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Present, Protective, and Promotive: Mentors' Roles in the Lives of Young Adults in Residential Care

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Mentoring relationships are considered among the most significant relationships with nonparental figures and a protective factor against a wide range of negative outcomes. This exploratory study explored mentoring relationships in the lives of 140 care leavers, and the way those relationships influenced their life course. Findings showed that most of the mentors were known to the young adults from their former care placement for 3 years and above. Thematic analysis revealed 2 main “types” of mentor: (1) a present, accessible and supportive mentor, who is mainly characterized as a parental figure and a role model, a life coach who is also a confidant; (2) a motivating and catalyzing mentor, who is characterized as promoting adaptive coping with life stressors, and leading the young adults to set and achieve their goals and change their behavioral and mental status for the better. The discussion addresses the contribution of mentoring relationships to the young adults' resilience in reference to social support and attachment theories. It discusses the importance of promoting a “mentoring policy” within the residential care settings, to enable youth to continue their relationships with their mentors during their challenging transition to emerging adulthood.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

This study suggests that professional relationships with staff members in residential care can become profound mentoring relationships. Additionally, it distinct two types of mentor: a present and supportive mentor and a motivating and catalyzing mentor. In light of the importance of mentoring relationships to youth outcomes, it recommends that residential care settings support these relationships during youths' challenging transition to emerging adulthood.

Young people who leave residential care settings are beginning their journey into emerging adulthood—a period in which they must make significant decisions regarding many aspects of their adult life, including housing, employment, career, and marriage (Arnett, 2000). However, they enter this crucial period much more vulnerable and disadvantaged than other young adults do. Their limited personal and social assets narrow their possibilities as adults, and likely have a profound impact on the way they perceive themselves and their possibilities, and on their outcomes in many areas of adult life. Consequently, earlier studies have shown that they have poor outcomes in core areas of adult life, including in the areas of education, employment, and risky behaviors (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Stein & Munro, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). These

outcomes have a great influence on these young adults' attempts to adapt successfully to adulthood.

Researchers who focused on the factors that enable residential care leavers to achieve favorable outcomes despite their past and present profound stressors have recognized three clusters of protective factors. These include personal characteristics, family support, and the presence of nonparental sources of support, such as mentors (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2011; Courtney et al., 2011; Wade, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). While the influence of the youth's characteristics and the role of the family in their resilience have been well established, little attention has been paid to the role of mentors as a protective factor and source of resilience among young adults who left care. However, the literature on mentoring relationships among at-risk youth suggests that the enduring presence of at least one caring and committed person might protect against many of the risks they must deal with during emerging adulthood, and may be beneficial for their development in many aspects of adult life (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson, 2013). The few studies that investigated mentoring relationships among youth in out-of-home settings focused on youth in foster care. These studies found that mentoring relationships in care were associated with better emotional, educational,

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and behavioral outcomes in adulthood (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2011; Collins et al., 2010). They suggested that mentors have the potential to lead to better outcomes despite adversity. Consequently, mentoring is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers and practitioners. However, many questions remain concerning the identity of the mentors available to care leavers and the effects they have on their lives in care and after emancipation (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016b). This study explored the role mentoring relationships play in the lives of young adults who left residential care settings in Israel and the way these relationships influenced their life course. The study also examined to which of the youths' social contexts these mentors belonged, including their extended family, residential staff members, and friends. Addressing mentoring relationships from the young adults' perspectives could expand our understanding of the roles these relationships play in the lives of care leavers, and help in the design of mentoring programs and the training of staff who work with youth in care and after emancipation.

Mentoring Relationships in Care Leavers' Lives

The term "natural mentor" is used to describe an older, experienced nonparental person, whom youth self-select from their existing social networks (e.g., school staff, neighbors, adult relatives). The mentor is a supportive adult figure who is significant to the youth, and these types of relationships are considered among the most significant relationships that youth develop with nonparental figures (Cavell et al., 2002).

The mentor typically provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the mentee's competence and character. It is assumed that over time the youth and their mentor develop a unique bond of mutual commitment, respect, and loyalty, which facilitates the youth's transition into adulthood. The primary pathways by which mentoring is presumed to operate is through improvements in the mentee's social and emotional development, enhanced cognitive development, and positive identity development. Youth mentors can affect these changes by engaging in behaviors that demonstrate trust, empathy, and tangible support (Ahrens et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2005).

Although natural mentoring relationships develop in an informal manner, they may be created and fostered formally through mentoring programs, through assigned mentors, or by professionals (Greeson, 2013; Greeson et al., 2010). Youth in care report three types of adult figures who serve as important nonparental sources of support: family members, friends, and adults who are formally involved with them through the care system (Collins et al., 2010; Munson et al., 2010).

The scarce literature on mentoring among former foster youth found that the presence of an adult mentor was associated with improved behavioral and health outcomes and asset acquisition (Greeson et al., 2010). Mentoring relationships were also associated with overall health and better mental health (Ahrens et al., 2011), higher life satisfaction and lower involvement in risky behaviors, such as unprotected sex, police involvement (Munson & McMillen, 2009), and homelessness (Courtney & Lyons, 2009).

Mentoring: Theory and Models

Research suggests that mentoring relationships offer a wide range of both instrumental and emotional support (Greeson et al., 2010; Munson et al., 2010). Earlier studies that examined mentoring relationships in youths' lives found that a successful mentor is characterized as one who knows the youth for a long time, and is consistent, trustworthy, loving and caring, authentic, respectful, and empathetic. Other characteristics of the mentor, such as their availability and approachability, were found to be among the most important characteristics for youth in care. These youth also emphasized their need for a role model who provides guidance and support, and acts like a family member who shares with the youth meaningful mutual relationships (Munson et al., 2010; Sulimani-Aidan, 2016b).

Strong emotional connectedness is assumed necessary in mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2006). Rhodes (2005) argued that without a strong interpersonal connection, mentoring is unlikely to lead to positive outcomes. In addition, mentoring relationships are expected to tailor the support they provide to the unique developmental needs of the youth, and provide a safe environment for self-exploration, reflection, and self-expression. A relationship with a mentor allows youth to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting, while eventually learning to operate more effectively without their support and guidance. This process is also assumed to lead to resilience (Eby et al., 2007).

Research Questions

This study aimed to describe the relationships young adults who left care have with their mentors. It explored the type of social contexts to which the young adults' mentors belonged (family member, staff member, friends), and the duration of their relationships. Furthermore, the study examined the subjective influence the mentor had on the adults' personal status and on their lives.

The goal of this information is to provide us with greater insight as to the adult figures care leavers perceive as important to them and to better understand the function of these relationships in the young adults' transition to emerging adulthood. These insights could also help service providers and staff gain more understanding of the way to become more meaningful and productive when working with youth in out-of-home placements and ahead of emancipation. Therefore, the research questions are as follows:

1. Who are the mentors of care leavers?
2. What were the mentors' influences on the lives of the care leavers? (roles and functions).

Method

Participants

The sample included 140 young adults who were emancipated from youth villages in Israel. Youth villages in Israel are a type of out-of-home setting that is overseen by the Ministry of Education (approximately 24,000 youths). Placements in educational settings are voluntary in most cases, and the majority of adolescents in these placements come from underprivileged and vulnerable Israeli families, mostly from the geographical or social periphery of Israel (National Council for the Child, 2009).

Among the 140 care leavers, 55% were young men and 45% were young women, with an average age of 20.5. Almost half of the participants (45%) were born in Israel, 35% were immigrants from Ethiopia, and 20% were immigrants from the former Soviet Union (20%). Most of the participants (82%) left care relatively close to the time of their interview (between 1 and 3 years). The average length of stay in the residential settings was 3.5 years.

Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the Ministry of Education. After obtaining approval from the inspectors of the youth villages, the research staff was given the names and phone numbers of youth who left care 1 to 4 years previously ($N = 250$). The research staff then randomly selected a convenience sample, approached the young adults over the phone, explained the study goals, and asked for their consent to participate in the study. The participants whom the research staff were able to reach and who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study were interviewed over the phone. Only participants who graduated on time were selected, and not those who left before their senior year, and they had to have stayed in care at least 2 years. Also, since youth villages include different ethnic groups, the sample included young adults from the most dominant groups (Israel, former Soviet Union, Ethiopia). A total of 140 participants matched these criteria and participated in the study.

A semistructured interview protocol was developed, consisting of open-ended questions about the care leavers' mentors and the mentors' roles in their lives. Two interviewers interviewed the young adults over the phone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 20 min, during which the young adults were asked to describe a nonparental adult who was most meaningful to them, and describe the way they influenced their lives. The questions were based on those of Courtney et al. (2011), and were as follows: (a) Do you have a person besides your birth parents who has a positive influence on your life (today or in the past)? (b) Who is that person? (c) What is their gender? (d) How long have you known this person? (e) How did this person influence your life?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed in several steps. For the quantitative data, research staff first characterized each mentor's identity according to his or her social context. Then we used frequency counts of the mentors mentioned in each of the social contexts (family members, staff members, and friends). Second, we calculated the frequency distribution for the length of the mentor–youth relationship.

For the qualitative data, we analyzed the open-ended questions and examined the youths' responses about how their mentors influenced their life. For this part we used theoretical thematic analysis, which is used to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was chosen as the main analysis method because it provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using this analysis allowed the use of preexisting theoretical frameworks, such as in

the area of mentoring relationships (Rhodes, 2002, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2006). Analysis was performed by three readers (the two interviewers and the leading researcher), who interpreted the young adults' answers and extracted central themes that expressed the young adults' perceptions of their mentors' influences on their lives, their roles, and their functions. The readers used an incident-by-incident coding technique, in which every portion of the interview transcript was extracted, clustered, and coded according to a central theme (Charmaz, 2006). Then we conducted a quantitative analysis of the recurrence of themes separately for the main themes and subthemes in order to illustrate the frequency of the themes that arose. Finally, after the code of the mentors' functions had evolved, we sifted through all the data again, using a focused coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The ensuing coding created two main categories with various related subcategories. During all of these phases, the readers analyzed the interviews and then met to discuss themes and resolve any discrepancies by discussion. Finally, to further check the validity of our findings, a summary report was provided to the young adults via e-mail, and their feedback was integrated into the final data analysis.

Results

Young Adults' Mentors

Table 1 presents the care leavers' distribution of their mentors. Two thirds of the mentors were males ($N = 95$; 67%) and one third were females ($N = 45$; 33%). Overall, youth indicated mentors from various social contexts, including residential care, extended family, and informal and formal ties. Most of the mentors the youth indicated were within the care placement ($N = 65$, 47.44%). More than a third indicated family members as their mentors ($N = 50$, 36.49%).

A relatively small number of care leavers mentioned their friends as their mentors ($N = 11$, 8.02%). In addition, less than 10% ($N = 10$) of the care leavers mentioned their current social context figures as their mentors, including their army commanders, employers, or independent living program facilitators.

Table 1. Distribution of the Social Contexts for the Mentor–Youth Relationship ($N = 137$)

Mentors	<i>n</i>	%
Within care		
Social counselors	45	29.1
Residential care principal	6	4.37
Voluntary staff	6	4.37
Housemother	5	3.64
Case workers	4	2.91
School staff (teachers, principal)	5	3.64
Within family		
Siblings	25	18.24
Other relatives (cousins)	14	10.21
Grandparents	11	8.02
Informal networks		
Friends	11	8.02
After-care networks (employers, army commanders)	10	7.29
Total	137	100

The Length of the Mentoring Connection

Table 2 shows the number of years the care leavers knew their mentors. The majority of them knew their mentors for 3 years or more ($N = 113$; 80.43%). Almost half of them reported knowing their mentors for 3 to 6 years ($N = 67$; 47.85%), and nearly a quarter ($N = 32$; 22.58%) knew their mentors from an early age (before age 10).

Mentors' Roles and Functions in the Young adults' Lives

Figure 1 illustrates the main themes and subthemes within the youths' descriptions of their mentors. The young adults were asked to share the role their mentor played in their lives and the type of influence they had on their life course. Two main themes arose from the care leavers' descriptions of their mentors: The first portrays a present, accessible, and supportive mentor. This mentor is mainly characterized as a loving and caring parental figure, a life coach who is also a confidant, who counsels youth from their own life experience and is perceived by them as a role model. The second main theme includes a motivating and catalyzing mentor. This type of mentor helps youth to cope adaptively with life stressors, and leads youth to aspire higher, achieve goals and change their behavioral and mental status for the better.

The present and supportive mentor. The majority of young adults ($N = 77$; 56.2%) in this study described a type of mentor who is most characterized by his presence, caring, and support of them. The influence this type of mentor had on their lives was highly related to the mentor's own personality, background, and life experiences. The "present mentor" is described as an approachable, informal figure who is always there for the youth to support, guide, listen, and care. Table 3 presents the distribution of the subthemes within this main theme, including the most salient quotations. The subthemes that emerged within this type of mentor were as follows:

A life coach. More than a half of the young adults ($N = 32$; 41.5%) emphasized their mentor's support through counseling, emotional and concrete support. The "life coach" mentor is characterized by their willingness to listen to the young adults' concerns and offer their point of view:

He sat with me and I told him what I went through in life. He advised me what to do. I care about what he thinks.

The young adults described this mentor as caring and offering support according to their needs at the time. For example, one youth described her mentor's support both of her loneliness and

Table 2. Distribution of the Number of Years the Young Adults Knew Their Mentor ($N = 140$)

Years	<i>n</i>	%
6 months to 2 years	27	19.28
3–6 years	67	47.85
7–10 years	14	10.0
11 years or more	32	22.58
Total	140	100

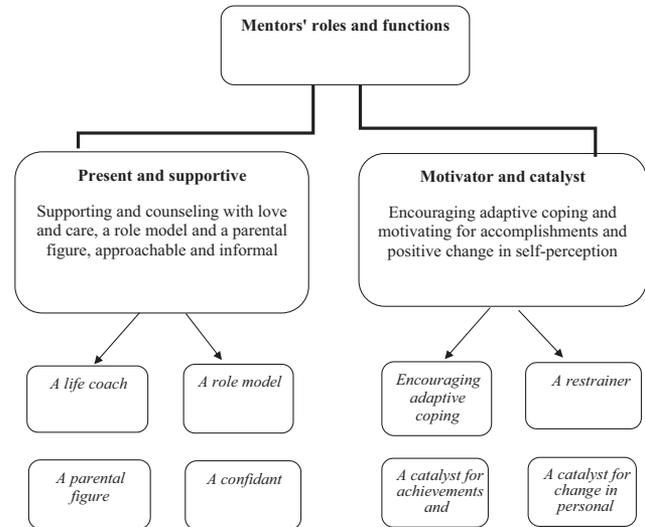


Figure 1. Mentors' roles and functions in care leavers' lives.

economic status: "He helped me financially. He supported me and took me to his house on the weekends when I was alone." Another youth emphasized his mentor's advice and counseling: "She helps me, gives advice, explains what to do. I used to consult her when it was tough and I was depressed. She educated me and I learned from her."

A role model. A quarter of the young adults ($N = 20$; 25.9%) described their mentor's role in their lives as being their role model. Some youth were inspired and encouraged by the fact that their mentor shared the same background with them but succeeded in life despite their poor start. One young adult said, "It's enough for me to see the long way he went through to make me want to do the same. He came from the same place I was and succeeded." Another young adult added, "He advised me how to deal with things. He went through the same things so he could give advice on everything I needed in life. He showed an example—went to the university."

However, some young adults emphasized that their role models advised them to avoid the wrong paths they took when they were young and to choose different ones. As one young adult described, "He explained me the reality. He used to say: Look at me, don't work hard like me. Study instead and you will succeed! Don't quit your studies just because you don't have the money."

A confidant. Some of the young adults described their mentor as the one person they could always turn to in need and as the one who knew their most secret wishes and fears. As one young woman indicated, "I told her everything about me. She knows every little thing and she helps me every minute and every hour." The mentor's availability and accessibility was evident in other young adults' descriptions of their mentors:

She is the only person whom I tell everything. She always took care of me and was always there. I used to come to her house and we spent time together. She told me I could come whenever I wanted.

She listened to me and was always there for me.

This "confidant" type of mentor is characterized by being the young person's best friend who is informal, reachable at any time,

Table 3. *Present and Supportive Mentor—Subthemes and Exemplary Quotes (n = 77)*

Subtheme	N (%)	Quotes
A life coach	N = 32 (41.5%)	<p>“He sat with me and I told him what I want out of my life. He advised me what to do. I care about what he thinks.”</p> <p>“He helped me. Supported me and took me to his house on the weekends when I was alone.”</p> <p>“He helps me . . . talks with me . . . when I need things . . . he explains things to me.”</p> <p>“She was very charismatic and she taught me how to behave.”</p> <p>“He had a very good influence on me. He was a very special person. Very warm and knows how to approach others. Always guided me and I could count on him.”</p>
A role model	N = 20 (25.9%)	<p>“It’s enough for me to see how much he went through to make me want to do the same. He came from the same place I did and succeeded.”</p> <p>“I learned a lot from his stories and the life he had, from his life experience.”</p> <p>“He explained reality to me. He used to say: Look at me, don’t work hard like me. Study instead and you will succeed! Don’t drop out of school just because you don’t have the money.”</p> <p>“He advised me how to deal with things. He went through the same things so he could give advice on every thing I needed in life. He showed me an example—went to university.”</p> <p>“He had a major influence on me. He is my role model when it comes to family, education and values. I aspire to be like him.”</p>
A confidante	N = 17 (22.1%)	<p>“He is just like a friend to me. He has a good influence on me. He is 26. He explains to me and listens to me and understands me.”</p> <p>“She listened to me and was always there for me.”</p> <p>“She helped me and supported me when my parents got divorced. I used to run to her and she was always there for me. Encouraging, supporting and advising.”</p> <p>“I learned a lot from her. She is the only person whom I tell everything. She always took care of me and was always there. I used to come to her house and we spent time together. She told me I could come whenever I wanted.”</p> <p>“She listened to me and was always there helping me decide what to do. I used to tell her about every little thing that happened.”</p>
A parent figure	N = 10 (12.9%)	<p>“She was like a mother to me. Talked to me and helped to know right from wrong.”</p> <p>“I saw him as a parent figure. He tried to educate me and I learned from it. A father figure that a boy can learn ‘boys’ stuff’ from.”</p> <p>“He raised me like a father and a mother.”</p> <p>“She gave me advice and talked to me like a mother.”</p> <p>“She was like a mother to me. Always said that I am different but in the good sense. She pushed me and educated me. I lived with her when I left care.”</p>

and who, in addition to giving advice and support, the youth could also have fun with and spend time with when they wanted to.

A parental figure. A parental figure is an image the young adults used to describe their mentor’s role in their lives ($N = 10$; 12.9%). In some cases, without adding any explanation of what it meant for them, simply saying, “He raised me like a father and a mother” or “She is like a mother to me.” Other young adults characterized the “parental figure” type of mentor as a person who advises youth and gives them tools to succeed in life, educates them, shows care and interest and helps distinguish right from wrong. As some of the young adults described,

I saw him as a parental figure. He tried to educate me and I learned from it. A father figure that a boy can learn “boys’ stuff” from.

It’s like your parents that you can share everything with.

She used to speak with me and give me advice. just like mothers do.

The motivating mentor. Another main theme that was prominent in the young adults’ descriptions of their mentors was their mentor’s role as a motivator and catalyst of positive change in their character and choices in life. Almost half of the young adults ($N = 60$; 43.8%) characterized their mentor not only as a person who listened to them and supported them, but also as a person who helped them

adopt a new perspective on life, encouraged adaptive coping patterns, and motivated them to aspire higher and reach their goals. Table 4 presents the distribution of the subthemes within this main theme, including the most salient quotations. The subthemes that emerged within this type of mentor were as follows:

A catalyst for positive change in the youths’ personal status. Young adults described their mentor as the person who was responsible for a change in their emotional, social, and behavioral status ($N = 22$; 36.6%). Within this subtheme some young adults referred to a positive change in their character:

I was only 70% a “human being” before I met him and today I am 80–85%. He gave me a lot of self-awareness.

Thanks to him I am much more mature today.

Our talks made me a “human being.” I am more serious now about my life.

Some young adults referred to a change in their own behavior as a results of their mentor’s positive influence: “He influenced my behavior, my actions, and the way I talk. There were things I could do . . . but now I don’t do those things and I don’t talk that way and don’t do those things.” However, others focused on the change of their perceptions of themselves and their emotions: “Her influence

Table 4. *Motivating and Catalyst Mentor—Subthemes and Exemplary Quotes (n = 60)*

Subtheme	N (%)	Quotes
A catalyst for positive change in youth's personal status	N = 22 (36.6%)	<p>"Her influence on me was very good. She made me become more patient, calm, and empathetic to society."</p> <p>"My behavior changed and it's thanks to him. I am much more mature today thanks to his help."</p> <p>"He influenced my behavior, my acts and the way I talk. There were things I could do . . . but now I don't do them and I don't talk that way and don't do those things."</p> <p>"I changed a lot because of him in the way I behave, the way I think and talk."</p> <p>"I was only 70% of a 'human being' before I met him and today I am 80–85%. He gave me a lot of self-awareness."</p>
Encouraging adaptive coping	N = 19 (31.6%)	<p>"She taught me how to deal with things. To put everything in perspective and in the right proportion. She taught me how to 'fall apart' without 'breaking into pieces.' She found me in the street."</p> <p>"He taught me important things for my life. He gave me tools how to handle trouble."</p> <p>"He helped me to cope. How to build my self in the right way."</p> <p>"She taught me how to look differently at life. How to deal with my difficulties."</p> <p>"He always led me in the right direction. Told me that I should always choose the right way. I learned from him to move on and never quit."</p>
A catalyst for youths' achievements and aspirations	N = 11 (18.3%)	<p>"He lifted me up and pushed me forward. Didn't allow me to stop in any area! Not in work, in school or socially."</p> <p>"Thanks to her I decided to join the Army and I am very happy about it."</p> <p>"I didn't want to continue to higher education but he said no, that it would be better for me to join this college. I listened to him."</p> <p>"I owe her my success. She pushed me to work hard and succeed. To dare."</p> <p>"She taught me how to play, enrolled me into a college for music and dancing. In short, she nurtured me."</p>
A restrainer/buffer	N = 8 (13.3%)	<p>"She educated me and helped me stop using drugs. She is really important to me."</p> <p>"I was 16 and I was a troubled youth. He put me into residential care and thanks to him I'm not a criminal like all my brothers. He kept me out of the trouble they got into."</p> <p>"Every Friday before we went home he talked with all of us. Told us what to do and not to do. Not to drink, do drugs, smoke. He helped me not to think about it or go near it."</p> <p>"I used to consult him about family matters. He told me how important it is to study and go to school. He kept me from drinking and coming home late at night."</p> <p>"The social worker made me realize that the things I do lead me to bad places. She opened my eyes."</p>

on me was very good. She made me become more patient, calm, and emphatic to society."

Encouraging adaptive coping. One third of the young adults ($N = 19$; 31.6%) described the type of influence their mentor had on their lives as promoting adaptive coping. This type of mentor was able to help youth foster a new and beneficial perspective on their status and life, and helped them cope with stressors efficiently. The mentors' influence on the youths' life perspective was evident in these young adults' words:

She taught me how to look differently at life. How to deal with my difficulties.

She taught me how to deal with things. To put everything in perspective and in the right proportion. She taught me how to "fall apart" without "breaking into pieces."

Other young adults emphasized the coping strategies their mentors taught them:

He always led me in the right direction. He told me that I should always choose the right way. I learned from him to keep going and never quit.

He taught me important things for my life. He gave me tools how to handle troubles.

A catalyst for youths' achievements and aspirations. The mentors' influence on the young adults was also manifested in their expectations for the future and concrete achievements due to the mentors' encouragement ($N = 11$; 18.3%). The "catalyst" mentor was characterized as a person who motivated youth to make more efforts, aspire, and achieve important life goals. As one of them described, "I owe her my success. She pushed me to work hard and succeed. To dare." Another youth said, "He lifted me up and pushed me forward. Didn't allow me to stop in any area! Not in work, in school or socially."

These aspects of the mentor–youth relationship portray a mentor who is active in their role in the young adult's life and uses the

youth's trust in them to direct and push them into achieving developmental tasks that are important for the youth's identity and future outcomes. This is demonstrated in some of the young adults' descriptions:

I didn't want to continue to higher education but he said no, that it would be better for me to join this college. I listened to him.

Thanks to her I decided to join the Army and I am very happy for it. [mandatory service]

She taught me how to act, enrolled me in a college for music and dancing.

A restrainer. Within the main theme of the mentor as a person who enables positive change in the youths' perspectives on their life and motivates achievement, a subtheme of the mentor as a restrainer against negative outcomes emerged ($N = 8$; 13.3%). Young adults saw the "restraining mentor" as having a positive influence on their perceptions and behavior with regards to risk behaviors the youth were involved in: "The social worker made me realize that the things I did lead me to bad places. She opened my eyes." Another young adult described the talks his counselor gave him and his friends before leaving care to their families on the weekends: "Every Friday before we went home he talked with all of us. He told us what to do and what not to do. Not to drink, do drugs, smoke. He helped me not to think about it or go near it."

In other cases the mentor was described as actively helping youth avoid deteriorating and "slipping down the hill," as some of the young adults described:

I used to consult him about family matters. He told me how important it is to study and go to school. He kept me from drinking and coming home late at night.

I was 16 and I was a troubled youth. He put me into residential care and thanks to him I am not a criminal like all my brothers. He saved me so I wouldn't get into trouble like they did.

Discussion

This study examined the mentors care leavers had and the roles they played in their lives. Youths' chosen mentors were part of their wider social context, including residential care, extended family, and informal and formal ties. These three categories were also found in earlier studies on mentoring relationships among youth in foster care (Collins et al., 2010; Greeson et al., 2010). Although one third chose family members as their mentors, especially their older siblings; the majority indicated that their mentors were staff members whom they knew from the care placements, with most youth indicating their social counselors. This finding emphasizes that formal and essentially professional relationships with staff members can become profound mentoring relationships, similar to those that can be found with a "natural mentor" in the community at large. This finding might also have to do with the relatively long and stable average length of time youth in Israel stay in care (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016a).

The fact that youth's relationships with staff members were considered by them as meaningful mentoring relationships is encouraging. However, after leaving care, staff members are in most cases not a part of the youths' social context, and their ability to continue their support and counseling is limited. This is different

from the relationships youth in the general population have with "natural mentors," who are embedded in the young person's social context and likely continue to guide them into adulthood (Rhodes, 2002). This understanding is strengthened, especially in light of the many complex challenges youth must deal with after leaving care to independent living, combined with the normative developmental tasks young adults deal with in transition to adulthood in modern society (Arnett, 2000).

Research on components of mentoring programs emphasizes the importance of the length of the mentoring relationship (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). The importance of the timeframe in establishing significant relationships is also evident in this study, since the majority of young adults knew their mentor 3 years or more. This aspect must be taken into account when designing an intervention plan for youth in care.

Mentors' Roles in the Care leavers' Lives

Earlier studies found the relationship care leavers have with an adult mentor was associated with improved outcomes in adulthood in many areas, including physical and mental health, risky behaviors, stability in accommodation, and life satisfaction (Ahrens et al., 2011; Courtney & Lyons, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009). The analysis regarding the mentors' influence on the care leavers' lives revealed two main "mentor figures": the "present and supportive mentor" and the "motivating and catalyzing mentor." Their functions and contribution to the young adults' lives will be further discussed in relation to the resilience framework, social support, and attachment theories.

The present and supportive mentor. The main theme that represents the present and supportive mentor includes several subthemes: life coach, role model, parental figure, and confidant. The present and supportive mentor is characterized as an approachable and accessible mentor who is always there to listen, support, and counsel. This type of mentor shows youth much care, warmth, and affection, acts both as a parent and a best friend, and is perceived by youth as a role model. Many of these functions were found in earlier studies. For example, Greeson and colleagues (2010) found that one of the functional roles filled by natural mentors included being like a parent, as well as providing guidance and advice, providing emotional and practical support, and serving as a role model. These components are also regarded as essential aspects in models of mentoring relationships (Ahrens, 2011). Rhodes (2005), for example, claimed that mentoring relationships are formed through trust, empathy, and mutual benefit. Youths' description of their mentors as parental figures and best friends also demonstrates Spencer's (2006) model. Spender argued that the deepening of the mentoring relationship is facilitated by the mentor's ability to act both as a friend and as a parent and understand reality from the mentee's standpoint, as well as to form cooperation and partnership.

Research on social support suggests that it plays an important role in the lives of youth in care and may strengthen them after emancipation (Wade, 2008). Research also suggests that care leavers' social contexts provide different types and amounts of support, and while some social ties provide instrumental and emotional support, other contexts primarily provide companionship (Collins et al., 2010). However, in this study youth's descriptions of their mentors present

the three main aspects of social support, including emotional support, manifested through love and empathy, instrumental support, and informal support, manifested through guidance and advice (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Therefore, in many cases it appears that their mentor encompassed all the types of support they need. This understanding is important, since resilience studies link all these aspects of social support, especially emotional support, with better coping with multiple sources of stress.

The personal qualities that emerge from the youths' descriptions of their mentors, such as sensitivity, trust, caring, and accessibility, are especially important when working with youth in care, whose relationships with their primary caregivers are impaired, and who suffer from mistrust and troubled attachments. Therefore, the attachment theory can be a possible framework in explaining the link between mentors' function in the youth's lives and its impact on their life course. According to this theory, a child's early attachment to their primary caregiver allows them to build up expectations in the form of an internalized representation or "working model" of relationships and the way they perceive their environment. These expectations, in turn, influence the child's self-esteem and feelings of being worthy of love, and have a long-term effect on how children experience and cope with stress, and are associated with emotional and cognitive development (Gittleman et al., 1998). The theory also posits that there are several possibilities that might change the "impaired" working model over time. One is a significant life-changing experience, such as an experience of an intimate and secure relationship. Therefore, it is possible that a profound relationship with a mentor figure can compensate for earlier disadvantaged attachment relationships (Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001) and become a "life-changing experience" for youth in care. Based on this theory, care leavers' relationships with their mentors enable them to experience positive relationships that emotionally compensate, by giving them the opportunity to be cared for by other adult figures. Therefore, youths' view of their mentor as "a parental figure," "life coach," and "confidant" encompasses these profound images that lead youths to gradually change the "working model" by which they perceive themselves and their environment.

A central function of the youths' mentors in this study, which is the mentor acting as a role model, was also found in previous studies (Rhodes et al., 2006; Sulimani-Aidan, 2016a). A mentor acting as a role model is perceived as an adult who, in many cases, shares with the youth a similar background, and who has successfully coped with challenges in life (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). This element serves different aspects in promoting a positive mentoring relationship and possibly better outcomes. First, it allows the youth to relate more easily to someone they believe can understand their situation and with whom they can share their feelings and fears openly without judgment. Second, the fact that this person had been in their situation and had overcome difficulties and coped successfully with similar challenges inspires youth and gives them hope and belief in their ability to thrive and succeed despite their poor start. A practical conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that residential care placements should enable youth to interact with staff whom they can perceive as role models, by training and recruiting staff with a similar background and characteristics, in terms of their life experiences, ethnicity, and gender.

Motivating and catalyzing mentor. The majority of youth in the study emphasized their mentors' influence on their life perception as a whole, their self-perception, and their achievements. The motivating and catalyzing mentor was described as being able to help youth change their point of view on life, adopt adaptive coping strategies to deal with stressors, and motivate them to aspire higher, change their behavioral and mental status, and perform better. These findings are in line with the model of Rhodes and colleagues (2006), which proposed that "a successful mentoring relationship may challenge and help change the negative views mentees have about themselves and their relationships with adults." In this study, however, not only had the young adults' perceptions changed, but also their aspirations and the decisions they made, such as joining mandatory army service or enrolling in college. These positive changes emphasized the significance of mentoring relationships for care leavers and clearly demonstrated their important impact on their emerging adulthood. This period is especially significant because it is characterized as a complex period in which young people have to make significant decisions in their lives (Arnett, 2000), and therefore their goals and future expectations play an important role in their decisions (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016b). At the same time, youth in their emerging adulthood explore their identity and future possibilities and are more self-focused. For youth who leave care this is a most vulnerable period due to their low personal and social assets and lack of parental support (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). Therefore, the role of a mentor figure who can help them elevate their expectations and support them to make the right decisions is very important.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study's finding indicating that the majority of the young adults' mentors were staff members whom they knew from the care placement suggests the need for a "mentoring policy" within residential care placements. Such a policy could enable youth to formally continue their relationships with their mentors, or design a continuing unit that would be familiar with the youth before emancipation and continue to support and counsel them in their emerging adulthood. The finding that only few care leavers mentioned a mentor who was part of their current social network after leaving care only reinforces the understanding that care leavers need the continuity of support from their mentors as they are taking their first steps as independent young adults.

Resiliency researchers posit that "protective factors" are something that is helpful or beneficial and modifies the effects of risk in a positive direction (Luthar et al., 2000). In this study, besides acting as promoters of positive outcomes, mentors were perceived by youth as a buffer against negative outcomes and the youths' deterioration. The mentors were described as helping youth avoid risky behaviors through conversations and restrictions. These findings indicate the integrative roles mentors play in care leavers' lives, both as protective and promotive. Therefore, residential care placements should seek to integrate these components in their intervention planning and staff training.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study aimed to provide important new information about young adults' perspectives regarding their relationships with their

mentors and their influence on their lives. However, it has some limitations that should be noted. First, the study focused on youth's perspectives on mentoring relationships within a particular cultural context. Future investigation could benefit from examining youth's perception of their mentors in other contexts and mentors' perspectives on their roles and the barriers they come across in establishing these relationships. Second, the study focused on youth's perceptions of the influence their mentors had on their lives with no gender and ethnicity distinction. Future studies should explore whether mentoring relationships fill different types of functions according to these aspects. Third, although the youth in this study testified they experienced a positive change in their lives as a result of their relationships with their mentors, future studies should examine the empirical correlations between mentoring relationships and future outcomes and expand our understanding of the link between mentoring and achievements.

Keywords: residential care; care leavers; mentoring; resilience; emerging adulthood

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