrate the hardships, barriers, and challenges they have faced. Not surprisingly, youth experienced numerous challenges in their transition out of the system and into

adulthood, made more difficult by how they defined adulthood as being able to take care of oneself. In general, the transition was more difficult than they had anticipated. As one young man said, "It's in your head that you can do it, but once you get out there in the world, it's really hard." A young woman said, "Everything I'm doing is a challenge." Some of this difficulty was related to a lack of material resources, such as, housing, employment, and health insurance. As one young man said in response to a question about his financial situation and in reference to the \$25 we were giving him for his participation in the interview, "Without this money today, I wouldn't eat."

However, this lack of material resources and support was not what youth tended to cite as most challenging in their transitions; rather, most youth noted a lack of social and/or emotional support as the most significant challenge in their lives. Many of their families were not there for them, despite their hope that they would be. Like the young woman discussed previously who left the system because she thought she could live with her mother, many youth did not have the familial support that they so desperately desired. A young man, when asked about his biggest challenge in the transition said, "Wanting to see my real mom but scared of doing it, scared to see her because she never was there." Because of such experiences with their parents, many youth have trust issues, which often lead to a lack of support from friends, as well. One young woman said, "It is hard for me to trust people. I always had a trust problem. That is why I don't have any friends, 'cause I don't trust anybody."

This contributes to the sense that many youth have that they must make it completely on their own, enhanced by the societal equation of adulthood and independence. One young woman explained this difficulty in discussing her greatest challenge since leaving the system: "Trying to get on my own. ... [but because of a lack of money] I would stay with

somebody, but I didn't want to feel like they were feeling like maybe I was a burden, you know, because I am living there and I'm like, you know, eating there and all types of things like that.” When they do not have people that they can trust who can help them out, and they feel like they must make it on their own but do not have the material resources needed, many youth resort to illegal behaviors to deal with their isolation and/or to attempt to make ends meet. As previously mentioned, more than one quarter of the youth we interviewed (and over one third of the population of youth aging out of care in Allegheny County; Shook et al., 2010) have been involved with the justice systems. Their continued involvement, whether they are on probation, have upcoming court hearings, or have been forbidden to see their children, presents additional challenges, particularly in terms of employment opportunities. So, as one young man said, “I'm in trouble with the law right now. ... I'm trying to make up for it. I'm trying to better myself.”

Another challenge frequently mentioned was related to mental health and emotional support. One young woman discussed the need for continued counseling after leaving the system, explaining that, “What happened in your past will still haunt you to this day, and that's my big obstacle, is every night, I have dreams about it, and it won't go away.” A young man, very similarly, stated that his greatest obstacle was “stuff in the past, I ain't going to lie, I have nightmares from what happened in the past.” Most striking, perhaps, are the comments of one young man, who responded to a question about his greatest challenge by saying, “Honestly, not to commit suicide.”

Youth also cited getting along with romantic partners as a challenge; specifically, many young men discussed the difficulties of dealing with the mothers of their children, with whom many seemed to have tenuous, conflict-ridden relationships. They

expressed confusion about how to negotiate these relationships, although they wanted to be there for their children. Certainly, the youth who have their own children face additional challenges. Many fear that their children will be taken away, and some, like the young woman who said “My baby will never experience anything I’ve ever had to go through,” remain emphatic that their children will not go through what they have. Unfortunately, concern about losing their children makes many youth afraid to ask for help, because, when they do, their parental abilities are sometimes questioned. As one young man explained his reaction to being told he was not being a good parent when he took his son with him to a homeless shelter, “How am I an unfit father because I had resources and went to a homeless shelter with my kid? But 24/7, my kid was taken care of.”

Similarly, a young woman discussed the difficult situation young parents find themselves in, “You have a child. If you don’t have a place to go with that baby, how are you going to manage to take care of the baby and yourself? ‘And we’re going to take the baby if you don’t have a house or if you don’t have a family member to go to.’” The last part of this quote reflects the message the youth are receiving from service providers — that they are in constant peril of having their children removed from their care (which was something that had already happened to two of the youth we interviewed) and that good parents are adults who can take care of their children without assistance. That this message has been received is articulated poignantly by one young woman’s response to a question about where she saw herself in the future. She said, “I don’t want anything big. I don’t want to be famous. I don’t want none of that. I just want to be able to take care of my family. I just want to be able to do what my parents weren’t able to do for me.”

Because of these numerous challenges and how difficult it is to be on their own, many youth expressed regret about their decisions to leave the system. One young man explained, “I stayed 8 more days [after turning 18]. ... I wish I [had stayed longer]. ... I could have stayed in [the group home], completed, got my diploma, saved more money than that, still kept my job...” A young woman said, “I wish I was still in CYF, like living there for me and my babies. That would be the best thing I had in my life. ... Even though I was real bad in it, like, it keeps me safe, like, it really helped me to have a childhood.” Thus, while some youth expressed a desire to return to the child welfare system, they recognized that this was not an option. As one young woman said, “I should have stayed in CYF... and now I can't get back in. ... If I could get in CYF, I would.” In the final section of this paper, we discuss the implications of our findings for understandings and conceptualizations of childhood and adulthood, as well as recommendations for policies, services, and supports that can help to prevent and respond to such feelings of regret and the other challenges youth identified in their transitions out of care and into adulthood.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

While youth in this study have experienced hardships in many of the areas frequently cited in the literature (e.g., education, employment, housing and justice system involvement), youths' discussions of their greatest challenges were focused on a lack of social and emotional support. Specifically, youth cited difficulties in relationships with family members and in current and former romantic relationships, in some cases with the other parent of their children, as well as a need for help with mental health challenges. They also mentioned challenges in their attempts to be “independent” — particularly with regard to making it “on their own” without help and providing for their children. The most frequent success cited by

youth was simply surviving, with successful assumption of “adult” responsibilities (getting one's own place, paying bills and becoming a parent) a close second. Thus, our findings echo those of Samuels and Pryce (2008) who found that youth aging out espoused a notion of survivalist self-reliance as a source of great pride. Yet, like them, we also discovered that often these efforts to be independent worked against youth in developing supportive relationships. Our findings add to the discussion by revealing that many youth view relationships as their greatest challenge, yet fail to recognize how their socially mandated attempts to be independent, resulting from their internalization of the societal equation of adulthood with independence, often impede them in this area.

This study suggests that youths' perceptions of challenges extend beyond the domains that scholars have typically explored. It supports emerging scholarship (e.g., Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003) emphasizing the goal of interdependence, as an alternative to independence, for youth aging out of care and the need for greater attention to their relational needs and skills. To enable a reframing of the goal as one of interdependence, we must challenge the societal equation of adulthood with independence reflected in youths' and service providers' understandings of adulthood. There is a great deal of evidence that happy, healthy, successful adults are not independent but instead have extensive social support (Durkheim, 1951; Furlong, 2003; Kessler & McLeod, 1985). Given the violations of trust experienced by many youth in their families, these youth need significant help in learning how to cultivate and maintain healthy relationships and support networks. They also need assistance in managing relationships with their families of origin, as we know that many youth return home upon exiting care and that most remain involved with their families in some capacity (Greenen & Powers, 2007; McCoy et al., 2008; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Youth express clearly that relationships are one of the greatest challenges to them in their transitions out of care and into adulthood, yet many services remain focused on efforts to develop their independence, often through the training in specific life skills. Research has found that supportive relationships are more important for this population than specific life skills, as supportive people can help you with whatever it is you need to learn how to do (Greenen & Powers, 2007). In other words, “services cannot take the place of meaningful relationships” (Greenen & Powers, 2007, p. 1098). As Courtney (2009) notes, the Fostering Connections Act of 2008 represents the beginning of a philosophical shift away from the promotion of independence and towards a focus on relationship and connection. This is an important first step, which must be followed by a commitment to explicitly challenging the societal equation of adulthood with independence at all levels — from that of the language of our policies, to the names of our programs, their behavioral goals and expectations, and in the everyday interactions between service providers and young people.

Challenging the goal of independence might serve to prevent some of youths' justice system involvement, which, according to youth, was often a result of their attempts to make it “on their own.” Reframing this goal may help many youth realize that they do not need to be independent to be adults and may make them more likely to remain in care beyond age 18, as well as to be willing to return to care, as many expressed a desire to do. Unfortunately, returning to care is not an option in Pennsylvania, although at least 19 states have developed policies that allow youth over 18 who have left the system to return to care (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009), just as many other young adults return to their parents' home for periods of time after initial departures (Magyar, 2006). Additional states should consider amending their policies in this area, particularly given mounting evidence that youth who remain in

care beyond their 18th birthdays have better outcomes than those who do not, at least initially (Courtney et al., 2005).

Further, lawmakers should reexamine the requirements for remaining in care, as many of the youth we interviewed wanted to stay involved with the system but were forced to leave because they were no longer in school or otherwise meeting the requirements of Pennsylvania law (see Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009, for more on the requirements in various states for child welfare involvement at ages 18 and above). Magyar (2006) argues that laws that make remaining in care contingent on engagement in school or in treatment are “particularly unfair” (p. 598), given that those who are out of school or treatment may actually be in greater need of assistance than those still in. Thus, remaining in care should not be an option available only to those youth who are doing well, but rather a means to provide continued support to those who are not. Finally, local child welfare agencies should ensure that their service providers are well educated on existing law, as well as on the importance of supports. The case of the young woman whose case worker told her that she would not be a good mother if she remained in care in order to further her education, rather than leaving care and seeking immediate employment, reflects short-term thinking and a misguided American focus on independence and self-sufficiency and the conflation of these concepts with adulthood.

It is important to note, however, that encouraging interdependence does not negate young people's need for increased autonomy and voice in what happens to them. It is essential to listen to youth and include their ideas and perspectives in discussions about both their individual cases and system policies and practices. This sounds obvious, but can be difficult to follow given time demands and resource constraints. Yet, its value goes beyond better decision making (which is compelling in and of itself) to the message that it sends to

youth that they are worth listening to. Surely this will help with another area identified in this research as in need of attention — that of the need for improved communication with youth evidenced by their confusion and misunderstandings about how the system works.

Perhaps turning 18, rather than triggering exit from the system if an affidavit is not signed, could instigate a case meeting in which choices, supports, and possibilities are discussed. A well-designed form with details on options could facilitate such a meeting, resulting in better-informed youth who feel that they can have a say in what happens to them without leaving the system. As increasing numbers of youth remain involved in care beyond their 18th birthdays, we must provide alternatives to congregate care that recognize and respect their need for increased autonomy, as well as giving youth more of a voice in all of the decisions about their lives (McCoy et al., 2008). Youth we interviewed made it clear that the conditions of congregate care settings are a significant barrier to continuing to engage with the system (as other studies have found as well, e.g., McMillen, Rideout, Fisher, & Tucker, 1997). Alternatives are being developed but not sufficiently. Allegheny County's efforts in supportive housing and services to youth between 16 and 24, including those who have left the system, are notable and laudable, such as programs that provide scattered-site apartments, the provision of independent living services to youth up to age 21, and the institution of the Independent Living Initiative offering educational guidance for youth up to age 24 (although it might be useful to consider renaming some of these if the goal of independence is reframed to one of interdependence or “fostering connections”). Continued support of such programs is essential.

At the same time, a central problem for youth aging out seems not to be the services and supports offered to them right before and after age 18, but the way they are treated in the

system much earlier than that. The desire for autonomy and independence they express as related to their decisions to leave the system, while in part a result of the expected desire for control over their own lives found among virtually all young people of these ages and a reflection of the societal equation of adulthood with independence, also represents a desire to be free of system constraints. In particular, they dislike the rules and operation of congregate care programs, and many feel that their need for a certain measure of self-determination and control over their lives is not, and has never been, respected by system actors (which Greenen & Powers, 2007; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007 heard from youth as well).

Challenging the societal equation of adulthood with independence necessitates reconsideration of definitions of adulthood and the controversial concept of emerging adulthood. Claims of emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental phase are based on the fact that many young adults are receiving support from their parents well into ages we have traditionally defined as adult. However, a recognition that no adult is truly independent but rather that all people are interdependent (on partners, parents, children, and other family members; Fraser & Gordon, 1997) suggests that “emerging adulthood” is instead one of a number of privileges enjoyed by young adults from well-off families. The concept of emerging adulthood, and adulthood itself, is a socially constructed category given meaning in the U.S. context by its relationship to neoliberal ideas about the individual and the importance of self-reliance. In other contexts, in which community members more explicitly acknowledge their dependence upon one another for their survival and happiness, understandings of adulthood are very different. Thus, we argue that changing definitions of adulthood, specifically disrupting the association of adulthood with independence, would benefit not only youth aging out of care but also the many marginalized people in our society forced to attempt to survive “independently.”

While comments from the young people we interviewed lend support to efforts to change constructions of adulthood, their experiences also suggest a need to reenvision our understandings and definitions of childhood. As currently set up, the child welfare system does not view children as capable actors, but rather as innocent children in need of protection and care. The child welfare system was created to care for children whose parents were unable or unwilling to do so. Its justification was based on notions of childhood and adulthood as distinct entities and thus contributes to the false dichotomy resulting from the equation of childhood with dependence and adulthood with independence, which resulted in an abrupt transition at age 18. Fortunately, policies and practices are increasingly reflecting recognition of young people's need for support beyond age 18 (although we must go further in this regard). But what about recognizing young people's need for some amount of autonomy and self-determination prior?

In the same way that a critique of the goal of independence for youth aging out of care recognizes that healthy, happy adults are not fully independent, we must also realize that healthy, happy children are not entirely dependent but rather need a voice in decisions about what happens to them. Thus, meeting the needs of young people aging out of child welfare necessitates not only a rethinking of the services and supports available to them as they make the transition out of the system and into adulthood, but also a reexamination of the services that we provide to them at much earlier ages. Perhaps the notion of “connected autonomy” used by a psychiatric treatment facility for emerging adults called Yellowbrick (Henig, 2010) can be useful in this context, as we consider the goal for young people of all ages involved with child welfare. This term recognizes everyone's need for some measure of self-

determination, as well as the importance of relationships, connections, and supports at all phases of life.

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