Facilitating the transition from placement to independent living: Reflections from a program of research

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Abstract

This article summarizes three interrelated research projects that explore the experiences of youth-in-care aging out of placement and making the transition to independence. Qualitative methodology was used to analyse themes emerging from group and individual interviews with these young people and the staff who work with them. Major issues considered were: the emotional consequences of the transition and stages in the emancipation process; stated gaps in the interventions and programs that these youth participated in; and the impact of agency culture and structure on approaches to this population. Lessons learned from this research are highlighted with particular attention on implications for intervention.

Key words: independence, emancipation, youth in placement, child and youth care

Introduction

Adolescents who leave placement for independent living face inordinate challenges. It is now well established that graduates of the child welfare and mental health systems in North America are over-represented among marginalized adult populations. Research has confirmed that significant numbers of these young people become homeless, are dependent on social welfare, or end up in prison or in adult psychiatric institutions (Aldgate, 1994; Gouvernement du Quebec, 1992; Tatara, et al., 1988). They are also prone to poor health, under-education, and unemployment (Collins, 2001).

The developmental psychology literature on optimal transitions to adulthood stresses the critical role of the family in supporting young people in moving towards independence (Coleman, 1989). The adolescents who leave placement to move out on their own lack this precious resource. As concluded by Collins (2001, p. 271): 'Given the importance of the family home in these transition experiences, the family safety net for young people aging out of care may be nonexistent, problematic, or at best, capable of limited and sporadic support.'

Over the last twenty years, placement agencies in North America have invested heavily in developing programs for this population (Meston, 1988). However, available statistics suggest that these programs have had limited impact and that successful adjustment to adult inde-

pendence is the exception, not the norm (Thompson, 1996). Research findings, while sparse, identify extremely poor outcomes, yet few studies have generated data that has clear implications for improving our interventions (Collins, 2001).

The purpose of this article is to summarize a series of studies conducted in Canada between 1998 and 2003. While two of the three studies are described in detail elsewhere (Mann-Feder & White, 1999, 2003), this article will present a synthesis with implications for intervention. All three studies relied on qualitative methodology (Patton, 1990), with an emphasis on analyzing spontaneous narratives of groups of research participants (Greenbaum, 1998). The interest of the research team has been to understand and capture the lived experience of youth in the midst of the transition from placement to independent living, and that of the youth workers who were involved with them.

Background of the research

This research grew out of collaboration between an agency manager and a consultant. Both were working with a child and youth care team which was operating a series of life skills workshops for youth from group homes, foster care and residential treatment who were in the transition to independent living. As is the case with many such programs in North America, the focus of the workshops was on skill acquisition in areas such as budgeting, cooking, and job hunting. Scannapieco and Shagin (1995) have referred to this approach as the teaching and learning of 'skills for self-sufficiency'.

It had been observed by the professionals on the team that, despite the accessibility of the workshops and their emphasis on relevant training, many young people were having trouble with learning. A review of theoretical writings on normative adolescence and the transition to adulthood revealed an important gap in the approach. While the team had been preoccupied with helping young people to cope with the *instrumental* demands of independence, they had done little to address the need for *emotional* preparedness.

It has been documented that functional independence in early adulthood can only become possible when an individual can give up emotional dependency and can be free of excessive guilt and anxiety in relation to the family so that a mix of autonomy and relatedness becomes possible (O'Connor, Allen, Bell & Hauser, 1996). This critically important emotional disengagement is facilitated by consistent, supportive relationships with significant adults who can tolerate successive attempts at separation (Newman & Newman, 1996). These successive attempts are much like rehearsals, and begin gradually with behavioral expressions of autonomy that grow into readiness for independence. This process has been compared to the 'refueling' behaviors of toddlerhood, when a child leaves his parent physically for minutes at a time, and then returns for reassurance, only to leave again. Not only do youth in placement not have an experience of a stable parental presence, our agencies are often not structured to allow for successive and gradual separation. In addition, most youth-in-care are still mourning the original separation that brought them into placement in the first place. This mourning, while thought by some to be a constant theme through a placement (Gordy-Levine, 1990), is powerfully restimulated when a young person is faced with a discharge plan that does not include a return to family. The result can be that adolescents leaving placement for independent living face a major developmental milestone burdened by unresolved experiences of separation and loss. This often provokes feelings of worthlessness and rage, because just as they were abandoned and helpless when first placed, they are now alone with nowhere to go at the termination of placement. While the freedoms of independent living may be idealized, these adolescents often secretly doubt their own capacities, and may either regress or deny their needs for support altogether. In either case, unresolved emotional issues block learning and the working through necessary for a positive transition (Inglehart, 1994).

Overview of the research

The realization that a 'lifeskills approach' to the transition to independent living neglected processes central to successful development led to the formulation of the initial research questions. What follows is a description of three projects, with each subsequent project evolving out of previous findings.

First study

The first study was the evaluation of an *eight-week group intervention*, which targeted the working through of feelings associated with leaving placement for independent living (Mann-Feder & White, 1999). Eight adolescents, all of who were scheduled to leave placement within six months but who came from a range of placements (foster care, group home and residential care), were referred to the group. All participants were recruited through their social workers, following a presentation by the group leaders on the purpose and parameters of the intervention, but attendance was voluntary. The two major themes that were central to this intervention were: the *review* of the initial placement process and unresolved feelings about the past; and the *anticipating* of life in independent living with the goal of ventilating and normalizing hopes and fears. Interactive games, exercises and art activities were devised to concretize the issues and maximize self-expression. The group was evaluated both with open-ended questionnaires and videotaped interviews, just after the completion of the eight-week program.

The impact was described as both positive and significant. Youth who had participated saw the group as a source of strength and support, because it helped them to feel less alone with their feelings. Many emphasized that they wished they had been exposed to the program earlier, closer to the beginning of their transition out of care. Staff who participated were impressed with the level of engagement and self-disclosure, even among young people who had been seen by the referring workers as resistant or non-verbal. 'If anything, the need for an emotional outlet and the extent of the psychological pressure in the transition to independent living had been underestimated' (Mann-Feder & White, 1999, p. 29). At the same time, staff involved became aware of how difficult it was to face the anger and fear of the participants. It was concluded that many youth workers might in fact avoid dealing with these issues, because 'they themselves may lose hope if they see independent living as a loss rather than as an achievement' (Mann-Feder & White, 1999, p. 37).

Second study

Results of the first study underscored the need to learn more about the emotional consequences of the transition from placement to independent living. The second study went on to further explore how young people themselves experience this transition (Mann-Feder & White, 2003). Questions that emerged from the earlier project were: What is the course of the transition to independent living? How do adolescents perceive existing preparatory programs? What services do they think are lacking?

Twenty-one adolescents at different stages in the transition to independent living participated in *small focus group meetings*. Participants were recruited through their social workers and a small stipend was offered to acknowledge that the youth were being invited to share their expertise with the research team. Informed consent procedures were followed and youth were informed of their right to discontinue their involvement at any time without losing the stipend. Three types of groups were organized: groups for youth-in-care within six months of leaving (n = 8), groups for youth in transition apartments (n = 4), and groups for youth who had been discharged to independent living within the last six months (n = 9). The purpose was to solicit discussion of feelings and experiences in the transition. Open-ended questions

were used for all meetings (Krueger, 1988) and transcripts of each videotaped session were produced. All transcripts were subjected to content analysis in a step-by-step process (Vaugh, Schumm & Singub, 1996), and cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990) was used to compare groups and identify minority and majority opinions.

Results of this study suggested that there are important commonalities in experience and important differences between youth at various points in the transition to independent living. All participants stressed the needs for emotional support in the transition, but saw youth workers, not their parents, as their main support. Relationships were consistently stressed over programs, but young people also asked for a gradual transition with more hands-on experience in important skill areas.

Different feelings were stressed by youth at different points in the process. All reported initial excitement, which soon turned to ambivalence and anxiety. The groups that had already left placement reflected on the anger and disappointment that hit hard when they actually left, and they reported that this anger was lingering. The sequence was experienced as one in which the initial, happy anticipation of freedom gave way to ambivalence and then anger. As concluded in this study, the sequence of emotional events strongly resembled the initial stages of grieving (Berk, 1998).

An important finding was that of the three groups under study, the youth still in placement but anticipating discharge seemed to be the most in crisis. They expressed the greatest anxiety and had the most complex and mixed feelings about leaving. It was unclear to what extent this mirrors the normal ambivalence of youth leaving home as described in the literature on adolescence (Coleman, 1989). It also raised questions in the minds of the researchers in relation to the agency context. To what degree were the youth in placement assured of reliable support? Could it be that most placement agencies see independent living as a default option and a failure because the youth is not returning home?

Third study

These last questions highlighted the potential impact of agency culture beyond discrete programs and led the researchers to undertake the third study. A focus group was held with a *group of staff and managers* with direct experience with the transition to independence. Participants were all volunteers who had had been approached on the basis of their role in transitioning young people out of care. All were trained in a method of organizational analysis (Guerard, 1999), which focuses on how the knowledge, beliefs, and decision-making power of different parts of an organization can impact on specific mandates. The analysis is still ongoing, but some striking results have already emerged from the early discussions.

There was a strong consensus that given a current focus in North America on family reunification, that the strongest efforts are made to support a return home after placement. Independent living does appear to be a last option. Concretely, this may mean that the decision to send a youth out on their own is often made very late, after all attempts to facilitate a return home have been unsuccessful. Not only does the young person then experience this option as a failure, there is often little time to prepare.

A second theme emerging from the discussions is that placement agencies seem to have two contradictory mandates: that of *containment* and that of *social reinsertion*. In order to successfully assist youth in the transition to independent living, controls must be relaxed and containment sacrificed in service of attempting successive attempts at autonomy. Clearly, there are risks both to the youth and the community involved, especially given a tendency towards behavioural regression in the transition. In the setting where the research took place, the organizational bias seems to have been to minimize risk in favour of containment.

Lastly, it seems that in the agency context under study, that not only the youth, but their direct workers had little power of decision with regard to the timing of discharge and the availability of resources to assist in the transition. This raises important questions about the contra-

dictions inherent in trying to encourage independence when youth and their closest advocates are disempowered in the process.

Lessons learned

After five years of research into the transition to independent living, the team is left with as many questions as answers. It is clear that our knowledge, and that of the field at large, is in its infancy. In addition, the research described involved small samples drawn from a single agency in a specific urban center, and generalizations can only be made with great caution. At the same time, our findings are suggestive of specific recommendations for intervention. What follows are the most salient implications of our work to date.

In the normative process of moving into independence in late adolescence, there is pain, ambivalence and a progressive move towards autonomy. This is complicated in youth leaving care by the restimulation of unresolved issues related to placement, which in fact, may represent a significant obstacle to the successful attainment of independence. Not only do we as interveners offer little opportunity for successive attempts at leaving and refueling, the separation process is doubly difficult because of unresolved losses from the past. This in turn may block skill acquisition. It is critical that youth workers rethink approaches that do not address the feelings provoked by this transition. At the same time, residential programs that launch young people into independence need to maximize *flexibility* and *opportunities for experimenting* with autonomous functioning.

The transition from placement to independent living is a complex process for young people in placement involving definite stages, each with unique tasks and needs. As a process, it provokes anxiety and anger, and interveners must be prepared to accept regression and acting out. This acting out should not be understood as a sign of unreadiness in the transition process, rather it is typical of this transition and youth need support to work this through. They are especially in need of *consistent, supportive relationships with adults* who can adopt a non-punitive approach and normalize the expression of feelings. It may be a natural tendency for some workers to distance themselves from young people in the midst of this mourning process, because it is in fact extremely painful, but the experience of the research team is that staff who avoid these issues tend to have clients who seem unable to acknowledge powerful emotions, which in turn creates more difficulty in the discharge process.

Our programs, in focusing on family reunification, create other barriers to successful transitions to independence. Leaving placement to live on one's own must be recognized as positive option, and one that needs much *advance planning and preparation*. Not only are better programs needed, but also placement organizations need to explore the beliefs and values in their system in relation to this transition. Is independence valued? What about interdependence? Is preparation for living on one's own important for all adolescents regardless of their discharge destination and should we normalize these needs? Are youth exiting to independent living allowed to fail as part of their development or is so much structure provided that there are few opportunities to experience freedom? Do young people have choices about how and when they leave placement? This research suggests that agencies should work to empower youth early on to *participate actively in decision making* as part of their preparation to live independently.

Conclusion

Multiple levels of analysis are needed to plan and deliver effective programs to support youth in the transition from placement to independent living. On the *individual level*, each youth

needs to be considered in relation to his/her placement history, emotional status and capacity to work through the issues of terminating placement, as well as his/her capacity to learn the instrumental skills needed and engage in appropriate work or school. On a *program level*, consistent relationships are needed that promote emotional expression, experimentation with autonomy, and hands on approaches to learning relevant skill. On an *organizational level*, beliefs about the transition need to be challenged, as well as structures and procedures that disempower young people and their workers and protect them from opportunities to experiment with autonomy. More research is needed, especially research that identifies successful care leavers and commonalities between them.

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