Growing Up Before Their Time: The Early Adultification Experiences of Homeless Young People

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1. Introduction

Approximately 1.6 million adolescents experience homelessness on a yearly basis (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011) and are often at increased risk for numerous negative outcomes, such as victimization (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce, 2004), substance use (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010) and psychological disorders (Stewart et al., 2004) that often correlate with their early family histories and current unstable living conditions. Though some young people are kicked out of their homes (Tyler & Bersani, 2008), the majority of homeless and/or runaway youth leave home in some capacity as a result of a conflicted family life (Tyler & Whitbeck, 2004). Related to both their early life experiences and premature departures from home, some young people are thrust into adult roles before they are fully prepared, such as caregiving for dependents at young ages (Burton, 2007; Kennedy, Agbenyiga, Kasiborski, & Gladden, 2010).

Adopting early adult roles, or early adultification/parentification, consists of a child or adolescent assuming adult-like traits and responsibilities, which often occurs within a family, such as providing extensive caregiving to parents or younger siblings (Burton, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). Young people who undergo early adultification oftentimes experience elevated levels of stress and psychological strain as they struggle to cope with the burden of greater responsibility (Foster, Hagan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). This is particularly salient for homeless young people given that many of them have left their family residence at an early age and now face additional stressors related to street life (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). No study to date has directly examined the experiences of homeless youth using a framework of early adultification. This is especially significant given that early adultification could be a potential precursor to leaving home as well as an outcome of running away. Understanding the processes of early adultification is necessary as it can increase the risks and challenges these young people already face both prior to and after leaving home.

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Though numerous studies have investigated the conflicted family backgrounds of homeless young people that can predict their departure from home (Tyler, Hagewen, & Melander, 2011; Shelton, Taylor, Bonner, & van den Bree, 2015) and the negative outcomes of youth homelessness (e.g., victimization, substance use) (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2004), few studies have investigated homeless young people's experiences of early adultification, which may occur both prior to and/or after they leave home. Therefore it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how many homeless youth undergo adultification based on its subjective nature. Furthermore, identifying the unique aspects surrounding young people's lives prior to and after leaving home is crucial in preventing future residential instability and in alleviating the issues that homeless young adults experience. The transitional period between adolescence and adulthood, or emerging adulthood, is also key in understanding early adultified young people's lives and how they perceive their own sense of development (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of early adultification to provide a more holistic picture of homeless young people's experiences. The findings from this study can potentially help service providers in tailoring programs for homeless youth through a better understanding of their life histories and family backgrounds.

2. Literature review

2.1. Early adultification

Childhood adultification occurs when young people perform the "'heavy lifting' in families…with the intent of meeting a specific family need," typically in the absence of guardian support (Burton, 2007, p. 331). Early adultification occurs when a young person assumes premature self-sufficiency or is forced into adult-like roles within the family before they are emotionally prepared to do so (Burton, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). These roles include acting as a primary caregiver to younger siblings or older relatives or providing critical emotional and instrumental support to a sole caregiver (Jurkovic, 1997). Though some individuals view early adultification as a positive experience (Burton, 2007; Nebbitt & Lombe, 2010), the majority of adultified young people experience heightened levels of stress and psychological strain as a result of these increased responsibilities and expectations (Foster et al., 2008).

Disruptions in family life, such as parental divorce, can drive young people into adultified roles as they attempt to provide emotional support to family members (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001). Similarly, conflicted life transitions, such as foster care, can push a young person into premature adultification (Singer & Berzin, 2015). Early adultification is related to a number of different factors, including family economic hardship, lower parental education levels and childhood caregiving roles (Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Undergoing early adultification leads some youth to enter into adult roles at young ages before they may be fully prepared to do so, resulting in life challenges such as teenage pregnancy (Kennedy et al., 2010) or independence through running away from home (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000). Early adultification is a salient process for young people and it is typically intertwined with wider familial conflict and household strain (Burton, 2007).

Exploring early adultification through the lives of homeless young people can expand understandings of their experiences both before and after they leave home, which is necessary knowledge for service providers in establishing effective interventions. That is, it is important for service providers to know the types of early adult-like roles that young people have already adopted so that interventions can specifically target these areas that may be causing some young people to feel stressed and overwhelmed. Through the premature adoption of adult-like roles, some young people may feel overburdened with and possibly resentful of their newfound responsibilities, which could lead them to leave home. Equally plausible is the fact that because homelessness itself is laden with stressors and issues of survival, young people can also undergo adultification after they leave home, such as in the development of skills that help youth successfully navigate street environments, or "street smarts" (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Finally, young people can become adultified *both* before they leave home and after they leave home, which can create increasingly complex experiences of adultification. As such, it is important to learn more about the phenomenon of early adultification to better understand young people's experiences of homelessness and how adultification processes are shaped by both their family backgrounds and the street context.

2.2. Homeless young adults

Certain young people are at higher risk of running away because of issues related to familial discord (Tyler et al., 2011) and disadvantaged communities (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Specifically, high rates of childhood abuse and neglect are often precursors to youth leaving home (Thompson et al., 2010; Tyler, 2006), along with home lives defined by poor parenting (Mallett et al., 2005). While it is necessary to identify general catalysts that prompt youth to leave home (e.g., child abuse, psychological stress), pathways into homelessness are often comprised of a combination of several influential factors that create unique circumstances for young people (Mallett et al., 2005). Homeless youths' family lives often lack a sense of crucial social support that is necessary for their well-being (Barker, 2012). Experiences of family conflict can lead to increased stress and feelings of "weathering" whereby young people feel older than their chronological ages (Foster et al., 2008). Homeless young people often report low levels of parental and caregiver monitoring and warmth, which can further contribute to their leaving home (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997).

2.3. Research questions

The present research addresses the following research question: What types of early adultification do homeless young adults undergo? Data analysis draws from responses to the following grand tour interview questions exploring young people's experiences: What was your life like growing up? Who did you live with? How did you get along with your primary caregiver(s)? Why did you leave home? What challenges do you face being homeless? Additional probing questions were asked to encourage young people to expand on particular experiences related to early adultification, such as their family relationships while growing up. The interview questions did not directly ask about early adultification so as to avoid leading participants and to allow them to interpret the questions from their own perspectives.

These questions provide insight into young adults' experiences and helped to reveal how the adoption of adult-like roles shaped their lives.

3. Design and methods

3.1. Sample and data collection

Data for the current study were obtained from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 40 (16 males; 24 females) homeless young adults, ages 19 to 21 years, in the Midwest using a convenience sampling strategy (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Age 19 was identified as the lower end of the age range based on the state context where the study was conducted, as 19 is the age of majority and these persons are deemed adults. Interviewers, who had over two years of experience working with this population, approached young people in places such as drop-in centers, shelters, as well as locating eligible respondents on the street in different metropolitan areas such as Des Moines, IA and Omaha, NE. Youth were eligible for the study if they met the age requirement and were currently homeless. *Homeless* refers to spending the previous night with a stranger, in a shelter or public place, on the street, in a hotel room, with friends (because they have no other place to go), or other places not intended as a residence (The National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). Study procedures were explained and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviewers offered agency services or referrals to all youth regardless of their decision to participate. The university Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Our sample included 24 females (60.0%) and 16 males (40.0%). Thirty-four young adults (85.0%) self-identified as heterosexual, three as gay or lesbian (7.5%), and three as bisexual (7.5%). Ages ranged from 19 to 21 years ($M = 20.17$ years). Twenty-seven respondents were White (67.5%), eight Black (20%), one Hispanic (2.5%), and four bi-racial or multi-racial (10.0%). Twenty-four young people (60%) were unemployed while 16 youth reported working at least part-time. Based on interviewer reports, 95% of young adults who were approached and who met study criteria agreed to participate. All interviews were conducted in private rooms at each locale's primary youth shelter. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, and all interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used to preserve confidentiality. Participants were paid $25 for their participation.

3.2. Data analysis

Preliminary analysis involved reading each interview transcript to gain a deeper sense of the data as a whole. We focused on the transcription sections related to interview questions on the topics of early family histories, which would best illuminate processes of early adultification. These grand tour interview questions included the following: What was your family life like growing up? Who did you live with? How did you get along with your primary caregiver(s)? Why did you leave home? What challenges do you face being homeless? Based on previous research and past experience working with homeless young adults, we approached data analysis with the general idea that homeless young people experience high levels of strain in their families of origin (Thompson et al., 2010), which

could shape their subjective experiences of adultification (Hagan & Wheaton, 1993; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009).

After the interviews were transcribed, examples of early adultification, as identified in the extant literature (Burton, 2007; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009) (e.g., caregiving, parenthood), were coded by both authors. We first utilized the method of initial coding to determine emergent themes and categories that corresponded with concepts of interest, such as young people's experiences while growing up and their lives once they had left home (Charmaz, 2014). Next, we employed focused coding to hone in on the young adults' subjective interpretations of their experiences with early adultification. Focused coding led to the development of codes related to early adultification, such as "caregiving for younger siblings." The themes that were generated emerged from the words of the respondents themselves. Thus, rather than trying to force young peoples' experiences into preconceived categories, themes were allowed to evolve naturally. The combination of initial and focused coding allows for a constructivist perspective to emphasize the participants' understandings of their lived realities and the meanings they attach to their adultified roles (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). During these coding procedures, our paper became organized around the examples of early adultification including *premature caregiving, early independence* and *parenthood*, and how these processes shaped young people's lives.

We assessed validity by building evidence for a code or theme from several individuals (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For intercoder agreement, we developed an initial coding strategy, guided by reading through the interviews as a whole, and then collaboratively established a final early adultification-coding scheme that was used for full data analysis. Following the in-depth coding of all interviews, we identified whether the authors assigned the same or different codes between text passages (Ritchie et al., 2013). Both authors coded all interviews, and in cases in which the intercoder agreement between the authors was low or discrepancies existed (less than 5% of the time), we obtained consensus through reevaluating our coding and themes in collaborative meetings. Percentage agreement was used to assess intercoder reliability based on the small number of subthemes that were coded for the "presence/absence" of the theme (i.e., premature caregiving, early independence, and parenthood; Boyatzis, 1998). We have exceptionally strong reliability given that our 95% level of agreement in coding is much higher than the 70% or greater score that is recommended for qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998). We also documented the chain of formulated interpretations throughout the data analysis process (Angen, 2000) by creating an audit trail to illustrate how codes and overall themes were constructed (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This audit trail consists of information on the multiple rounds of coding and how the codes evolved throughout the data analysis process.

4. Findings

The overarching theme of *early adultification* can be understood as a complex process surrounding young people's departures from home as many young adults cited adopting adult statuses prior to leaving home as well as during their time on the streets. The subthemes of *premature caregiving, early independence* and *parenthood* demonstrate the subjective experience of early adultification. These experiences also varied in their timing in

the young people's lives, as *premature caregiving* and *early independence* generally occurred prior to the youths leaving home, while *parenthood* typically ensued after young people left home. Running away or leaving home for the first time (often at age 13 or 14) thrusts young people into premature independence because they often described lacking the financial or emotional capacity/ability to handle this transition at such an early age. Furthermore, some youths' housed lives (e.g., premature caregiving) helped push them to leave home as they described feeling overwhelmed by the strain of caregiving responsibilities and their conflicted relationships with their own caregivers.

While leaving home, often at an early age and due to family conflict, in effect adultified all of the young adults, only 26 young adult participants had explicitly experienced specific examples of early adultification throughout their childhood and adolescence that have been identified in the general population (Jurkovic, 1997). Furthermore, all participants conceptualized the experiences of leaving home as pushing them into adult roles. The two groups (i.e. early adultified and non-adultified) were similar in terms of experiences of abuse, family conflict and instability; therefore the groups are not qualitatively different concerning the young adults' backgrounds. Some youth reported experiencing multiple different types of adultification, therefore the final themes are not mutually exclusive. Early adultification is distinguished by its timing in the young person's life, either while they were still living at home or after they had already left home. Because residential instability is oftentimes a dynamic, revolving process between housed and homeless environments (Wright, 1989), it is important to keep in mind that experiences of early adultification could span these multiple transitions as well.

4.1. Premature Caregiving

Nine young adults reported being burdened with excessive household responsibilities while growing up prior to leaving home. Family responsibilities included caregiving of younger siblings or relatives and housework that involved chores like cooking and cleaning. Other family members placed these expectations on the youth. All of the youths' experiences of premature caregiving occurred while they were living at home with family members before they exited their households, which points to the wider family issues of caregiver neglect and problematic parenting.

In describing her life with her mother prior to running away, Sara stated it was "basically taking care of my brothers and sisters all the time and never being able to do anything except going to school, work and watching my brothers and sisters." Sara soon grew resentful of these family burdens and felt that the only escape was to leave home: "I couldn't take it anymore…living underneath her [mother's] rules, her regulations, basically being the really big responsible one while my mom went out to the bars." Cindy also recalled being the primary caregiver for her younger siblings when her mother suffered from depression and financial problems: "I was pretty much cooking and cleaning and doing laundry and waking the kids up to go to school and walking them there to make sure they went." Similarly to Sara, Cindy also felt increasing emotional strain related to these caregiving responsibilities. These young women's experiences of being forced into caregiving for younger siblings created an inordinate amount of stress in their lives as they attempted to balance these

demands with other expectations, such as school. They discussed feeling overburdened with the task of caring for others when they were unprepared to do so, a sentiment that was echoed by the other young women who reported premature caregiving.

The sense of an older subjective age for Sara is captured in the way she describes her life living with her mother:

> Me being like [in] the body of an eighteen year old girl but like the mind capacity of a 40-year-old…making sure my brother took a shower, make sure my sister got her homework done and where she was at, make sure Trevor wasn't getting bullied at school.

As a result of this caregiving pressure, Sara left her mother's home and moved into an apartment with 10 other people and soon began her cycle of "move, move, move…I didn't stay at a place very regularly." This is problematic as the task of childcare is typically fraught with higher levels of stress and responsibility, a finding supported by the premature caregivers in this study. Samantha dealt with similar premature caregiving expectations, who was responsible for caring for her younger brother and doing household chores, all while coping with physical abuse from her stepmother:

> My step mom became really physical towards me and I was babysitting my brother and when she came home she claimed I hadn't changed him all day because his diaper was really wet. And I was like well I did, I changed him several times…and she was really upset, she had probably been drinking and on top of that she did crack so you know her moods was like wild. And I was standing there washing dishes and she came in and she choked me and she started hitting me with her fists and I fell down…

Following this victimization, Samantha ran away from home and soon thereafter found herself "sleeping on the streets and just kind of wandering around." These premature caregiving roles of youth could act as a precipitating factor in their exit from home to the street as a way to escape family caregiving responsibilities and household conflict.

Premature caregiving emerged as a multifaceted adultifying experience for some participants in this study, leading to varying responses from youth. The only male in this group, Joe, reported mixed feelings of both obligation and resentment towards his caregiving role: "I got three nephews…I'm like the only father figure they got…that's good practice for when the time do come." Though Joe was childless at the time of his interview, he intimated that his time with his nephews could potentially prepare him for fatherhood one day. When asked about stress he experienced on a daily basis, he replied, "I'm stressed out about my nephew crying so damn much and worried about him being a punk." While Joe's caregiver role with his nephews represented an important aspect of his life, it also placed pressure on him to succeed in positively shaping their futures. This example shows that young people can conceptualize adultified roles in a positive way.

Young adult premature caregivers also cited being burdened with extensive amounts of housework and chores in their households, which increased their daily strain levels.

Christine experienced the stresses of adulthood when she left foster care and moved back in with her physically disabled mother when she was 15:

> I got tired of taking care of her…I had to turn her and make sure she stayed clean and I had to cook and clean the house. When her nurses didn't show up, I had to do it and then I had to go to school and I was tired.

As her daughter, Christine felt obligated to care for her mother, but she quickly experienced the weathering effects of early parentification, especially when it conflicted with school responsibilities. This reversal of roles between child and parent was stressful for Christine, as she was placed in a guardianship position that runs counter to normative expectations of the parent as caregiver and the child as dependent. The stressful burdens of early adult statuses may prompt a youth to run away from home as a means of escape or undergo further adultification while living at home, such as early independence.

4.2. Early independence

In addition to some young adults facing premature caregiving responsibilities, seven youth from this sample experienced early independence in providing for their own subsistence when faced with neglectful caregiving. Five females and two males reported caring for themselves during ages ranging from 7 to 14 years while they were living at home. Though the typical arrangement of caregiving involves an adult guardian caring for a child, some young people must independently arrange for their own basic needs while they are residing in a housed environment. In essence, these young people were forced to fend for themselves in their housed environments before they left home, which could prepare them for the compulsory independence of street life.

Some youth reported that they grew up with little parental supervision and were compelled to provide for their own basic needs. When asked about her life before her parents' divorce when she lived on her grandparents' farm, Michelle stated, "We'd play around normal life," which all changed when Michelle moved back in with her mother. As an adolescent, she consistently found herself home alone while her mother was working and her mother's boyfriend was drinking at a bar. She described her experience in the following way: "From the time I was 11 [years old] I started raising myself, cooking, cleaning, doing my own laundry." In this form of early adultification, youth are faced with the task of providing for themselves with little guidance or supervision from adults. Adding to this issue of early independence, Michelle also shared a conflicted relationship with her stepfather, in that she endured physical abuse "every time he was drinking" and that she "couldn't say anything. Everything I did started an argument." Michelle's membership in a blended family household enhanced her early adulthood through increasing her burden of early independence as well as exacerbating familial strain and conflict.

Other young adults' transitions to premature self-sufficiency were characterized by wider, oftentimes severe, familial conflict. Denise, for example, linked her transition to early independence to her abusive mother: "I first got pretty much on my own when I was seven, because there was like a report that she was beating us and it was true." At this point, Denise recalled, she entered into foster care and cycled between foster homes, the street and various family members' homes, including her abusive biological mother's residence, until she was

emancipated from foster care at the age of 18, highlighting a complex pattern of early independence spanning both housed and homeless contexts. In addition to her experiences with physical abuse and foster care, Denise's biological mother also kicked her out on several occasions, beginning when she was only 14, and there was a lack of maternal monitoring throughout her residentially unstable adolescence: "My mom she would like go out and stay with one of her boyfriends and leave me and my brother there [at home]." This example of early independence underscores the multifaceted experiences of adultification and how they can be tied to numerous different familial issues.

In a similar vein, Robyn underwent early independence during her transition into foster care and found herself alone with her siblings after her mother abandoned them:

> My mom had left and went to California and she left all eight of us kids at home in the projects alone. A guy came to the door looking for her with a gun and so we were scared and we all went to our next door neighbor's house and she had been calling Child Protective Services or whatever. I guess the last time was the last straw and we all got taken away that night. Thank God for that, because I was trying to feed, dress, and do all this stuff for myself and I was just lost. I mean, damn, I was only 6 years old.

Robyn's experience was closely tied to broader familial conflict and caregiver neglect, as well, which is evident in her description of her mother's drug and legal issues: "She went to the pen[itentiary] like two different times for selling crack to an undercover cop." Both Denise and Robyn's accounts of premature independence were linked to other problematic issues present in their families, showing how early adultification must be considered within the context of family dynamics.

For Debbie, maternal work obligations made her the primary homemaker and caregiver for herself and her father. Debbie recounted the following conflict between her parents: "My mom was a working mom, she worked full-time…She was always gone, well me I would just kind of stay home and cook my own dinner and my dad would get mad because dinner wasn't ready for him." In this way, Debbie found herself in the middle of the conflict between her parents when she was expected to cook for her father and act in ways that modeled spousal behavior. Debbie's experience was further exacerbated by the conflicts she witnessed between her parents related to a dual-earner household: "They just fought about everything…my dad would always work and then come home and then expect dinner done…my mom was a working woman, she worked full-time." Being responsible for oneself transforms into a conflicted experience when a young adult is further expected to perform caregiving and housekeeping chores for other family members simultaneously.

Some young people, on the other hand, transformed the stress of early independence into a positive experience. Both males in this group, Brian and Jody, viewed their experiences in independence as rewarding. When asked about his life experiences up to the present, Brian replied:

> Just thinking about my life, just thinking about how much crap I've been through…
> I raised myself most of my life and I'm a damn good person. I'm a damn strong
> person and the fact that I have to work to bust my balls every day to get everything

that I get makes me a stronger person, makes me a better person than I could ever imagine being.

Relatedly, Jody proudly declared, "I've been taking care of myself since I was like 14," when asked how he managed street life on a daily basis. As a teenager, Jody reported, "I was forced to go there [detention center] because my dad didn't want to fucking raise a child that's all." Despite their experiences of forced early independence growing up, these young men's coping abilities (e.g., self-efficacy) could potentially better prepare them for the conflicts of street life as they were inclined to interpret their struggles as character building.

4.3. Parenthood

Thirteen young adults experienced early adultification by being thrust into traditional markers of adulthood once they had left home: pregnancy and/or parenthood. For young adults with a history of homelessness, experiencing pregnancy and parenthood at a young age could prove difficult if they have limited resources and few social supports available. Becoming a parent at an early age was a diverse experience for young mothers and fathers, consisting of a variety of emotions and interpretations in young people's responses. Therefore, the combined burden of residential instability and parenthood can work to exacerbate young adults' insecure living conditions and severely worsen the stresses they experience on a daily basis within the street environment.

Being both a young mother and a runaway created incredibly stressful everyday experiences. For Jennifer, the transition from being a runaway to being a homeless parent required a shift in perspective on what she considered her greatest obstacles: "When I was on the run, it was 'What am I going to eat you know today or tomorrow whatever.' Now it's like, I don't know, just hoping I can raise my baby boy up." Similarly, when asked about the daily struggles she faced living on the street, Candy stated, "Not having a job. Being with my son all the time and not getting a break from him. Feeling like I'm going to hurt him because he annoys me because he's a brat." Clearly, Candy felt resentment towards her son and her admission of potentially abusing her son highlights the lack of healthy coping resources Candy possesses, which was tempered by her unstable living conditions and her lack of resources. In this way, a young homeless mother is forced to not only face the stress of providing for her own needs, but also the concern of being unable to properly care for her child.

Vanessa also experienced the stress of pending early parenthood, but staved it off by opting for an abortion when she was living on the street. Following the abortion, she remembered that she "stayed depressed for like four months" and because of the psychological trauma she "would never do it again." Similarly, Danielle suffered from high levels of stress related to parenthood when Child Protective Services removed her children when she was deemed an unfit parent. In response to queries about her present life satisfaction, Danielle stated that she has "stress every day cuz I can't see my kids every day, and [the] fact that I have no place to stay of my own, [because of the] fact of being pregnant again." These young women's experiences show that being simultaneously responsible for one's own survival and that of a child while living on the street makes the harsh reality of early parenthood and adultification especially salient and difficult to manage.

Though the experience of early motherhood is rife with stressors for homeless youth, some may interpret their status as personally redeeming. These young people transformed the risk of early parenthood into a resiliency-building experience. Stacey, for example, reported that becoming pregnant and concern for her unborn child encouraged her to abandon unhealthy habits, such as drug use, and gave her a more positive outlook on life:

> I know getting pregnant changed me…I've seen how a lot of babies end up when their mom is gone off of drugs when their mom is pregnant…I want my baby to be healthy and I don't want my baby taken away from me…I know I have to stay off of drugs because I've got to keep my appointments and take care of myself and the baby.

Despite the stressors of being simultaneously homeless and pregnant, Stacey positively viewed her pending motherhood as motivation to stop using harmful substances. Positive lifestyle changes can coincide with pregnancy, and this response is shown in Stacey's case where she went off drugs because of the potential adverse effects that drug use could have on her unborn child.

Young men varied in their reactions to early parenthood. Similar to some of his female counterparts, Jody viewed fatherhood as a positive milestone in his life: "I just had a baby girl you know and I was so happy about it cuz I actually accomplished something." Despite his own personal gratification in having a daughter, Jody also reported that he lacked familial support for being a father: "No congratulations or I'm happy for you [from his family], just something to put me down." However, Jody also conveyed that he believed his homeless experience gave him an upper hand in life: "I have something that very few people possess. I have book smarts and I have street smarts…in how the game runs on the street." Jody's words highlight how young parenthood can be an especially conflicted emotional experience in how it shapes their lives as young adults.

Some young people, on the other hand, tell distinctly negative stories of early parenthood while living on the street. Stressful relations characterized Tom's experience of becoming a father, stemming from conflicts with the mother of his child, rather than with the baby. According to Tom, "She [his baby's mother] supposedly got a restraining order on me… Now she's got full custody of the baby. She won't tell me where she [is] at." From this account, Tom had little control over his baby's fate and most likely had little to no visitation rights. Tom is somewhat optimistic about the future as he indicates, "I'm hoping I can get back what I had…see my child more than what I do [now].". As these experiences illustrate, the mistimed events characterizing early adultification can be crucial influences that shape life on the street for these young adults.

5. Discussion

This qualitative study of the early adultification of homeless young adults identified issues that young people undergo as a result of experiences for which they did not feel prepared, both before they left home and/or once they had exited their households. Distinctions were also evident in the subthemes of early adultification of premature caregiving, early independence and parenthood, showing that not all young people experienced adultification

in the same way. Family conflict was very common for these young people, such as caregiver abuse and neglect, and strained home lives in the context of early adultification may have been one of the reasons these young adults fled from their homes. Furthermore, early parenthood elicited complex responses from young parents ranging from negative to positive. Young adults also experienced these transitions earlier than is considered normative, such as being a caregiver and/or leaving home, which will likely have implications for their economic and emotional well-being as they further transition into adulthood. Exploring young people's experiences of early adultification is critical as it can exacerbate the stressors and challenges these young people already face and create further barriers to their successful transition into residential stability.

Experiences of early adultification must also be considered in the context of timing in the young people's lives. For example, some youths' encounters with early adultification occurred prior to leaving home, such as in the cases of premature caregiving and early independence. Thus, early adultification may be one contributing factor in their decision to leave home, which is evidenced in youths' reports that they "couldn't take it anymore." Though not stated directly by young people in this study, the experience of homelessness itself can also be conceptualized as an extreme example of early independence. Parenthood, meanwhile, was a marker of adulthood that young adults in this study discussed within the context of the street, though it may have been one of the reasons for their leaving home, as many young women are kicked out of their family homes for becoming pregnant (Saewyc, 2003). Therefore, events occurring before youth leave home as well as after they are on the street can strongly impact their future trajectories and opportunities (Elder, 1998; Kennedy et al., 2010).

Homelessness is an experience that further complicates adjustments into later life stages by increasing risks for health problems, unhealthy relationships and economic difficulties (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002). For example, homeless young adults emphasized premature caregiving roles that included taking care of themselves as well as other family members such as siblings or parents in their households of origin. Parental neglect may be one such type of family conflict that can lead to adultification, especially if youth lack support and guidance from their primary caregivers (Thompson et al., 2010). Young people responsible for younger siblings or relatives may be more likely to have children at a younger age if they feel prepared for the task of parenthood (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Furthermore, young adults engaging in risky sexual behavior may then be at greater risk for sexual exploitation and victimization both in a housed residence and on the street (Tyler et al., 2004). Early adultification could therefore complicate homeless young people's lives by exposing them to normative adult roles before they may be emotionally and materially prepared.

Additionally, it is possible that several social factors could uniquely shape early adultification. Gender and class may be two lenses through which to interpret the complexity of early adultification among homeless young people. Females may be more likely to report early adult responsibilities traditionally associated with femininity and women's roles, as young girls are pressured to engage in domestic caretaking roles in economically deprived families (Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). In terms of class, some young women's accounts of parenthood mirror the experiences of low-income young mothers and

their belief that "children provide motivation and purpose in a life stalled by uncertainty and failure" (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 172). Homeless young women may be at a higher risk of economic instability as a result of the feminization of poverty, especially single mothers with young children (Hays, 2003). Mothers can find it even more difficult to provide for their children if they are unable to secure stable employment, housing and other necessities, which can also hinder attachment patterns with children as was shown in Candy's troubled relationship with her son. Complicated experiences with pregnancy and parenthood are particularly salient for many young homeless women who are already struggling to survive on their own (Begun, 2015). Some young men recounted an absence of familial support in their transition to parenting and poor relations with their children's mother. One possible explanation is that a lack of maturity, social support and positive role models, such as their own parents (Scharf & Mayseless, 2011), contribute to young men's inability to take responsibility for their children. If an intimate relationship is characterized by abuse and conflict, a young man may be unable to form a positive relationship with his child, as was shown in the case of Tom who lost custody of his son and had limited contact with him.

Homelessness and economic insecurity combine to create lifelong adverse effects, which often span generations (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999), and these experiences can potentially hinder the ability of young men and women to successfully emerge into culturally normative adult roles (Arnett, 1998). Homeless young adults disproportionately come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997), which often exacerbates wider familial discord such as poor parenting and abuse (Tyler & Melander, 2010). Homeless young people's families are also often characterized by high rates of caregiver and family member substance abuse and criminal activity (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Early adultification is also highly prevalent among youth who come from families that are struggling economically (Burton, 2007; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009), as young people are expected to shoulder the weight of household struggles (Roy, Messina, Smith, & Waters, 2014). High levels of family discord, including chronic neglect, combined with a lack of economic resources can severely inhibit caregivers' ability to reduce burdens of early adultification on young people, especially in terms of caregiving for other family members.

Finally, the concepts of race and culture may also help explain the diverse experiences of early adultification among homeless young people, though we lacked the variation to examine differences across race and ethnicity in this study. For example, interpretations of caregiver neglect can be closely tied to cultural differences, whereby encouraging more adult-like roles and promoting self-sufficiency at earlier ages can be viewed as normative, rather than as maltreatment, within particular subpopulations. Expectations of young adult caregiving and household responsibilities may be stronger in families of color where the sense of family obligation and duty is more pronounced (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). Future studies should explore the racialized components of early adultification, specifically within the context of young people's early departure from home.

Roles associated with being a caregiver, parent or achieving early independence require an advanced level of maturation, resilience and life experience to be carried out successfully (Arnett, 1998). By prematurely adopting adult statuses and roles, young people are not afforded sufficient time to transition into these stages, but are abruptly thrust into them with

little chance to properly adjust (Jurkovic, 1997). It is possible that many young adults' experiences with early adultification was one of the main reasons for them leaving home by making them feel more resilient in their ability to survive on the street or view running away as an escape. Our findings revealed that many young people who experienced premature caregiving and independence framed these roles as overwhelming in addition to their other life responsibilities. The combined effects of early adultification and leaving home can thus create inordinate levels of everyday stress for young people.

On the other hand, some young people in this study found experiences of early adultification to be rewarding. By being an early caregiver, some young people prided themselves on having an influential role in younger siblings' or family members' lives, though this was the exception to the norm. For example, pending parenthood helped some young adults modify their lifestyles by reducing risky behavior such as substance use and imbuing the youth with a sense of accomplishment. The present study found young people's encounters with early adultification to be multi-faceted, as homeless young adults simultaneously viewed their experiences both negatively and positively.

5.1. Limitations

While this study contributes to our understanding of young people's early life experiences, it is not without limitations. First, some of the theme sample sizes were somewhat small (i.e. early independence), as not all study youth explicitly reported experiencing early adultification. This issue limits the findings' generalizability to the larger population of runaway and homeless young adults. However, early adultification may have been more salient for some young people compared to others if they chose to share it in their interview. This study is also limited by its lack of distinction between running away and becoming homeless. As such, the complexity of early adultification for these young people is a fruitful area for future research, such as comparing and contrasting the experiences of youth with runaway experiences, those who are homeless and young people who ran away and became homeless. The findings are also limited by retrospective accounts of past adultification occurrences, which may have been flawed by lapses in memory (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Also, only having access to the young adults' perspectives presents the possibility that they may have misreported some past events, though previous research has highlighted the agreement between homeless youth and caregiver reports of household conflict (Whitbeck et al., 1997). While young people may feel overburdened with caregiving responsibility, his or her caregiver may believe that these were reasonable expectations.

5.2. Conclusion

Findings from this study point to a variety of future considerations for both scholars and policymakers. By knowing more about processes of early adultification, service providers can use this information to specifically tailor programs with these issues in mind. Future research should explore the dynamics of early adultification across various social locations, such as gender, class and race. Young adults may encounter early adultified roles in distinct ways and thus could develop varying resilience strategies in response to their experiences of conflict and trauma (Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001). For example, homeless young adults who are parents require resources for themselves and their children, and these

young parents may seek to balance assistance with their own autonomy. Services, including counseling and childcare, can provide homeless young adults with crucial life skills that can foster their individual development and promote their future life chances (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004).

Furthermore, premature caregiving, early independence and parenthood are not the only instances of early adultification that young people undergo. For example, young people may also experience early adultification through working a full-time job (Lenz-Rashid, 2006) or dropping out of school (Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). Given the array of backgrounds of these young people, service providers would benefit from a detailed history of young adults' early experiences to determine their skill sets and to further tailor services to homeless young people's specific life circumstances. A consideration for the timing of the development of early adultified roles is critical in establishing intervention programs for young people both before they leave home and once they exit their households. For example, youth who feel more adultified may be resistant to using services if they value their independence and are unwilling to seek out help. Service providers should take into consideration the experiences of early adultified youth by working to tailor programs to runaway and homeless youth who wish to maintain their autonomy by practicing inclusivity and being non-judgmental towards youths' lifestyles (Darbyshire, Muir-Cochrane, Fereday, Jureidini, & Drummond, 2006; French, Reardon, & Smith, 2003). Furthermore, family-based interventions can take into account wider family issues in providing aid to youth who leave home (Milburn et al., 2012), especially in light of early adultification's linkage to household conflict and discord.

Acknowledgement

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Highlights for "Growing Up Before Their Time: The Early Adultification Experiences of Homeless Young People"

- Early adultification among 40 homeless youth is qualitatively explored.

- *Premature caregiving* burdened participants with familial responsibility.

- *Early independence* forced young people to provide for their own needs.

- *Parenthood* thrust young people into the adult role of childcare once they left home.