Experiences and Expectations of Adolescents Who Live in Group Homes: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: The goal of this study was to investigate the experiences and future expectations of adolescents who lived in group-homes (state or private residences of children or adolescents who cannot live with their families). A qualitative design utilizing a phenomenological approach was utilized. Eight adolescents who lived in state group-homes, and had a mild disability or depression, were interviewed. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed based on the common sub-themes and major themes that emerged from the data: "Interpersonal Relationships" and "Preparing for Adulthood". Under the first major theme, participants focused on their feelings and experiences after removal from their biological homes, their relationships with their families of origin, peers, and caregivers, as well as their perceptions of their group-homes. Under the second major theme participants focused on their career aspirations, preparation for the future, and their present need for support from adults. In conclusion, adolescents living in group-homes who experienced major stressful life events, including living with a disability or with depression, seemed to show remarkable resiliency and positive aspirations for their future.
Key words: group-homes, adolescents with mild disabilities or depression, resiliency, qualitative research.

In contemporary American society, not all children and adolescents live with their biological family. Every day, the Child Welfare System in the United States (U.S.) is entrusted with the care of over 400,000 children through foster homes, including group-homes or other out-of-home arrangements (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2010). For example, in the state of Florida, there are between 9,000 and 10,000 children who are removed from their homes annually because they experience neglect or abuse at the hands of a family member (Our Kids of Miami-Dade / Monroe, 2013). Many of these children and adolescents live temporarily or permanently in distinct settings, including but not limited to group-homes and foster care single-family homes. Some of them spend their entire years, from birth to 18, living in state custody and are moved through the system, living in different settings as they age.

A group-home is a private or state residence for children or young people who cannot live with their family; typically, there are at least four but no more than six residents in a group-home,and there is at least one trained caregiver there 24 hours a day. A foster care single family home refers to a family where the minor is placed, normally through the government or a social service agency. Children who live in group-homes are older and tend to have more problems than those who live with their relatives or in foster care single-family homes (Barth, 2002). One of the justifications for placing children in group-homes is that their behavior is substantially worse than could be managed in foster care single-familyhomes.

Unfortunately, youth who exit the Child Welfare System at age 18 often do not fare well as adults (My First Place, 2013). They are prone to become more involved with the court system by engaging in risky criminal behaviors in an attempt to develop survival skills, using illegal substances, and interacting with dysfunctional peers. They suffer from feelings of depression, suicidal thoughts, and other identified mental health disorders (Barth, 2002).

Although some studies focused on the views of foster and/or adopted children and adolescents living in family-like environments (Barth, 2002), few investigated the experiences of youth who live in group-homes (Hill, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of adolescents in group-homes who had a mild disability (e.g., learning disabilities) or depression. This research focused on this group of adolescents, since it has

been found that a substantial percentage of youth in group- homes have disabilities or suffer from depression (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

To understand how youth perceived their experiences and what they expected for their future, a qualitative research, using a phenomenological approach, was implemented. This approach allowed an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Data for this study were collected through individual in-depth interviews with the participants. Using a semi-structured qualitative interview, eight adolescents receiving supported housing through the Child Welfare Department were asked to describe their past and present experiences living in group-homes and their expectations for their future. In this study, group-homes referred only to settings where there are four or more youth in one placement.

Methods

Sampling:Typical case sampling was used to select the participants.Typical case sampling is used in qualitative research to describe average-like cases to people unfamiliar with the phenomenon studied (Patton, 2002). In this research, the typical characteristics of the intended sample were that the adolescents had to have lived in a group-home for at least two months in the past year and had a mild disability or depression. Participants included eight adolescents, ages 15 through 17; six females and two males. Six participants were African Americans and two were Hispanics (one of them defined herself as White Cuban). One participant had conduct disorders, one had a learning disability and conduct disorder, and the other six had depression, which in a few cases was combined with another condition (e.g., Obsessive Compulsive Disorder).

Participants were interviewed individually in their group-homes or schools for about 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed and interpreted by the researcher, using primarily the phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research is the study of essences discovered among lived experiences of people who share a phenomenon. Essences are core meanings mutually understood through a commonly shared experience (Patton, 2002).

Analysis

Coding of the data was performed using a manual content approach. After reading each transcript three or four times, the transcripts were color-coded. The responses of the participants were grouped together by each question to have a visual and clear representation of the data. This allowed for a view of all the responses given for each question, as well as knowing which participant gave each response. Once responses across participants were grouped, they were thoroughly examined for commonalities or similar content. Examining the commonalities for each question allowed the researcher to identify patterns and themes.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and themes in adolescents' experiences and expectations for their future. The responses were examined and reexamined for recurring issues. During this process, exact and similar words, expressions, or ideas across participants were grouped together into sub-themes based on their common content. Sub-themes that had a common issue running through them were collapsed to form a major theme. Thus, various sub-themes together formed a major theme. The sub-themes that were grouped under the broader, more abstract major themes were discussed with two professional researchers, who also verified whether participants' responses were correctly classified into the sub-themes and themes.

Results

Two major themes emerged; the first one was "Interpersonal Relationships". Sub-themes subsumed under that theme were: "Leaving the Nest", "Communication with Immediate Family", "Peer Relationships", "Relationships with Caregivers", and "The Group-Home as a <Home>".

The second major theme was "Preparing for Adulthood", and its sub-themes included "Career Aspirations", "Transitioning into Adulthood", and "Understanding and Support".

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships constituted a central issue expressed by all the participants, whether they were referring to familial relationships, peer relationships, or relationships with caregivers. In the following report, the quotations keep the original words of the participant, in their colloquial language.

Leaving the Nest:

Participants seemed to suffer from homesickness at various times and levels, no matter how well they were treated at their new residence, the group-home. According to a female participant, *"Things would be a whole lot better if I was with my family, because I would be with them…"* And one of the two males in the study stated, *"Things are better now in this home. We have clothes to wear and lots of food. Yeah, they're better here, but not as good cause I miss home."*

Communication with Immediate Family:

One key reason youth run away from foster care placements is to be with family and/or friends (Pergamit & Ernst, 2011). It appears that one thing that kept the youth from running away from the group-homes was their ability to visit family members often at the families' homes. All the participants communicated with their family members on a frequent basis. Most of them received weekend passes and were able to visit with extended family members during the weekend.

Participants' communication with their family referred many times to their relationships with their siblings, and many of them considered themselves as the primary caregivers of their siblings. As one female said, *"I had to make sure that she ate. Make sure she had clothes on her back. Make sure her homework was done..."* She spoke of times she would not eat so her sister could. Another stated she took the bulk of her monthly allowance given to her by the state to help her brother pay for his first year of college.

Peer Relationships:

Although some youths reported having friendships with other youths in the home, several voiced challenges of getting along with peers in their group home. Participants complained about fighting, bullying, stealing, or rudeness. One female participant explained that there were physical altercations among the female youth in her home, as well as constant harassment from other females. As another female stated, *"This is the first group home I ever been in with rude people,"* and an additional one said, *"These girls, sometimes it goes from picking [on me] to jealousy or just to be spiteful. It varies."*

The issue of respect by others, particularly by peers, was embedded in the peer relationships sub-theme. One of the femalesubjects felt she was disrespected because: "… *I guess I felt disrespected because they used to talk about me and stuff. I guess cause of the smell".* Another described why she did not feel respected: "No *respect. By certain people, yes. They used to always make fun of me, cause I was white. They picked on me. "*

Relationships with Caregivers:

While half of the youths expressed that some caregivers were good role models, the other half stated that none of the caregivers were good role models. One female subject stated that one of the caregivers at her group-home stood out as a role model, because she *"would approach you and talk to you with respect."* One male subject said that his caregiver was a good role model because he *"helps us with school and gives me money."* However, a female participant said that one caregiver in particular was "*fake, gossiped, and talked about everybody behind their backs."*

Curfews and rules was one of the complaints expressed by the participants. The only two males interviewed responded that the thing they liked least about the group-home and the caregivers was the curfew and the rules. A female participant had a similar perspective saying, *"Sometimes they follow the rules too much. ... You got new staff, come in, they just go by every rule, and it's just so aggravating cause it's a lot of rules."*

<u>The Group-Home as a "Home"</u>:

Participants were asked about the similarities between their experiences in their biological homes and in the group-home. One of the females explained that dinners together and worshipping together reminded her of living in her biological home. Another commented: *"When I first got here, no, I didn't like it. But, since I was here for a long time, then yeah, I like it. They got T.V, movies I can go watch, I got my phone, and I can go outside. It's kids there, so, it's kinda like my grandma house. I could walk in the kitchen, if I want, and all that stuff."* A male participant said that it is the same because *"you have to go to school, they make sure you eat good, and they love the kids...."*, and a female stated, *"Things are better now in this home. We have clothes to wear and lots of food."*

The majority perceived the group-home as a place that provided them independence and autonomy. They were pleased they were permitted to carry their cell phones with them. As one of the participants stated, "*They allow you to have your phone. They don't tell you what time to turn it in or nothing like that. It's basically like you independent here."*

Preparing for Adulthood

This represented the second major theme that emerged from participants' responses.

<u>Career Aspirations</u>:

Youths in foster care graduate at lower rates and are less likely to complete high school than their non-foster care peers are (RHEFC, 2014). However, in this study, all participants had career plans for their immediate future. They stated they planned to go to college when they graduate and most of them had big aspirations (being a lawyer, a pediatrician, etc.), which may have represented wishful thinking at this point in their lives. A female participant said: *"I want to be a lawyer for child abuse, or a veterinarian, or something like Humane Society. But, I don't wanna charge people to get the shots and stuff."*

<u>Transitioning into Adulthood</u>:

Participants were asked about how they will manage once they aged out of the foster care system. The responses were extremely positive. All of them felt they would be able to take care of themselves once they were no longer living in a group-home. Respondents spoke of finding jobs, receiving career training, or living with family and friends after graduation. A female responded: *I could live on my own right now, but when it comes down to rent and stuff, I don't think I can, unless I'm living with a family member or someone that I could only pay like half the rent."*

<u>Understanding and Support</u>:

Youths provided suggestions of what adults could do differently today to ensure they have a good life now. A female participant stated, *"I would like group homes to make it like a family setting. Be strict, but not too strict. Don't run a group home like the military. Listen to the kids' suggestions. "* Another stated, *"Now I'm becoming an adult myself so there's not much you really can do, but just give good advice, and try to help me not make mistakes."* An additional female said: *I don't think you guys can do anything. I think it's up to me at the end of the day. I think you guys do your best to put me in a home that's going to help me advance in life, and everything else is pretty much up to me."*

Many respondents mentioned the importance of adults' support to help them prepare for their future. One of the females suggested: *"Talk to us and every time you hear something about the economy or jobs and stuff like that, let us know. Inform us, have classes with us".* Other participants wanted assistance with finding employment, mentoring to help them stay on track, pushing them harder, teaching them how to be more independent, and providing them classes on writing resumes.

Discussion

A central issue in this research was the importance of interpersonal relationships between the adolescents and other peers, family members, and caregivers. These results may indicate that in this study the success of the youths' placement in the group-homes was partially due to the personal interaction permitted between the youths and their biological family members while the youths resided in the group-home. Since each of the adolescents experienced some level of distress due to leaving the biological home, interpersonal relationships with their biological family members, peers, and caregivers were critical.

A second major theme revealed in this research was youths' thoughts about preparing for adulthood. Every youth who was asked about his or her career aspirations responded immediately and positively. Although all the participants had plans to go to college and attain a professional career, for some of them, attending college may have been unrealistic since they had repeated multiple grades and were attending alternative schools. Another important finding was that nearly all youth felt they could take care of themselves as adults.Receiving understanding and support from adults seemed to be the ultimate desire of the participants; they wanted adults in their lives.

A limitation of this qualitative study was that although all the participants had a mild disability or suffered from depression, this issue did not come up naturally in the interviews, and participants were not eager to talk about it. Further qualitative studies should be conducted to explore the influence of these conditions on the life experiences of adolescents in group-homes.

Based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged in this study, the essence of the phenomenological experience of youths with mild disabilities living in group-homes may be summarized as follows:

Adolescents living in group-homes who experienced major stressful life events, including living with a mild disability or with depression, seemed to show remarkable resiliency and positive aspirations for their future in spite of their challenging pasts.

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