ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Qualitative exploration of supporting figures in the lives of emerging adults who left care compared with their noncare-leaving peers

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Abstract

Studies on youth leaving care have emphasized their limited social support and their need for continuing support after emancipation. However, less is known about the nature of their existing social networks after emancipation and their roles during their transition to adulthood compared with their noncare-leaving peers. With this in mind, 32 young adults aged 18 to 25 participated in semi-structured interviews regarding their current support figures in order to learn whether they were congruent with their needs after emancipation. Thematic analysis revealed four main features of the two groups' social networks: (a) stability versus uncertainty as to the lasting presence of the supportive figure, (b) reliance on parents as main supportive figures versus relying on different supportive figures, (c) confidence versus uncertainty in the supportive figures' ability to help, and (d) holistic versus fragmented support of the young adults' needs. The discussion addresses the unique characteristics of care leavers in emerging adulthood and the implications of their social networks' features for their adjustment after emancipation. One of the study's recommendations is to proactively connect them to new supportive figures such as professionals or mentors by offering them mentoring programs cognizant of the instrumental and developmental tasks of emerging adulthood.

KEYWORDS

emerging adulthood, leaving care, social support, transition to adulthood

1 | THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG YOUTH LEAVING CARE

Social support networks play an important role in the lives of young people in care and in their transition to adulthood (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Perry, 2006; Wade, 2008). Social support is defined as "the emotional, psychological, physical, informational, instrumental, and material assistance provided by others to either maintain well-being or promote adaptation to difficult life events" (Dunst & Trivette, 1988, p. 3). Indeed, earlier studies showed that young people who had better outcomes after leaving care were those who were more likely to have had at least one stable relationship, maintained ongoing contact with their caregivers, and were better able to make the most of any support that was offered (Stein, 2006). Higher levels of social support were also correlated with higher well-being after the transition from care (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007), higher academic achievements, social adjustment (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006), financial status, and stability in accommodation (Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013). As a group at risk of social exclusion, social networks are especially important for care leavers because they can promote social integration and social connectedness.

Studies outline five key providers of social support of young people: parents, relatives, other adults, peers, and siblings. The majority of youth in care have at least three distinct network domains including their biological families, their care settings, and peer

networks, from which they draw health-protective resources such as instrumental and emotional support. The role of these support figures in care is well documented, as they are dominant in the lives of the youth while they are in care, especially the professionals and their own friends (Jones, 2014; Sulimani-Aidan, 2016; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017a). However, less is known about the identity of care leavers' supportive figures and those relationships during the transition to adulthood. Therefore, this study aims to narrow that gap and explore the role of those figures after emancipation.

The social networks of youth in care also vary in strength and may provide different types and amounts of support. For example, research has found that networks of kin provide mutual aid and instrumental and emotional support, whereas networks of friends primarily provide companionship (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). Many of the earlier studies that examined social support of youth in care focused on those aspects while in care (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013; Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). However, it is likely that these young adults' needs for support after emancipation are different from their needs while in care. This raises different questions regarding care leavers' social support after leaving care. For example, what is the type of support care leavers receive during the transition to adulthood? What is the ability of their social networks to support them in dealing with the developmental tasks during their transition to adulthood? Earlier studies that explored these aspects emphasized the feelings of isolation and loneliness upon leaving care (Morgan, 2012; Munro et al., 2011). Although some care leavers derived support from their extended families, many reported lacking a "safety net" (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013) and described their families' inability to support them economically or offer emotional support and advice regarding instrumental and developmental tasks during the transition to adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018).

In Israel, there are no formal services and only few other resources designed specifically to support care leavers (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). Youth in Israel age out of three different type of out-of-home placements including supervises therapeutic residential care facilities, foster care—supervised by the Ministry of Social Affairs—and social services and educational residential settings (youth villages)—supervised by the Ministry of Education. Each of those out-of-home placements cares for vulnerable youth who come from broken and underprivileged families, mostly from the geographical or social periphery of Israel. Many of these settings also receive adolescent immigrants, mostly from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia (Mash, 2001). Many of these care leavers experience stressors during the transition to adulthood. In addition to their past adversity that includes the trauma of abuse or neglect in their biological families and their removal from the home, they must cope at the same time with living independently and providing for themselves while navigating through the tasks of adult life. Unlike their peers in the general population who experience the transition to adulthood more gradually and with higher support, care leavers' transition to adult life is abrupt, with weak supporting relationships (Stein, 2006; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017a). In addition, care leavers in Israel join the mandatory demanding military services and experience many adjustment difficulties during their service, such as being absent without leave, being brought to trial in a military court, or spending time in military jail (Schiff, 2006).

This study explores care leavers' social support networks as perceived by the young adults up to 6 years after leaving care. It is assumed that during the transition from care to independent living, many of the care leavers' social ties are disrupted and that they try to reassess the supportive figures they can rely on in their emerging adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). Therefore, exploring their social networks after emancipation could shed light on the extent, type, and quality of support they receive after the transition from care to adult life.

2 | SOCIAL SUPPORT DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Similar to their peers in the general population, young adults who leave care begin their journey into adulthood at the age of 18. This period, known in the literature as "emerging adulthood," is one of the defining periods in their lives. According to the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), during this complex period, young adults experience many changes in most of the important life domains that are significant to their future as adults. During this period, they must make significant decisions in their lives in the most important life aspects including housing, employment, career, and marriage (Arnett, 2000). Alongside these important practical decisions, the majority of young adults struggle with issues of identity exploration and are self-focused on their needs and plans. In addition, they experience more instability due to their increased independence and freedom from time constraints and social control and less monitoring by their parents (Arnett, 2007). Arnett (2000) described this period as an optimal opportunity for self-exploration, when emerging adults are free to explore possibilities in a variety of life domains, but especially love and work. These significant developmental tasks make this period a demanding and complex life phase for all young adults. However, it is all the more challenging and stressful for young adults who left care, due to their poor personal and environmental assets (Stein, 2006; Sulimani-Aidan, 2014).

Arnett (2000) also posits that due to social and cultural changes, in the course of this period, most young adults in Western society lean more on their families and do so for a longer time, especially relying on their parents' support. Indeed, studies have shown that the average age that young adults in America leave their parents' home is 28 (Clark & Davis, 2005). Other studies found that youth in the general population leave the parental home at around age 23 and often return home after an initial failed attempt at living independently (Furstenberg, 2010). It is assumed that care leavers do not enjoy the privilege of leaning on their parents during this period. They experience more stress and must struggle emotionally and financially during this period due to their weak social ties and low support from their families. Although studies show that many of them return to the family home after discharge and stay in contact with family and relatives (Collins et al., 2010), there is little indication in the literature as to how much support they derive from family contacts (Jones, 2014). In addition, studies that focused on the status of care leavers a few years after emancipation both from their own point of view and from their carers' emphasized their limited social networks and their loneliness, as well

as the ambiguous nature and even the negative effect of their informal support network of care leavers (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017b; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018).

This study leans on the emerging adulthood theory that emphasizes the importance of support, mainly parental support during emerging adulthood, due to the demanding and prolonged transition to adulthood in modern societies (Arnett, 2007). Although earlier studies on youth leaving care emphasized their need for continuing support after the transition to independent living (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011), relatively less is known about the nature of their existing social networks as perceived by them after leaving care. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap and explore the informal and formal social networks of care leavers compared with their noncare-leaving peers during emerging adulthood. It aims to explore the identity of their support figures and compare the perceptions of the two groups regarding their roles and the types of support they provide them during their transition to adulthood. Thus, it seeks to expand our understanding of the nature and characteristics of the social networks of care leavers compared with their noncare-leaving peers (e.g., the size, quality, and longevity of their social networks). Describing the characteristics of the perceived supportive networks of the two groups will allow to learn more about their features and whether they are congruent with their needs during emerging adulthood. This information could expand our understanding concerning the type of support young adults have and need during the transition to adulthood and contribute to the knowledge regarding both met and unmet needs of the vulnerable young adults who leave care.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants

Table 1 presents the demographics of the young adults who left care and their peers who lived at home. We selected the young adults using "purposeful sampling" (Patton, 2002), based on the diversity in the life areas documented in earlier studies during the age frame of 18–25 with regard to occupation (work, studies, military service, etc.) and accommodation (living with parents, alone or with friends, in army apartments, etc.). The aim was to obtain a sample with diverse life situations to capture the different support figures during this period.

The research participants were 32 young adults between the ages 18–25. Of these, 16 were young adults who were emancipated from different types of out-of-home placements in Israel (therapeutic residential care placements, youth villages, and foster care). Among the 16 care leavers, 56% were young women, and more than half (62%) were in early emerging adulthood (ages 18–21). Two-thirds were emancipated from residential care and foster homes and the rest from youth villages. More than a third (38%) were living with their parents. More than two thirds of them were either working or in their military/civil service.

For the noncare leaver young adults, we chose an opportunity sample of 16. We aimed for a group similar to the care leavers in the different demographic aspects and life areas including their

TABLE 1 Young adults' demographics (N = 32)

Demographics	Emerging adults who were in care n = 16	Emerging adults who lived at home (not-care leavers) n = 16
Gender		
Male	44% (7)	62% (10)
Female	56% (11)	38% (6)
Age		
18–21	62% (10)	25% (4)
22-25	38% (6)	75% (12)
Occupation		
During military service/civil service	31% (5)	31% (5)
Working	38% (6)	25% (4)
Studying	13% (2)	38% (6)
Volunteering	-	6% (1)
Unemployed	19% (3)	-
Accommodations		
With parents	38% (6)	62% (10)
In a supervised apartment	31% (5)	-
With roommates/ alone	25% (4)	38% (6)

current framework and accommodation. Of this group, 38% were young woman and 62% were young men. Most of them were between the ages of 22 and 25 (75%). A quarter (25%) were working and a third were in their military service (31%). Almost two-thirds were living with their parents (62%).

3.2 | Procedure

After obtaining approval from the ethics committee of the authors' university, the research staff selected a sample of young adults between the ages of 18–25 who left care one to 6 years previously and young adults of the same age range who were not care leavers and lived with their parents. The young adults were given an explanation about the study goals and asked for their consent to participate in the study. The participants were interviewed face to face in a place of their choice. We used purposeful sampling and included several selection criteria: First, the sample included young adults in their early emerging adulthood. Second, because young adults in this period vary by their primary occupation, we included in the sample young adults in army service, further studies, employed, and unemployed. In addition, we chose young adults living in different accommodations due to the variety in accommodation in this period (e.g., living at home with their parents, living in supervised flats for care leavers in the community, or living alone/with roommates). In sampling the comparison group, we tried to choose young adults that best matched those selection criteria.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, consisting of open-ended questions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Open-ended questions facilitated flexibility and depth in the young adults' answers, and the semi-structured format allowed the interviewers to pursue emergent, unexpected directions in their answers. Interviews were not time-limited, with interviews ranging

from 35 min to an hour. During the interviews, the young adults were asked to describe themselves (background, occupation, age, etc.) and were asked about the supportive figures in their lives today, those figures' characteristics, contribution, and roles during the transition to adulthood.

3.3 | Data analysis

The chosen method to analyse the interviews was theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is used to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. This method of analysis allowed the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as in the area of emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2007). 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 their perception of their social support figures during the transition to adulthood. The readers employed an incident-by-incident coding technique in which every portion of the interview transcript was read and coded for important themes. This was followed by a focused coding process, during which the incident codes were reread and analysed in order to identify larger themes (Charmaz, 2006). During these phases, the readers analysed the interviews and then met to discuss themes and resolve any discrepancies by discussion. Finally, after the code of supportive figures and their features was developed, the readers sifted through all the data again, using a focused coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The ensuing coding created four main categories that characterized the social networks of emerging adults compared with emerging adults who left care.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | The identity of the supportive figures

Interviews revealed that among the noncare-leaving emerging adults, the parents were the most mentioned supportive figures, whereas among care leavers, different professional figures, especially from care and educational settings, were described more frequently (foster parents, social counsellors, and caseworkers). Care leavers put a greater emphasis on their friends' role in providing both emotional and concrete support and elaborated about them in their interviews (for example, friends who lent them money or gave them a place to live): "I can't live at home and my family can't support me in living. I sleep at friends' house." (21, care leaver) unlike their noncare-leaving peers who mentioned their friends only after and in addition to their parents with little explanation as to their support. This 21-year-old noncare-leaving young mans' quote demonstrates this aspect: "I adore my mother! She supports me, believes in me and many times along the way she was there for me, and my father … he is a super hero. Whatever I need he will be there for me. He is my model … I am telling you they are incredible parents! Besides, I have my friends and we hang out together, share things. I love them!"

The young adults' answers regarding the identity of their supportive figures in the present revealed differences in the continuity of the support. Although noncare-leaving young adults mentioned figures

(mainly informal) that were always part of their lives and would continue to be in the future, care leavers tended to talk about formal figures that supported them mostly in the past and whose present or future support was in question: "there is the social worker that helped me a lot, but I am not there (in care) anymore so it's not relevant".

4.2 | Characteristics of the social network: Noncare leavers versus care leavers

We asked the young adults about the role of the social figures in their lives today. Their descriptions revealed the significant differences between the social networks of care leavers compared with noncare leavers. Specifically, four main themes arose characterizing the duality in these young adults' social network features. The themes included: (a) stability versus uncertainty in the lasting presence of the supportive figures, (b) reliance on parents as the main supportive figures versus holding on to different supportive figures, (c) confidence versus uncertainty in the supportive figures' ability to help, (d) holistic versus fragmented support of the young adults' needs. Those themes will be elaborated below. Selected quotes are presented in Table 2:

4.2.1 | Stability versus uncertainty in the lasting presence of supportive figures

The theme of stability was dominant in the young adults' descriptions of their supportive figures. For the noncare-leaving young adults, the prolonged and lasting presence of their supportive figures (mainly their parents) was obvious; care leavers expressed uncertainty regarding the enduring presence of their supportive figures in the future and even now in their emerging adulthood. For example, this 24-year-old, noncare-leaving young women, who is studying to be a nurse, is confidant in her parents' support both emotionally and economically, during her studies and after: "There is my family, my brothers and mostly my mom and dad. What's significant about them is that they are always there for me to talk, advise, and I know that in the future too I will have their support for everything I need." However, for this 22-year-old care leaver, there is a lot of uncertainty about the identity of a supportive figure in the future: "I can't think of anyone that I can count on for life … I got help in the places I was. They always told me to call if I needed help (residential care) … but it's not something that I always rely on."

The care leavers' uncertainty about the lasting presence of the supportive figures they once knew or those who support them in the present leads them to put greater emphasize on their own strength, as opposed to the noncare-leaving young adults who rarely mentioned themselves as "their own support figure." This 21-year-old care leaver is an example: "I hope that when I need support I can reach my social worker (from care). Maybe the army can help. It's hard for me to think about it. I feel stronger today than in the past. I know what I want. I will be okay, I think" (young man, works in a restaurant).

4.2.2 | Reliance on parents as main supportive figure versus maintaining different supportive figures

All of the noncare-leaving young adults without exception mentioned their parents as their main supportive figures and described their support in various ways: "There is the obvious, which is my mother. She

TABLE 2 Characteristics of the social network: Care leavers versus noncare leavers

Theme	Quotes	
	Care leavers N = 16	Noncare leavers N = 16
Stability versus uncertainty in the lasting presence of supportive figures	"The counselors in care were supportive but there is no one that guides all the way. Every time there are other services that help on the way. It's hard … I can't say it's not."	"My mother was then and now the first person I would turn to when I needed something or just to talk. She is always available to me. I'm certain that this is how I will see her in the future too."
	"I can't think of anyone that I can count on for life … I got help in the places I was. They always told me to call if I needed help (residential care) … but it's not something that I always rely on. Let's say that the principal helped me to join the army. There was this social worker that helped me but she left and than another one came. You can't really count on them … "	"My mother. She always has faith in me. I know that she believes and will do what's right and what's important."
	"Not long ago I had an aunt. She helped me with everything but she died. The rest of the family live far away."	"I receive a lot of emotional support from my parents. I drive over to take groceries they buy for me every week … they were always there for me. I know that in every situation I will find their support."
	"My boss in my army service was very meaningful to me. He helped me find a job and supported me after I left the army. The truth is that today I am no longer in touch with him … "	"My parents pay the rent and my studies. They help with everything I need."
Holistic versus fragmented support of the young adults' needs	"There is this counselor in my studies that I listen to and he gives me good advice. He helped me to find scholarships … My grandmother cares a lot about me but she drives me crazy … My mother helps me mostly with her encouragement."	"Every step of the way when there were difficulties (during army service) my family believed in me and said I could do it even if it looked impossible. The family was always there for me even in the practical things like sending a fax".
	I have a few good friends that I know would help me if I asked them. Some of them let me sleep at their house when I didn't have money to pay the rent. There is this social worker I went to see a few times and really tries to help. She listens to me and tries to help me get a job and scholarships and so on … "	"My parents really believe in me and know to set an example, not in their words but by their acts. They help me and encourage me"
	I used to be very attached to my grandmother. She knew me best. Ever since she died I don't have anyone like her. My father listens to me. He doesn't complain like my mother who will not let me breath!. I used to think that my acting teacher would help me. He did help! He gave me a job and even let me join his course for free."	
Reliance on parents as main supportive figure versus maintaining different supportive figures	"*My mother* helps me sometimes. When she is in a good mood, I can speak with her … My *friends* from the mentoring program help me too. They know how to cheer me up because they go through the same things I do. The *manager* in the youth club also helps a lot. She gives me advice and tells me what to do in situations at work."	"During high school my mother was always there for me. She helped me prepare for my exams and do my chores so that I can succeed. I have ADHD but she always believed in me and never gives up. She and my father will do everything for me in order to help,e accomplish my goals. Very supportive."
	"For every situation I "fit" the right person … I have two former counselors that I can contact when I need to talk and there is the social worker that did more than enough for me. There is more than one social worker."	My father. He is a kind of person that talked to me since Day One. He explained business to me. Actually gave me a direction … I am very close to him. Also, he has connections and he introduced me to some people already. All of this adds up. This and the fact that he is a meaningful person in my life. A kind of role model.."
	"I had a few counselors and teachers who I had really good relationships with. I had a great psychologist. Later on I had my mentor at the mentoring program. I really love her. She helped with my studies … and there was this volunteer that I used to talk to every day … "	"My parents back me up with everything. I feel that everything is open for me. They paid for my driving lessons. It was hard but my father encouraged me and told me it was important"
Confidence versus uncertainty in the supportive figures' ability to help	"As far as my family's concerned – I don't have anyone. My mother doesn't really care about me, my father – who knows where he is, my sister … there's only my little sister whom I feel responsible for take care of. Only my former counselors (at the residential care) are meaningful to me … I know they can't help me with everything but they will do their best … "	"I am sure that my parents can help me with my main goal in life (higher studies). They support me in everything I do. So I am calm in this regard."

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| Theme | Quotes | |
	Care leavers N = 16	**Noncare leavers** N = 16
	"I met a friend during my military service and I went to her house for dinner a few times. Her family are really nice and host me gladly but I don't think they are the ones that can help me with my future … I don't know yet. We'll see where life leads me and whom I will find on my way."	"There is the obvious which is my mother. Always believes in me. She can help me with all my needs."
	"I have only my self to rely on. I guess I have more people to support me compared to my friends but at the end of the day I deal with my difficulties by myself … my sister is my anchor. I know that she will be there for me if I really need her. But has her own daily survival with her husband and kids … I don't want to burden her. We help each other in our everyday reality. But how can she help me?! She needs help in herself!".	"My mother always encourages me no matter what! She says it doesn't matter what you end up doing. You are pretty, smart! And you will succeed. She gave me everything so that I could study for the university exams and told me that if I pass she will take me on a weekend out of the country."

Note. Themes and exemplary quotes (*n* = 32).

always believes in me. She can help me with all my needs" (young adult, 22, works in a residential care facility). Even when those young adults mentioned other supportive figures, they were described as being "in the shadow" of their parents, additional but not as important or necessary support for them during emerging adulthood. This scenario was not found among the group of care leavers. In addition, those who referred to their parents as supportive usually included them among other supportive figures, not as dominant sources of support in their life. The description of this 20-year-old young man who is in a mentoring programme illustrates this theme: "I have my therapist (in the drug addiction program), but she doesn't seem to always understand things. I have the family social worker who helps my family. My mother loves her and it is a major help. My brother gives me good advice, and I have my former counselor who helped me (at the residential care), but now I'm not there so I'm not sure."

The noncare-leaving young adults who mentioned their parents as supportive figures highlighted the "assets" that their support included. They were aware that their parents' own abilities and resources could be available to them in the future as well as the present: "I want to study to be a doctor. My father works at the university so we have a lower fee. I believe that all of my parents' investment in me and strength they gave me helped me believe more in myself. And of course their financial support helps a lot. They pay for my studies" (young man, 23, studies medicine).

4.2.3 | Confidence versus uncertainty in the supportive figures' ability to help

One of the main aspects of the young adults' description of the supportive figures in their lives concerns their sense of certainty versus uncertainty. The feeling of certainty that support would be available when needed was expressed only by the noncare-leaving young adults: "I'm sure that my parents can help me with my main goal in life (higher studies). They support me in everything I do. So I'm calm in that regard" (young man, 22, a college student). Care leavers, on the other hand, described their relationships with their supportive figures with a great sense of ambivalence and insecurity in their ability or willingness to support them, as emerged from this young woman's interview: "My grandmother, I think she … is behind me when it comes

to big decisions. She will help me and maybe my mother, maybe. She's always there but she can't help. And there is my boyfriend too, I think …" (young woman, 22, studying for her GED).

One aspect that relates to their uncertainty in their social networks' ability to support them during emerging adulthood involves the care leavers' understanding of their family and friends' own struggles. This aspect was absent from the noncare-leaving young adults' interviews. However, care leavers mentioned their concerns about their parents and their own need or duty to support their family rather than receive support: "Sometime my mother helps me. When she's in a good mood, I can talk to her and she gives good advice. I want her to know that I really love her and I appreciate all that she's done for me. I know it's not easy for her …" (young woman, 20, in military service). Another young man explained that he asks for his mothers' support only as a last resort: "Let's say that my mother always helped me with all sorts of things as a child … but I try to ask as little as I can. For example, I buy my own clothes. If she supports me it's only when I don't have any other choice. She will always be my last resort, I don't rely on her because she's not in the best condition either … " (young man, 21, studying for his GED).

4.2.4 | Holistic versus fragmented support of the young adults' needs

Compared with the young adults who left care, young adults who lived with their parents perceived their support network as holistic, with one or two main support figures, usually their parents, offering various types of support during emerging adulthood, including emotional support, financial assistance, and counselling. Most of these young adults simply used the words: "everything I need," with no further elaboration. However, the description of those who elaborated more about the type of supportive roles their parents played in their life illustrated the holistic nature of their support: "First of all, I have my family. My parents are my role models. They both have academic careers in a profession that interests them. They help me and continue to help me in every phase including work, studies, buying a house, and more. Even emotionally, they always encourage me and support me to aspire higher … " (young woman, 24, a college student). All of the care leavers described different types of support from different support figures. In

the majority of cases, there was not a sole figure that provided all the types of support they needed. As one of the care leaver said: " It depends on the people who were beside me during different periods. There is not a specific person that I can think of" (young woman, 19, in army service). For this group, each support figure provided a specific type of support according to their ability: "I have a few good friends that I know would help me if I asked them. Some of them let me sleep at their house when I didn't have money to pay the rent. There is this social worker I went to see a few times and really tries to help. She listens to me and tries to help me get a job and scholarships and so on ... " (young man, 22, works as a guard).

5 | DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to explore the characteristics of the social networks of care leavers compared with their noncare-leaving peers during the transition to adulthood. Earlier studies showed the limited support care leavers have after their departure (Wade, 2008). However, this study adds to the existing knowledge about the features of their existing social networks. This information can broaden the understanding about the needs of care leavers during independent living and contribute to the design of programmes to support their transition to adulthood. The theory of emerging adulthood assumes that during this period, young adults lean more on their parents' support due to the demanding tasks of this period and its longevity (Arnett, 2007). The findings of this study support this assumption. All of the noncare-leaving young adults mentioned their parents as their main support figures for both concrete support, guidance, and emotional support. Also, the findings reinforce the theory's assumption that at-risk young adults such as care leavers cannot lean on their families' support during the transition to adulthood. Although most of the care leavers thought about their families and their parents in particular when asked about support in their lives, their descriptions of those relationships showed limited to non-existant support for various reasons. Generally, the themes that arose highlighted the ambivalent and complex nature of their relationships with their parents and unstable support that was limited in time, space, and circumstances. It is clear from all their descriptions that they cannot lean on their parents for support during this period the same way as their noncare-leaving peers. In some cases, they feel the need or the duty to support their families.

5.1 | Unstable support in an uncertain period

Many earlier studies that examined care leavers' challenges in transition to adulthood (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Stein, 2006; Sulimani-Aidan, 2014) highlighted these young people's need for support in dealing with the challenges of the transition to adulthood. Social support during emerging adulthood is considered essential concerning this period's characteristics, including identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and possibilities (Arnett, 2000). The study's findings regarding the noncare-leaving young adults highly support the emerging adulthood theory's assertion that these young people receive the continuing support of their families

in the present and the future. The noncare-leaving young adults' social networks are characterized by their stability, the certainty of their ability to be there for them when needed, and a holistic response to their various needs, most of the time by their parents. The findings regarding the care leavers' group presents a more complex and varied picture both with regard to the identity of the figures and the support they provide. First, as expected, their parents were not the only support figures in their lives. All of the care leavers mentioned different support figures. However, the figures they described were mostly various professional figures they had in care. This finding is not surprising. Not all care leavers can be reconnected to their families. They need to find alternative connections that can fill the void of lost family relationships. Earlier studies have noted that former social workers, counsellors, and foster parents have been described by care leavers as sources of support (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005). A recent study in Israel found that almost two thirds of care leavers reported they had contacted their former staff in care for support for up to 6 years after leaving care (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016).

The transition to adulthood is one of the most challenging life tasks in modern society (Arnett, 2000), yet young people who leave care must make an abrupt move from a protective and supportive environment to independent living (Schiff, 2006; Stein, 2006), while lacking the ability to depend economically and emotionally on their parents' support. Therefore, it only makes sense that these young people who spent years in care and formed close relationships with professional figures would turn to them for support and guidance after emancipation. However, these finding show that during emerging adulthood, the social networks of these young people do not change or expand. This is troubling because, formally, they are no longer under the responsibility of the care system and the support they are able to receive from the professional figures they knew is very limited. This finding is also in line with the literature review of Hiles et al. (2013) who stated that care leavers not only lose out on the development of a longstanding support network to help in their transition from care but are also less likely to develop supportive relationships in the future.

Another central difference in the social network characteristics of the noncare-leaving group compared with care leavers is the holistic nature of the support noncare-leaving young adults receive in comparison with the fragmented support care leavers derive from the different support figures in their lives. Although the noncare-leaving group describes their parents as the main providers of their needs, care leavers seem to lack one figure they can rely on for different types of support during emerging adulthood. Care leavers mentioned different support figures they reach out to for help including friends, former teachers, and social workers. On the one hand, this finding might suggest that they are resourceful in their pursuit of social support that can compensate for the lack of enduring support from their parents. An earlier study found that youth able to access social support from different sources were better able to buffer distress than youth who had only one source of social support (Perry, 2006). However, this might be more the case when these youth are still in the protective environment of the care setting, rather than when they are struggling on their own after leaving care. After leaving care, they enter their emerging adulthood and are preoccupied with many new challenges, much different from those they dealt with in care, including housing,

employment, and perusing higher education (Arnett, 2007). Furthermore, the majority of them must also deal with the stressful and demanding tasks of mandatory army service in Israel. Although it is encouraging that they can cite their friends and former staff members as supportive figures, many of the difficulties these young adults struggle with both in terms of the developmental tasks of this period and in terms of their own life circumstances (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014) are very complicated and require professional counselling. Therefore, they should be addressed by adult figures with knowledge and experience in dealing with these types of challenges, who are familiar with the services and resources that exist for young adults who left care, or services for at-risk young adults, and who can help them exercise their rights. This conclusion is strengthened by an earlier study that suggested the ambiguous nature and even the negative effect of the informal support network of care leavers (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017a).

The emerging adulthood theory marks exploration and future possibilities as one of the dominant features of young adults (Arnett, 2007). The noncare-leaving young adults' descriptions of their strong and holistic support by their parents illustrates how this support enables them to pursue their hopes and future plans. In contrast, the weak social ties care leavers have influence their ability to explore their possibilities and narrow their future expectations. Similar findings were found in an earlier study on the barriers care leavers meet in pursuing their future goals (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017b). Therefore, these findings demonstrate the importance of social support not only in buffering the negative affects during the transition from care to emerging adulthood but also as a promoter of the pursuit of future goals.

6 | LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the study's sample came from a small group of young adults. We tried to include and compare participants from diverse care settings, current occupations, genders, and ages. Although qualitative inquiry is not designed to be generalizable, we must exert caution relative to the limited sampling that was used. Also, the study focused on the young adults' descriptions of their supportive figures and did not distinguish between differences that might stem from gender and ethnicity or socio-economic status, nor from their use of services after care. Furthermore, the majority of care leavers were interviewed up to 3 years after leaving care. Therefore, it is possible that the professionals in their former care were still important sources of support in their lives. Future studies that focus on their social support 3 years and more after emancipation might show whether their supportive figures changed over time. Finally, based on the emerging adulthood theory, the study examined the social support networks of care leavers compared with their noncare-leaving peers. It would be interesting to learn whether the characteristics of care leavers' social networks differ from their at-risk peers who stayed at home.

7 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Despite its limitations, this study's findings have important practical implications that should be noted. One implication concerns the findings suggesting that care leavers regard the professionals in their former care as supportive figures even when their support is limited or was given a few years earlier, while in care. This suggests the significant role of those figures in their lives and the importance of formally supporting those relationships after leaving care. Professionals in former care and foster parents are described in the literature as "bridge relationships" for care leavers, as they continue to play an important support role whereas the youth establish alternative supportive relationships (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009). Therefore, they are considered part of the discharge process. However, the care leavers' descriptions in this study did not suggest any "new" supportive relationships that were established after discharge. Therefore, another practical implication is to proactively connect them to new supportive figures such as professionals or mentors. For example, through mentoring programmes or supervision apartments, and introduce them to new supportive connections that are available to them and are knowledgeable regarding the instrumental and developmental tasks of this period.

Another conclusion concerns the findings emphasizing the complex relationships care leavers have with their parents after discharge, showing that most of them cannot receive their parents' support or that such support is limited. This suggests the importance of a family-focused approach upon leaving care. Residential care placements should integrate the family in the youth discharge plan and be aware of the family's status, assessing the parents' ability to support them after returning home, and assisting in making connections with other family members, services, and programmes that can compensate for their lack of support.

Finally, the study shows that care leavers perceive their social networks as unstable and experience much uncertainty in their support figures' ability to support them in the future. This indicates the need to design programs that continue to support these young adults through a longer period to enhance their connections with more stable support figures in their communities.

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