A Developmental Theory Perspective on the Child Welfare System

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Executive Summary

The work of developmental theorists explains that human behavior evolves within an environmental context. Current policy in the area of emerging adults transitioning from the child welfare system has largely ignored the developmental perspective in favor of structural solutions or the creation of foster homes, adoptive families, group homes, and residential facilities (i.e.; Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, Adopt and Safe Families Act, The Fostering Connections to Success and Promoting Adoptions Act, Keeping Children and Families Safe Act). Although it may be necessary to have alternative family structures when preservation of the biological family is not possible, the risk to healthy development this poses must be acknowledged and development must be supported. Problems faced by youth transitioning from foster care may be developmental not structural, suggesting a developmental approach to solving this problem. Focusing on more than outcomes in adulthood would result in a more holistic examination of the developmental experience of emerging adults.

This paper provides an overview of Life Course Developmental Theory and its potential impact on program and policy improvement for aging out youth. It also proposes a framework that allows application of developmental processes and related competency outcomes that can be used when examining the experience of aging out.

Introduction

Current foster care policies appear to be formulated on the idea that creating foster families (which are structured to act as substitute families), in combination with material supports (life skills classes, housing assistance, etc.) provides the support necessary for a child to successfully achieve competency in transitioning to adulthood (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997; Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendment, 2001; Fostering Connections to Success and Promoting Adoptions Act, 2008). However, the current outcomes for youth who age out of foster care suggest that these policies and the assumptions inherent in them are inaccurate. Few studies in the child welfare literature have examined how development within the child welfare system impacts the ability to achieve adult competency (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galan-Cisneros, 2015). The current research base clearly documents that emerging adults exiting foster care are failing to achieve competency, but the process of how and why this is happening is unclear.
Emerging Adulthood
Emerging adulthood is defined as a distinct developmental stage occurring between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. Arnett (2000) describes the major developmental tasks during emerging adulthood as 1) accepting responsibility for one's self, 2) making independent decisions, and 3) becoming financially independent. Research conducted by Arnett (2000) shows that individuals in emerging adulthood do not describe themselves as either adolescent or adults. Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood establishes the transition to adulthood as a distinct developmental period in which individuals experience significant uncertainty.

Competence
Competence is defined by Waters and Sroufe (1983) as an "ability to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and to generate and capitalize on opportunities in the environment" (pg. 80). This definition fits well when examining human development and is consistent with Life Course Theory, which will be explored further in this paper.

According to Waters & Sroufe's (1983) conceptualization of competence, an individual gains competence in one developmental transition and then they carry those skills into the next transition and are thus more fully prepared for the challenges they face. This means that examining competence solely after a youth ages out is inadequate and fails to account for the accumulation (or lack of) of skills that happen throughout a youth's time in foster care. Further, Waters and Sroufe (1983, pg. 81) directly tie competence to developmental outcomes stating, "The competent individual is one who is able to make use of environmental and personal resources to achieve a good developmental outcome."

Competence vs. Adaptation
It is important to differentiate between competence and adaptation if we are to achieve long-term positive outcomes for youth who age out of foster care throughout their life course. Adaptations may be positive in the short-term but competence by definition must be tied to a positive developmental outcome. It is possible to have an adaptation that is initially helpful but later interferes with development.

For instance a child may learn to adapt by disassociating during traumatic experiences but this adaptation may hinder later development of healthy adult relationships (Waters & Sroufe, 1983). The concept of competency also stresses the importance of resources within the environment, but specifically focuses on the individual's ability to utilize the environment as opposed to the actual quality of environmental resources.

Successful maneuvering through the developmental period of emerging adulthood can be discussed in terms of competency. Successful development for an emerging adult is currently measured by examining their competency with key tasks that are used to define adulthood. These tasks include housing stability, employment/income, education, social relationships, physical relationships, physical health, and mental health. The measurement of these concrete tasks has traditionally been the way researchers have measured competence among emerging adults transitioning from foster care (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Pecora, Kessler, O'Brian, White et al., 2006; Urban Institute, 2008). This concrete measure of competence provides useful but limited information. It does not provide a framework for understanding the mechanism of developing competence and the adaptations that may occur in the developmental process that can later impede competence.

Conceptual Framework for Understanding Development among Emerging Adults in Foster Care:
Life Course Theory
A solid framework for understanding development among emerging adults in foster care can be found in Life Course Theory which provides a model that explains the many directions that can be taken during development into adulthood (Elder, 1998). In order to evaluate the quality of these developmental pathways and make comparisons based on adult outcomes, the concept of competency is incorporated into the model.

Life Course Theory explains human development in an ecological context. The basic premise of Life Course
Theory is that human development is shaped by changes within the environment. Previous research suggests that the differences between homeless emerging adults who have not aged out of the foster care system and emerging adults who become homeless after aging out of foster care are the child welfare environment and the policy supports foster youth receive (Gomez, et al., 2015). Life Course Theory takes into account the complex interaction of cultural, human, and environmental diversity (Germain, 1994).

**Life course theory includes four basic principles:**
1) historical time and place  
2) timing in life  
3) linked lives, and  
4) human agency (Elder, 1998).

“Historical time” suggests that one’s life course is affected by the historical context and places the individual experiences during their development (Elder, 1998). “Timing in life” is defined as life experiences that influence human development based on when during development they occur (Elder, 1998). The timing of major life events (e.g. marriage, childbearing) have lasting impacts on development and affect future transitions (e.g., educational achievement) (Elder, 1998). Life Course Theory suggests an emphasis on programs and policies that acknowledge the concept of “timing in life.” The age of the child (“timing in life”) when an event occurs affects the child’s development. This, then, would indicate that programs cannot be one size fits all. Adolescents and emerging adults will have different child welfare needs than others who are at different times in their lives. Research also tells us that youth are likely to learn more when they are involved in the planning and execution of training and view the training material as relevant to their situation. Further, caregivers need training in order to provide developmentally appropriate services to prepare youth for independent living while they are in care (Choca, et al., 2004).

Similarly, the concept of “linked lives” needs to be incorporated into policy. Although it seems reasonable that development would be influenced by the other individuals in a youth’s life; this concept is largely ignored in policy and programming. Finally, “human agency” is defined by how individuals shape their life course through their choices within their situational limitations and advantages (Elder, 1998). Human agency explains positive and negative adaptations individuals make during the life course.

**Implications for the Child Welfare System**

**Historical time** is an important factor to consider when suggesting policy interventions. The time in history that a policy is introduced impacts it political and fiscal viability. For example, the issues surrounding youth aging out of foster care have been problematic since foster care was created. In 1999, policymakers supported and funded the Foster Care Independence Act.

**Timing in lives** is another important influence on development. The timing of when a life event happens is important and influences the developmental path the individual takes (Elder, 1998). Arnett’s work (2000) described instrumental developmental tasks during this time in a child’s life and includes: 1) accepting responsibility for one’s self, 2) making independent decisions, and 3) becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2000). Developing in the restrictive environment of the child welfare system can negatively affect the first two tasks by unintentionally teaching learned helplessness which has a negative impact on competence.

Life Course Theory also encompasses the importance of **linked lives**. Important individuals influence emerging adults’ development. Emerging adults aging out of foster care are influenced by both the lives they are linked to and by the links that are missing. Their relationships with foster parents, caseworkers, foster siblings, guardians ad litem, and judges all impact their development. The length, stability, and disruption of these relationships also equally have an impact. One idea not currently thoroughly considered is the importance of continuing relationships after they leave placements/care and/or supporting healthy interactions with biological parents while in care.

Finally, the Life Course Theory model incorporates the concept of **human agency**. Human agency involves the individual’s choices about how they will respond to the environment and how they will use the resources available to them. Human agency is connected to competence both in the concrete way it is measured (i.e. outcomes, mental health, education,
etc.), and in the developmental definition that defines competence as the ability to utilize resources in order to obtain a positive developmental outcome. Human agency determines one’s ability to utilize these resources. Unfortunately emerging adults aging out of foster care are more likely to report perceptions of being helpless and lacking human agency. And, important to note is the fact that some homeless aged out youth attribute their lack of self-efficacy/human agency to the child welfare system (Gomez et al, 2015).

Future research, practice, and policy should incorporate all facets of this conceptual model. It is likely that to impact emerging adult outcomes it is necessary for policies and programs to intervene earlier in development and to address additional aspects of development (i.e. biological relationships, maintaining foster relationships, teaching youth to exercise human agency, etc.).
The diagram below (Figure 1.1) depicts all potential developmental paths an individual can take. The circle represents the barrier between the individual and the environment. This barrier is impacted by the environment and culture in which development occurs. Figure 1.1 provides a visual depiction of the role of human agency in determining the developmental path. Despite the influence of historical time, timing in lives, linked lives, and environmental factors; each individual makes choices about how they respond that directly shapes their path.

**Figure 1.1**
*Life Course: Human Agency*

### Historical Time
When in history a person lives will impact their developmental course

### Timing in Life
What age an event occurs during a person’s life will impact how he or she develops

### Linked Lives
Who is in his or her life will impact how he or she develops

### Human Agency
How an individual reacts to an event will impact his or her development
Conceptual Model
As depicted in Figure 1.2, this paper explores the idea that problems faced by youth transitioning from foster care may be developmental not structural, suggesting a developmental approach to solving the problem of aging out youth lacking competency.

Figure 1.2
Conceptual Framework Guiding the Application of Theory

In summary, though there are several policies that have been implemented to support emerging adults aging out of foster care (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Fostering Connections to Success and Promoting Adoptions Act, 2008), scant improvement has been documented. As previously stated, Life Course Theory suggests that policies and programs have not been effective because they have not taken the developmental process into consideration. Policies have attempted to treat the issue by creating alternative family structures (i.e. foster care) and have assumed that the developmental process will take place in any type of family structure (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997; Adoption Promotion Act, 2003). Life Course Theory suggests a different approach to the problem.
Implications for Policy and Practice

Simply funding programs aimed at teaching youth about adult tasks (i.e., Preparation for Adulthood) or funding programs to compensate once poor outcomes are realized (i.e., housing vouchers, public assistance, etc.) is not enough. Instead, policymakers and practitioners can have a better impact on outcomes by starting with the developmental process itself. Throughout the time a child is growing up in foster care they develop a sense of learned helplessness that impedes their ability to deal with the harsh realities of the adult life they are statistically likely to encounter. Although professionals in the child welfare field may be dismayed by (or even disbelieving of) the high rates of homelessness, low rates of education, elevated health and mental health problems, and impaired social supports experienced by those aging out of foster care, these experiences are real. Both policymakers and practitioners may better serve these youth by acknowledging and preparing them for this reality. As previously mentioned, research suggests that homeless youth who did not age out of foster care have a developmental experience that prepares them for the realities of their adult life and gives them necessary skills to maneuver the challenges they face in adulthood. This is in opposition to their peers who grow up in foster care.

Foster care policies and practices need to reflect the reality of adulthood after foster care. As opposed to being sheltered, youth should have opportunities to learn how to manage adulthood and become independent. Current Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) services provide training in interpersonal skills, job skills, housing and transportation, health, planning for the future, and money management. But, not covered in the curriculum are street survival skills. Youth are not taught how to identify and avoid predators, how to sell plasma or panhandle (common employment for homeless adults), how to fit into a street culture and build supportive and protective relationships, or the benefits and risks of shelters and couch surfing (sleeping at different acquaintances homes). They do not learn how to protect themselves from being victimized by unhealthy family members, or where they can shower when they are living on the street.

As provided by the Fostering Connections legislation, Texas began providing supervised independent living (SIL) in May 2013. This is a newly implemented program so program assessment information is limited and it is too early to assess outcomes for young adults participating. Despite being a new program this, as well as the ability to access trial independence periods, are examples of programs conceived through a developmental lens. SIL services allow for a gradual transition to independence. Young adults have the opportunity to practice independence through activities like living unsupervised, take responsibility for finances, and shopping for basic needs (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2015). They also have case management and support as needed in their transition. Like the SIL program, trial independence is a developmentally driven policy (Texas Family Code §263.602). It allows young adults to leave services entirely but return if they determine that additional support is needed (Texas Family Code §263.602). In these ways the policies address the process of transitioning to adulthood versus the outcome which is a healthy shift toward policies that acknowledge the developmental needs of youth exiting foster care.

A large proportion of foster children will find themselves homeless upon exiting care. The majority do not attend college; do not have stable housing; do not obtain employment that provides a living wage; do not own a car; have never managed money; and, in lieu of supportive relationships, return to their perpetrators. Youth in foster care grow up in a system that is focused on political liability. They grow up guided by charts and level systems, having actions and moods monitored and documented, surrounded by treatment professionals including foster parents, case manager, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and special education professionals that micro manage their lives. They must gain the approval of their foster parent, caseworker, guardian ad litem, and judge to drive a car; to take a trip out of state with their foster family; to visit a sibling; to participate in a contact sport; to obtain medical care; to be near a lake, pool, or ocean; or to have a sleepover at a friend’s house. They do not make their own decisions. Decisions are made for them. They do not have the opportunity to critically think, to self-manage, or to
learn from mistakes. They learn to be dependent on a system that disappears when they become adults.

In addition to providing youth training in survival skills, these youth need to also be offered opportunities to be independent and take risks. As opposed to needing more protection, they actually need less. Youth should be encouraged to live as independently as possible while in care so that they can learn from their mistakes while still having supports in place. Youth should be encouraged to work, drive, maintain their own schedule, make their own choices about friends and social situations, and begin contact with biological families.

Another key need of youth leaving foster care is relational. Their development is shaped both by the relationships they have and the absence of relationships. Despite acknowledgements that relationships and social supports are important, current policies have continued to focus on more measurable outcomes such as housing and employment (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Research findings support policy changes that would use biological families as a key relationship for youth aging out of foster care. The majority of youth who age out of foster care return to their biological families (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). Current policies prohibit youth who return to a perpetrator from receiving all their benefits (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999). In contrast to limiting biological family contact, it is recommended that policies acknowledge the reality of these relationships and teach youth how to safely maneuver them, where to draw boundaries, and how to avoid being victimized.

Aged-out foster youth have indicated the need for two primary policy changes: to be allowed continuity in their relationships and to be involved in the development of policies that affect them. Additionally, they have indicated that they need more opportunities to participate in activities similar to their peers who are not in foster care. In fact, emerging adults discussed this as a failing of the system that leads to learned helplessness (Gomez, et al, 2015). Unfortunately, unless the youth voice is reflected in every aspect of program and policy decision making, any changes may fail to have the desired impact on the success of emerging adults aging out of foster care.

**Conclusion**

As reported above, several policies have been implemented in an effort to support emerging adults aging out of foster care (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Fostering Connections to Success and Promoting Adoptions Act, 2008). In spite of these policies, little improvement has been noted. The current services do not mediate the impact of developing within the child welfare system. The fact that outcomes continue to be poor despite repetitive and persistent policy making suggests the need to consider a developmental approach to the problem. Life Course Theory suggests the reason that policies and programs have been ineffective at improving outcomes for emerging adults exiting foster care is that they have not acknowledged that this is a developmental process. Policies have attempted to treat the issue by creating alternative family structures (i.e. foster care) and have assumed that the developmental process will take place in any type of family structure. Life Course Theory supports a different and perhaps more effective approach to the problem.
REFERENCES


Texas Family Code §263.602
