UNDERSTANDING RUNAWAY BEHAVIOUR IN GROUP HOMES: WHAT ARE RUNAWAYS TRYING TO TELL US?

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Abstract: This paper explores runaway behaviour in foster care through the lens of Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model of stress and coping. To better understand the context and meaning of this behaviour in these troubled youth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 runaway adolescents in foster care. Thematic and conceptual analyses were used. The foster care system’s response to runaway behaviour was also examined by constructing foster trajectories for every youth in the study. The results show that running away can be understood as a coping mechanism that displays adolescents’ need for connection, empowerment, and emotion regulation, factors not addressed in foster placement. The trajectories suggest that foster care system intervention plays a role in placement disruption and runaway behaviour. In light of these findings, changes in foster care structure and policies seem essential in order to provide stability and continuity of care, as well as an environment where connections, empowerment, and emotion expression and regulation are possible to achieve.

Keywords: Runaway Behaviour, Coping, Conduct Disorder, Child Protection Services, Youth Intervention, Qualitative Research

Introduction

A large number of studies have shown the many risks associated with runaway behaviour in adolescents, such as the development of mental health problems and the risk of exploitation, abuse, prostitution, and gang affiliation (c.f. Hoyt, Ryan, & Cauce, 1999; Kaufman & Widom, 1999; Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, & Watters, 1998; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000). Over the long run, running away seems to be one of the

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main risk factors for homelessness as an adult (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Poirier, 2006; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991). While researchers across the board agree on the negative effects, few studies have examined this risky behaviour in adolescents placed in an alternative living situation (e.g. foster care residential units or group homes). An estimated 24% to 42% of these adolescents run away at one time or another during their stay (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Fasulo, Cross, Mosley & Leavy, 2002; Robert, Thérien & Jetté, 2009). Runaway behaviour is not new; it is acknowledged by specialized institutions working with troubled youth (in the U.S., Canada, England, etc.) and by researchers working on the problems affecting these adolescents. From a scientific point of view, runaway behaviour is part of a large spectrum of behavioural problems that manifest in these adolescents (other problems include substance use, impulsive or aggressive behaviour, delinquency, etc.) and that generally lead to diagnosis of a conduct disorder (CD). Based on this perspective, runaway behaviour can be a symptom or indicator of a more complex psychological problem. Researchers and clinicians are therefore more interested in the nosological category that this behaviour is associated with (i.e. CD) than they are in the behaviour itself. Because runaway behaviour is a recurring and lasting behaviour in residential units for teens in every state and country, institution staff have become accustomed to dealing with this type of behavioural problem. Researchers and intervention centres alike tend to associate running away with the other characteristics of the client (relationship problems, authority defiance, substance abuse, etc.) and this association is how they explain runaway behaviour.

We consulted a modest number of studies that have, over the past two decades, focussed on runaway behaviour in adolescents housed by Child Protection Services (CPS). Given the long- and short-term harmful consequences of running away, these studies have attempted to shed light on the explanations for these behaviours. There are two predominant types of explanations presented by the researchers: the first focuses on the structural characteristics of the institutional living situations, whereas the second focuses on the unique clinical challenges involved in working with these youth. These two types of explanations are not incompatible, but are complimentary. Used in practice during the intervention, these scientific explanations make it easier to appreciate the significant challenges that come with adolescent runaway behaviour in residential group homes.

The unique environment of these housing types—centered on authority, rules, and discipline—plays an important part in whether or not an adolescent will decide to run away. Angenent, Beke, and Shane (1991, pp. 94–97) found that adolescents that run away have a negative perception of the living situation in these homes. Adopting an empowerment perspective, Leaf (2002) mentions that support for these vulnerable adolescents must aim to give them a feeling of “being in control” and to promote independence. This theoretical standpoint is underpinned by the Clark et al. (2008) intervention model, which states that the adolescents’ involvement in their intervention plan will improve their sense of control over their life and will decrease the incidence of running away. Robert et al. (2009) have observed that adolescents who are less likely to run away are more aware of their intervention plan: they know the reason behind their placement, the placement’s possible duration, and the conditions for release. Therefore,
they have a better understanding of their presence and its clinical necessity as well as the behavioural changes that are expected of them. Echoing these research results are a number of authors who have noticed a feeling of helplessness in youth in alternative living situations. These authors also believe that running away is an attempt to regain control (Courtney et al., 2005, pp. 44–54; Martinez, 2006, p. 85; Penzerro, 2003, p. 238).

The constraining nature of living in these situations is not the only factor that could explain runaway behaviour; the clinical nature of the interventions for these adolescents could also be a contributing factor. For example, Fasulo et al. (2002, pp. 635–637) showed that a continuous and intense therapeutic link with youth had a positive effect and significantly diminished the risk of running away. Therefore, establishing a bond of confidence between the foster care worker and the adolescent is the first step towards therapeutic treatment, which in turn can have a beneficial effect on runaway behaviour. Referring to the attachment theory, the authors explain that most adolescents under alternative care have suffered from negative experiences with the caregivers, making them more vulnerable and susceptible to having relationship problems (Leaf, 2002; Penzerro, 2003; Stefanidis, Pennbridge, Mackenzie, & Potthast, 1992). Furthermore, the high number of placements/displacements during the course of the adolescents’ lives creates a relational instability that exacerbates these difficulties (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Nesmith, 2002; Robert et al., 2009). The lack of attachment, which can be traced back to the adolescents’ pasts, can compromise the support process, especially if the institutional living environment (authoritarian climate, multiple displacements) does not allow a significant relationship to form between the foster care worker and the youth. The runaway behaviour itself prevents youth from establishing a relationship with the foster care system/workers (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Penzerro, 2003; Stefanidis et al., 1992).

Conceptual framework and study goals

Our study is inspired by the transactional model of stress and coping constructed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This complex and dynamic model, which factors in the interaction between the individual and their environment (Chabrol & Callahan, 2004; Paulhan & Bourgeois, 1995), is undoubtedly pertinent to examining the contexts (internal and external) in which runaway behaviour arises (Courtney et al., 2005). The model posits that the concept of “coping” is inseparable from the concept of stress. Stress comes from the dynamic between the individual and their environment where stress is equivalent to a risk for the well-being of the individual or to a situation surpassing their resources. The appraisal done by the individual gives their perception of the situation and is as real as the situation itself. The coping strategies used to manage the needs and emotions caused by the stress vary according to the availability of internal and external resources as well as the perceived and possible level of control over the situation. Examining runaway behaviour will help us better understand which needs the adolescents respond to and what makes them express themselves in this manner. In other words, we seek to understand the many meanings that this type of behaviour has for adolescents.
A second aspect of runaway behaviour is equally important to investigate considering that it falls in line with our research topic—the meaning behind running away. Our study will focus primarily on the institution’s point of view. Researchers have not extensively documented the response of the foster care system to runaway youth, for whom they are legally responsible. How does an institution, responsible for the care, security, and rehabilitation of youth, manage runaway behaviour? At an institutional and legal level, runaway behaviour refers to an unauthorized absence. It is reported to the police and is recorded in the files after a set number of hours, which varies according to different regulations. In Canada, there is no specific legislation on how to manage runaway adolescents in the care of Child Protection Services (CPS). Institutions are obligated to report the missing youth to the police, but the institutional measures are established on a case-by-case basis when they return. By documenting the institutional responses to runaway behaviour, we can better understand the current guidelines and practices for managing and preventing runaway behaviour.

Our study has two goals. The first is to propose further theoretical development for the explanations provided by the current studies by examining runaway behaviour through the lens of coping strategies. By studying and analyzing it in its context, we can better evaluate to what extent runaway behaviour is a coping strategy for the runaway adolescents. The second goal is to examine the responses of the foster care system in terms of the measures taken following the runaway behaviour by tracking the trajectories of the services the adolescents in the study received over the course of their lives.

Following our analysis, we will be able to update the specific dynamics that implicate the adolescent and the intervention situation that are created around the runaway behaviour. These dynamics will help us better understand the issues at stake in runaway events and identify possible solutions.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Our sample consisted of 10 adolescents between 14 and 17 years old who had been removed from their original home environment and placed in a substitute home environment during their adolescence. At the time of the interview, all participants were under the care of CPS and living in special units for adolescents in difficulty. This convenience sample was chosen using two selection criteria: 1) the youth had to be in the foster care and be between 14 and 17 years old (so they could freely consent to participating in the study) and 2) they had to have run away from their institutional housing at least once in the six months preceding the interview.

Most of the youth we interviewed were around 11–13 years of age when they ran away for the first time. The total number of times they ran away varied between 2 and 20 for the majority of the youth, and they ran away for a period varying from a few hours to 6 months. Some of the youth have been in several care homes or have had frequent past contact with CPS. The age of first contact with CPS varied from birth to 14 years old (3
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before age 3, 3 at age 6 or 7, 2 at age 10 or 11, and 2 at age 13 or 14). Because of the number of contacts and early age of first contact with CPS, several of the youth had various types of placements: foster homes, less-restrictive group homes (where youth continue to attend their usual school), group homes with more intervention and less freedom (e.g., allowed to leave on weekends only) and detention placements. The number of placements and displacements (P/D) throughout the life of these adolescents varied from 1 to 17 (4 youth had 5 P/Ds or less, 2 had 7 and 8 P/Ds, and 4 had 12–17 P/Ds).

Data collection methods

We used two types of data collection methods to meet our two research goals. To meet the first goal, we conducted semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes, where youth were invited to tell their life stories. The interviews with our participants are rich and contain a wealth of information, but not all of this information will be used for this article. We will use only the information that allows us to document the contexts and dynamics (individual/environment) surrounding the runaway behaviour during placements.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to make them more accessible and easier to analyze. We analyzed the qualitative data in two steps—thematization and conceptualization, as described by Paillé and Mucchielli (2005, pp.123–179). Firstly, the thematic analysis was based on the interview transcriptions. It consisted of identifying the themes relevant to the study that were discussed by the participants. Secondly, we performed an analysis using conceptual categories. These conceptual categories came from meaning inferred by the researchers based on the adolescents’ stories, the conceptual framework, and the research questions. The researchers discussed these categories until they reached a consensus.

Finally, using digital data from the PIJ system (an information system used in CPS), we created individual trajectories for each youth. These trajectories present events in chronological order and include the external services received by the youth and their families, the placements and displacements in alternative living situations, and the times they ran away.

Results

The adolescents mentioned several types of reasons or motives for their runaway behaviour. In general, they identified a separate reason for running away each time they did it. Few of the adolescents said that running away was similar each time. Some of the motives they gave were running away to be with a loved one (e.g. boyfriend/girlfriend, parent), running away to be with friends and have fun, running away to have more freedom, running away from a stressful situation or to forget their pain and distract themselves from their troubles, and running away because their placement is longer than they would like. In addition, we analyzed the interviews, which brought to light the needs the youth feel and sometimes express when they run away. This information allowed us to determine the role that running away has for the youth. We identified
three main categories of runaway behaviour, each corresponding to a coping strategy for a specific need. These needs are 1) reconnecting with their natural environment; 2) taking back control of their lives; and 3) expressing their feelings.

Running away as a way to reconnect with the outside world

In some cases, running away seems to have a normalizing function, since its goal is to “reconnect” with important life events outside the youth’s residential unit (special occasions like spending Christmas with family, celebrating New Year’s, celebrating their birthday, snowboarding season, etc.) and with their loved one(s) (certain family members, friends, girlfriend or boyfriend) who they have been distanced from because of their placement. Running away is an attempt at reuniting or making a connection with family or friends with whom they feel or hope to feel loved and wanted. We think running away is not only a response to the need to control their life like any “normal” youth, but also a coping strategy that allows them to temporarily integrate into their natural social environment and to renew important relationships.

Running away as a way to regain control over their lives

The majority of youth have a hard time accepting their placement and enjoying it, so running away lets them “make up for lost time”. Their placement in residential units gives them the feeling that they are losing control over their life and losing their freedom and autonomy. The adolescents frequently stated that they did not have any decision-making power: they described their placements and displacements in various living situations as an outside decision. They used expressions like “they put me,” “they decided I would go,” and “they threw me,” as if they were an object being manipulated. The rigidity and inflexibility of the rules also led to this feeling of loss (of control, freedom, and autonomy). Because of their negative impressions of foster care and CPS, which often also includes foster care workers and social workers, running away is a way for many adolescents to escape and distance themselves from what they see as an alienating environment. In such a context, where running away is an escape, it is a coping strategy that youth use to try to regain control over their lives (Courtney et al. 2005). This behaviour appears to be a response to an environment that the youth perceive as coercive; furthermore, this environment appears to contradict the need for autonomy that is particularly pressing at this stage of development. Confirming our interpretation, some adolescents conveyed to us that running away gave them a feeling of power. Running away means taking care of oneself and surviving without help. Therefore, running away is a way of declaring independence and self-determination, which are values generally esteemed by adolescents, especially those from less fortunate circumstances.

Running away as a way to express their feelings

Finally, our analyses show that sometimes, running away meets a need that the youth may not have clearly expressed during the interview; running away is an outlet for
emotional tension created by a conflict or a crisis situation (the loss of a loved one, the announcement of an unexpected forced placement) or for feelings related to a stressful experience from the past brought on by something in the present (the feeling of being abused, provoked, or disrespected). Runaway behaviour appears to be impulsive and unpredictable in contexts where youth feel ambiguous emotions and struggle to identify and control them.

All three cases are often found in one adolescent’s past, which makes it difficult to pinpoint only one reason or explanation for runaway behaviour. However, they cover most runaway situations (individual/environment) identified in the youth’s stories.

The foster care system’s response to runaways

The trajectories in Figure 1 help us obtain information on the services (Foster Care System) provided to the adolescents over the course of their lives. The main objective is to examine how the system responds to runaway behaviour with particular attention to the following elements: time of the first runaway (R), number of home displacements that occur after the runaway (ND), increase, more or less pronounced, in runaway behaviour in terms of length and frequency (R+ and R++), and finally, placement in a detention centre. The courts decide this placement after the youth has committed a delinquent act.

For half of the adolescents (five), the decision to take them out of their original home and place (P) them in a substitute environment (foster home or other) was followed by runaway behaviour (R) or an increase in the number of runaways (R+ and R++) if they had already run away from their family home. Even though we cannot establish a cause and effect relationship between the first placement in a substitute home and the start of runaway behaviour, it is plausible to think that this decision brings on significant stress for the adolescent, who can then react with runaway behaviour.

Once runaway behaviour seemed to be more instilled in a youth’s life, we noted that they are displaced more often (ND) and, inversely, one or more displacements (D) are followed by runaway behaviour, or an increase in this type of behaviour (R+ and R++). This creates a to-and-fro motion between runaways and displacements in different types of living environments (group homes). The increase in frequency or length of runaway behaviour (R+ and R++) leads not only to more displacements but also to increasingly restrictive housing (the type of home is not represented in Figure 1). For half of the adolescents in our study, the displacement to more secure housing does not have a counter effect on their runaway behaviour. This behaviour continues until they commit a crime during a runaway, are arrested by the police, and are taken into custody.
Service trajectories help us see the different ways CPS responds to runaways. We can conclude that the institutional answer to runaway behaviour, which precedes or follows...
the first placement, consists in displacing the youth to a substitute home, generally a more secure or supervised place. In all cases, this answer does not stop runaway behaviour that, when it continues, accelerates to delinquent acts that automatically lead to an arrest and placement in a detention facility. Some of the adolescents in our study were without a doubt informed by foster care workers of the consequences runaway behaviour can have on their life in the long run. Furthermore, a few adolescents mentioned that they appreciated the homes that are stricter or that have more supervision or are harder to run away from, even though these places were more restrictive to their freedom.

Discussion

The analysis of the situation (individual/environment) related to runaway behaviour gives us a better and more informed look at this singular reaction, but the reason behind the behaviour is smoothed over by associating it to a conduct disorder (CD). Once placed in their real setting, runaway behaviour seems to be a coping mechanism and not an indicator of a CD. A coping mechanism seems to be a healthy reaction for youth faced with a situation over which they have little control (Tischler, 2009). We do not doubt that the youth in our sample answer the diagnostic criteria for CD. This diagnostic knowledge seems sterile according to the foster care workers. The emphasis we give to runaway behaviour is transferable to the world of practice because it allows us to figure out what the youth try to express by running away.

Three types of situations seem to encourage them to run away: 1) when the youth cannot find another way to express their desire to “reconnect” with the outside world (loved one or important event); 2) when they want to retake control of their life; and 3) when they have strong emotions that are difficult to manage. Furthermore, we have not excluded the idea that running away is a way of expressing a resistance to making a connection with the foster care workers, yet this connection is necessary for therapeutic conditions that lead to rehabilitation. Runaway behaviour, with these adolescents, is a great challenge for the implementation of clinical conditions necessary for their rehabilitation.

Currently, it is not certain that the answers or reactions of the foster care system correspond to the needs expressed through runaway behaviour. Multiple displacements, and the result of running away, can risk compromising the establishment of an important link between foster care workers and the youth. The therapeutic connection that should be built during an institutional placement takes time, patience, regularity, and a lot of availability on the part of the foster care worker. The Angenent et al. study (1991, pp. 94-97) showed that the relationship climate between foster care workers and the youth was a determining factor for runaway behaviour. Additionally, supervision and discipline alone in certain environments would not be a risk factor for runaway behaviour; it is more a combination of these characteristics with a cold, distant, and authoritative relationship between the foster care workers and the youth that can be a risk factor. The testimonies of some of the adolescents that mentioned feeling good in their more restrictive group home suggest that supervision and structure could prove to be beneficial and reassuring. Without a doubt, these group homes offer favourable conditions for trust and a
therapeutic relationship between the youth and the foster care workers. The study led by Fasulo et al. (2002, p. 636) shows the existence of a connection (inversely proportional) between the intensity of the therapeutic relationship and runaway behaviour. There could be numerous benefits for the youth: the development of a sense of security in their environment, a sense of ownership to the therapeutic approach, a better understanding of the situation, expression of emotion instead of acting on them, etc. Furthermore, all of these may lead to stopping runaway behaviour.

Bibliography


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