



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Child Youth Serv Rev. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2021 January 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Child Youth Serv Rev. 2020 January ; 108: . doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.104626.

Perspectives of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care on Relationship Strength and Closeness in their Support Networks

Jared Israel Best, MSW^{*}, Jennifer E. Blakeslee, PhD, MSW

Portland State University

Abstract

Research, practice, and policy focus on the importance of relationships with young people aging out of foster care, especially relational permanency. While previous research has examined these relationships, typically with mentors, foster parents, or biological parents, few have examined the quality of strong network ties within support networks. This study incorporated a network approach to understanding how youth discussed strong ties and defined closeness in relationships. Qualities of strong ties included stability, multidimensional support, advocacy, honesty and genuineness, commonalities, trust, and small interconnected core networks. Understanding qualities youth value in close relationships may help service providers in supporting and enhancing relational permanency from multiple sources of support for youth aging out of the foster care system.

Keywords

foster care; aging out; relational permanency; social support; support network; network ties

Introduction

Background

Of the nearly 438,000 youth in foster care in the United States, over 20,000 age out every year (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), and research demonstrates a range of problematic outcomes for such youth, ranging from lack of educational attainment and unstable employment to substance use and incarceration. (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006). In an effort to mitigate problematic outcomes, the Independent Living Program (ILP) provides services to prepare young people for the transition out of foster care, focusing on educational and housing support, employment support, and financial literacy, with the goal of promoting independence and self-sufficiency. Nearly 46,000 of youth in care are ages 16 to 21 and thus eligible for

^{*}Corresponding author: Jared Best, Portland State University, School of Social Work, 1600 SE 4th Ave # 900, Portland, OR, 97201, jibest@pdx.edu.

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services through the ILP, but only half of eligible youth access these services (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017; Okpych, 2015).

Additionally, child welfare services for youth have begun to focus on social skill-building and relational permanency. Historically, permanency has meant permanent living arrangements for children and youth in foster care, including reunification, adoption, and guardianship, with foster care placement assumed to be a temporary intervention (Maluccio & Fein, 1983). More recently, relational aspects of permanency have focused on the child welfare system's role in maintaining and/or establishing permanent ties with concerned and caring adults and/or families (Pine, Spath, Werrbach, Jenson, & Kerman, 2009). Relational permanence is thus defined as enduring, long-term connections, typically with caring adults (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013; Salazar et al., 2018).

In an effort to establish relational permanence, services often promote commitments between a youth and a youth-identified adult with the goal of establishing lifelong, supportive, kin-like relationships (Foster Club, 2010). However, research also demonstrates a connection to just one adult is insufficient to meet the relational and support needs of youth, instead suggesting a network approach to identifying multiple domains of support as more predictive of outcomes (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano., 2011; Blakeslee, 2015; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Thus, research has more recently focused on social support networks, including youth perspectives of those networks (e.g. Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Samuels, 2008; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). Networks of youth who experience more successful transitions include multiple strong network ties as well as a variety of caring, supportive adults with whom relational permanency has been more established (Ahrens et al, 2011; Samuels, 2008; Singer, Berzin, & Hokansen, 2013).

Connections to supportive adults provide a variety of benefits for youth aging out of care (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Perry, 2006). For many youth, mentoring relationships with adults represent one way of meeting support and relational needs (Ahrens et al., 2008; 2011; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Munson et al., 2010). However, youth themselves identify a wide range of formal and informal relationships with adults and others from whom they might seek support (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Samuels, 2008). For example, some research suggests better outcomes for youth who demonstrated greater organizational involvement as well as multiple close friendships (Jones, 2013).

Robust social networks include a range of informal and formal relationships of varying characteristics and strength, with strong ties offering more multidimensional support, regardless of the domain in which that relationship is situated (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Social network theory posits that tie strength includes duration and frequency of contact as well as homophily (similarities or shared traits) (Borgatti & Lopez-Kidwell, 2011; Louch, 2000; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Among youth in foster care, tie strength has been correlated with psychological well-being, and even provides people with access to other social networks (Ahrens et al., 2011; Jones, 2013; Perry, 2006).

Arguably, closeness as a relationship quality is the best indicator of tie strength within a social network (Marsden & Campbell, 1984), and youth in care typically feel more supported by and connected to network members with whom they feel close (Jones, 2013). Yet very little research has explored youth perspectives regarding relationship closeness itself, which remains a nebulous and undefined term to describe particularly meaningful relationships or strong ties; although concordant and clearly intertwined, closeness and tie strength remain distinct theoretical concepts. Closeness is often understood as a particular quality, in addition to types of support and roles of network members, such as informal mentors or parental-like figures. However, closeness can also be understood as a broader dimension impacted by other qualities like support provision or social roles. Increased understanding can guide service providers to focus on helping to identify and support strong network ties based on the qualities of those relationships, and more specific understandings of closeness as a quality of these ties, as defined by youth. Knowing what constitutes closeness (and thus meaningful relationships) for youth can guide more targeted approaches to support closer relationships between youth and various network members, as well enhance less close relationships and strengthen overall support networks and core networks, or a smaller core of stable, family-like relationships (Blakeslee & Keller, 2018; Degenne & Lebeaux, 2005).

Current Study

Building on prior work (Blakeslee & Best, 2019), this study takes a network approach to understanding strong ties from youth perspectives as well identifying multiple sources of support and meaningful relationships. This approach represents an effort to move beyond prescriptive understandings of relational permanence, such as relationships with a singular supportive and caring adult, parent-like figure, or mentor. By casting a wider net of identifying supportive relationships, this study aims to focus on the quality of the relationships identified as strong ties rather than roles or types of support. While previous research discusses various types of support, this study focuses on the qualities of relationships youth identify in support network members with whom they have strong ties as well as the ties themselves. This research is guided by two main questions: (1) What do youth aging out of foster care identify as qualities of close relationships and strong network ties? (2) How do youth aging out of foster care define those qualities? The purpose of asking these questions is to understand relational needs of youth aging out of foster care. Youth perspectives on closer, more supportive relationships may offer opportunities for enhancing and supporting more meaningful relational permanence for youth aging out of foster care from a variety of network members.

Methods

Recruitment

Youth ages 16 through 20 who were in foster care at the time of recruitment were eligible to participate. We employed a purposive approach to sampling and recruitment; recruitment occurred in three phases and yielded a total of 22 participants (see Blakeslee & Best, 2019). First, youth attending a statewide ILP conference focused on post-secondary career preparation and planning, participated in a social support network mapping workshop and

self-selected to participate. Next, in an effort to increase a more regionally diverse sample, the Oregon Department of Human Services Child Welfare (DHS) generated a random sample list of youth who, according to age, were preparing to age out of foster care. Lastly, halfway through data collection, co-investigators recruited for demographic and geographic diversity through ILP service providers to ensure a representative statewide sample. Approximately 55% of youth we contacted agreed to participate and all participants provided written consent, in addition to DHS caseworkers' consent to contact all potential participants from each phase. All participants received a \$40 gift card for participating.

Participants

Participants were ages 16 to 20 with an average age of 17.68 years. Half of participants were from metropolitan or urban areas, while five were from mid-sized cities, and five lived in rural settings (determined by population density per square mile). Twelve participants identified as female and ten identified as male. Eight participants stated they identified as part of the LGBTQ community, 17 were currently involved in ILP services, and youth-reported time in placement ranged from eight months to over ten years with an average time in care of between four and five years. Participants described their own race and/or ethnicity with exactly half (11) identified as White and/or Caucasian. Six identified as "mixed," two identified as Black and/or African American, and three identified as another race/ethnicity. At the time of the interview, 12 youth were living in a foster home (four of those were kin or biological families), four were living in residential facilities, three were living with friends or friends' parents (uncertified foster homes), one lived with roommates, one lived in college student housing, and one was living in a homeless shelter. To ensure anonymity, the interviewer assigned pseudonyms for each participant.

Data Collection

Support network mapping.—The support network map in this study is based on Blakeslee's (2015) network map and outlined in further detail by Blakeslee and Best (2019). Prior to meeting participants, one intern completed a support network map and participated in an interview while another intern, who had experienced aging out of foster care, observed the interview and provided feedback regarding the map and interview questions. This process served as a pilot interview to aid in revising the map and developing the interview protocol. The research team revised the interview protocol following each interview from the first phase of recruitment

Participants completed support network maps and semi-structured, in-person interviews (see Blakeslee & Best, 2019). On each map, youth identified people who had played a significant role in their lives in the past year in four broad areas: family, friends, school/work, and community. Youth drew lines between their initials in the center of the map and the people on their maps to indicate strength of relationships. Thicker lines indicated strong relationships, narrow lines indicated neutral relationships, and dotted lines represented weak relationships. Youth also drew symbols next to each network member to indicate types of support each person provided. Types of support included emotional support, concrete support, and informational. Lastly youth circled individuals with whom they had daily or almost daily contact then drew interconnecting lines between people who knew each other.

Interviews.—After completing individual support network maps, participants responded to a series of questions starting with what stood out to them or what they saw when they looked at their maps. Depending on responses and in varying order, the interview proceeded with questions regarding individual relationships, particularly relationship strength and support (e.g. “What makes a relationship strong,” “What type of support do you have the most of?”). While discussing strong network ties, participants consistently indicated closeness and trust as markers of strong relationships. Interviewers asked participants to define closeness and trust in their own words with questions such as what makes a relationship close, how they defined closeness in a relationship, how they defined trust, what trust looked like to them, and how network members earned their trust. Next youth discussed areas in which they received specific types of support, answered questions about interconnection (“How do these people know each other?”), and discussed their ideal maps (“What would your ideal map look like?”), including obstacles in the way of their ideal maps and services that may or may not exist to support ideal maps. In the final phase of the interview, participants discussed how they anticipated future maps would be composed either a year from the time of the interview or upon exiting care, depending on proximity to exiting (i.e. age). Participants also identified chosen family, older adult role models, and anyone who might be an informal mentor or like an older sibling, aunt, uncle, or grandparent. Participants ended with final thoughts for DHS or anything else they wanted the interviewer to know about their support network maps. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 45 minutes to nearly two and a half hours, with the average length between one and one- and one-half hours.

Analysis

Professional transcription services transcribed every interview, including one interview with a Spanish-speaking participant and interpreter; both the Spanish and English portions of this interview were transcribed in their original languages and a professional transcriber and translator then translated the Spanish to English for the purposes of coding. Two interns verified the remaining 21 transcriptions while listening to the recorded interviews and correcting typographical errors. Coders then uploaded transcripts into ATLAS.ti 7 software and developed a codebook using theoretical thematic analysis, a deductive approach driven by research and interview questions using a particular theoretical lens (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding in this case followed a support network theoretical framework (Blakeslee, 2015; Blakeslee & Keller, 2018; Blakeslee & Best, 2019), including extensive coding of relationship characteristics, which are the focus of this study. The initial codebook was based on broad themes identified in preliminary coding of the first half of transcribed interviews as well as research aims and broad interview questions. Three coders coded one interview to refine and expand the codebook. Next two coders primary coded two interviews each then secondary coded each other’s primary coded interviews. Coders then met to discuss commonalities, discrepancies, and further refine the codebook to ensure inter-rater reliability. Coders repeated this process until each transcript was both primary and secondary coded by the same two coders and both agreed on all assigned codes and quotations for the entire dataset. Thus, the development of codes was an iterative process in which the researchers revised existing codes and identified new codes until reaching a point of consensus and saturation. To address the current study’s research questions, analysis

identified themes specifically related to youth-identified close relationships and strong network ties.

Results

Results build on previous findings (Blakeslee & Best, 2019) outlining the utility of support network analysis in identifying network-level dimensions of foster youth support networks through systematic network mapping. Findings reflect three broad themes of strong network ties with each theme consisting of two to three subthemes: multidimensional support including emotional, concrete, and informational supports; qualities of strong ties including stability and trust; and qualities of close network members including commonalities, honesty and genuineness, and advocacy. The following sections will use language referring to closeness or close relationships to reflect the language participants used based on how the interviewer framed the mapping procedure. Language referring to network ties, however, reflects the research design and conceptual framework of this study. Thus, language used to describe closeness and language used to describe qualities of strong network ties, though related, remain conceptually distinct.

Closeness and thus strength of network ties, for many participants, was earned through time, reliability, maintaining confidentiality, reciprocity of sharing, and providing consistent emotional support. Closeness also included moments of vulnerability, whether that meant participants asking for particular types of support or the proximity and presence of network members during trauma, transition, or other types of network disruption. Closeness also included advocacy, championing, and youth-led approaches. Participants who felt network members advocated for them, championed their goals, and promoted the participant's active involvement in their own case management and service provision, also readily identified these network members as people with whom they shared much closer relationships. Lastly, while trust was a quality of strong network ties, participants also used the same language to define trust as they did closeness in relationships, indicating some overlap between themes.

Multidimensional Support

Emotional Support.—Participants identified emotional support, including demonstrations of care and concern, as paramount in defining closeness and identifying close relationships. Indeed, participants cited emotional support as one of the most important components of their maps, generally stating they felt they had enough emotional support, but also noting it was a type of support they wish they had more of. Thus, network members who provided this support in ways participants felt were genuine and freely given were members with whom participants felt particularly close and connected, representing strong ties. Amari, a 17-year-old White female living in a foster home with several other youth, said regarding her caseworker, “She’s always there. She wants the best for me,” and, of her counselor, “[She] just, always has my back. She always listens.” Amy, a 19-year-old White and Native American female living in a metro area, had a support network consisting almost primarily of paid professionals and service providers. Regarding a director of a local organization, Amy stated, “This person is much more emotionally invested in me and my well-being than anyone else.”

Emotional support was often intricately connected with other types of support such as informational support (offering advice) and included active listening, being available, and not betraying participants' confidences. Matt, an Italian and Native American male living in a boy's residential program, also had a support network comprised entirely of staff, stated:

Yeah, all the people that I have my strongest relationships with... give me emotional support. So they're sort of like people I can go to for when I have questions, but also when I need like, someone to talk to.

Many participants stated network members who were available and accessible to participants when participants needed to talk to someone were members with whom participants had the closest relationships. Most of these same participants also reported strong ties with members in whom they felt they could confide. Matt spoke generally about relationships with this type of quality, "... I can like, really talk to [them] about my problems and not be afraid of, like what they're gonna say... I trust them with the deeper things I have to say." Some participants also specifically identified mental health support as a component of emotional support inherent in strong ties. Oscar, a 19-year-old Latino male, came into foster care after immigrating from Mexico. Being separated from his family and the consequences of being undocumented negatively impacted Oscar's health. Oscar identified formal service providers, including his lawyer and probation officer, as closer relationships that supported his mental health, "I think that they have helped me, supporting with my mental health, which allowed me to move forward. They were all committed to helping me." Thalia, an 18-year-old female who identified as mixed ("Mexican, Black, White, Native..."), said of her principal at school, "We have a deep relationship. Like very close... I ended up very suicidal. He really got me out of it."

Some participants identified special circumstances, such as mandatory reporting, but strongly preferred to confide in members who would not "blab" or "snitch" even if their roles as formal supports and service providers required them to do so. Confiding and confidence was also strongly associated with trust (see Trust and Reciprocity).

Emotional support also referred to connection. For many participants, these factors contributed to a sense or gut feeling of connection and closeness. While this quality was mostly inarticulable, these participants easily identified network members with whom they shared this connection. Luca, a 20-year-old White male who had been staying in a homeless shelter, stated:

...you understand people's feelings... it's like being able to talk to them about anything or just being able to go to them and have... a decent conversation with them... It's like I feel that emotional connection, but it's not really always explainable. You can't really explain that sort of connection,

and, "When I think of like a connection, I think of it like as an emotional connection."

Concrete Support.—Other types of support were also factors in distinguishing strong ties. In addition to providing emotional support, "being there" often meant providing concrete support, such as transportation, housing, food, and other tangible types of support. Amanda, a 19-year-old Native American female identified her caseworker as a person who

provided this type of support, saying, “She’s just kind of there like if I need something, like if something goes wrong or if I have to go to court for a yearly court thing.” Even if this type of support was part of the role of the network member, such as a foster parent providing housing or caseworker providing a bus pass, participants did not consider this an entitlement, but rather an act of generosity, especially when network members expended more than the expected amount of energy to provide this support. Jessica, a 17-year-old Jewish female living with her aunt and uncle (who were also her foster parents) expressed that even though she lived with them, concrete support did not seem like an entitlement, but rather an act of generosity, stating, “They have no problem like, inviting me to go to dinner with them or like, like getting me things if I need them... They’ve been a really good resource and, and I mean, I’m pretty close to them.”

Network members on whom participants could rely during vulnerable periods and particularly during transitions were often cited among the strongest ties, such that “*being there*” also meant ensuring participants’ basic needs were met in addition to being emotional supports. Reagan, a 16-year-old white female, came into care from another state after her mother died and her uncle placed her in a drug rehabilitation facility. Reagan said of her CASA (court appointed special advocate), “She’s just... very supportive and gives me what she can.” Justin, a 17-year-old Caucasian male living in a foster home with one other foster youth (also a participant of this study), said when asked what stood out to him about his map as a whole, “There’s just constant care and my needs are met.”

Informational Support.—Information in the form of guidance and advice was also a common component of strong ties. Advice was the most typical type of this support, including advice regarding future goals, relationships, and various other burgeoning skills related to emergence into adulthood. James, a 16-year-old White male who was living in the same residential facility as Matt, stated regarding his younger sister, “She’s more of a person that I can just go to and say, hey, I’m kind of struggling. Is there any advice you can give me...?” Jessica frequently discussed the multidimensional support she received from her aunt and uncle and, more specifically, regarding informational support, “They kind of just let me do my own thing, but they’re also there to like, guide me.”

One such area about which participants sought guidance was relationships and relational skill building, including advice regarding romantic relationships with partners/significant others. Multiple participants identified times of transition as disruptive to the stability and longevity of relationships and thus felt they lacked skills in building and maintaining meaningful relationships. Some participants depended on network members with whom they felt close to provide modeling of supportive and healthy relationships, as well as helping them to navigate factors such as conflict that tended to characterize participants’ weaker ties. Several of these participants felt that strong network ties provided them the opportunity to practice relationship skills and address deficits in terms of skills and the sizes of networks. For example, Amanda talked about her struggle with her biological mother and the reversal in roles she experienced with her. Amanda also said she had the opportunity to practice healthier and more appropriate roles while living with her foster parents, with whom she was still very close, saying, “When I was in foster care, I learned how to not do that and just have like, a normal mother-daughter relationship with her... through one of my foster moms,”

and, "... just building relationships with caseworkers and ILP workers... that's helped me a lot... it kind of helps me practice, you know, returning the relationship in a good way."

Qualities of Strong Ties

Stability.—Stability in relationships was the most salient theme of closeness and strong ties. This theme manifested in a variety of ways. First, stability in relationships meant both longevity and duration of those relationships. Many participants reported network members who had been in their lives the longest were strong ties, especially network members who had been in participants' lives at the point of coming into care or during other particularly traumatic events that disrupted network maps. Amari articulated this when discussing her caseworker, "[My caseworker's] always been there for me. She's been my caseworker since the beginning of time," as well as Matt, who spoke about his residential program case manager, "... she's worked here longer than I've actually been here. So she's been here for a while. Um, so I've known her a lot – as long as I've been here."

Participants who stated they felt specific network members were more likely to be on future maps allowed themselves to feel closer to these network members. Gabe, a 20-year-old Black/African-American male who was living in student housing relied on a core group of friends for most of his support needs, saying of them, "They're... pretty close like family. I see [them] every single day. And... he'll probably be my best man on my wedding." James, however, was isolated from chosen peers by virtue of being placed in a residential facility and relied on formal service providers for those needs, specifically his ILP worker. When asked about what he thought his map might look like in the future, James stated, "[My ILP worker] will probably still be around, but I'll have built a stronger relationship with him."

Participants often identified stability and duration of relationships during traumatic transitions as demonstrations of loyalty in that network members who participants could trust to "stick around" were seen as more loyal and thus these relationships were stable and secure. Stability was also defined as regular contact. Network members with whom participants had regular contact, sometimes just by virtue of living together, by virtue of network members investing time as a demonstration of loyalty, or by virtue of contact and regular communication, were closer than network members whose contact was intermittent or inconsistent. These participants saw regular contact, like loyalty, as a demonstration of reliability. The network members that participants saw as reliable were usually the same members with whom participants reported strong ties. Carla, a White, 20-year-old female college student living with roommates, felt particularly close to a former foster parent, saying, "I talk to her every day. If not, go see her," and Kai, a 17-year-old Black and White male said regarding his caseworker, "I still call her every day so she knows I'm alive and stuff... [she]is the only one who really checks up on me every day." Ila, a 17-year-old African American female, summed up stability as both duration and communication, stating, "What makes them close? ... length of time and just communicating."

In addition to the contribution of stability to close relationships and strong network ties, instability due to repeated disruption, loss, and betrayal also impacted the opportunities for and access to closeness that once characterized some relationships. In describing disruption, Matt shared regarding the former stepfather with whom he played video games, "He was a

great man. He just couldn't stay... It just wouldn't work out." Kai talked about a brother with whom he was once close, but no longer, "He just disappeared on me when he got older. Soon as he got grown, he disappeared on me... Before foster care, he was my brother though and we lived together for a whole 15 years." Jessica detailed the loss of her relationship with her mother that followed the disclosure of abuse perpetrated by a family friend, in which her mother sided with this family friend, stating:

I would love to have a relationship with my mom and, I mean, in my heart, I've already forgiven her for all the vile things that she said about me...we used to have a good relationship and I miss that.

Trust and Reciprocity.—Over half of the participants mentioned trust either as a component or intimately correlated with strong ties ("... there has to be trust there"). Thalia spoke at some length about her boyfriend, who she said was her biggest support and thus closest relationship, stating:

I'm talking about every way possible. He's not always able to come meet with me, but he's there to listen, he tells me advice, he tells me the truth advice, he tells me what the best thing to do, um, he tells me things, even things sometimes that I probably don't wanna hear. He'll sit there and tell me 'cause he knows it's gonna help me in the future – very honest... trustworthy.

There was considerable overlap with or at least a relationship between themes of strong ties and definitions of trust. Trust, like closeness, included stability of relationships. Participants typically trusted network members with whom relationships demonstrated duration and longevity, network members who were described as more reliable, and network members with whom participants had regular contact. Wyatt, a 17-year-old White male, lived in the same foster home as Justin. Both referred to their foster caregivers as their parents (i.e., mom and dad) and both, because of experiences with families of origin, needed network members to demonstrate trustworthiness. Wyatt said, regarding his network in general, "The people on this map are the people that I trust... showed that they weren't ever going to leave me. They were actually there for me." Many of these same participants also trusted network members who provided the most emotional support and with whom participants felt connected. For example, Amari stated, "They're people I can trust with telling them something and I can go to when I'm really upset."

Emotional support and connection often meant participants could confide in these members, these members were more genuine, honest and direct, and these participants shared similar traits and interests with members they trusted more. Ila, whose major support came from school staff, said she understood sometimes staff had to communicate with each other, but regarding confiding in a particular former teacher with whom Ila felt close, she stated, "He'll say, 'This is between me and you, nobody else has to know'." Brianna, a 19-year-old Caucasian female elaborated on the close relationship she had with a friend, "He's just really interested in like being my friend... he doesn't have any expectations from me. He doesn't have any ulterior motive." Additionally, trust was also reciprocal, in that participants had to demonstrate they were also trustworthy. Reagan illustrated this idea, stating "... kind of people being there for each other and not just a one-way street, and also there as to be trust

there and like, they, you have to know they care I guess. Trust was also representative of deeper, emotional and inarticulable connections, or a “gut feeling.” Amanda described this as, “just kind of like a feeling I have with people.” Trusted network members also held participants accountable and were honest, direct, and genuine.

Many participants felt the strength of ties and closeness in relationships were often due to mutuality and reciprocity and depended on participants providing similar types of support or even possessing similar qualities. For example, participants felt it was important to be genuine and honest and valued providing multidimensional support and “being there for each other and not just a one-way street” (Reagan, quoted above). Similarly, relationships were close or ties were strong not only because participants could confide in network members, but also because network members could confide in participants. Participants saw their participation in these relationships as both a reasonable and desirable attribute of strong ties and close relationships.

Some participants were particularly deliberate regarding trust, which in turn impacted network composition. These participants, typically male, kept smaller networks because previous experiences inhibited them from trusting many people easily. Wyatt stated, “I keep a very tight circle... Because you’re least likely to get let down... I know people can’t be trusted.” These participants also viewed smaller networks as easier to surveil, in that members would be less likely to betray them because participants had more opportunities to monitor people due to the overall size of the network. Wyatt shared, “It’s easier to keep an eye on them that way... to make sure that they don’t fuck me over.” Kai said “I don’t have that many people, but all the people I have are close.” Justin stated, “... we’re all close and we don’t let outsiders in.”

Characteristics of Close Network Members

Commonalities.—Multiple participants identified similar personality traits, identities, qualities (specifically humor), and interests as contributing to closeness in relationships. Jessica clarified, “[It’s] the level of comfort that you have with someone, how much your personalities work well together, um, if you have a lot in common, or if you have different interests that work well together.” Reagan shared regarding her grandmother, “[We] are both crafty and like, have a lot of goals and stuff... and like, are kind of overachievers.” For some participants, like Matt, this shared interest was simpler. He spoke of the brief, but close relationship he had with his former stepfather, stating, “...we played video games together. So we had a good relationship.”

Youth also felt sharing qualities like humor as well as traits, identities and interests contributed to these specific network members knowing participants on a deeper level. Participants felt these network members had an innate knowledge of participants, without necessarily identifying tangible or definable benefits of the relationship that may have otherwise indicated closeness (Amari: “[It’s] just like a bond that I’ve had”). Commonalities also included shared life experiences.

I felt like I wanted to... try and be friends with her because she’s like, just got hit really hard with anxiety and stuff and has lost a family member, so I felt like you

know, ‘I could really connect with you. We should hang out,’ and I guess we just kind of hit it off and she’s like, one of my best friends... (Reagan).

Participants expressed that network members with whom they shared some commonality understood them better, thus making the relationship closer.

Honesty and Genuineness.—Some participants also identified specific qualities of relationships or network members that contributed to relationship closeness. Participants experienced more closeness with people they felt were genuine and honest as well as members who were understanding and nonjudgmental, thus allowing participants to be themselves and thus be genuine in return.

Several participants appreciated transparent communication in which they were held accountable, mostly from former supports they felt were “real” with them. Amari talked in detail about the closeness she felt with her counselor because of this quality, “She doesn’t like sugar coat things. Like, she’ll tell me things straight up, like... ‘That’s not right’ and then she’ll listen to me and she’s honest with me... She calls me on my crap all the time.” James talked about qualities he looked for in a close friend, including this kind of honesty, “A true friend actually holds you accountable and actually tells people when something’s wrong and does what’s morally right.” In fact, participants stated while they preferred this type of communication, they also respected this communication when they felt it was nonjudgmental (Reagan, “I could be myself in front of her. Like, I can be goofy and speak my mind without her, like, being uh judgmental or anything...”), often meaning network members who communicated more directly and transparently also genuinely supported participants’ choices and goals. Thus, relationships were closer, particularly with formal supports, when those people promoted youth-led approaches to decision making and goals (see Advocacy).

Lastly, participants often described unpaid and informal supports as closer relationships by virtue of offering support voluntarily and not being paid to do so. Removing financial incentive seemed to make relationships more authentic. Amy, again whose network was almost entirely service providers said, “She’s the type of person who’s not just doing her job. She actually gives a shit,” while Amari spoke more about her caseworker, “[She] just does whatever she can. I mean, she really does her job. She doesn’t just do her job... she puts all of her into it. Like she actually cares about, genuinely cares about people she works for,” and Gabe’s summation about his own caseworker was, “She loves her job... That’s what it comes down to.”

Sometimes roles, including organizational barriers that relegated network members to specific and limited purposes, prevented honesty and genuineness in relationships. Participants felt these relationships were not supposed to be close. James talked about multiple barriers he faced to being close with residential staff:

I mean, we’re not overly close ‘cause that’d be unprofessional... It’s a professional boundary that they are not allowed to cross... I have stronger relationships with people who are closer to me than people who are just there because of circumstance,

and Amy who, despite the composition of her map, still felt supported in certain contexts, regardless of the limitations imposed by narrowly defined roles or organizational norms:

... there's a difference between someone being concerned about me because they're paid to do that and like, that's their job [and] someone who cares about me because I'm a person that they care about.

Advocacy.—Another form of support that contributed to closeness in relationships was advocacy, which manifested in multiple ways. Participants who felt network members advocated for them out of protectiveness felt closer to these network members (Reagan, regarding her caseworker: "... when somebody does me wrong, she's like, 'My mama bear instincts are kicking in right now'"). Network members who identified areas of need for participants and advocated for those needs were also typically closer relationships than with other network members. Lastly, advocacy manifested as championing participants' goals. Thus, network members, particularly formal supports and service providers who incorporated youth-led approaches in case management, practice, and service provision by "respecting what the person wishes" were typically the closest relationships and by whom participants felt the most supported. Feeling heard, supported, empowered, and offered autonomy strengthened connections across all networks. These participants felt network members who advocated for and championed participants' goals and thus incorporated youth-led approaches to case management or service planning knew participants better than other network members. By virtue of understanding and supporting participants' goals, participants felt closer to these network members (Thalia, regarding her principal: "... I'm very excited that he actually has control of my schooling 'cause he actually knows what I wanna be...").

Discussion

This study used a support network mapping approach to identify various key players, including strong ties, in the support networks of young people aging out of foster care. Participants shared understandings of qualities of strong ties and core networks as well as qualities of network members with whom they had strong ties and who provided them with consistent, multidimensional support. Multidimensional support almost always included emotional support in addition to one other type of support and sometimes all three types of support. Stability, including longevity, as well as emotional support were the most salient themes participants discussed when identifying strong network ties. Other types of support, such as informational support, including guidance, advice, and relational support, as well as concrete support, such as helping participants meet basic needs, strengthened ties. Strong ties with network members also included those with whom participants shared something in common, such as interests, traits, or life experience, as well those who were honest and genuine and advocated for participants. Many participants discussed having smaller support networks, typically due to disruption, and stated that a strong tie was what warranted inclusion on network maps. Lastly, youth discussed trust as both a component of strong ties as well as several themes related to closeness that also indicated trust, such as stability, emotional support, and honesty.

This study echoed previous research asserting that stability was an important component of strong ties in the support networks of foster youth (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Previous research distinguished longevity as a distinct theme of supportive relationships among youth in care (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Munson et al., 2010; Perry, 2006), where this strengthened relationships due to the depth of knowledge network members gained about youth over a long period of time. While studies also singled out consistency and contact (Munson et al., 2010), this study included those as components of stable relationships as well as longevity. Thus, stability was a broader theme that reflected both length of time as well as sustained communication over that length of time.

This project also demonstrated three different types of support outlined in previous research as an integral component of strong ties and, more specifically, close relationships (Munson et al. 2010; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). While emotional support was the second most frequently discussed theme, informational and concrete support were also significant in identifying closeness with network members who provided broad support. Included in informational support was relational guidance and skill building, also confirming other research asserting this need for young people aging out of foster care (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Additionally, themes of honesty, genuineness, and commonalities echo prior research identifying authenticity and shared characteristics as important relationship qualities for youth in care (Ahrens et al., 2011; Munson et al., 2010). Indeed, studies of groups and personal networks have long identified such commonalities, or homophily, as both a trait of strong ties as well as a factor in the potential for integration of network members into core networks (Louch, 2000). Commonalities in this study included shared experiences, interests, and identities and also highlighted the importance of honest, authentic communication as well as shared communication styles, including humor (Ahrens et al., 2011). While humor was not a distinct theme in this project, several participants highlighted humor as an important and meaningful example of shared communication styles. Another facet of communication was confidentiality, which emerged as related to trust in this and other studies (e.g., Munson et al., 2010).

Lastly, some participants in this study discussed having smaller networks due to a variety of reasons. In such cases, typically only strong ties warranted inclusion in these support networks. Thus, participants were intentional about the size of their networks and, similar to other research (e.g. Cunningham & Diversi, 2013), may have also been intentional about cutting ties, especially considering past relational trauma and difficulty trusting other people. In this study, maintaining smaller networks may also have facilitated establishing strong network ties, particularly for participants with considerable disruption and trauma related to abuse and neglect or toxicity in relationships. This was typically due to interconnection and greater feelings of closeness to network members who knew and worked with multiple other network members.

Implications

While this study reiterates and reinforces many themes found in existing literature about youth in foster care and supportive relationships in general, it also contributes to a dearth of

literature that analyzes support networks of foster youth in transition. Allowing youth to identify a variety of network members as supportive, including peers, siblings, or significant others, challenges the current focus and privileging of relationships with singular sources of support, such as parent-like figures or mentors, which may be insufficient to meet the relational or support needs of youth aging out of foster care. This study seeks to center youth perspectives regarding qualities of meaningful relationships, including informal and peer supports, as opposed to relationships of a more transactional nature (i.e. who offers which type of support) from the perspective of researchers and service providers.

Current practice and policy recommends that youth aging out of foster care establish permanent relationships with at least one caring, supportive adult, which can impact youth outcomes during transition (e.g., Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010). However, this study incorporates a network approach to relational permanency and is informed by research that argues examining only one relationship, particularly in terms of outcomes, is a limitation of previous research (Munson & McMillen, 2009). In fact, research demonstrates that support from one domain is not enough and that having support from multiple domains is significantly predictive of positively impacting outcomes, particularly, psychological distress (Perry, 2006). Additionally, in previous research, youth identified a median of two adults as significant supports within their networks (Ahrens et al., 2011). While most participants in this study could identify at least one adult who filled a parent-like role and provided multidimensional support, participants expressed relying on multiple network members in a variety of roles and differentially in terms of support as more valuable than one particular adult figure. Thus, a more holistic examination of supportive relationships, particularly relationships youth identify as close, may help prevent poor outcomes experienced by the population of youth aging out of foster care. Service providers might employ network mapping, particularly during times of network disruption or in an effort to help youth clarify histories of loss and reconnect with previously strong network ties or to identify strong network ties and thus opportunities for relational permanency.

Additionally, youth include both formal supports, such as caseworkers and other service providers, as well as informal supports, including peers, significant others, and both chosen families and families of origin, as meaningful and equally integral parts of support networks. Because youth value genuineness and reciprocity in relationships, this offers compelling support for more relational approaches to working with youth in foster care. Indeed, when supportive adults or mentors shared with or confided in youth, this had implications for the quality of these relationships, which previous research suggest may impact the delivery of services (Munson et al., 2010). While providing services to support and strengthen networks, formal service providers often find themselves as central members of these networks. Thus, relational approaches to working with young people can provide young people opportunities for secure attachment and relational skill building as well as models for mutually supportive, relationships. This, in addition to the importance of shared qualities or experiences, may also have implications for the receipt of those services. This attends to larger systems and organizational issues in which service users may benefit from receiving services from service providers with whom they share certain qualities, such as racial or ethnic identities or even lived experience.

This study and others (e.g. Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010) suggest that supporting relationships youth identify as meaningful can positively impact outcomes for transition-aged youth. Relational permanency planning may include understanding perspectives regarding relationships, including the quality of relationships with members of support networks. A failure to assess the quality of these relationships, especially from the youth perspective, may impact the stability of entire networks during transition out of care. This understanding, support, and incorporation of youth perspectives could translate as allowing youth to identify relationships in which they would like to invest, including contact with family members and the opportunity to spend time with chosen peers and significant others. For example, allowing youth in residential settings more opportunities to interact with strong ties from networks prior to entering residential settings may have a profound impact on the potential for relational permanency both upon exiting residential care and also after aging out of the foster care system. While some researchers contend that youth cannot accurately discern or assess the quality of their own relationships (Collins et al., 2010), allowing youth to identify close relationships may positively impact both youth involvement and investment in case management and transition planning, which in turn yields more favorable outcomes for these youth. This can also ensure the stability of relationships with support network members and reinforce strong network ties. Thus, it would behoove both researchers and service providers to understand qualities of supportive relationships as defined by youth in an effort to ensure both relational permanency as well as general network stability.

Limitations

While the sample of this research study was diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and LGBTQ identities, the sample was selected by convenience and only from the state of Oregon. Furthermore, this study did not address the potential impact of identity on network ties and relationships, though some of this might be inferred in the section discussing commonalities. Despite the variety of regions in which participants lived, this sample may not have been representative of a larger sample either on the state or national levels. Second, data was collected from each participant at only one point in time, which does not account for network disruption or transformation within the sample. Third, the original purpose of this study was to understand how services and service providers could facilitate and/or enhance youth's support networks. However, the focus quickly expanded after interviewing participants and learning about the impact of individual relationships on network composition and stability. Future studies will further investigate the factors that contributed to network disruptions and gather rich data regarding the intentionality behind smaller networks or how those networks differed in size and composition from typical networks of the general population of youth. Lastly, the mapping procedure, including identifying strength of ties and types of support was prescriptive and only somewhat descriptive. In other words, interviewers provided participants with language regarding types of support as well as ways to distinguish strength in ties, such as thick, narrow, and dotted lines. While we felt this would ensure more uniformity in the mapping procedure across participants thus allowing for a more reliable analysis, future research may offer participants the opportunity to articulate these features in their own words.

Conclusion

This paper explores the perspectives of youth in foster care regarding strong network ties and close relationships. Findings range from multidimensional support to qualities regarding support network structure and qualities of support network members, respectively. Results reflect previous literature and support a social network framework for understanding the relational needs of youth transitioning out of foster care. Most salient findings of closeness and strong network ties include stability and emotional support. Findings regarding stability may offer direction for service provision to include contextual factors, such as stable educational settings or proximity to kin, during transition and support needs offer a compelling argument for more relational approaches to youth work, especially regarding the loss of formal supports upon aging out. Findings also reflect the importance of multidimensional support from a variety of network roles and domains and that one caring supportive adult, while integral to networks, could not possibly meet the varied relational needs of youth aging out of foster care.

Current policy and practice focus on the goal of permanency for youth aging out of care, which has historically meant permanent living situations. Contemporary understandings of permanency for this population typically mean relational permanency, or a lifelong connection to a caring and supportive adult. Research demonstrates multiple types of support from a range of close relationships and strong network ties ensure favorable outcomes, including permanency. Thus, a social network framework with an understanding of the quality of strong network ties, including closeness as defined by youth, can provide direction for policy and practice in ensuring permanency goals for youth who age out of the foster care system by more intentionally addressing relational and support needs related to permanency outcomes.

Funding acknowledgement:

Preparation of this article was supported in part by funding from the National Institutes of Health Award Number UL1GM118964, administered by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

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- Network-level analysis helps identify dimensions of foster youth support networks
- Strong network ties include multidimensional support, stability, and trust
- Close relationships include commonalities, honesty and genuineness, and advocacy
- Understanding qualities of relationships enhances networks and supports permanency