Exploration of the youth-adult relationship in residential care

Small glimpses from a large sample of youth

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of youth living in residential care about their relationships with the youth care workers who care for them. The data come from an open-ended survey question asking youth to describe the qualities they like about their favorite youth care worker. A total of 738 youth from across 16 agencies participated, and a wide range of topics were described. Using the constant comparative method, we developed a scheme for categorizing care worker qualities and coded all responses to identify the primary themes reported by youth. Eighteen categories emerged including qualities mostly related to interactional style such as engagement, genuineness, flexi-

bility, understanding, respect, and structure. The categories endorsed by youth differed based on their gender, age, and tenure at the agency. Findings from this work can support residential care agencies' efforts to maximize their fit with the needs, preferences, and best interests of the youth they serve.

Keywords: residential care, youth-adult relationship, careworker qualities

Introduction

In the United States, the value of services for children in out-of-home care is typically evaluated based on evidence of their impact on safety, permanency, and well-being (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013a). The field has made considerable progress operationalizing these outcomes and developing a host of high quality tools to assess them (Webb, Dowd, Harden, Landsverk, & Testa, 2010). The priority on developing behavioral outcome measures is partly due the imperative within most states to demonstrate that public expenditures on out-of-home care for children yield measurable benefits (Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2004). Equally important, however, is the need to focus attention on more proximal social dynamics that programs produce around the youth in order to affect these positive outcomes (Granger, 2011; Izzo, Bradshaw, Connell, & Gambone, 2003). The *youth-adult relationship* is commonly recognized as a key mechanism through which youth-oriented services operate, and the quality of that relationship has been described as 'the active ingredient on which effectiveness of all other program elements depend' (Li & Julian, 2012, p. 163). The nature of this relationship, however, is less well-understood (Castro-Blanco & Karver, 2010), and progress on the measurement of these intermediate outcomes has been considerably slower, compared to the measurement of behavioral outcomes.

Werner and her colleagues conducted groundbreaking research identifying the characteristics and experiences of high-functioning children who thrived despite the presence of great adversity in their lives (Werner & Smith, 1992). Among the most important protective factors common to these individuals was the presence of a non-parental adult in their lives who offered unconditional acceptance, and could serve as a role model and confidant. The presence of such relationships helped to build their capacity for trust and autonomy, both crucial to the development of self-esteem and self-efficacy. These effects were stronger in males than females, but were present in both genders.

In a similar vein, the current project sought to study *high-functioning youth-adult relationships* in order to shed light on the 'protective factors' that enhance them, despite the presence of highly adverse conditions that make it difficult for these relationships to thrive. This study examines relationships between youth living in residential care and the youth care workers who provide care to them. The population of youth in residential care is particularly important to study. Despite the steady transition toward foster homes as the mode of choice for children in out-of-home care (U.S. DHHS, 2013a), congregate

care continues to play a significant role in the developmental lives of large numbers of young people. In 2012, an estimated 27,000 youth received residential care services in the United States (U.S. DHHS, 2013b). It is common for these youth to experience multiple placements, and there is great variability in the quality of care they receive across institutions, as well as instability within any given placement. Despite these and other difficulties, the time youth spend in care also constitutes a period of immense opportunity to provide corrective experiences for them. Adults in these settings have great potential to play a meaningful role in their lives, and can serve an important protective function. Moore, Morretti and Holland (1998) suggest that group care can improve opportunities for positive social development by promoting a belief in children that, despite their histories, there are adults who can provide for their social, emotional and other developmental needs. This affects their attachment representations and opens the door for healthy and satisfying relationships with both adults and peers.

The literature examining youth experiences in residential care is relatively small (Fox & Berrick, 2007). Moses (2000) conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of staff practices to develop engaged relationships with youth in care, highlighting the difficult balance between delivering standardized treatments while individualizing services to meet the unique needs of each resident. The study, however, relied solely on reports by 25 child-care workers at a single care facility. Other studies of children in residential care included relatively small samples (Gardner, 1996; Manso, Rauktis, & Boyd, 2008) or relied on retrospective reports from adults about their previous experiences in care (Schiff, 2006). Wilson and Conroy (1999) surveyed a large sample of children in out-of-home care, but included only two questions about the youth-adult relationship ('do you feel loved' and 'do you feel safe'). Residential care represented only a small proportion of their sample. A recent quantitative study by Harder, Knorth and Kalverboer (2013) offers a valuable addition to the literature, identifying a range of treatment skills and client characteristics that predict the quality of youth-adult relationships among 135 adolescents in secure residential facilities.

Research from youth service settings outside of congregate care is highly relevant as well. Freake, Barley and Kent (2007) reviewed 54 papers examining adolescent perspectives about favorable qualities of helping professionals in medical and mental health settings. The most commonly cited qualities included trustworthiness, providing helpful information and advice, listening, competence, respect, kindness, being easy to talk to, and being treated as an individual. Greeson and Bowen's (2008) interviews with youth in foster care revealed that youth consistently identified trust, love and caring, and being 'like parent and child' as important characteristics of their positive relationships with adults. Related research has examined how relationship development plays out differently depending on the characteristics, history, and needs of the young person. Studies on youth mentoring suggest that development of youth-adult relationships vary considerably with regard to youth gender (Rhodes, Lowe, Litchfield, & Walsh-Samp, 2008) and age (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Although length of time in care seems likely to influence relationship perceptions, this finding has not consist-

ently been found in the literature (DelFabbro, Barber, & Bentham, 2002; Garland, Haine, & Boxmeyer, 2007).

There seems to be widespread agreement that facilitating social, emotional, or behavioral improvement requires that professionals, regardless of degree or discipline, are able to engage youth into an effective working alliance (Schuengel & Van IJzendoorn, 2001; Walter & Petr, 2006). In the current study, we examined more closely the nature of the relationships among a large sample of youth living in group care and the youth care workers who provide direct-care services to them. This study aims to contribute to the field by providing insight from the youth perspective about the kinds of adult characteristics and interaction styles most likely to facilitate effective youth-adult relationships, and thereby improve the chances that youth can benefit from their services.

We made no explicit hypotheses, but instead took the opportunity to learn from youth, in their own words, what characteristics, practices and styles of interaction were associated with the direct-care staff whom they liked the best. We also sought to learn whether the factors considered salient to youth differed based on characteristics such as their gender, age, or length of residence at the agency.

Method

Procedure

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger evaluation being conducted to test the efficacy of the CARE program, which is described elsewhere (Holden et al., 2010). The study involved annual surveys of youth living in residential care agencies in North and South Carolina, in which they were asked to report on their perspectives and interactions with direct-care staff who provided daily care for them in their residential units. At the end of the survey, respondents answered the following two questions, which were read out loud to them by a survey administrator: 'Are there one or two staff members who are your favorites?' and an open-ended 'What makes them your favorite?'. Youth who answered 'yes' were provided as much time as they needed to write their responses. Youth were instructed that it was okay to write as much or as little as they wanted. The only restriction given was that they refrain from writing names of particular staff.

Youth were invited to participate in the survey if they were at least eight years old, were deemed by agency staff as capable of understanding and following the survey instructions, and if their parent or legal guardian provided written informed consent, which typically was obtained at admission. A member of the research team visited each agency annually for four consecutive years and met with all eligible youth at the agency. Surveys typically occurred in small groups of five to ten youth at a time without agency staff present. At each session, the administrator introduced the survey, indicating that its purpose was 'to help agencies become better places for kids to live,' that participation was voluntary, and that there would be no penalty for refusing participation. Youth did not place their names on the survey and were guaranteed that no one at their agency would see their individual responses. Only youth who provided written assent were allowed to complete the survey.

Over the course of four years, 1,014 youth from sixteen agencies were invited to participate, and 974 gave written assent and went on to complete the survey. Of those, a subset of 193 youth were surveyed two or more times. Only the first survey for each participant was included in the current study, leaving a final sample of 738 unique respondent surveys in our analytic sample.

Participants

The 738 participants were almost equally divided between males (53.6%) and females (46.4%), and ranged in age from 8 to 21 (mean age=14.3). Participants were mostly Caucasian (68.8%) or African-American (20.6%), and had resided at the agency between 15 and 2,777 days (median=159 days). About half of the youth were referred to agencies by the department of social services (50.3%), and a small number were referred through the department of juvenile justice (4.9%). Although participating agencies were not considered 'residential treatment' programs, all offered some form of counseling for emotional and behavioral problems.

Responsiveness

Of all 738 survey respondents, 597 youth (80.1%) provided a written response to the question asking about the characteristics of their favorite staff members. Non-response was significantly greater among males (24.4%) than females (11.9%), χ^2 =18.87, p<.01. Non-response, however, did not differ significantly by age, race, or length of residence at the agency. Youth who wrote a response to the 'favorite staff' question were also no more or less likely to have completed the questions on the preceding closed-ended survey questions. Thus, although our qualitative findings appear to represent girls slightly better than boys, there is no evidence of other demographic biases in the data.

Of the 597 youth who gave a written response, the responses ranged from 2 to 109 words in length, with an average length of 22 words. Nearly half (48%) wrote 20 or more words. The number of separate categories included in their responses ranged considerably. The average number of categories was 2.3. About 65% included two or fewer categories, and 28% included between three or four categories. The remaining 7% included between six and eight categories.

Development of Coding Scheme

Using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), four members of the research team independently reviewed a set of 100 surveys to identify the qualities and characteristics of youth care workers mentioned in the youth responses. Each team member independently grouped similar responses into a smaller set of categories and then met to examine and compare the categories selected. When similar categories were selected, common labels and definitions were agreed upon.

As summarized in Table 1, a total of 18 categories were derived, each representing qualities or characteristics of youth care workers that are valued by youth.

Some of these were grouped into clusters or families of similar categories. Some responses by youth were short and included only one or two categories, and other responses were

Table 1. Examples and Frequencies of Each Category regarding Favorite Staff Members

Categories of Youth Responses	Sample Quote	%
Engaged: Listens	'listens to my mind, how I feel' 'they listen well and understand'	13.1
Engaged: Meets Emotional Needs	'make me feel safe' 'encourages me and builds up my self esteem'	7.5
Engaged: Helps Resolve Problems / Teaches	'...help you find a good [solution]' 'don't just say you're 18 you figure it out ... you don't need help' 'They are able to break things down to me when I don't understand things.' 'give me things ... to make it in the future like advice'	11.7
Engaged: Meets Tangible Needs	'Buy us stuff' 'Cooks well' 'Takes us places'	11.6
Engaged: Available / Dependable / Approachable	'I can go to them for anything and they will drop what they are doing and try to help.' 'I'm not afraid of getting in trouble for things I've done in my past. When I actually talk about it to them.' 'I can actually talk to her without her saying something negative'	14.7
Engaged: NonSpecific	'always joke around with us' 'participate in things with us' 'feel free to be in our lives'	22.5
Genuine: Cares / Invested in us	'want us to succeed' 'fight for me because of what they see in me' 'they look more to the kids than to the money'	13.6
Genuine: Relationship	'I can talk to him like I'm talking to my dad' 'love you like you're their own'	13.4
Genuine: Fair / Trustworthy / Honest	'don't accuse you until they herd both stories' 'they will never hurt me in any way (conversations, or physically)' 'Show no favoritism' 'care about the kids equally' 'Give appropriate consequences for most problems' 'keeps their word'	8.9
Understanding / Can Relate	'understands how it feels to be in a group home' 'I feel like they just know exactly how I feel' '... they know what I like, and they know my persiality.'	18.8
Flexible: Tolerant / Forgiving	'aren't so tight on rules they give us room to breathe' 'don't yell in my face' 'isn't as strict about things lets us bend the rules a little' 'realize we are teenagers and we can't do it all' 'when I broke a rule he would correct me without coming down on me'	8.9
Flexible: NonSpecific	'they let me eat what i want!' 'they wake us up at six instead of 5:45 AM on school days' 'let us do more fun stuff'	6.2

Respect: Individuality / Autonomy	'not try to change me when they know its not going to happen.' 'treat me like a normal person and not someone with a broken family' 'nonjudgemental, have respect for me and my opinions' 'lets us pick out our kind of clothes … be who we want to be'	6.9
Respect: NonSpecific	'respect you and your privacy' 'made me feel like someone' '…talk to you in a respectful way when you are doing wrong'	7.2
Provides Structure	'They make sure that were doing what were supposed to do and are doing good in school and making sure that we are doing our chores' 'She keeps me in check and she wants me to do what's right.' 'prayers at night'	2.5
Adult Characteristics: Relational	'nice', 'funny', 'likes to have fun', 'always has a smile', 'easy going, laidback, and fairly easy to get along with', 'cool', 'understanding', 'loving gentle spirit'	40.9
Adult Characteristics: Similar to me	'He likes all the same things I do and he is sort of a redneck like me' 'i have common interests with them. We like the same things.' 'He has a lot of hobbies that I really like.'	2.9
Adult Characteristics: NonSpecific	'Because they are singers/song writers!' 'they know my parents' 'HIS beard Freakin rocks. Amazing with crafts… He tells great stories'	7.5

Note. Kappa coefficients were above .60 for all categories except Engaged: Tangible Needs; Genuine: Fairness, and Structure. Examples reflect verbatim responses and no spelling corrections were made.

longer and allowed for several categories to be extracted. The unit of analysis was each complete youth response. For each unit, each of the 18 categories was coded as being 'present' or 'absent' within the response.

After an initial set of categories was derived, a provisional coding scheme was developed and two coders were assigned to code a common set of 50 responses using the guide. Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960) was used to examine reliability across coders (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997). Kappa coefficients can range from 0 to 1.0, with higher values reflecting better inter-rater reliability. After comparing codes and discussing discrepancies across coders, we determined that the coding scheme was adequate, but some definitions required refinement in order to improve reliability across coders. We then repeated the process with a second set of 50 responses using the revised coding guide. For this step, Kappa coefficients across coders ranged from .50 to .80. For codes with Kappa less than .70, coders met to examine discrepancies in their coding, reached consensus on how to code those data records, and made further refinements to the coding guide. On a final set of 50 records, coders made independent ratings and we repeated pairwise reliability

analysis. Final Kappa scores ranged from .45 to .91. While reliability was acceptably high for most categories (Fleiss, 1981), three remained below .60, indicating that these categories should be interpreted with caution (see Table 1).

Results

Number and Diversity of Codes

Of those who provided any response, the average number of categories mentioned was 2.3. The mean number of categories offered by girls was significantly greater than by boys (2.6 vs. 2.1. respectively, t=5.47, p<.01), and that difference remained significant after controlling for the greater overall response length among girls. Response length and number of themes were both related to age, with youth age 11 or below writing less, and youth age 15-17 writing the most. There were no differences by race or length of residence at the agency.

Categories

Responses from youth described a range of staff qualities and characteristics, most of which were related to the adults' style of interacting with youth. Using the analytic and coding processes described above, a total of 18 categories were derived from the responses analyzed. These included five general clusters or families of categories, along with two independent categories that did not fit neatly into any cluster.

The *'Engaged' cluster* comprised six categories, all reflecting some way in which adults made a deliberate effort to interact, spend time with, or help the youth. *Engaged-Listens* was used for deliberate statements that the adult listens or makes an effort to accurately understand the youth's perspectives or concerns. *Engaged-Available* included statements that reflect the adult being available to provide assistance whenever someone needed it, or the youth being able to approach them to talk about any topic without feeling inhibition. *Engaged-Resolves/Teaches* involved statements about adults helping to solve specific problems, giving helpful advice, or teaching them and building their capacity in some way. *Engaged-Emotional Needs* was used for any statement that referenced adult efforts to improve their mood, or respond to them when they are feeling some type of emotional distress. *Engaged-Tangible Needs* involved things typically associated with custodial care, such as providing material goods, transportation, or other routine tasks of care. However, it also included many things that involve more than the minimal effort required for the job. *Engaged-NonSpecific* included generalized forms of engagement that involved efforts to interact with, help, or spend time with youth.

The *'Genuine' cluster* included three categories that in some way reflected a confidence that the adult acts out of an authentic concern for them personally and/or is dedicated to helping children. The responses in this cluster often included explicit statements indicating that staff were not motivated by self-interest or expediency. *Genuine-Invested* was assigned to statements conveying that the adult acted out of a personal, intrinsic investment in youth's development and well-being. *Genuine-Relationship* was used for statements that explicitly compared the adult or the relationship to an authentic relationship such as family or a true friendship. *Genuine-Trustworthy* was

assigned to responses that indicated that the adult could be relied upon to be fair and honest, to maintain their confidentiality, or to keep their promises.

The *'Flexible' cluster* included two categories that in some way reflected a willingness or tendency to adapt their expectations or responses to the youth's unique situation or preferences. *Flexible-Tolerant* was used for responses indicating greater allowance for youth to make mistakes or to fall short of expectations, not applying immediate or automatic consequences, and refraining from reactions that cause confrontation or escalation. *Flexible-Nonspecific* was used for statements about adults being flexible or adaptable in other situations, unrelated to transgressions.

The *'Respect' cluster* included responses reflecting acceptance of youth and validation of their intrinsic worth and right to fair treatment. *Respect-Individuality/Autonomy* was used for statements about the adult's acceptance of the child's unique characteristics, preferences, and perspectives, and their belief in the child's right to some autonomy and self-determination. *Respect-Nonspecific* was used for more generalized statements about respect, acceptance, or validation by the adult.

Understanding/Relatable was assigned to statements indicating that the adult has insight and/or experience that enables them to understand the youth's unique situation or perspective.

Structure was used for statements indicating that the adult provides clear expectations, restrictions, or guidelines that help to either keep order and peace in the home or that help ensure that youth complete their responsibilities.

The *'Adult Characteristics' cluster* involved responses that identified discrete, favorable characteristics of the adult. Typically, responses in this cluster were stated briefly and without reference to why the characteristic was valued. *Adult Characteristics-Similarity* was used for statements about the adult's similarity to the youth in some respect, and was only assigned if the response did not go on to indicate that the characteristic enabled the adult to better understand or relate to them. *Adult Characteristics-Relational* was used for descriptions of interpersonal qualities that facilitate harmonious interactions and satisfying relationships. *Adult Characteristics-Miscellaneous* was used for characteristics that had some idiosyncratic significance that could not readily be determined from the text.

We used multiple regression analysis to test whether the likelihood of youth endorsing any of the categories was related to age or length of stay. Each model controlled for response length given that the likelihood of endorsing any category was affected by the amount of text they wrote. We also conducted Chi-square tests to examine whether endorsing a given category was related to gender. As shown in Table 2, our analyses revealed significant differences for several categories.

Specifically, girls were more likely than boys to endorse Engaged-Listen, Engaged-Available, Engaged-Meets Emotional Needs, Genuine-Fair, and Respect for Individuality/Autonomy. Older youth were more likely to endorse Engaged-Available, Genuine-Invested, and Respect for Individuality/Autonomy than younger youth. Also, youth with longer tenure at the agency were more likely to endorse Genuine-Invested and were less likely to endorse Respect for Individuality/Autonomy, compared to youth with shorter tenure.

Table 2. Significant Differences in Category Frequency by Gender, Age, and Length of Stay

	Gender differences	Age differences	Length of stay differences
Engaged: Listens	χ^2=18.12, p<.01 Girls: 19.0%, Boys: 7.3%	-	-
Engaged: Available	χ^2=23.94, p<.01 Girls: 21.8%, Boys: 7.6%	B=1.01, p<.01	-
Engaged: Meets Emotional Needs	χ^2=7.45, p<.01 Girls: 10.5%, Boys: 4.6%	-	-
Genuine: Cares / Invested in us	-	B=.89, p<.01	B=63.86, p<.05
Genuine: Fair / Trustworthy	χ^2=5.11, p<.05 Girls: 11.6%, Boys: 6.3%	-	-
Respect: Individuality / Autonomy	χ^2=14.53, p<.01 Girls: 10.9%, Boys: 3.0%	B=1.14, p<.01	B=-85.30, p<.05

Discussion

The fact that good relationships are critical to working effectively with youth is a truism in our field. Maintaining good relationships can be elusive given the complex flow of events and dynamics that youth and care workers encounter together from day to day. No magic formula will ensure relationship harmony, but part of the formula must include understanding the needs and perspectives of youth, and learning from the successful relationships in their lives.

Fortunately, many youth are both willing and able to articulate those perspectives, as demonstrated in the current study. Our findings provide some insight about how youth appraise and describe their relationships with key adults in their lives. Some of the most commonly cited themes involved basic characteristics that made the adults pleasant to be around and to interact with (e.g., laid back, fun, always has a smile) and regular engagement with the youth in a variety of informal ways. Explicit statements about flexibility and respect were mentioned less frequently, though it seems likely that these may have been implied in some of the more brief responses provided (e.g., laid back, nice). In addition to these global relationship features, some more nuanced aspects of their relationships included a feeling of genuine connection ('like a real friend' or 'like my grandpa'), and the adult being able to understand or relate to one's own experience.

Many of the study's findings echo what has been reported elsewhere about relationship development between adolescents and non-parental adults. Soenen, D'Oosterlinck and Broekaert (2013) found that youth reported structure, staff availability, and respect for alone time as crucial elements of effective residential treatment. In a study by Manso et al. (2008), youth in residential care reported that their positive relationships with adults were related to the positive feelings they

experienced with them (e.g., trust, respect, caring), as well as a range of adult behaviors (e.g., problem-solving, listening, talking) and qualities (e.g., maturity, self-control). Harder et al. (2013) found that among youth in secure residential facilities, youth-adult relationship quality was related to 'treatment skills' such as clear and positive communication, conveying respect and commitment, and fitting with client needs, among others. Similarly, Zimmerman, Abraham, Reddy and Furr (2000) reported that youth in residential care valued the continuous availability of support from adult relationships, and Kendrick (2013) recently highlighted the significance to youth of feeling they are in a family-like relationship. Finally, Oetzel and Sherer (2003) indicated that therapeutic alliance with adolescents was predicted by therapists being rated as empathic, real (i.e., genuine), and having respect for privacy and autonomy.

Some of our demographic findings also have parallels in the literature on youth-adult mentoring which suggest that girls and boys bring different needs and approaches to the mentoring relationship (Rhodes, Lowe, Litchfield, & Walsh-Samp, 2008). Mentoring relationships also tended to terminate earlier for older adolescents (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) which may reflect changing developmental needs of older versus younger youth.

Limitations

A few limitations to the current study should be noted. First, all data came from youth living in agencies from two Southeastern states in the United States, and it is unclear how well our results generalize to other youth outside this geographical region. Second, the inter-rater reliabilities were low for three categories: Engaged-Tangible Needs, Genuine: Fairness, and Structure. These codes were retained for descriptive purposes, but were not included in the analyses comparing subgroups of youth. Future work is needed to further examine and refine these codes. Third, data were drawn only from written responses to one survey question and thus are somewhat limited in depth and scope. This particular method of data collection, while allowing for large-scale sampling, over-represents youth who are more competent or prolific writers and under-represents youth who may not feel as comfortable giving written responses. Interviews and focus groups would allow for probing and other strategies to elicit more in-depth responses from youth. Finally, youth responses were likely somewhat influenced by having just completed a survey that asked questions about various ways that staff might interact with them. However, it should also be noted that there were several topics raised on the survey that were not evident in their text responses, and many text responses were substantially different than the topics addressed in the survey questions. Thus, while some priming may have occurred, the response data appear to reflect a spontaneous reporting of the issues most salient to youth at the time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, youth living in group care, as in any context, must be receptive to and engaged with the adults caring for them, or there can be little hope of any meaning-

ful impact of residential services on their lives. As a corollary, adults working with these youth must have the characteristics and core competencies to engage youth into meaningful, productive relationships. Moreover, administrators must have insight about how to select appropriate staff and/or be able to prioritize their professional development efforts toward building these characteristics and competencies within their workforce (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Several models currently exist in the field to promote staff and organizational competencies for responding to the individualized needs of youth in care (Bloom, 1997; Holden, 2009; Fixsen, Phillips, & Wolf, 1978). This work will be optimized by assessing the perspectives of young residents throughout the process. The data, as well as the process itself, can serve to keep child care organizations oriented toward maximizing their 'fit' with the needs, preferences, and best interests of their most important stakeholders.

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