"*All My Relations*": Examining nonhuman relationships as sources of social capital for Indigenous and Non-indigenous youth 'aging out' of care in Canada

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Abstract

Objective: Provincial and territorial legislation across Canada mandates child welfare agencies to release youth from their care at the age of majority. Consequently, youth exiting care tend to have limited support networks, mostly comprised of formal and short-term connections. There is a gap in research examining long-term supportive relationships from the perspectives of youth who have 'aged out' of care.

Methods: This PAR photovoice project involved 8 former youth in care ages 19 to 29 in Vancouver, B.C. over the course of 12 weeks, and entailed collaborative thematic analysis of the photographs. The lead researcher executed additional analysis following the data collection phase.

Results: Relationships to culture, spirituality and the land were identified as important by racialized and Indigenous youth. Animal companions also emerged as an important non-human connection. Key barriers included a lack of culturally matched foster placements and social workers, gentrification, housing restrictions and a narrow definition of family relationships. Key strengthening factors included supportive community organizations and culturally responsive workers.

Conclusion and Implications: Findings highlight the importance of including the relationships that matter to youth in care within child welfare decision-making and planning processes, and a need for systemic investment in long-term nurturing of those relationships. Connections that are outside of the traditional social capital framework for young people in care, such as non-human relationships, also need to be valued. By doing so, youth exiting care have a better chance at accumulating social capital and building a support network they can rely on during their transition to adulthood.

Keywords: Aging out; transition to adulthood; emerging adulthood; social capital; social support network; relational support; foster care; foster care; youth in care; care leavers; indigenous youth.

Introduction

Demographic and sociological research over the last 20 years in most Western countries illustrates that young people are progressively taking longer periods of time to transition to adulthood. This phenomenon, termed by Arnett (2015) as emerging adulthood, is associated with young people transitioning to adulthood between the ages of 19 and 29. Canadian studies illustrate this demographic shift; in 2011, 42% of Canadian youth aged 20 to 29 were still living with their parents, compared to 27% in 1981 (Statistics Canada 2002, 2011). Leaving home has also become less permanent and reversible, as nearly a third of emerging adults return home after leaving (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). The literature also illustrates that young people today continue to rely on their social support networks, including their parents, friends and communities, throughout their adult lives (Avery, 2010; Molgat, 2007).

In contrast, youth in long-term government care who are not adopted or reunited with their biological families are expected to rapidly transition to adulthood and become self-sufficient (Reid & Dudding, 2006). This is due to provincial and territorial legislation across Canada mandating child welfare agencies to release youth from their care at the age of majority (Mulcahy & Trocmé, 2010). In Canada, child protection legislation, supports and services are a provincial and territorial jurisdiction, and the Federal government is responsible for funding child welfare services for Indigenous children living in First Nations communities (Trocmé et al., in press). According to national estimates, approximately 10% (6,700) of the youth in care population 'ages out'[1] of the Canadian child welfare system every year (Flynn, 2003). In British Columbia, where this study was conducted, approximately 1,000 youth 'age out' of care on a yearly basis at age 19 (Vancouver Foundation, 2016).

Limited extended supports are available to youth exiting care in Canada as very few jurisdictions offer services past the age of majority, and those services tend to be particularly targeted to those pursuing post-secondary education or diagnosed with a disability (Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012a). All services are offered on a voluntary basis, meaning that youth over the age of 15 (14+ in Quebec) can refuse services and must immediately emancipate from the system (Trocmé et al., in press). Many jurisdictions are currently discussing the provision of continued supports for youth leaving care, with some provinces starting to make changes to their child protection policies and regulations.

Examples of such supports include tuition waivers and extended supports up to age 24 in Ontario and 26 in British Columbia, and a Free Tuition Program in New Brunswick up to a maximum of four years for college and undergraduate degrees (Trocmé et al., in press). However, it is important to note that none of these programs start automatically as youth 'age out' of care - they must know how to access these programs, apply for them, meet the restrictive eligibility criteria (e.g., enrolled in school full-time, be in a rehab program or life skills program) and be approved (Vine et al., 2020). In British Columbia, it is estimated that only one-third of youth exiting care can access some form of extended government supports (Hyslop, 2017).

Evidence from North American studies over the last three decades demonstrate that youth exiting care are at a much higher risk to face a multiplicity of challenges than their peers who are not in care, such as high rates of homelessness, under-education, poverty, mental health issues, substance abuse and early parenthood (Casey Family Programs, 2003; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Day et al., 2011; Koegel et al., 1995; Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012b). Research in other Western Countries such as the UK (e.g., Stein, 2006), Scotland (e.g., Stein & Dixon, 2006), France (e.g., Stein & Dumaret, 2011) and Australia (e.g., Mendes et al., 2014) reflect similar outcomes. To date, there exists limited peer-reviewed Canadian research on youth 'aging out' of care outcomes, although longitudinal outcome studies appear to be increasing in certain provinces such as British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec (e.g., Beaupré & Flynn, 2014; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Rutman et al., 2007; Tessier et al., 2014).

It is important to note that while outcome comparisons of youth in care and those not in care may be impacted by population differences, some studies have also done comparisons with marginalized youth populations which show that the negative outcomes risk remains higher for the youth in care population. For instance, preliminary results from the first wave of a longitudinal study in Quebec illustrate that at age 17, 37% of youth in care from their sample (n = 1136) had experienced a period of dropping out of school, compared to 8% of their peers not in care and 12.4% of marginalized youth in Quebec (Goyette & Blanchet, 2018). The study also illustrates that youth in care are

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[1] 'Aging out' refers to youth who have reached the age of majority and are no longer eligible for child protection services. Although it is a label that is not applied to youth in the general population, it is a term that most people who are/have been in care understand, and is widely used in the literature. 'Aging out' is in brackets throughout this article to de-normalize the term.

lagging academically compared to their peers: only 26.7% of youth in care aged 17 had never repeated a school year, compared to 79.8% of the peers not in care and 60% of marginalized youth in Quebec.

This article seeks to challenge the exiting care policy and practice status quo, and highlights the research showcasing the need for and benefits of long-term supportive relationships for youth 'aging out' of care. Current theoretical frameworks, such as permanency and social capital, are also challenged and reframed based on the relational realities of youth in and from care. Through the expertise of former youth in care and arts-based research, the study presented in this article sheds light on non-conventional forms of relations that are meaningful and supportive to their transition to adulthood - such as animal companions, culture, spirituality and the land.

Independent vs. interdependent living

Independent Living Programs (ILPs) tend to focus on tangible self-sufficiency skills (e.g., cooking, cleaning, budgeting, CV writing) and are typically offered by child welfare agencies in a classroom-based setting to help prepare older youth in care for the transition to adulthood. Unlike the US, which implemented the Fostering Connections Act in 2008, there exists no Canadian federal legislation mandating the provinces to assist youth leaving care, and thus no concrete accountability process for the provision of ILPs. The only three Randomized Control Trial (RCT) impact studies of ILPs conducted to date, all based in the US (California and Massachusetts), suggest that such programs are inadequate and do not increase social support nor employment outcomes for youth exiting care compared to "services as usual" control groups (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2015; Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson et al., 2015; Zinn & Courtney, 2017). One of the studies showed a significant reduction in social support over time for those who participated in an ILP program in California (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson et al., 2015).

Canadian research on ILP impact remains limited, due to a lack of administrative data collection past the age of majority. In a systematic review of North American studies evaluating ILPs and Independent Living Services (ILS) between 2000 and 2018, Doucet, Greeson, and colleague (2020) found only three Canadian studies emerging from the grey literature, originating from British Columbia and Quebec. Canadian studies to date show mixed and limited impact on the outcomes of youth exiting care (Goyette et al., 2006, 2012; Rutman et al., 2014). Youth exiting care indicate that ILPs alone are not sufficient to meet their transition needs, as they do not tend to focus on emotional support and mentoring over extended periods of time (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Rosenwald et al., 2013).

Research illustrates that foster youth want permanence in their lives and to feel connected and supported by people who genuinely provide them with unconditional love (Sanchez, 2004). Innovative discussions in the child welfare literature call for an exiting care paradigm shift from independent living to a more realistic approach focused on interdependence (Antle et al., 2009; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Propp et al., 2003). Such an approach aims to normalize the reliance of marginalized populations on relational support networks throughout their entire lives rather than isolating and individualizing them.

A focus on interdependence emphasizes the importance of both formal and informal support networks for youth exiting care. By providing a safety net in times of crisis, interdependent networks can help youth surmount challenges for which they may not possess sufficient skills, confidence or time to handle on their own (Propp et al., 2003). Youth 'aging out' of care need to experience interdependence so that they can acquire the practical skills, knowledge and social capital to support their transition to adulthood (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011).

Research illustrates that youth exiting care identify biological families, caregivers, peers, natural mentors and intimate relationships as key meaningful connections in their lives (Duke et al., 2017; Smith, 2011; Thompson et al., 2016; Wade, 2008). When given the right tools and nurturing, these relationships can act as a buffer against many of the negative outcomes young people from care experience after leaving the child welfare system (Duke et al., 2017). Despite these findings, studies highlight that nearly half of youth 'aging out' of care do not have enduring relationships with supportive and caring adults (Greeson et al., 2010).

Youth 'aging out' of care and social capital

According to Coleman's interpretation of social capital theory, close relationships are an important source of support and resources that can contribute to a young person's growth and adjustment throughout their life course (Duke et al., 2017). These relationships, typically grounded in the family context, provide resources such as information channels, establishing shared social norms and values, and creating trustworthy social environments where obligations and expectations are shared and met (Coleman, 1988). Close family relationships, when combined with other types of

supportive relationships in the larger community, provide enhanced benefits for young people (Duke et al., 2017). The impacts of social capital on marginalized youth populations, such as rural, immigrant and urban low-income youth, are also well documented in the literature, with positive impacts demonstrated in areas such as help-seeking behaviours (Schenk et al., 2018), pursuing post-secondary education (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009) and reducing the risk of involvement with youth gangs (Briggs, 2010).

Research illustrates that many youth 'aging out' of care have significant social capital deficits due to the lack of stable family relationships during their time in care (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). The impact of those deficits is heightened when accompanied with a lack of support during the transition to adulthood (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). While research stresses the importance of familial bonding in young people's successful development during the transition to adulthood (Avery, 2010), many of the familial connections of youth in care are lacking trust and reciprocity - core relational characteristics that are required for social capital to be obtained from such relationships (Barker, 2012). Thus, for youth 'aging out' of care, it is important to consider sources of social capital that are located outside of the traditional familial context and relevant to their lived realities. These include relationships with nonhuman sources of social capital, such as animal companions, culture, spirituality and the land.

There is emerging literature on the social capital potential of spirituality and faith (Candland, 2000), including in Indigenous communities and cultures (Ledogar & Fleming, 2008). Hill and Cooke (2013) refer to connections with Indigenous culture, spirituality and associated rituals, such as prayers and medicine, as "symbolic capital", and is a socially invested resource that is part of the Indigenous social capital framework. Spirituality can help Indigenous youth to feel grounded in their culture and increase resiliency (Hill & Cooke, 2013), a sentiment that was reflected in the recommendation developed by the youth co-researchers related to this theme as they called for increased access to cultural programs and retreats. Such programs and retreats are a form of bonding social capital (i.e., relations within the Indigenous community) and can help young people access symbolic capital (Mignone & O'Neil, 2005).

Research indicates that place attachment can serve as a resilience factor during periods of transition and uncertainty by fostering "individual, group, and cultural self-esteem, self-worth, and self-pride" (Hay, 1998 as in Dallago et al., 2009, p.149). Dallago and colleagues (2009) argue that place attachment also impacts a young person's sense of safety as well as their ability to acquire community-based social capital. However, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in care, who tend to experience chronic displacement during their time in the system and afterwards, the opportunities for developing place attachment are few and far in between.

While research on the benefits of animal companions for youth 'aging out' of care is lacking, there is considerable research on the meaningfulness of animal companions for marginalized youth, particularly for homeless and street-involved youth. For instance, homeless youth identify animal companions as companions that provides them with unconditional love and significantly reduces their feelings of loneliness, depression and social isolation (Lem et al., 2016; Rew, 2000; Rhoades et al., 2015). Animal companions can also provide marginalized youth with psychosocial benefits, such as social interactions with people in the neighbourhood, that are otherwise difficult to access (Lem et al., 2016). There is emerging literature examining the animal companion connection as a conduit for social capital, which shows significantly higher levels of social capital for those with animal companions even after controlling for age, sex, education and children (Wood et al., 2005, 2017). Those with animal companions are more likely to feel connected and interact with the broader local community, and animal companions can facilitate the formation of new friendships (Wood et al., 2017).

The accelerated transition mandated by the child welfare system has also been shown to affect the ability of youth in care to self-focus, and limits their ability to build human and social capital to support them throughout adulthood (Courtney et al., 2012; Singer & Berzin, 2015). Age-based service cut-offs place an unrealistic expectation of instant adulthood upon them, one that many of their peers are not held to (Stein, 2006). These structural and systemic challenges can create social isolation and low levels of connectedness to their peers, school, community and those who they consider as family (Smith et al., 2015).

The perspectives of youth are often not considered in child welfare policy and permanency planning (Samuels, 2008). Consequently, child welfare permanency planning generally does not incorporate alternative paths to establishing permanent and supportive relational networks for youth 'aging out' of care, especially those that do not fit within traditional and legal family definitions (Samuels, 2008). As a result, youth who are unable to achieve permanency during their time in care are forced to leave at the age of majority with little to no sustainable social support system.

Thus, it is important to capture the perspectives of young people 'aging out' of care about the relationships that matter to them, as their own perceptions and experiences may vary from what adults might think they are experiencing. Considering these realities, this research sought to explore the following question: what kind of relationships are perceived by youth who have 'aged out' of care as supportive of their transition to adulthood, and how can those relationships be developed and nurtured in the long term?

Methods

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR requires collaboration with those who are affected by the issue being studied, with the aim to build advocacy capacity and affect social change in the community (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). This approach is rooted in transformative research with oppressed and marginalized groups, and aligns with the objective of this research: to provide a powerful platform for the voices of youth 'aging out' of care in a social action context. A PAR approach framed the research process and implementation, and incorporated youth engagement and partnership in the research proposal, design, data collection and analysis, and dissemination.

PAR also challenges the researcher-participant divide by equalizing power dynamics, engaging those with lived experience as experts of their own lives and humanizing their contributions to the research. Essentially, the participants are co-researchers who are, "at least to some degree, investigating themselves" (Hart, 1997, p.92), and should not be tokenized as mere participants in a scientific study.

There are several ways to do participatory research with young people, such as engaging them as partners in the project through an adult supporter or ally (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). This approach is commonly used in PAR projects led and initiated by university researchers, and entails the development of intergenerational reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the youth. This process of mutual knowledge development and exchange allows for the adult researchers to better understand the world of young people, and for youth co-researchers to better understand the world of research and policy (Robin et al., 2015). For a project to be participatory, the researcher and the youth must share interpersonal and institutional power to move towards quality collaboration (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

Youth with care experience have expressed the need for PAR approaches to contribute to their liberation and healing (Doucet, Dzenghanin et al., 2020). When PAR approaches equalize the power dynamics that exist in research settings between the researcher(s) and the participants, feelings of systemic alienation and exploitation by former youth in care can be mitigated (Doucet, Dzenghanin et al., 2020). Also, PAR can contribute to the development of their political agency by providing a platform and opportunities to influence the political discourse on exiting care (Doucet, Dzenghanin et al., 2020).

Photovoice (PV)

PV is an arts-based qualitative method rooted in critical feminist theory, empowerment education, documentary photography, and social constructivism (Wang & Burris, 1994; 1997). PV employs photography and group dialogue - the fusion of images and words - as a means for marginalized individuals to deepen their understanding of a community issue or concern and explain their own experiences through critical reflection and dialogue (Palibroda et al., 2009). PV differs from traditional documentary photography in that it shifts the lens from a voyeuristic view to one that gives the camera to and empowers those with limited power, status and access to policy and practice decision-makers (Wang & Burris, 1994).

PV is an empowerment tool, through which marginalized individuals can work together to represent their own lived experiences rather than have their stories told and interpreted by others (Wang & Burris, 1994). Specific photographic techniques are utilized to teach marginalized individuals creative ways to show others the world through their eyes (Palibroda et al., 2009). The visual images and accompanying stories produced by a PV project are dissemination tools that can be used to reach and inform key stakeholders and policy decision-makers through various mediums, including an art exhibit (Palibroda et al., 2009).

This research method is a particularly powerful tool in engaging youth who have 'aged out' of care, as they are often socially and politically disenfranchised, isolated and in need of connections to the larger community. While the purpose of PV is to examine serious issues, it also incorporates fun, creative and collaborative research approaches,

which can encourage young people's willingness to participate (Blackman & Fairey, 2007). PV and PAR also provide an opportunity for co-researcher skill development through photography training, critical reflection, group dialogue and analysis, problem-solving, political engagement and advocacy, research, co-authorship, public speaking, as well as opportunities for personal growth (Blackman & Fairey, 2007).

Recruitment and sample

This study focused on recruiting young people, including Indigenous and LGBTQ2+ youth, between the ages of 19 and 29 who 'aged out' of care and resided in the Greater Vancouver area at the time of project recruitment and implementation. A focus on a 10-year age range was intentional: first, to reflect the age range defined as "emerging adulthood" by Arnett (2015), and second, to capture a variety of perspectives on supportive long-term relationships for youth 'aging out' of care. Recruitment of Indigenous and LGBTQ2+ youth was also intentional, due to their overrepresentation in the child welfare system. In British Columbia, 61% of all children and youth in care are Indigenous (Trocmé et al., in press). Estimates from the US showcase that LGBTQ2+ children and youth are 2.5 times more likely to be placed in foster care than non-LGBTQ2+ children and youth (Fish et al., 2019).

While the study employed convenience sampling recruitment techniques in all recruitment communications, it also incorporated purposeful recruitment techniques by emphasizing the intent to specifically engage and recruit Indigenous and LGBTQ2+ youth co-researchers. Recruitment was done by engaging with youth-serving organizations and agencies via email and phone, doing in-person presentations to various community youth groups, and circulating the project poster on social media. University ethics approval was obtained prior to the recruitment process.

A group of seven to 10 co-researchers is recommended as the ideal size for a PV research project, as it allows for a sufficient variety of experiences and ideas while providing enough time for each co-researcher to contribute to the project in a meaningful way (Palibroda et al., 2009). A group this size helps to maintain sufficient time at each session to answer questions, address sensitive issues and accommodate diverse learning styles (Palibroda et al., 2009). The study began with 11 youth co-researchers after making an exception for an additional Indigenous participant who ardently wanted to participate in the project; however, three of the co-researchers decided to end their engagement after the first six weeks of involvement. The final sample consisted of eight youth co-researchers; demographic information is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Information

	Frequency
Ethnicity	
Indigenous	3
Mixed Iraqi/Indigenous	1
Mixed Ancestry	1
Ashkenazi Jewish	1
African Canadian	1
Caucasian	1
Gender	
Male	3
Female	4
Non-binary	1
LGBTQ2+	5
Age	
19	3
21-23	3
26-27	2

Data collection and project implementation

Twelve weekly group sessions were held between October and December 2017. A detailed project sessions implementation plan can be obtained by contacting the author. Informed written consent was received by the youth co-researchers, and all but one agreed to be publicly identified. The sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by the lead researcher; the transcriptions were then verified with the youth co-researchers to ensure transparency and ownership of their own narratives. Check-in and check-out exercises were facilitated at the beginning and end of each session to encourage the building of trust and to explore any challenges or breakthroughs that may have come up during the session.

At the start of the project, youth received photography training from a professional photographer, and were provided with digital cameras. The research team convened for two to three hours each week to examine and discuss the photographs submitted by each youth co-researcher and connect them to the research question. Each youth co-researcher submitted six to seven photographs over several weeks. The following questions guided the photo contextualization process during those sessions:

1. What does this photograph mean to you? Why is this photo in particular most significant to you?

2. How do you see this photo as a reflection of the issue of supportive long-term relationships - and one that is relevant to you as a former youth in care in your community?

3. What is the relationship between the content of the photo and how you perceive the community/the world around you? What recommendation for change in your community is associated with this photo?

With the assistance of the lead researcher, youth co-researchers employed thematic analysis of the photos and the photo contextualization transcripts. As part of the group analyses, youth co-researchers also developed concrete recommendations for change to child welfare policy and interventions related to the relationship-based themes that emerged from their photographs. During the last week of the project, a photo exhibit was held at a local art gallery, which was open to the community. Several key government officials and child welfare policy decision-makers were present, in addition to representatives from the community. After the completion of the data collection and project implementation phase, the lead researcher built on the thematic analysis completed by the youth co-researchers and conducted further in-depth thematic analysis of the photo contextualization transcripts. Youth co-researchers were consulted on these additional analyses for accuracy, approval and transparency purposes.

Results

Fifty-two photographs in total were submitted by the youth co-researchers. Forty-one key sub-themes emerged from the photographs; these sub-themes are divided across three thematic categories: (1) relationships that matter to youth exiting care; (2) barriers to establishing long-term supportive relationships; (3) strengthening factors in establishing long-term supportive relationships. While the results mainly focus on common sub-themes, individual sub-themes are also represented as the experiences of youth 'aging out' of care are not homogenous. While the research question examined all meaningful relationship types, this article focuses specifically on the key nonhuman relationships that youth co-researchers identified in their photographs. Table 2 summarizes the sub-themes across the three thematic categories.

Table 2. Themes emerging from photographs

Sub-themes	Frequency[2]
Theme: Nonhuman relationships that matter to youth exiting care	
Culture and spirituality	Universal
The land	Atypical
Animal companions	Atypical
Theme: Barriers to establishing long-term nonhuman relationships	
Housing	Universal
Lack of culturally matched placements	Common
Gentrification	Atypical
Narrow definition of family relationships	Individual
Theme: Strengthening factors in establishing long-term nonhuman relationships	
Supportive community organizations	Common
Supportive social workers	Atypical
Culturally responsive workers	Individual

### Connection to culture, spirituality and the land

More than half of the youth co-researchers, particularly those of Indigenous and racialized backgrounds, expressed the need to be connected to their culture and their history. According to them, this is often a relationship component that was missing in their case plans during their time in care, and highly impacted their sense of belonging and identity. A lack of culturally matched foster placements was also identified as a barrier to forging and nurturing this type of connection. For most, connecting to their culture and spirituality occurred after they had exited care, through their relationships with culturally responsive workers, supportive community-based organizations and cultural groups. The youth co-researchers who had the opportunity to reconnect with their culture and spirituality felt it had a significant positive impact on their lives, and attributed their success to this connection. As one youth co-researcher

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[2] Legend (drawn from Ladany, Thompson and Hill's (2012) labelling of the representativeness of themes): Universal = all or all but one youth co-researcher (7 to 8); common = more than half and up to all but two youth co-researchers (5 to 6); atypical = at least two up to half of youth co-researchers (2 to 4); individual = one youth co-researcher.

shared:

> "[...] For me, culture is really important in my life, it's helped me build a sense of identity and feel connected. [...] After I aged out, we did a really good program where it would help me transition, so that introduced culture into my life. [...] I never had that growing up. [...] Growing up in care, my mom after she went to residential school, she didn't experience any of her culture or spirituality because it was not allowed. [...] Being able to pass [culture] along to the next generation is something that's important to me, which is cultural identity and spirituality. It just makes me feel calm and it helps out with finding myself." – Ronda

Other youth co-researchers struggled with the disconnect between mainstream Western culture and their own cultural roots, and voiced their desire to (re)connect with their cultural origins and spirituality (see Figures 1 & 2).
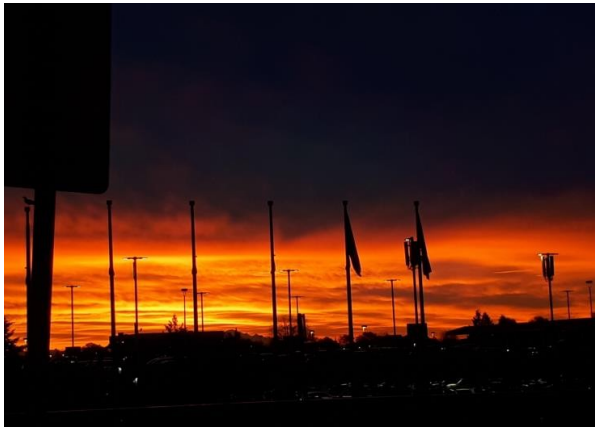
Figure 1. *Awaken With the Sunrise, Fire Keeper* by Raina Jules

Caption:
"I am back from the Dead.
My ancestors did not have time.
To share their teachings.
To pass on the torch.
To show me the way.
So, I rise with the morning sun.
So the fire within can show me the way."

"I was just thinking about it when I was looking at it [the sunrise] the other day, like how our ancestors would get up that early to do what they needed to do to start the day. [...] You have to get up to survive, and that's the first step. [...] I don't even know my grandparents [...]. Just seeing that [sunrise] made me think of them. [...] But I didn't know [my elders while I was in care]."

Figure 2. *Untitled* by [name redacted]

"[This photo] is about my spirituality and religion. That's basically a shelf in my room with a bunch of Judaica. When I was in care my social worker and foster parents didn't really understand what my religion meant or what it was. So, I didn't really get to practice much and I didn't really get to connect with other people much. Because they were like 'oh you can just do what we do, it's fine'. And I was like 'that's not really what I do'. When I did go and start connecting with people [of the same faith as me], it kind of made my life more significant in terms of connecting with the synagogue people. I found there is a common connection, even though we're all just Jews in the Diaspora."

For one Indigenous youth co-researcher, (re)connecting to the land meant a (re)connection to her ancestors and history; it was a relationship that was intertwined with culture and spirituality, and had been damaged by the child welfare system through displacement and intergenerational trauma from residential schools. It was also a relationship she could pass onto and share with their children (see Figure 3).

Most Indigenous youth co-researchers expressed a sense of grief and loss due to experiencing multiple layers of intergenerational displacement and trauma through the removal from their communities of origin and simultaneous separation from their siblings. The removal from their communities of origin also impacted their ability to form cultural connections to the land; this is termed in the literature as place attachment, as young people develop a deep emotional bond towards specific geographical places and structures over time due to repeated positive interactions (Dallago et al., 2009).

Another co-researcher shared his connection to his neighbourhood and the comfort and sense of belonging he found in a part of the city constantly threated by increased gentrification (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. *The Fire Within* by Ronda Merill-Parkin

Caption:
"The land that you walk on
Is a part of
Those before
Those who follow
It is a part of me
It is the fire within."

"I always have been drawn to being on the land, I really enjoy it, that's where I'm most at peace, I'm most calm. [...] So it [the photograph] represents my burning desire to reconnect [with the land]. I think we're so colonized now that a lot of us forget our relationship with the land and how important it is to connect with the land. In Aboriginal culture and spirituality, it's really important to protect the land. Just to have the desire within me is really important to pass it down to my daughter."


Figure 4. *Comfort* by Harrison Pratt

Caption:
"Rundown buildings, unkempt lawns, and graffiti keeps my neighbourhood safe from gentrifying developers. Paradoxically, developers make living conditions worse for low-income people. Higher rents, displacement, and replacement by yuppies are a looming threat from the corporate world. Youth-in-care can't afford to lose the last remaining neighborhoods they call home."

Animal companions: More than just animal companions

Nearly half of the youth co-researchers shared photographs of their animal companions, referring to them as family. All youth co-researchers expressed that housing restrictions were a major barrier in being able to have an animal companion, and that the child welfare system's narrow definition of *family* did not consider animal companions (see Figures 5 & 6).

Three of the youth co-researchers had animal companions at the time of the study, and one of the youth co-researchers had a strong desire for an animal companion but was unable to obtain one due to housing restrictions in her apartment building. Those who had animal companions expressed that they were more than just a pet: they were considered as family members and a source of relational stability. As one youth co-researcher shared, "*I feel like I've created a new family for myself*."

In terms of benefits, one youth co-researcher expressed that their animal companion helped to develop their nurturing capacity towards themselves as well as others, and improved their mental health. Another youth co-researcher shared that their animals had greatly improved their quality of life, while another emphasized the relational stability and unconditional support provided by the relationship. Those with animal companions also reflected on the interaction between people who came into their home and their animal companion, and how it improved their own connections to others. For one youth co-researcher, their animal companion was the greeter of the house, making people feel welcomed; for another, their animal companion acted like the landlady with their roommates, as someone who "*comes and checks on you*".
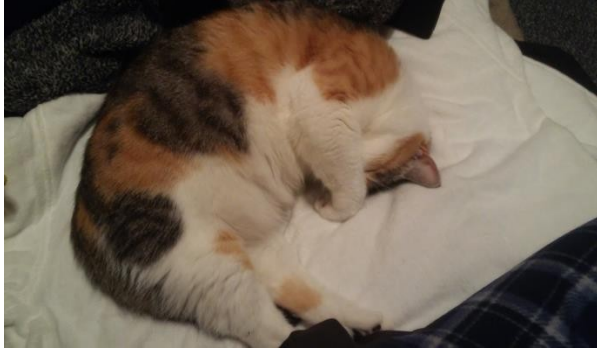
Figure 5. *Fat Rolls* by Sabien Vanderwal

Caption: *"Part tabby, part calico - this is my service animal."*

"[…] with animals, they give you such unconditional love and it's always going to be unconditional. Like it doesn't matter if I change the type of food she's eating or if I don't give her pets one day or I accidentally step on her tail - yes, she's going to be mad at me if I step on her tail, but in the end, she still going to love me because she's that type of cat. She's a therapy animal, she's my service animal. She means the world to me, and she's my baby and I love her."

Figure 6. *Rescue Family* by Tahsina Al-aibi (Fish)

Caption: "*These are my pets. When I look at this photo I see my family. All three were rescues. The dragons are named Yin and Stumpy-Yang, they came into my life in January 2016. My cat Sushi came into my life only a couple of months ago. All my pets have improved my quality of life, and I feel I can relate to them because I was also a rescue. Sometimes living alone can be really tough, and animals make it a lot better.*"

However, the barriers to crucial basic needs, such as shelter, were also exacerbated by having an animal companion. Several youth co-researchers had to hide their animal companions from their landlords in fear of getting evicted due to restrictive tenancy laws. For one youth co-researcher, they had been able to get their animal companion certified as a service animal for their post-traumatic stress; however, the process to obtain the certification was complicated and lengthy and they still experienced issues in obtaining housing. These barriers were also highlighted in the recommendations developed by the youth co-researchers, as they called for the removal of barriers to obtaining service or therapy animal certification and to accessing affordable housing.

Discussion and implications

Much of the research on social capital and relational networks for youth 'aging out' of care focuses on relationships with humans, particularly with adult caregivers, kin and peers. Due to the broad research question and participative nature of the project, youth co-researchers identified key relationships outside of the normative confines of social support networks and social capital theory; they assigned importance to nonhuman relationships, such as with culture, spirituality and the land. Traditional social capital conceptual frameworks have been criticized as being colonial in nature and not considering the symbolic capital that is intertwined within sources of Indigenous social capital (Hill & Cooke, 2013). More participatory research needs to be done in this area to reflect ways of knowing, doing and relating for Indigenous youth in care.

Relationships to the land also emerged from the findings, which connects to the literature on place attachment (Dallago et al., 2009). While research highlights the negative psychological impacts of place loss on children and youth during natural disasters, such as grief and alienation (Carroll et al., 2009), further research on the impacts of place loss and place attachment for youth in and from care is required. In addition, child welfare policies and practices need to focus on providing increased opportunities for long-term positive connections to the land and the community for youth while they are still in care, as those attachments can potentially act as a buffer to the challenges experienced during the transition to adulthood.

Animal companions emerged from the findings as another important nonhuman relationships. The social capital and resilience benefits outlined in the literature were echoed by the youth co-researchers in this study who had an animal companion. The liabilities associated with having an animal companion, such as the ability to access housing, certain community services, such as shelters and drop-in clinics, and employment opportunities are also reflected in the youth homelessness literature (Lem et al., 2016; Rhoades et al., 2015). It is thus important for service providers and policy decision-makers to consider the importance of animal companions for marginalized youth, and ensure access

to pet-friendly services and supports. Young people from care should not have to decide between giving up a family member to access crucial supports or becoming homeless. In addition, it is important to note that most of the literature on social capital and animal companions does not focus on marginalized populations, and further research on the connection between those having an animal companion and social capital for youth 'aging out' of care is required.

This project has several limitations. Photovoice requires group discussions with the youth co-researchers over an extended period rather than one-on-one interviews; this can increase the risk of certain voices being more prominent while the voices of timid others being less pronounced. However, the lead researcher made efforts to counter this risk by facilitating inclusive weekly group discussions, and the photo contextualization process allowed for each youth co-researcher to present their photography work, views and expertise. The extensive time commitment and emotional labour required for this project also impacted youth co-researcher retention. Three youth co-researchers, all of Indigenous background, were unable to remain engaged with the project after the first six weeks due to feeling overwhelmed by the project requirements. In addition, the purposive and convenience sampling methods used for this project may have excluded young people from care who are often the most silenced, such as street-involved youth and those involved in the criminal justice system.

However, this project also has several strengths. The lead researcher is a former youth in care, which helped build a rapport of trust and reciprocity with the youth co-researchers. The required prolonged engagement also helped to develop a safe and trusting group dynamic, and encouraged youth co-researchers to be transparent and truthful in their sharing of knowledge. Member checking, peer debriefing and support was built into the project process, and youth co-researchers engaged in ongoing constructive criticism and feedback on the data collection, analysis and dissemination processes. The PAR approach also allowed for youth co-researchers to own the project and be recognized in the community and by key policy-decision makers as experts on their own lives.

This research provides a deeper understanding on the types of relationships that matter to young people from care, and how they can be better developed and nurtured over time. The participatory nature of the project allowed for themes outside of the confines of the traditional relational boundaries of social capital theory, such as nonhuman relationships, to emerge from the youth co-researchers' contributions. To develop a social capital framework that is relevant to the realities of youth exiting care, further research on the benefits of nonhuman relationships is required.

There is a well-known Indigenous phrase, "*all my relations*", that emphasizes the interconnectedness of human beings to the universe (Kaminsky, 2016). This Indigenous philosophy can also be applied to the relational needs of all youth 'aging out' of care. Child welfare policies, decision-making and practices need to invest in all the relations of youth in care - including to the spiritual, cultural, earth and animal worlds - and ensure their continuity during the transition to adulthood. This can be done through increasing access to community-based cultural programs, and matching Indigenous and racialized youth with culturally responsive social workers and foster placements. Eliminating barriers to housing and support services for those who have animal companions is also key in sustaining those connections, as well as ensuring therapy or service certification for animal companions. By doing so, youth exiting care have a better chance at accumulating social capital and building a support network they can rely on during their transition to adulthood.

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Conflict of interest

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