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Examining the Help Seeking Experiences of Youth in Extended Care: A Narrative Ethnography Study

Sarah M. Pennington

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EXAMINING THE HELP SEEKING EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH IN EXTENDED CARE:

A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY STUDY

By

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Presented to the Faculty of the

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EXAMINING THE HELP SEEKING EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH IN EXTENDED CARE:

A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This narrative ethnographic study examined the help-seeking experiences of foster youth as they transitioned into adulthood in extended care. The purpose of the study was to understand whether foster youth in extended care report a period of continued support which assisted in the development of their adult roles, relationships, and the knowledge and skills to become productive and satisfied adults. Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) asserts foster youth viewed their adult identities as grounded in independence and standing on their own, or are foster youth influenced by the relationships and the network of support embedded in the extended-care network which aligns to the assumptions of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2017). Themes identified during the analysis process included: (a) Youth felt responsible for their own development and safety while also disconnecting from the people in their lives; (b) Participant's lack of trust in others led to difficulty asking for help and balancing life's challenges; and (c) A lack of growth-fostering relationships. Implications from this study suggested opting into extended care provided the financial and housing support needed for foster youth. However, participants did not view extended care as offering relational support due in part to their view of adults as self-reliant. With limited social supports in place, participants struggled to balance life's commitments. This study offers suggestions for future research focused on extended-care programing for foster youth.

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As I think back over the process of writing my dissertation, an outpouring of gratitude flows through me. I had the good fortune of becoming a professional school counselor after years of being a stay at home educator for my own children. My husband has always had great faith in my abilities, even when I did not believe in myself. In spite of my own internal struggles, Troy has stood by me and provided the emotional and financial support to allow me to walk my own path. Thank you for believing in me when I was unable to believe in myself.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Foster care influences the transition between adolescence and adulthood; it shapes how foster youth embark on the journey into their adult lives. During the transition into adulthood, foster youth report a transition from having all major life decisions made for them by the agency, to sudden and complete independence causing youth to feel ill prepared to manage their lives (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). Studies examining outcomes for foster youth aging out of the child welfare system found foster youth face challenges including difficulty achieving self-sufficiency (Abrams, Curry, Lalayants, & Montero, 2017); limited human, social, and financial capital (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). In addition, these young people experience homelessness, unemployment, and often drop-out of school (Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelcu, 2013; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017). Poor outcomes for this group of youth have spurred some states to extend foster care beyond the age of 18. In 2012, California began the process of developing a comprehensive extended foster care program through the passage of Assembly Bill 12 (Courtney, Dworsky & Napolitano, 2013). By extending care beyond the age of 18, foster youth have the choice to remain in care and continue to access benefits and programs specifically designed for transitional-aged youth (ages 18-21). As foster youth transition into their adult lives, it remains unclear whether the development of extended care produces foster youth with better self-sufficiency, relationship networks, and adult outcomes.

The Importance of Relationships During Transitions

Emancipation from foster care—or aging out—is defined as the age at which the formal relationship of the state to the child under guardianship ends (Berzin et al., 2014). Traditionally, this process occurs once a foster youth turns 18 or has graduated from high school. When foster

youth age out of care, previous research suggests this particular group of young people lag behind their same-age peers in educational attainment (Courtney, Okpych, & Dennis, 2016). Additionally, foster youth who age out of care experience high levels of unemployment and homelessness (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Lee & Morgan, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017). A problematic belief that adulthood suddenly and completely arrives for young people at the age of 18 remains troublesome when addressing the needs of foster youth who age out of care. Berzin et al. (2014) found young people age 18-21 need continued support from family, as this type of support allows for a period of emerging adulthood where young people gain the skills required to participate as an adult in the modern world. Many youth leave foster care without the resources and support that adolescents usually receive through stable family based networks (Blakeslee, 2015). The process of transition between adolescence and adulthood represents a stage where young people slowly develop the skills and knowledge to navigate an adult world successfully.

Some former foster youth believed aging out of the child welfare system represented a developmental marker that indicated they were ready for adulthood. Emancipation from state care cut short the needed supportive services and relationships foster youth relied on and needed to successfully make the transition to adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Transitional-aged foster youth lament the loss of support and relationships when aging out and leaving care. The foster care experience implies the potential loss of relationships with the biological family and a loss of formal relationships when youth emancipate from care. This interpersonal trauma can be especially difficult during developmentally vulnerable periods in life such as the transition to adulthood (Kress, Haiyasoso, Zoldan, Headley, & Trepal, 2018).

In a large, longitudinal study, Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Carry, and Love (2010) followed transitional-age foster youth in three states until the youth reached the age of 26 years old. They found the majority of youth leaving care transitioned without the knowledge and skills needed to have positive adult outcomes for education, employment, health, housing, parenting, and general well-being. In fact, very few foster youth completed a college degree by age 26, many were unemployed, and the foster youth who reported working were unable to earn a living wage. Additionally, some participants in the Courtney et al., (2010) study reported overcoming their foster youth experience by completing a college degree and finding gainful employment, although the success of these foster youth represents a minority group. While some youth reported feeling satisfied and hopeful in relation to their future, most youth faced poor educational outcomes, becoming single parents raising children alone, incarceration and criminal justice involvement. Furthermore, many foster youth exit the child welfare system only to find a life of poverty and the daily struggle to overcome and thrive as young adults.

Moreover, foster youth who transition out of care and formal support systems often lack the needed network of relationships that provide the emotional, informational, and the concrete support required to navigate early adulthood (Blakeslee, 2015). Gookind, Schelbe, and Shook (2011) found relationships present one of the greatest challenges for foster youth as they transition to adulthood. Not only do foster youth thirst for caring, long-term relationships with adults as they transition into adulthood, but the lack of social and emotional support remains their most significant challenge while shifting into adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Paulsen & Berg, 2016).

In a recent large-scale study in California, Courtney et al. (2018) evaluated the impact extended foster care had on youth outcomes. The researchers posed these questions: 1) What

influences during transition to adulthood do foster youth face? (2) What factors influence the types of support youth receive in extended care? And (3) How do state services influence the relationship between extending care and youth outcomes? Foster youth in this study estimated the size of their social support network, when given a range of 0-99, as only three people who they could turn to for tangible support and four people they could turn to for emotional support (Courtney et al., 2018). Male foster youth reported fewer supportive relationships than females, and their supportive relationships consisted of siblings or romantic partners.

Youth who participated in the transition studies highlighted the dichotomy between desiring their independence with the real social and financial needs youth experience as they embark on their journey towards independence after foster care (Abrams et al., 2017; Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). Interestingly, foster youth reported perceiving themselves as adults well before the age of 18 because they fulfilled adult responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings (Munson et al., 2013). These early adult identities support their desire to leave care when they turn 18 years old. However, transitional-aged foster youth struggle to meet a number of developmental domains including: education (Okpych, Courtney, & Dennis, 2017), employment (Geenen et al., 2017), housing (Kinarsky, 2017), social relationships (Goodkind et al., 2011; Greeson, Thompson, Ali, & Wenger, 2015), community connections (Lee & Morgan, 2017), and personal identity development (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). The desire to be free from the constraints of foster care lead many youth to transition out of the child welfare system before they possess the tools needed to become self-sufficient adults. The idea to extend foster care beyond the age of 18 began as a way to address the real barriers emancipated youth faced.

Statement of Problem

Fostering Connections to Success and Adoptions Act of 2008 amended parts of the Social Security Act to connect and support relative caregivers, improve outcomes for foster children, provide for tribal foster care and adoption access, and improve incentives for adoption (Eastman, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, Mitchell, & Courtney, 2017). The last legislation, Fostering Connections Act, subsequently lead California to pass Assembly Bill 12; AB12 legislation allowed foster care for eligible youth to extend beyond the age of 18 to the age of 21 in the state of California. Assembly Bill 12 was signed into law on September 30, 2010 and took effect on January 1, 2012 with a purpose of improving outcomes for older foster youth in care.

Due to changes in foster care legislation, foster youth who stand on the precipice of their 18th birthday stare down a fork in their life road. In California, foster youth may choose the road of exiting the foster care system unencumbered by program requirements, or they may choose a second road and remain in care to develop relationships and skills needed to more smoothly transition to adulthood. A salient question is whether the existence of extended foster care allows transitional-aged youth a period of continued support to develop their adult roles and relationships, which support youth during their transition into adulthood.

Purpose and Research Questions

Questions remain regarding how foster youth view their formation of independence, and whether extended foster care assists with producing youth with better self-sufficiency and relationship networks to navigate their adult lives. While extended care allows foster youth access to continued benefits, case management, housing support, and independent living programs, the impact of such supports and how extended care addresses other aspects regarding how foster youth adjust to adulthood remains unknown. This narrative ethnographic study

examined the help-seeking experiences of foster youth as they transition into adulthood. The study sought to discover whether being in an extended-care program allowed foster youth a period of continued support, in order to establish well-intentioned relationships, and time to develop the knowledge and skills needed to become productive and satisfied adults.

The questions posed examined the experiences of foster youth in relation to help-seeking behaviors as they navigated the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the influence relationships had on a young person's well-being. Additionally, the questions asked sought to understand whether or not foster youth viewed their adult identities as grounded in independence and if they stood on their own as Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Finally, the questions asked considered the impact foster youth may experience due to the foster youth influence of the relationships and the web of support embedded in the extended care network, which aligned to the assumptions of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018).

Research Questions:

1. How does the experience of foster youth in extended care align with the assumptions of Survivalist Self-Reliance?
2. What are the perceptions and behaviors of foster youth when asking for help?
3. Do foster youth experience growth-fostering relationships as described in Relational Cultural Theory?

The sample for this research study consisted of five foster youth between the ages of 19 through 21, two female participants and three male participants. All the participants reside in one county in the Central Valley of California. All participants had been in AB12 at one time. Participants described the total length of time spent in foster care ranging from 3 years to 18 years. The foster youth who participated in the study worked, attended community college, or

attended college and worked simultaneously to meet the program's eligibility requirements for extended care.

Key Terms

Adult Outcomes for Foster Youth: Measure used to study foster youth outcomes. The CalYOUTH study sought to understand how extended-care fostering impacted adult functioning in youth by reviewing outcomes in education, employment, health, housing, parenting, and general well-being (Okpych, Courtney, & Dennis, 2017).

Assembly Bill 12 (AB12): The law that extends foster care to age 21 in California. If youth are in a foster care placement (Department of Children and Family Services {DCFS} or Probation) on their 18th birthday, foster youth may be eligible for Extended Foster Care. Youth may opt into all the services and benefits DCFS and Probation has to offer including support, funding, and housing (placement). Youth may be eligible for re-entry up to age 21 if they leave foster care after age 18 (CDSS Programs).

Interdependence: A concept from Relational Cultural Theory. Views the concept of self in relation to others. The self is not separate from the relationships one holds. Healthy functioning and development occurs not by developing independence from others, but through growth-fostering relationships and connection (Jordan, 2018).

Mutuality: A concept within Relational Cultural Theory. Mutuality acknowledges that our need for connection and growth is a priority in our individual lives. Individuals in growth-fostering relationships influence each other, are emotionally available, and through this give-and-take the relationship influences the development of each person through interconnection (Jordan, 2018).

Transitional-Age Youth (TAY): A youth who reaches the age of 18 years old in foster care without achieving permanency. Permanency includes reunification with family of origin, adoption, or legal guardianship (Abrams, 2017).

Relational Cultural Theory: A model of human development and a therapeutic framework. Relational Cultural Theory places an emphasis on human connection and interconnections as the path for optimal growth (Jordan, 2018).

Relationship Disconnections: A concept within Relational Cultural Theory. Relationship disconnections are misunderstandings, lack of validation, exclusion, or injury within a relationship. Disconnections are viewed as normative and inevitable (Jordan, 2018).

Social Network Theory: A model of social human functioning. Social Network Theory views individuals in the context of their larger social environment through relationships, group memberships, and community. Individuals benefit from the resources derived from these social networks because social networks have real value in an individual's life (Blakeslee, 2015).

Survivalist Self-Reliance: A concept experienced by foster youth. Survivalist Self-Reliance includes holding early adult roles, pride in surviving one's past experience, and independence. A hallmark of this identity is the idea that dependence on others or the system of child welfare is a direct attack on an individual's independence (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Limitations and Delimitations

Norris (1997) claims research is a human activity, and it is important for the researcher to manage certain processes to produce excellent, honest, and fair research. An initial step in this process is openly describing my biases and assumptions. My personal experience includes more than eight years as a volunteer Court Appointment Special Advocate (CASA) and mentor to foster youth. I was motivated by my experience with foster youth to design a research project to

explore the transition into extended care. Additionally, I am a professional school counselor working in California, and I have a strong bias towards viewing education as a means to a better future. I acknowledge that I work within a system, advising students to pursue a college education in the face of skyrocketing college costs, limited support systems, and poor matriculation rates at public and private institutions. I understand and have knowledge of the high dropout rate for first-year college students including foster youth, and recognize there are significant unmet student needs including lack of academic preparedness, lack of mental health services, and difficulties securing financial aid. Furthermore, I am currently in a doctoral program myself, which further supports my assumption that pursuing a college education is a worthy path. Even with these challenges, however, I continue to believe the pursuit of higher education is a worthy goal for young people, especially former foster youth. I was transparent with each participant, revealing that I currently work in education, specifically conducting college advising. Each participant received a letter of introduction which outlined my current profession and standing as a doctoral student.

Limitations. Brinkman and Kvale (2005) recognized when the object under consideration for a study is human experience, qualitative methods are the most appropriate devices of knowledge production. I decided to utilize a narrative ethnography approach for the study. Narrative ethnography is steeped in the idea that, “we do not have direct access to experience...life comes to us in the form of stories” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 250). Procedures for validity include those strategies used by the researcher to establish credibility for the study.

Researcher reflexivity is a method for a researcher to disclose their assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As the sole researcher, I used several devices to address my own biases. Field notes produced during and directly after each interview with participants provided a reflection of my own thoughts, experiences, and understandings. Upon completion of each interview and during the data analysis phase, I reviewed field notes for biases, misconceptions and assumptions. I utilized member checking to ensure the ideas told by participants remained true to their stories (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Participants were all invited to read early analysis produced from the interviews in an attempt to accurately convey their meaning and stories. Two participants conducted member checking, as the remainder were unavailable to the researcher.

Robinson (2014) describes the sample universe as the practical boundary for the study by specifying what a sample is composed of, thus defining who or what the study is about. This study utilized nonprobability, purposive sampling. For example, I sampled a specific group, utilizing gatekeepers to identify foster youth over the age of 18 who at some time participated in extended care. Purposive sampling assisted in identifying the participants who fit the profile and desired characteristics for the study, because these individuals may have an important perspective on the phenomenon in question (Robinson, 2014). One limitation stems from the conclusions I can draw from the study, which are germane only to my sample. Although nonprobability sampling is not generalizable to foster youth as an entire population, the study's findings are highly transferable to populations of foster youth who share characteristics with the participants.

A second important concept regarding limitations includes the participant's ability and willingness to share their experiences with the researcher and how the searcher protects identities

of participants. Gatekeepers advertised the research project to potential participants, which allowed participants the opportunity to view letters of consent (see Appendix A) and guide questions (see Appendix B) prior to contacting the researcher. Informed consent entails “informing the research participants about the overall purpose of the investigation, the main features of the design as well as any possible risks and benefits” (Kvale, 1996, p 93). Interested participants on their own contacted the researcher to participate in the study. In addition, prior to the recorded interview, the researcher and participant had several points of contact from text messaging and telephone calls, to time together prior to the interview to begin to establish rapport and discuss any questions or concerns participants had regarding the interview.

I discussed with each participant the use of several devices to ensure confidentiality and how I would protect their identities. These devices included the use of pseudonyms and omitting any information that could potentially identify participants. In order to shield participant identities, I was not free to disclose personal information in an effort to prevent the possibility of identities becoming decoded. Finally, participants received information that stated they could end the interview at any time. Participants had several opportunities to decline their participation without recourse, and those who participated did so willingly.

A final limitation on the study was the use of Survivalist Self Reliance and Relational Cultural theory. The focus on these frameworks may have prevented exploration of other experiences of participants.

Delimitations. The choices made by the researcher to set boundaries and limitations on the scope of the project represent the delimitations. Very early on in this research study, I made a decision to only include foster youth who had opted into extended care and not include participants who left foster care upon their 18th birthday. I intentionally sought to delve into the

experiences of youth who remain in care to discover whether this extended care, support, and services post 18 years of age allows foster youth a period of continued support to develop their adult roles, establish relationships, and acquire the knowledge and skills needed to become productive and satisfied adults. While this does represent a delimitation in my study, I was intentional in recruiting this group of foster youth because their experiences offered me the information I sought to understand in relation to their transition into adulthood (Robinson, 2014).

Another delimitation of the study happened when I decided to document the perceptions and behaviors of foster youth when asking for help in relation to two existing frameworks: Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018). As extended care continues to evolve, few studies exist which give rise to the stories of foster youth navigating this system during the transition into adulthood. To better understand the impact extended care had on foster youth's journey to adulthood, I sought to understand if the experiences of this group of foster youth aligned with the ideas previously documented in research. Therefore, questions used surrounded the assumptions of Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018).

Finally, narrative ethnography is the methodological approach for this study. Narrative ethnography is a flexible research design that allows meaning to emerge through the stories told by foster youth (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). While flexible, narrative ethnography focuses on individual inquiry, leading to collecting individual, personal stories of participants within a culture sharing group, and allows the co-production of knowledge to develop between researcher and participant (Rappaport, 1995). This framework reported findings in a way to protect individual stories of participants without losing sight of the cultural context of participants (also a delimitation).

Bracketing

Bracketing is a method to alleviate the potential negative effects of unacknowledged researcher assumptions and preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010). This narrative ethnographic study investigated the experiences of foster youth in relation to help-seeking behaviors as youth navigated the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the influence relationships had on a young person's well-being. As a former CASA, I worked with foster youth as they navigated the child welfare system. I witnessed firsthand young people in foster care impacted by trauma, mental health, loss of stability, broken relationships, and changes in school placements. Older foster youth I mentored experienced poor adult outcomes including low educational attainment, unemployment, poor health, lack of adequate housing, single parenting, and low levels of well-being. Furthermore, I conducted a year-long study of the current research on foster youth focusing on transitional-aged youth. These experiences and knowledge of foster youth could not be entirely set aside as I managed my study. The use of bracketing allowed me to concede or put aside my prior knowledge, assumptions, and biases with regards to foster youth in extended care.

Sorsa, Kiikala and Kuriki (2014) warn if bracketing is not used during research, there exists the risk that data will be more reflective of the researcher's worldview rather than the participants'. By utilizing bracketing, I established myself as a nonparticipating observer. I remained attentive of the experiences within the world of extended-care foster youth while suspending my own assumptions and biases (Tufford & Newman, 2010). I understand the benefits of removing young people from abusive and neglectful situations, and I acknowledge my own experiences working with foster youth who were continually traumatized by placement

into foster care. While I can weigh the benefits and challenges of foster care, I sought to analyze the data objectively for the stories and ideas participants discussed.

Bracketing was an ongoing, reflective process as I directed my study, and allowed me to scrutinize the personal and professional challenges in conducting a research project with foster youth. Tufford and Newman (2010) assert bracketing allows research to reach deeper depths of reflection over all stages of qualitative research. It remained crucial to be genuine and transparent with my own biases, pre-existing ideas, and beliefs surrounding foster care. The use of field notes provided a self-reflective process to establish when my thinking reproduced my assumptions and biases. In acknowledging the need for balance between my beliefs, past experiences, and current knowledge, I made every effort to guard the participants' stories with an objective, open mind. My findings and results demonstrate my effort to remain mindful of my assumptions and biases throughout the study.

Summary

Transitions imply change is eminent, and questions remain whether foster youth who remain in care during the transition into adulthood are better equipped to successfully embark into early adulthood. This research represents a scholarly attempt to examine issues such as these.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

When focusing research on foster youth, the results have demonstrated poor outcomes for this group of young people with regard to their transition into adulthood. Cunningham and Diversi (2012) found youth who aged out struggled to meet their basic needs and described lives fraught with homelessness, unemployment, and hunger. With one of the largest populations of foster youth in the country, California responded with legislation to support older foster youth through the development and implementation of extended care. In 2010, AB12 legislation allowed foster care to extend to the age of 21 years old. The goal of extended care focused on developing programs to improve outcomes for older foster youth in California. CalYOUTH (Courtney et al., 2018) has collected initial descriptive data on the first wave of extended-care youth. However, questions remain: Does extending care positively impact foster youth adult outcomes, and what other factors contribute to foster youth successfully transitioning into their adult lives?

The Need for Extended Care

Abrams (2017) defines youth who reach the age of 18 years old in foster care without achieving permanency as Transitional-Age Youth (TAY). Permanency includes reunification with family of origin, adoption, or legal guardianship. Foster youth who remain in the child welfare system as TAY emancipate or age out of the system upon turning 18 years old. Data from the Midwest study found emancipation from foster care demonstrated poor outcomes for youth including low educational attainment, high rates of health and mental health needs, unemployment, homelessness, and increased criminal justice system involvement. (Courtney et

al., 2010). Additionally, many of these challenges continue into adulthood for former foster youth.

Transitional-Age Youth. Youth participating in transition studies highlighted the dichotomy between desiring their independence with the real social and financial needs youth experience as they embark on their journey towards independence after foster care (Abrams et al., 2017; Gomez et al., 2015). Interestingly, foster youth report perceiving themselves as adults well before the age of 18 years old as they view adulthood as fulfilling adult responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings (Munson et al., 2013). These early adult identities support their desire to leave care when they turn 18 years old. However, TAY struggle with education (Okpych et al., 2017), employment (Geenen et al., 2017), housing (Kinarsky, 2017), social relationships (Goodkind et al., 2011; Greeson et al., 2015), community connections (Lee & Morgan, 2017), and personal identity development (Unrau et al., 2012). The desire to be free from the constraints of foster care led many to transition out of the child welfare system before they were truly ready. The idea to extend foster care beyond the age of 18 began as a way to address the real barriers emancipated youth faced.

Foster Care Legislation. Three major federal statutes currently define the child welfare system in America. The Adoption and Safe Family Act of 1997 is a federal law enacted in response to concerns many children remained in foster care for long periods or experienced multiple placements. This legislation required timely permanency planning for children with an emphasis on a child's safety. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, a federal law, aims to assist youth aging out of foster care obtain and maintain independent living skills. The Fostering Connections to Success and Adoptions Act of 2008 amended parts of the Social Security Act to connect and support relative caregivers, improve outcomes for foster children, provide for tribal

foster care and adoption access, and improve incentives for adoption (Eastman et al., 2017). This last legislation, the Fostering Connections Act, subsequently led California to pass Assembly Bill 12. AB12 implementation occurred in January 2012 and allowed eligible youth to remain in care to the age of 21.

CalYOUTH Study. *California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study* or CalYOUTH (Courtney et al., 2018) was a five-year (2012-2017) ongoing study designed to evaluate the impact of extended foster care on youth outcomes. The CalYOUTH study followed 732 foster youth to evaluate the impact of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act on outcomes for foster youth during their transition to adulthood. Data gathered originated from three sources; transitional-age youth participating in extended foster care in California, child welfare workers, and government program data. The final report, published in 2018, presented findings after following transitional-aged youth until their 21st birthday.

CalYOUTH paints an early, descriptive picture of the AB12 experience of foster youth. With the third wave of data collected, Courtney et al. (2018) described the following four findings: (a) most TAY opt into AB12 and are fairly satisfied with services; (b) extended-care youth continue to demonstrate poor outcomes; (c) extended-care youth are diverse; and (d) extended-care youth are primarily people of color.

For the young people in the CalYOUTH study, 62% remained in foster care until they aged out at 21 years old (Courtney et al., 2018). When youth did decide to leave care before age 21 years old, participants cited many reasons including wanting to be on their own and more personal freedoms. At the same time, foster youth did not want to deal with social workers, foster parents, group home workers, nor did they want to join the military, or reunite with

biological families. However, when presented with an option of continued support by remaining in care, the majority of youth in the study remained in custody until they turned 21.

According to Courtney et al. (2018) most TAY in California take advantage of AB12 and report fair satisfaction with services. These services address material needs of older foster youth including financial benefits, housing assistance, and continued case management. Rosenberg and Kim (2017) found when former foster youth struggled with securing stable housing it made it difficult for youth to do well in school or find employment. The advent of AB12 recognizes the need to address benefits and tangible support for TAY to ensure basic needs. AB12 participants continued to have poor outcomes in comparison with their same age peers without foster care experience including educational attainment, employment, economic self-sufficiency, physical and mental health, and criminal justice involvement. Meeting the material and housing needs removed barriers to educational attainment, homelessness, and hunger highlighted in other studies focusing on TAY (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Day et al., 2012; Salazar, 2012). Despite the improvements in helping foster youth make the transition into adulthood, the research results in the CalYOUTH study suggest participants still struggle with important adult domains including overall wellbeing (Courtney et al., 2018).

Another result found in the Courtney et al. (2018) CalYOUTH study suggests foster youth who remain in care after the age of 18 years old complete more education than foster youth who opt out of the foster care system at 18 years old. In fact, Courtney et al. (2018) found allowing youth to remain in extended foster care in California increased the likelihood they completed their high school diploma or GED. But the CalYOUTH study, which studied foster youth in extended care, also found college bound rates for former foster youth remained low with graduation from college an even smaller number. By the age of 19 years old, 71% of CalYOUTH

participants had completed a high school diploma, and 86% of participants cited a desire to complete a college degree. However, only 3% had completed an Associate's degree and 1% completed a Bachelor's degree by the age of 21 years old (Courtney et al., 2018). Furthermore, the Midwest study, one of the largest longitudinal research projects conducted with foster youth, found only 40% of foster youth completed a year of college by age 26, and only 8% overall earned a degree from a two- or four-year institution (Courtney et al., 2010). Other important findings from studies which looked at college attainment for foster youth include significant barriers such as the lack of academic preparation (Geiger & Beltran, 2017), unresolved mental health needs (Morton, 2016; Salazar, 2012), financial instability coupled with food scarcity (Kinarsky, 2017), and lack of supportive relationships (Day et al., 2012). Many former foster youth are reluctant to identify themselves due to the stigmatizing and negative experiences of being in the child welfare system (Salazar, Jones, Emerson, & Mucha, 2016).

The next finding from CalYOUTH highlighted that extended-care youth are diverse, and required programming different from a one-size-fits-all approach. Courtney et al. (2013) speculated early in the CalYOUTH study that AB12 marked a major change in roles and programming for the child welfare system in California, noting "foster care agencies accustomed to keeping children safe and finding permanent homes are now responsible for helping young adults move towards independence" (p 20). Additionally, Geenen and Powers (2007) found material resources and support did not pose the most challenging need during transition, rather, lack of social and emotional support was cited as the most significant challenge during transition for TAY. Programs that focus on independent living skills often neglect the need for supportive relationships, which Transitional Age Youth need. As extended care continues to develop, so

will programming to address the needs of foster youth as they make the transition into adulthood.

Singer and Berzin (2015) found youth from disadvantaged groups who experience early adult responsibilities—like foster youth—miss out on opportunities to build human, social, and financial capital. This lack of capital creates more barriers in their adult lives. The CalYOUTH study found more foster youth are people of color who also have similar indicators to the other sub groups the study examined, with similar indicators of disadvantage including low-income earning, males with lower educational attainment than females, increased criminal justice involvement for males, and high numbers of youth experiencing non-marital parenthood before age 21 (Courtney et al., 2018).

With the inception of extended care in California through AB12, studies reviewing early outcomes for extended care find youth continue to struggle with measures of wellbeing including educational attainment, employment, and economic self-sufficiency. While there is promise for improving outcomes by providing access to services beyond the age of 18 years old, it appears other factors contribute to the lack of progress towards self-sufficiency.

Survivalist Self-Reliance

Self-sufficiency among foster youth is often equated with independence and is closely tied to the desire to transition out of care at 18 years old and move away from dependency both physically and psychologically (Abrams et al., 2017). In several studies, foster youth believed adults are personally responsible and self-sufficient, and do not ask for help or support, because adults take care of themselves (Berzin et al., 2014; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014). Many foster youth report difficulty identifying and acknowledging their needs

and weaknesses due to their overwhelming desire to be viewed as personally strong and self-reliant (Jones & Gragg, 2012). Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) founded in the belief that seeking help is a direct example of an individual’s lack of independence.

Samuels and Pryce (2008) studied former foster youth and found they experience development in the context of competing tensions between independence and dependence. On one hand, youth in this study cite having limited control over their lives while in foster care, while simultaneously experiencing adult-like responsibilities. These researchers define coping with these tensions as Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and the use of this framework developed into a maladaptive set of coping skills for foster youth.

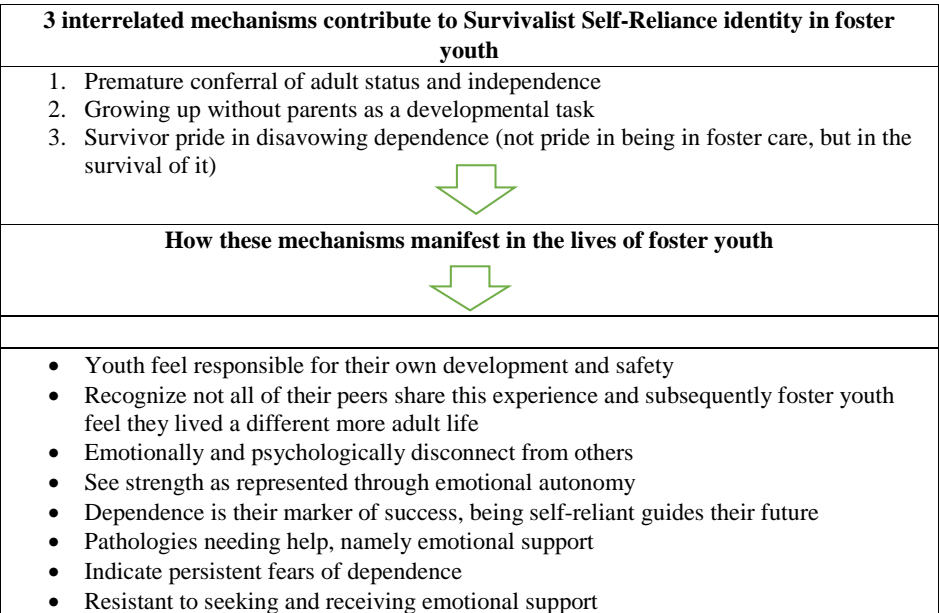


Figure 1; Survivalist Self-Reliance Identity (Samuels & Pryce, 2008)

Mechanisms of Survivalist Self-Reliance. Survivalist Self-Reliance has three distinct mechanisms which contribute to foster youth developing this type of identity (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Demonstrated in *Figure 1*, these mechanisms manifest in the lives of foster youth in

specific ways by creating a contradiction. Since foster youth are thrust into developing their independence, this creates a dichotomy for them. Foster youth avoid seeking help from others, yet the lack of seeking help prevents them from successfully navigating their lives, and it creates additional barriers that they have to overcome.

Adult status and independence. Samuels and Pryce (2008) assert foster youth experience the “premature conferral of adult status and independence” (p. 1202). This can occur within the biological family where the youth is responsible for taking care of self and siblings, or within the system of child welfare itself when youth continue to experience trauma and neglect. Foster youth highlight the need to grow up quickly, and realize if they want something, they believe they can rely only on themselves, essentially filling the role of parent, because only the foster youth looks for their own interests (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005).

Growing up without parents. The second mechanism triggering the Survivalist Self-Reliance identity includes growing up without parents and learning to take care of oneself through life (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Paulsen and Berg (2016) found foster youth cite a need for independence and autonomy, and Singer and Berzin (2015) discovered foster youth held onto the notion that all adults take care of themselves. Therefore, growing up without parents and embracing their autonomy is a step towards their early adult role and allows them to navigate out of the foster system.

Survival pride. Samuels and Pryce (2008) found the final marker for foster youth who develop a Survivalist Self-Reliance identity remains a, “survival pride and the disavowal of dependence” (p. 1205). This factor continues to be highlighted by the need for youth to be strong and completely autonomous and self-reliant in the face of hardship as, “their life stories become testimonies of survival against all odds” (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1206). The barrier this

identity creates subsequently leads foster youth to not ask for help and to turn down support and services because they believe asking for help is proof they are not independent or self-sufficient enough to be a responsible adult. These youth tend to blame themselves when they face obstacles, rather than understand the lack of existing resources and supportive relationships are the barriers to success (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Foster youth report the experience of being a foster child prepares them for adulthood by simply surviving the system. Survivor pride exists as another theme that runs within foster youth research and relates to Survivalist Self-Reliance. Unrau et al. (2012) found this pride prevents young people from depending on others or expressing vulnerability, because this poses a risk to their sense of independence and beliefs around being a successful college student.

Impact of Survivalist Self-Reliance on Transitions. Studies focused on the experiences of transition shed light on the difficulties foster youth face when they turn 18. Interestingly, foster youth report feeling as though they have many adult-like responsibilities at an earlier age than their same-age peers who have not been in care, yet they are treated by the state as incapable of making major life decisions. Singer and Berzin (2015) found the lack of support from adults, caring for younger siblings, and seeing themselves as an adult create a belief in foster youth that they are capable of independence at age 18. Due to early adult responsibilities foster youth face, researchers view foster youth as simultaneously being dependent and independent. While many foster youth do have adult responsibilities, they do not practice increasingly complex adult roles. Abrams et al. (2017) looked at outcomes for foster youth aging out of the child welfare system and found they faced challenges which include difficulty achieving self-sufficiency, limited human, social, and financial capital (Berzin et al., 2014); as

well as homelessness, unemployment, and school drop-out (Munson et al., 2013; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017).

Many foster youth learn early in their lives that asking for help and relying on others can be dangerous to their sense of independence. In a study of former foster youth attending four-year universities, Morton (2017) found the biggest barrier to educational success was a commitment to independence and not asking others for help when it was needed. As a result, this group of foster youth experienced academic failure, dropped classes, and subsequently jeopardized their financial aid and college housing (Morton, 2017). While educational barriers do exist for many students, foster youth have an additional barrier to educational success, embodied by the unwillingness to ask for help when needed.

It remains unclear how foster youth view their formation of independence, and whether extending care assists with producing youth with better self-sufficiency to navigate their adult lives. Former foster youth acknowledge the combination of early independence and challenging childhoods assist in their developing perseverance, empowering them to seek out a better life for themselves. While these themes highlight a sense of resilience, there remains the reality that many youth leave care with few resources and few meaningful, supportive relationships. Samuels and Pryce (2008) posed an important idea within their study, which asked whether interdependence needs to replace policy and services which support, “the use of independence as a synonym for self-reliance and interpersonal autonomy” (p 1208). Interdependence remains an idea firmly embedded within Relational Cultural Theory of human development (Jordan, 2017).

Relational Cultural Theory

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) is a model of human development that initially focused on women and marginalized populations. RCT asserts humans experience healthy lifespan development when they are connected, and that humans require this connection “to flourish, even to stay alive, and isolation is a major source of suffering for people” (Jordan, 2018, p 3). RCT presents a vehicle to explore social identities in conjunction with how relationships are constructed, and provides a framework for understanding the influence relationships have on a young person’s wellbeing as they develop their adult identities. RCT developed as a model to challenge many of the prevailing developmental theories, specifically the idea of independence as the model of mature development.

RCT and Lifespan Development. Jean Baker Miller (1986) laid the foundation for Relational Cultural Theory with her critique of traditional psychology’s idea behind independence and the misrepresentation of women’s experiences within those theories. Miller’s work addressed hidden forces of power and dominance, which play a significant role in shaping social and individual development. For Miller (1986), relationships were at the center of human growth and potential, and she asserted, “individual development proceeds only by means of connection” (p. 83). Miller (1986) set the stage for the early ideas behind Relational Cultural Theory and provided an emerging lens to understand human development.

Core Concepts of Relational Cultural Theory

1. People grow through and toward relationships throughout the lifespan
2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning
3. Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterizes growth
4. Empathy and empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation
6. In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit.

Development is not a one-way street

Figure 2: Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2017)

Jordan (2018) asserted traditional models of mental health and human development assert that healthy development of self is focused on autonomy, individualism, firm self-boundaries, and separation as markers of maturity. In contrast, RCT views healthy lifespan development and growth of self as rooted in the context of relations with others. *Figure 2* highlights the core concepts of Relational Cultural Theory which contends healthy, growth-fostering relationships lead to empowerment and self-worth (Duffey & Trepal, 2016). Kadushin (2012) found these relationships may also develop social networks, allowing access to resources and valued social constructs including trust, reciprocity, and community. Throughout our lifespan, we require relationships in the same way we require sustenance, and within our relationships each person is interdependent. Furthermore, Benson (2014) found within relationships social support is given and received, creating a sense of human capital that can be tapped into when needed. This theory does not advocate fixed states or unidirectional paths of development where people move through developmental stages in a systematic, linear fashion, and suddenly arrive at independence. Rather, RCT highlights development in terms of increasing complexity within relationships, allowing for mutuality.

Mutuality. Jordan (2017) defined mutuality as the process where both people in a relationship grow through a symbiotic give and take, and each person supports the other towards growth and the investment in the wellbeing of the other. Benson (2014) found relationships create mutual obligations for both parties, requiring each member in the relationship to provide and receive support for a relationship to develop appropriately. This idea of give and take in a relationship breaks down barriers of unequal power because each person holds empathy for each other. The fundamental belief that both people in the relationship have something of value to

contribute to a relationship is the foundation of mutuality and growth-fostering human development (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002).

RCT claims mutuality is an interactional process where one's self is created in relation to the other. Lenz (2016) found this to be very different from traditional western approaches to growth, "which assume that autonomy and independence from others contribute to a sense of competence and esteem" (p. 415). Studies that highlighted RCT as a framework when studying mentoring relationships between adults and students found when adults viewed young people as lesser, this inequality hindered mutuality (Beyene et al., 2002; Spencer, Jordan, & Sazama, 2004). However, when young people's expressions of their wants, needs, desires, and strengths played a role in shaping effective mentoring relationships with adults, mutuality was developed and both adult and young person grew. While these relationships may not be equal, there exists a committed investment by both parties.

Relationships contributed to resilience among foster youth due to the support youth perceived stemming from the social networks around them. Blakeslee (2014) found that foster youth who believed they had people in their life who they could count on for support acquired a sense of hope, confidence, and security. Marion, Paulsen and Goyette (2017) found the number of support people in the lives of foster youth did not matter but the quality of the relationships did, as the quality relationships assisted in their transition out of foster care. Furthermore, Kadushin (2012) discovered support networks act as a buffer against stress and mental health concerns among foster youth, and therefore provide an important resource for young people to have in their lives.

Five Good Things. Jordan (2018) demonstrates in *Figure 3* the hallmark of growth-fostering relationships includes “five good things” (p. 235). RCT recognizes growth-fostering relationships as having the following five criteria; a sense of zest, a capacity to act or be productive, better understanding of self and others, a sense of worth, and the desire for more connection (West, 2013). Jordan (2018) asserts instead of moving toward greater independence and separateness, the developmental goal highlighted by RCT is to increase our capacity for relational resilience, mutual empathy, and empowerment of each other. However, this thinking remains in direct conflict with the many prevailing ideas in Western culture, which assert moving away from dependence on others and to stand on one’s own is viewed as optimum human functioning.

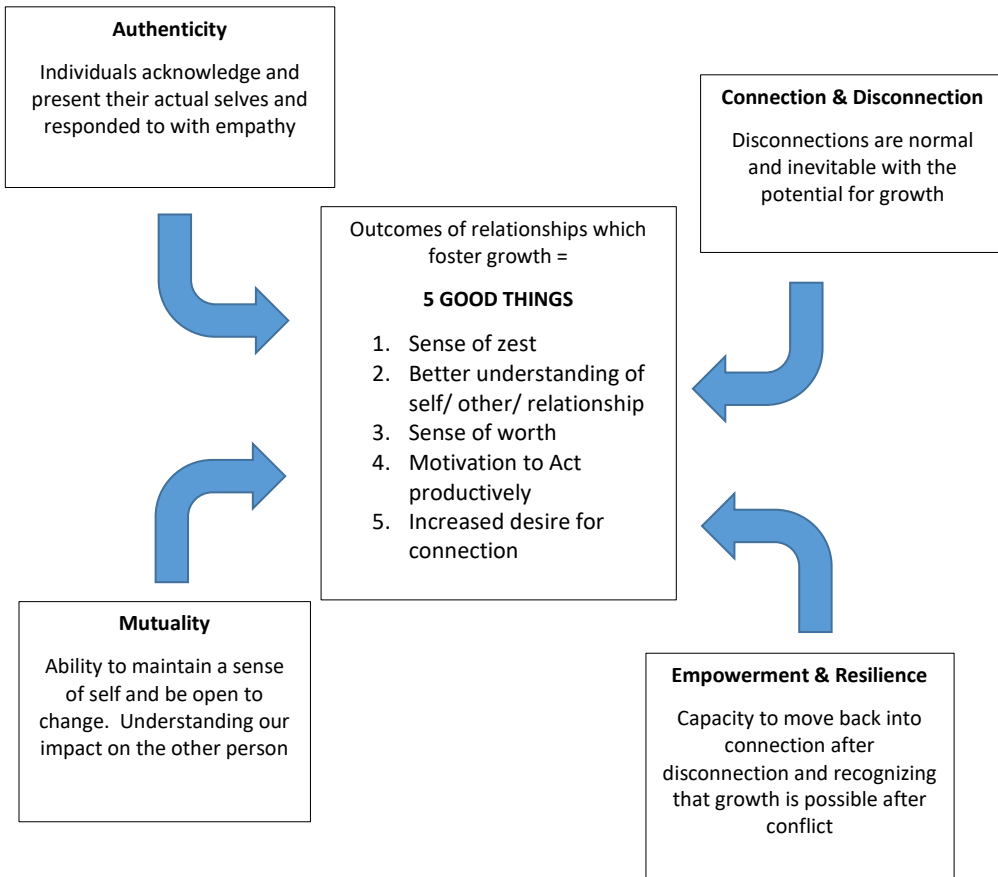


Figure three: Conceptual dimensions of growth-fostering relationships (Lenz, 2016)

Disconnections. RCT recognizes that disconnections influence relationship development. Disconnections occur regularly in relationships through disagreements, misunderstandings and conflicts. Kress et al. (2018) highlights these disconnections as common and necessary for relational development. Duffey and Trepal (2016) found when individuals experience chronic disconnections, they may seek emotional distance in order to create a sense of safety within relationships. Additionally, Courtney et al. (2016) discovered the experience of being in foster

care is rooted in the process of relational disconnections due to experiencing multiple traumatic events, unstable placements, stays in group homes, and other significant challenges for foster youth. Furthermore, Jordan (2017) stated how individuals' navigation of relational disconnections is directly connected with their own well-being and ability to engage in future relationships. "When acute disconnections are repaired, relationships are strengthened, and trust builds"; in contrast, "when acute disconnections are followed by invalidation, shaming, anger, or further rejection, people develop survival strategies of disconnection" (p. 241). This research supports how foster youth develop a survivalist self-reliant identity to protect themselves psychologically and why they aggressively avoid dependence on others.

Disconnections often arise due to shame and a sense of unworthiness. Jordan (2018) acknowledges how patterns of isolation, disempowerment, shame and isolation act as a way to silence individuals, but disconnection also "plays a large role in silencing and disempowering marginalized groups" (p. 35). Identity development through the lens of RCT highlights the impact privilege and social status have on our relational patterns. Hammer, Crethar and Cannon (2016) found people with membership in social identity groups—historically disenfranchised, exploited, marginalized, and victimized—may use disconnections to protect their psychological wellbeing. Jordan (2018) states the central relationship paradox in RCT arises when a person has been hurt or violated in relationships; the yearning for connection can increase and at the same time an increased fear of seeking connection may also develop. Spencer et al. (2004) discovered the ability to bring oneself fully into a relationship authentically may be compromised in relationships with uneven power, when the less powerful individual is expected to conform.

Relationships provide protection and hope for foster youth, even when their social networks are limited (Zinn, Palmer, & Nam, 2017). Marion et al. (2017) found all youth require

supportive relationships during transition to adulthood because relationships are a source of emotional encouragement, companionship, guidance and assistance, and a source of material resources. However, transitional age foster youth often lack these relationships, and view this lack as a significant challenge (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Miller (1986) recognizes the most valuable of human qualities is the ongoing process of psychological development through relationships, and individual development proceeds only by means of connection. It is this connection in the process of developing adult identities that seems lacking among foster youth, creating barriers for economic, social, and interpersonal growth.

Conclusion

Foster youth aging out of the system have little social capital, limited relationship networks, and few supports in place which make navigating the path into adulthood difficult. A solution to these issues developed into extended foster care, which bills such as AB 12 in California. Although extended care offers programming and assistance with material needs and housing, outcomes for extended-care youth continue to lag behind same age peers in relation to adult functioning. Messages about the need for independence and self-sufficiency, past neglect and trauma caused foster youth to believe asking for help is dangerous. It continues to be unknown whether the existence of extended foster care really allows transitional-aged youth a period of continued support. While current research suggest it is helping foster youth, more research is needed to understand how foster youth develop their adult roles and identities, and successfully complete a college degree.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The following chapter describes the methods used to conduct this narrative ethnographic study with extended-care foster youth. This study sought to discover whether being in an extended-care program allowed foster youth a period of continued support in order to establish well-intentioned relationships, and time to develop the knowledge and skills needed to become productive and well-functioning adults. This chapter highlights the purpose of the study, the sampling strategy for the participants, the research design, the collection of data, and a discussion of research ethics.

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research “is an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological approach to inquiry that explores a social or human problem” (p. 326). Qualitative methods are utilized by researchers to provide answers from participants on a specific problem or experience. A researcher uses narrative ethnography to provide a methodology for gathering and analyzing the rich contours of participants’ narratives and as a way to co-produce ethnographic knowledge with participants (Gubrium & Holstien, 2008, Tedlock, 1991).

Setting. This study focused on older foster youth living in the Central Valley of California, a rural area dominated by agricultural fields that produce a large percentage of the food consumed in the United States and the world. The environment and setting impact the lives of the participants because “their stories are affected by the environments in which they are embedded” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 255). My study was conducted within one county located in the Central Valley, with an estimated population of almost 500,000 residents. Sixty-four percent of the population identifies as Hispanic, the median household income is \$42,000

per year, with a quarter of the population living in poverty. Educational attainment remains low, with high school graduation rates at 68.7% and only 14% of residents holding a bachelor's degree or higher ("U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts" 2017). The local community college cites their annual student enrollment at 12,277 students. Overall graduation rates for students who began their studies in the fall of 2014 and graduated within 150% normal time to completion for their program was 24.7% for males and 32% for females (US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2012).

As earlier research has highlighted, educational attainment for foster youth tends to lag behind their same-age peers. By the age of 19, 71% of CalYOUTH participants had completed a high school diploma (Courtney et al., 2018). However, only 3% had completed an associate's degree and 1% had completed a bachelor's degree by the age of 21. The Midwest study found only 40% of foster youth completed a year of college by age 26, and only 8% overall earned a degree from a two- or four-year institution (Courtney et al., 2010).

Participants. The sample for this research study consisted of five foster youth between the ages of 19-21, two female participants and three male participants. All the participants reside in the one county in the Central Valley of California. All participants had been in AB12, California's Assembly Bill 12 allowing eligible youth to remain in care to the age of 21. Participants stated their total length of time spent in foster care ranged from 3 years to 18 years. The foster youth who participated in the study worked, attended community college, or attended college and worked simultaneously to meet the program's eligibility requirements for extended care.

Narrative Ethnography. Brinkman and Kvale (2005) recognized when the phenomenon under study is human experience, then qualitative methods are the most appropriate tool for discovery and understanding. As qualitative researchers, we can only enter into a person's world through communication, and subsequently depend upon ethnographic dialogue to create an understanding by observing, asking, and examining (Tedlock, 2003). Ethnography is a research lens used to describe a particular cultural-sharing group through the meaning the group ascribes to their actions and behaviors (Wolcott, 1999). Ethnographies may study an entire culture-sharing group or a subset of a group in order to collect data to uncover patterns of ideas and beliefs. Wolcott (1999) makes a distinction that ethnographic research focuses on seeing, not looking. Research can focus on listing the things observed in an environment, but the ethnographer must conceptualize the meaning beyond the words spoken by participants. Creswell (2013) claims a distinction of ethnographic research is the way it utilizes theory to focus the researcher's attention when collecting data, and the theoretical frameworks of Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2018) will provide a focus for the study.

This study utilized narrative ethnography, "as analysis of the internal organization of stories" (Gubrium & Holstien, 2008, p. 241). Narrative ethnography's purpose provides "rich textual discourse about the way experiences really occurred" (Wilder, Vazquez-Montilla, & Greene, 2016, p. 152), while also providing a method of procedure and analysis aimed at the close scrutiny of social situations (Murchison, 2010). Additionally, narrative ethnography is a participatory process between participant and researcher. Yang (2015) asserts interviewer and interviewee come to co-construct the meaning of their unique experience during the interview process.

Gubrium and Holstien (2008) maintain that “narratives are rooted within the social context of the environment under study” (p. 252). Narrative ethnographies provide an opportunity to co-create stories with participants from marginalized groups. Rappaport (1995) asserts this approach allows researchers to listen to, amplify, and give value to the stories of the participants, especially elevating the voices of people who are not recognized as valuable in a society. Rappaport (1995) provides a foundation for the importance of narrative work as a way to empower marginalized groups. First, content is discovered through the process of telling a narrative. Through this process of telling a narrative, respect is given to the stories of people’s lives. Finally, the process of narrative allows a metacommunication, or the process of communication between participant and researcher.

Wilder et al. (2016) asserts the power of narrative ethnography is its ability to translate life events into textual conversations creating a mechanism to tell the stories of participants in a way that allows participants to co-create data. In-depth interviews provided context and allowed foster youth to describe firsthand their lived experiences. Interviews also provided a framework to develop an analysis of the behaviors and actions of their culture-sharing group through oral stories (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008), while providing a mechanism for researchers and participants to collaborate. Unraveling the stories and experiences told by participants allows the researcher to see into the world of this group of foster youth living in extended care.

Sampling. Robinson (2014) explains a small sample size allows individual voices to come through in a study. This study utilized a purposive sample of five foster youth who were over the age of 18. Participants were recruited through the help of several gatekeepers currently working with foster youth through the county office of education. The gatekeepers advertised the project to potential participants and provided the letter of consent (see Appendix A), introduction

letter (see Appendix C), and guide questions (see Appendix B) to foster youth. The foster youth interested in participating contacted the researcher directly through text message or by telephone call. Participation was voluntary.

Additionally, I utilized nonprobability, purposive sampling for the study. Robinson (2014) asserts this sampling strategy is used when individual participants have a unique and important perspective on the phenomenon in question. I sampled a specific group, utilizing gatekeepers to identify foster youth over the age of 18 who had participated in extended care. Purposive sampling assisted in identifying the participants who fit the profile and characteristics for the study (Creswell, 2013). Although nonprobability sampling is not generalizable to foster youth as an entire population, the study findings are highly transferable to populations of foster youth with shared characteristics (Robinson, 2018).

Several factors contributed to the need to keep the sample size small. First, as a single researcher completing her dissertation, I was limited by a short timeline and limited resources to complete this study. Second, delving into narratives requires a focused amount of time for data collection as well as data analysis. Finally, a small sample size provided a richness to each story that could be lost within a larger sample.

Research Design. I was interested in hearing from foster youth about their experiences living in extended care as they began their journey into adulthood. Specifically, I wanted to understand their perceptions of what it means to be independent and whether they identified important relationships in their lives. Brinkman and Kvale (2005) maintain qualitative research interviews “[provide] access to subject experiences and [allow] researchers to describe intimate aspects of people’s life worlds” (p. 157). The narrative ethnographic approach embraces the idea

that research is replete with the unexpected and cannot be completely programed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). More specifically for this current research project, narrative ethnography was a method aimed at close scrutiny of social situations, and “provides the analytical platform, tools, and sensibilities for capturing the rich and variegated contours of everyday narrative practice” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 251).

I secured approval for my research from the George Fox Institutional Review Board (see Appendix D). Once I obtained approval, I reached out to the gatekeepers to begin advertising my research project to potential participants. The gatekeepers provided my contact information, guide questions (see Appendix C), informed consent (see Appendix A), and letter of introduction (see Appendix B) to potential participants and the participants reached out to me directly and voluntarily via telephone or text message indicating their interest in the study. I provided a \$40.00 cash incentive to participants upon completion of the interview.

Prior to the official interview, several points of contact between the participant and the researcher occurred including text messages, telephone conversations, and unrecorded conversations prior to the recorded interview. I interviewed each participant one time in person. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was audio recorded with a recording device, and transferred to digital file. I uploaded the digital files to a transcription service, Gotranscript. Once I received the written transcripts, I began the initial coding process.

Data Collection. Hampshire, Iqbal, Blell and Simpson (2014) state interviewing requires collaboration between researcher and participant, where connections are developed in order to co-produce data. An exciting prospect within ethnographic research is the notion that some of the most important findings and insights are unanticipated (Murchison, 2010). Data collection

consisted of the process of conducting individual interviews with each participant and keeping a field notebook for observations and researcher reflections. Although guide questions provided a framework for each interview, the open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to tell a story.

Interview guide questions provided direction during the interview process for all participants (See Appendix C). The participants were all adult foster youth and of legal age to sign informed consent prior to participating in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary with no substantial physical or psychological risks associated with participation. Furthermore, the guide questions accompanied the informed consent document to provide foster youth an opportunity to understand the interview questions prior to signing consent. A monetary incentive of \$40.00 was provided to all participants who opted into the study. To ensure participants felt comfortable with the setting of the interview, the participants chose the location of each interview. I conducted four of the interviews in participant's homes, and one in a coffee shop, which offered a semi-private room.

Interviews. Prior to the recorded interview, the researcher and participant had several points of contact to establish rapport and discuss any questions or concerns participants had regarding the interview. I discussed the use of several devices to ensure confidentiality with each participant. These devices included the use of pseudonyms and omitting any information in the research document that could potentially identify participants. Finally, participants could end the interview at any time and retain the \$40.00 incentive. All participants completed the interview in its entirety.

Field Notes. I produced field notes directly after each interview. These notes provided my own observations and reflections to capture the context of the interview, including the participant's deportment during our time together, the physical setting of each interview, the mien and disposition of the participants. Finally, the field notes provided a tool for my own internal reflection after the interviews. My field notes allowed me to self-disclose assumptions, beliefs, and biases existing at the time of the interview, and I was able to reflect upon these during data analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2010).

Guide Questions. Guide questions (see Appendix C) were developed in relation to two frameworks guiding the study; Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018). With the assistance of my dissertation committee, a list of guide questions were generated and directed the interviews. While guide questions provided a framework, open-ended questions allowed participants freedom to tell a story.

Data Analysis. Creswell (2013) describes data analysis as a spiraling process which circles back through data as meaning unfolds. Data analysis was iterative and ongoing once interviews were completed. Cross and Galletta (2013) provides the following framework, which I used to analyze the written transcripts. First, each transcript was read through several times to get an overall sense of the interview. Next, I made notes on each transcript to locate meaningful text within individual interviews. At this time I read through the interviews, highlighting words and phrases that were repeated or salient to the research questions, and asking what experiences and meaning each participant narrated within their interview. Finally, I read through each interview multiple times to find evidence tied to the research questions. Through these steps I developed early codes to capture ideas related to each participant's interview, reduced codes to themes, reviewed thematic patterns across interviews, and finally identified how the data

addressed the research questions and how they related to Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018).

Positionality. It is of great importance for the researcher to acknowledge the role of power and privilege when working with marginalized groups. As a white, middle class, educated female, it was important that I acknowledged the bias and privilege I brought to my research with foster youth. I was aware of the social desirability effect, and addressed the tendency for participants to give socially acceptable answers or responses by setting up the interview process with each foster youth to invite honest and candid answers, even if those answers were difficult to hear. I spent time building rapport with each participant and reviewed my guide questions and research to highlight my desire for the youth to tell their own story. I understood the importance of holding my worldview in check when working with foster youth because I have never walked in their shoes nor will I ever experience being in foster care.. The use of open-ended questions allowed foster youth to tell their story, in their own words.

Research Ethics. Creswell (2013) highlights the ethical responsibilities for researchers to clearly and honestly convey to participants the nature and purpose of the study in a truthful manner. There are five distinct ethical areas which researchers must acknowledge as they embark upon qualitative research: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation, and the consequences for future research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Ensuring participant privacy through anonymity (concealing the identity of participants), and confidentiality (protecting the personal identity of participants) are salient issues regarding research ethics (Creswell & Miller, 2010). There remains a concern that ethnographic research has the potential for taking confidential information and producing material for public

consumption with the possibility of “destroying the privacy and autonomy of the individual” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 267). A participant’s signing informed consent does not entitle the researcher to divulge private information. Therefore, participant confidentiality was given high priority, with identities protected by utilizing pseudonyms. I deleted from the data information gleaned from the interviews not focused on the research question, or information, which could potentially identify participants. All data collected remains locked in a physical location, and digital materials held in confidence by utilizing passcodes. In the third year after publication of the research, all data will be deleted and physical copies of notes and paperwork destroyed personally by the researcher.

Finally, the concept of exploitation of participants and repercussions after the research is published are important for me to consider because “sometimes actions that are motivated by ethical ideals can cause severe problems, not just for the researchers but for the people they are studying” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 279). Foster youth are a marginalized group of young people who must follow program rules and policies to remain eligible to continue to receive support and benefits. Therefore, agencies and even colleges hold power over this group in terms of determining who receives resources and whether a participant is compliant. I took seriously the ethical considerations in order to balance the goals of the research with the values and interests of the participants involved.

Research Study Timeline. The following was the timeline for my research study:

- November 2018 – Proposal meeting and acceptance of my research study proposal by my dissertation committee at George Fox University

- December 2018 – Submission and approval of my George Fox University Institutional Review Board form
- January 2019 – Make contact with gatekeepers to advertise my research study to potential participants
- February 2019 – Conduct interviews with participants
- March/April 2019 – Code and analyze data for themes
- June/July 2019 – Final rewrites of chapters one, two, and three, write chapters four and five; submit to an editor for grammar/conventions, and APA format assistance
- July 2019—Oral defense and complete revisions

Contribution to Research and Practice. Large-scale studies recently published in California have provided a baseline for understanding the initial impact of extending foster care for youth (Courtney et al., 2018). Many questions remain, however, regarding whether extended care provides the support foster youth need to develop adult roles, relationships, and the knowledge and skills to become productive and satisfied adults. While it appears many youth in California are opting into AB 12, educational attainment, lack of social supports, and employment continue to represent challenges for foster youth according to the CalYOUTH study (Okpych et al., 2017). My research provides a voice for youth to highlight what supports they use and programs that offer appropriate assistance. These insights from youth have the power to appraise current practices within extended-care programs. In addition, the findings have the potential to inform post-secondary planning before foster youth leave high school. As an

educator who works with high school-aged students, I am interested in what foster youth say about the barriers they face in relation to their transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Summary

This narrative ethnographic study examined the help-seeking experiences of foster youth as they transition into adulthood while remaining in extended care, to understand the influence relationships have on their wellbeing as they develop their adult identities. The following chapter introduces the participants and presents the findings of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study examined the experiences of transitional-aged foster youth who opted into extended care through AB12 legislation, which allowed foster care for eligible youth to extend to the age of 21 in the state of California. I explored participants' personal narratives in relation to their experiences as young adults who remain in foster care as they navigate their early adult lives. This chapter introduces the participants in the study and reveals the themes identified through data analysis.

For this narrative ethnographic research, I personally interviewed five participants one time each. At the conclusion of each interview, I uploaded the audio files to my laptop and transferred the files to a transcription service, Gotranscript. Once I completed the interviews, I started the data analysis, which remained iterative and ongoing. Creswell (2013) describes data analysis as a spiraling process which circles back through data as meaning unfolds. Cross and Galletta (2013) provided the following framework which I used to analyze the written transcripts, specifically I: read each transcript through several times to get an overall sense of the interview, made notes on each transcript to locate meaningful text within individual interviews, read through interviews asking what experiences and meaning each participant narrated within their interview, and highlighted words and phrases repeated or salient to the research questions. Finally, I read each interview multiple times to find evidence tied to the research questions. Through these steps I developed early codes to capture ideas related to each participant's interview, reduced codes to themes, reviewed thematic patterns across interviews, and finally identified how the data addressed the research questions and how they related to Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018).

Participant name	Previously in AB12	Currently in AB12	Working at least one job	Previously attended college	Currently attending college	Graduated high school
Jacob		X	X			X
Andrew		X		X	X	X
Isaiah	X	X	X	X	X	X
Molly	X			X		X
Rose		X	X		X	X

Figure Four: Participants

Description of Participants

The Participants (see *Figure Four*) for this study consisted of 2 females and 3 males ages 19-21. Participants described that the length of time spent in foster care ranged from 3 years to 18 years. Some of the participants had experienced failed adoptions in foster care while others reunited with their biological families. All lived through a wide range of changing placements, which included attending multiple schools while in foster care. Participants unanimously agreed that foster care was a difficult system to experience. All participants had been in AB12 at one time and experienced turning 18 in foster care. Of the four participants who continue to have a relationship with their biological family, most cited biological family as their main support system at the time of the study. Participants identified a single person as their only support person. These relationships were varied and included a significant other, grandmother, and mother.

Jacob. Jacob is a tall lanky young man, who arrived at our meeting on a rainy winter afternoon, wearing a black sweatshirt with the hood pulled up over his head. Rather than take public transportation, Jacob walked several miles in the rain to get to our meeting place. Jacob

enjoys telling a story, has a huge friendly smile, and easily began the interview with expressive body language. Jacob described his journey through foster care as beginning in his teens, leaving care upon graduation. Jacob talked about foster care as providing stability in his life which he did not experience in his childhood. However, when Jacob grew closer to his 18th birthday his relationship with his foster family started to fall apart. Jacob does not have a relationship with his biological family. Jacob graduated on time with his diploma. Jacob returned to foster care when his plans after high school fell through. While not currently enrolled in college, Jacob plans to enroll in the future. Jacob meets the AB12 program requirements by working.

Andrew. Andrew is a tall, thin young man with an easy smile. Andrew suggested we have our meeting at his home, where he is currently living and paying rent with his biological family. We met outside on the front porch. Andrew entered the foster care system around the age of five, experienced a failed adoption and reentered foster care, moving through a series of foster placements until his 18th birthday. He described how his biological family is rebuilding their relationship. Andrew described his foster care experience as difficult, including a failed adoption and being a runaway. Upon graduation from high school, Andrew enrolled at the local community college, where he dropped out after several semesters. Currently working, Andrew has new plans to reenroll in college next semester to enter a Career Technical program for a specific job pathway. Andrew meets the program requirements for AB12 by working full time.

Isaiah. Isaiah is a serious young man who firmly shook my hand as he invited me to his new apartment for our meeting, which he shares with another foster youth in AB12. Upon arriving at Isaiah's sparsely furnished apartment, I saw his pride at having his own place as he invited me in. Isaiah is a reserved young man, who rarely smiled during our meeting. Isaiah told me he recently moved to the area after getting kicked out of the AB12 program in the county he

grew up in. When offered the chance to start over and go back to school, he took the opportunity to relocate, enroll in a new community college, and come back to extended foster care through AB12. Isaiah entered foster care around the age of 12 and describes how he was yanked out of his home, experienced multiple foster care and school placements, yet graduated high school on time. Isaiah continues to have a relationship with his biological mother. A local company recently hired Isaiah, and he plans to work while remaining in college full time. Isaiah qualifies for AB12 by attending school full time.

Molly. Molly waited for me at her front door with a huge nervous smile on her face. Molly was cautious as she invited me into her home. She had made arrangements with her roommates for us to meet at their apartment while everyone was at work. Molly entered foster care during her teen years, attended more than five different schools, and lived in six different group homes which she cannot even remember the names. She sums up her foster care experience as “horrible.” Molly has a strong relationship with her paternal grandmother. Molly graduated with her diploma, but staying in college is a struggle. Molly currently has taken the semester off to reenroll next school year. Molly is currently not participating in AB12, as she was discharged from the program due to conflicting public benefits which made her ineligible for AB12.

Rose. Rose is a soft-spoken, serious young woman who thought carefully about my questions before answering. I arrived at Rose’s home around lunchtime; invited in, I noted that all the shades pulled. Rose had slept in due to working several jobs and going to college full time. Rose shared she has multiple school assignments due, and after our time together she would try to finish writing a large paper that she could not finish the night before due to work. Rose described her journey through foster care as difficult, beginning at age two when she

subsequently experienced multiple traumas while in foster care. Rose cited a strained relationship with her biological siblings. Rose graduated on time with her high school diploma. Rose meets the program requirements for AB12 by attending community college full time.

Thematic Overview and Research Questions

Creswell (2013) asserts qualitative data analysis consists of preparing and organizing data simultaneously, then reducing the data into codes and themes. Analysis does not entail distinct, sequential steps; rather it is an interrelated process. I utilized Cross and Galletta's (2013) framework to analyze the written transcripts, and developed early codes. Next, I reduced codes to themes, reviewed thematic patterns across interviews, and finally identified how the data addressed the research questions. From this analysis the following themes emerged: (a) youth felt responsible for their own development and safety while also emotionally and psychologically disconnecting from the people in their lives; (b) participants' lack of trust in others led to difficulty asking for help and balancing life's challenges; and; (c) participants lacked growth fostering relationships. The research questions posed examined the experiences of foster youth in relation to help-seeking behaviors as they navigated the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the influence relationships had on a young person's wellbeing.

Question 1 - How does the experience of foster youth in extended care align to the assumptions of Survivalist Self-Reliance? Many salient themes emerged from interview data which provided support that foster youth's experiences and perceptions align with the assumptions highlighted by Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), including premature conferral of independence, growing up without parents, and pride in survival of foster care. More specifically, these mechanisms show up in the lives of foster youth in specific ways including that youth feel a sense of responsibility for their own development and safety. In

addition, youth disconnected from others. In their lives, they admitted to not trusting others and did not see the need for support people to lean on when they were struggling.

Participants Feel Responsible for Their Own Development and Safety. The need to grow up quickly and be on their own led participants to feel responsible for themselves developmentally. When thinking about support prior to turning 18, participants highlighted few people they could count on for continuous support. Many factors including multiple placement changes between foster homes, group homes, and schools. Isaiah stated,

I went through school pretty much on my own trying to do my work especially my last 2 years of high school. I didn't talk to nobody, I had no friends. I was just focusing on me. I'm almost 20 now, I make my own decisions and have my own place. People don't get to know everything about me and my past. That's me being treated like an adult. I'm not going to change to fit your expectations, I rely only on myself.

For the participants, moving placements and schools—sometimes several times within a school year—contributed to their belief they could not seek support from others. Being responsible for their own development and safety was most apparent when participants turned 18. Rose shared about her final foster placement before entering AB12,

When I was 18, my foster parent just wanted me out. Me and her never got along. It was a house full of six girls. Six teenage girls and her. She favored the other girls over me. She [foster parent] was always mean to me. There was even a time when she cussed me out and was saying, 'This is why your family didn't want you. This is why your family left you' and all that stuff. That was a couple days before I turned 18. I turned 18, she was just like, 'Get out'.

Rose left foster care and subsequently moved out of state, only later to return and enter the AB12 program. Rose admitted she was unable to support herself by working and welcomed the chance to return to foster care due to the financial benefits and housing support.

Jacob talked about the need to leave foster care and make his own way as a young adult directly after high school.

As an adolescent, they don't really want you. That is why it was the most difficulty I've had was actually being accepted, finding that place of wanting; because they even said they don't want me. Honestly, I can't speak for them [foster parents]. I can't answer for them. I don't know their motivations for doing that. If there're just willing to take me in and them just be willing to kick me out just as easily. Just like what I said earlier, they're very good people. To have that happen, I felt afraid. I felt like I'd just been suckered into something. It's just like I don't know why they did it but it's done. It's over now and that's it.

Participants described tensions with their foster families as they approached their 18th birthday, and believed there would be no continued support after they become adults unless they opted into AB12. All participants noted that AB12 allowed them the option of living on their own, or the ability to pay rent with roommates. Participants did not remain with foster families, as they were not welcome to stay, nor did they want to remain in these homes.

Participants experienced responsibility for their own safety and development while living in foster care, which aligns to the assumptions of Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Opting into AB12 allowed participants financial benefits, but participants continued to describe managing their lives on their own. Another theme identified through data analysis was disconnections from others and the lack of trust in relationships.

Disconnections. Participants described experiences of growing up without supportive relationships and feeling the need to be independent at a young age. Participants described lives where they had to ensure their own development and safety, and felt they could not trust others. All cited one person who they felt supported them including biological mother, grandparents, and romantic partners. When asked about this significant person's role in providing support, all participants held back from sharing their struggles. This meant that when they were having difficulties or struggling in their personal lives, they would not share this with anyone. Jacob shared,

Got to say, not really. See, when I am going through problems, I'm not much ones who ask for help. I wasn't raised that way and that's a tough shell to break. When you're put into this circumstance, I know where they're coming from like foster family, my social workers, school counselors, my friends. Everywhere, I have people there for me that want to help me out but I don't receive support. I knew it was there but I made a conscious decision not to accept it. My problem is my problem. I'm going to deal with it myself. Yes, its stupid but it is also my failsafe because I've been hurt too way too many times and trust issues a thing. I know they're friends, family, professionals, but I don't trust them with the things I go through so I don't receive support to well.

All participants talked about difficulties with trust, especially when it came to hardships they experienced in their lives. When asked about support people in her life, Rose talked about her sister. "My sister used to be that person for me, but now, if I ever try to talk to her, she's just like 'You worry too much' or this and this and that. I stopped telling her things." Rose felt she could not have honest conversations about real struggles in her life with her sister. Rather than address this relational conflict, Rose chose to close that part of herself off from her sister.

Jacob stated when he is struggling, nobody knows,

I wasn't raised to talk about my emotions. I wasn't raised to talk about my problems with other people. My deal with stuff like that, if I am just pent up aggression or somethings troubling me, I would just write it. I would write about it and if that doesn't work I would just bottle it up, stuff it deep down somewhere and keep it stored away. Just cover it up, cover it up, cover it up and hope to God it doesn't resurface again. It's not that I'll say it's the most healthy way because you can take care of your body all you want but if your minds messed up it's not good for anybody because mental illness is a big deal.

Additionally, Molly shared,

I tell my grandmother when things are going really good. She's about the only person who knows unless my therapist catches on. When things aren't going well my grandma usually doesn't. I don't like to burden people. Like my grandma, she gets stressed out easily. I try not to burden her with the negative stuff so I don't tell her a lot of things about how I'm doing.

Participants described hiding their struggles from the people in their lives. This description even included withholding struggles from the professionals assigned to their cases, like social workers, therapists, and school counselors.

Independence as a marker of success. Participants framed their definition of what it meant to be an adult as an independent individual who stood on their own, without support. Although all participants had jobs, attended college, paid rent for their own housing, and were essentially on their own, they did not consider themselves adult. Participants believed when they relied on others this was a sign they were not able to manage their own lives. Subsequently, participants avoided asking for help, even when they truly needed it.

When asked what an adult represented to them, participants struggled with identifying themselves as adults. Molly admitted she did not see herself as an adult because at times she still needed help from others.

To me, it's somebody who is responsible for themselves and just knows how to take care of themselves and support themselves. I don't know, just somebody who's responsible.

Sometimes, yes I think I am and sometimes, no. I am responsible just the first of the month, every time I pay my rent on time, but other than that, most times, I don't consider myself an adult because I still rely on other people too much.

Rather than seeing adults as having a wide support network, all youth framed their definition of adulthood as being completely responsible for anything and everything they do. Furthermore, participants stated adults did not rely on other people, especially when things were not going well. Andrew also did not see himself as completely independent.

Being an adult, it's like you're completely responsible for anything and everything you do. If you get in trouble, well, you can't go to your parents. If you get in trouble, it's the law. Then, it also means you have to be responsible for stuff like bills and car payments. You can't just skip out on work like you do school. I don't know. You're just an adult now. I see myself transitioning. I recently came back into contact with my mom and family around two years ago. We're still building that family relationship that we missed out on. I see myself as a kid sometimes when my mom helps me but the other times, I've been that independent kind of person. When I was in foster care, that last two years, I just did my own thing. I'm pretty wise with my money. I get my priorities done. I'd say I'm transitioning. I'm not quite there yet. I'm not enough to be on my own yet."

Andrew talked about adult responsibilities including full time employment and paying rent and bills, but because he relied on his mother, he felt he was dependent.

Foster youth avoided seeking and receiving support, and when they did lean on others this created a reason for not seeing themselves as an adult. Strength and the ability to see themselves as adults was represented by autonomy and independence. These themes support the participants experiences embedded in the idea of Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Question 2: What are the perceptions and behaviors of foster youth when asking for help?

Due to viewing independence as self-reliance, asking for help and seeking support proved difficult for all participants. Help-seeking attitudes and behaviors of participants highlighted the next concepts uncovered in the study. The inability to connect with others and the drive to be independent of support among participants aligned with the assumptions of Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Several themes emerged within this idea of help-seeking: lack of trust in others led to an unwillingness to ask for and receive help, and difficulty balancing adult demands of work, school, and personal relationships.

Lack of trust leads to difficulty asking for help. Trust was a strong theme that emerged in the data analysis, especially in relation to giving and receiving support. All participants talked about being there for others, and a few even indicated that their future career goals included a helping profession like therapist or social worker. But all participants felt guarded and unwilling to ask for emotional support for themselves.

When asked who knows when things are not going well, Jacob summarized why he avoided telling other people his problems or asking for help. Jacob stated:

When things are not going well I am still tighter than anything. I do not let nobody know it. It goes a long with the same mindset. I said earlier that it's just I don't like to bring other people into my problems. It's my stuff. It's just like, 'Yes, I know you'd like to help but no.' When things are not going well I'll clam up. You won't know what's going on. I just go on mask. You'll see what I want you to see. You'll hear what I want you to hear. Let's say it's more like a defense mechanism and trust.

Later Jacob indicated, "I don't want to drive people into my problems but I would gladly shoulder your problems," which was an interesting contradiction expressed throughout the interviews. There was an overwhelming sense that each participant would help someone else out, but they would not in turn seek help for themselves.

Andrew's sentiment about relationships and support in his life were answered in a similar fashion,

I have a really small circle. I know a lot of people but I'm really not close friends with a lot of people because most of my life I know a lot of them backstab me, show their true colors later. When I was in foster care I got adopted by these people when I was eight. I thought that as going to be the home for me, but they showed their true colors. Me and four other foster brothers I was living with, we all ran away when they went out to eat. Then we had this big old court battle over custody and stuff. I didn't trust my other foster families after that. I ran away again when I was 15. I finally turned myself in because I knew I needed to go to school.

All participants had experienced feeling abandoned and let down by people in their lives, which in turn developed the belief of relationships as unreliable and not to be trusted.

Lack of trust in others and the drive to be independent left participants on their own in navigating their lives. Participants talked about the struggle to handle multiple responsibilities and the difficulty finding balance in their lives.

Balancing life's challenges. Lack of trust and the unwillingness to reach out for support also lead to difficulty with balancing life's challenges for participants. They avoided having support people in their lives. When participants would have benefited from support, they avoided it. Four dropped out of school, one experienced hospitalizations, two lost jobs, and three found themselves evicted from their housing.

When asked about her biggest challenge currently, Molly responded,

Just life getting in the way, like my mental health, my living situation, just everything. I am not in school this semester because I went into the hospital. When I was in the emergency room, I kicked someone when they were restraining me. I ended up having to go to court on the first week of school, so I had to drop all my classes. I haven't been able to finish a semester yet, I'm behind. I wanted to finish community college by the time I was 20, and obviously, I haven't even started or finished a semester, so that doesn't really work. The counselor, I forgot her name, Sandra something. She's with access and ability, I don't know if she can even help with getting me back in school. Its hard to have to explain what's going on, they don't always help.

Isaiah cited his biggest challenge as,

The patience and then taking the time to actually study outside of class because things get hectic around here. Everything has its time and trying to find that little time for everything has been the challenging part for college. You have to figure it out on your own, it's hard trying to wrap my mind around all this stuff.

Without other adults to rely on, participants were on their own trying to manage their lives. Rose also found balancing school and work difficult.

For me, I have struggled with a class that I have now. I feel the college classes are a lot harder than high school. Right now, I'm in the middle of writing a five-page essay. It's due tonight. I have two jobs. Balancing it out is hard. I didn't have work at all yesterday and I planned on writing my essay, and then, what do you know, I get a call in to work. I got to go. I was like, 'okay'. I was up till 3:00 in the morning trying to write my essay last night. I got three pages done, so I have two more to write before tonight. I have a 50-question unit test on Thursday in history. I feel my biggest challenge about being a student is just worrying about whether I'm going to pass the classes or not.

When asked if there was anyone at the college to assist with coursework, time management or other academic supports like tutoring, Rose simply answered, "Not really, no."

Balancing obligations and attending college and working simultaneously present difficult situations for many young adults; however, participants did not view their situation as a valid reason to ask for help. They felt a need to do it all on their own, and remain independent of any support.

Andrew talked about the difficulties of maintaining balancing that led to dropping out of college.

I wanted to graduate [from high school] and go to community college. That was my goal. But it didn't work out like I wanted, its harder when you're on your own. I started working and going to college at the same time. It was just too much at the time. I realized that the classes, the way they were, wasn't really what I thought it was going to be. I might reenroll in August for the HVAC program.

Andrew specifically pointed to lack of transportation, and the ability to drive himself as a barrier to working and school, “It was a hassle because I would have to rush on my bike and I’d be all sweating by the time I get there. I couldn’t work on my permit because I was just so busy. The main problem the last couple of years has been transportation.”

Opting in AB12 provided an opportunity for participants to have access to professionals for interpersonal support and mentoring, however foster youth cited the reason for opting into AB12 was tied to financial support and housing benefits.

When asked what motivated them to opt into extended care, all pointed to the financial benefits. Molly indicated she opted into AB12,

Mostly for the financial benefit, that way I can get out from under my grandmother’s roof and get my own place. Like right now, I live with two roommates, its going ok. My goal is to move to attend university and work for the county some day. I can’t really count on my grandmother always being there, because a day is not guaranteed.

Rose echoed this sentiment when asked why she enrolled in AB12,

Because the monthly checks would help me into getting my own place. After high school I tried doing it on my own, I wasn’t in AB12. I moved in with my brother and some stuff happened between us. His girlfriend hates me, hates his other sister, won’t let him talk to us. I moved here and got into AB12. That’s how I got to live here.

Participants all cited the financial support provided by extended care the reason for opting into the program. All participants cited attending and completing a post-secondary program as a goal for their future. Even when participants cited having difficulties navigating college and dropping out, college continued to be a dream they held for their future. When asked

whether there was a specific program or person who helped them navigate the college system, all participants indicated that they were on their own.

I had no support and I was trying to wrap my mind around college. They [social workers] didn't walk me through everything. I was going into college blind. I had to sign myself up, do my own little process and everything and I was totally confused...after that I dropped out and decided to try to look for full time work and that also fell through because it turns out finding work is a lot harder (Isaiah, 2-15-2019).

While the participants were all enrolled in extended care and had access to case workers and other programs, many did not utilize programming for interpersonal support. Participants experienced multiple problems remaining enrolled in college. Molly shared,

At school I have to do it all on my own because I don't have a lot of friends or people to help. I don't like to rely on others. I don't get along with other people that well, so it's a struggle to even be there [school]. I don't trust easily and my mental health sometimes gets in the way.

All participants were aligned to the assumptions of Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) when it came to their lack of trust in others and the inability to seek help when they were struggling. Being self-reliant cut off the ability to ask for help and in turn led participants to struggle balancing life's commitments including school and work. The need to be independent pushed relationships to the side, because participants believed adults stood on their own. Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2017) holds a counter view to the idea of independence. Within RCT, healthy adults find themselves embedded within a network of relationships, which foster growth between individuals. However, these relationships were missing from the lives of participants.

Question 3: Do foster youth experience growth-fostering relationships as described in RCT?

According to Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018), growth-fostering relationships embody several hallmarks. Within relationships that are supportive and cultivate growth, authenticity, the ability to share your entire self is necessary for real engagement and full participation. These relationships develop over our lifespan and support relationship growth, empathy, and mutuality. Mutuality focuses on the concept of being able to maintain a sense of self while remaining open to change. Relationships have periods of connection and disconnection. When connection is experienced after disconnection, there is a sense of empowerment and relational resilience. Growth-fostering relationships are grounded in the idea that both parties benefit and grow because development is mutual, not a one-way process.

This study sought to understand whether extended care allowed foster youth a period of continued support to develop their adult roles and relationships. Within the interviews there was little evidence pointing to the existence of growth fostering relationships within the lives of foster youth. While all participants discussed relationships in their lives, there was a need to withhold pieces of themselves, especially in times of struggle when participants needed support. In the process of withholding their struggles, participants found a lack of authenticity in relationships.

Authenticity

While youth described relationships with biological parents and romantic partners, all admitted they guarded themselves by not sharing when things were not going well or they were struggling personally. Embracing the ideal of self-reliance at the heart of being an adult, all

participants withheld pieces of themselves in their relationships and therefore did not experience growth-fostering relationships. For example, Jacob admitted,

I've been molded by the experiences I went through. They made me just think different, switch the gears so I don't know what it's like to be a kid. I don't know what it's like have emotions towards people or things or relationships. That's the way that my experiences made me.

Isaiah talked about the need to protect himself from other people's expectations, and withheld plans and talk about his future from the people in his life. Isaiah felt the need to withhold his plans for the future due to his experience in foster care,

It was tough to get the hang of foster care. I was just yanked out of my home. I was in about a little over five foster homes or group homes or whatever over the course of like six and a half years I want to say from 12 to 18 and I went to approximately like eight schools. The hardest part was controlling my anger because I was an angry kid all the time. I couldn't trust nobody. Even now I don't tell no one my plans because the future can change at any moment, so I don't like getting people's hopes up too much."

Molly stated she did have a therapist and clinicians she relied on when she was struggling in her life, "It's usually my therapist. The people at the clinic, everybody there knows when I'm not doing too well. Just nobody outside of there usually knows." Molly understood these individuals were in her life as workers and they did not cross over into her personal life and relationships. Molly did not experience the same support and understanding in her personal relationships. The lack of trust in others and withholding pieces of themselves led youth to missed opportunities to generate authenticity in relationships.

Mutuality

The concept of mutuality in growth-fostering relationships points towards the ability to maintain a sense of self while staying open to change. Participants were closed off from social relationships and did not highlight experiences with others that led to understanding themselves. When asked if she has relationships that help her overcome struggles, Molly stated,

I don't have a lot of friends, I have to do it all on my own. I don't get along with other people that well, it's a trust thing, so it's a struggle being around people. I lash out at everybody and everything. I just keep away from people. It's better that way.

Both Andrew and Rose had the largest network of relationships, and indicated it was easier to cut people out of their life than work through conflict. Andrew cited a small circle of friends due to people who he felt he could not trust,

I have a really small circle. I know a lot of people but I'm not really close friends with a lot of people because most of my life I know a lot of them backstab me, show me their true colors later. Even the people in foster care, like the people who wanted to adopt me. They all show their true colors eventually. You have to keep a small group close, not let everyone into your life.

Rose talked about her difficult journey through foster care and the later strained relationships with siblings fraught with misunderstandings,

My journey through foster care was really difficult because I went in for the first time at the age of two, and then I was adopted at the age of three and abused sexually, physically, and emotionally for 10 years. I went back in the system at the age of 11 and stayed until I was 18. I think I was in about seven different homes. I attended about six different

schools. You learn you can't trust most people. My sister was in foster care too. We still keep in touch, but it's been hard. She used to be that [support] person for me, but now, if I ever talk to her, she's just like, 'You worry too much, or this and this and that'. I stopped telling her things.

Missing from the conversation was the idea that conflict is natural in relationships, and provides an opportunity to work through misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Lack of trust in others made it difficult for participants to experience growth fostering relationships.

Conclusion

The final research question in this study focused on whether participants experienced relationships in their lives that foster interpersonal growth. When it came to interpersonal relationships, participants guarded themselves when they struggled. Data analysis showed participants cited the biggest benefit of AB12—extended foster care—was financial support and housing assistance. Therefore, participants did not perceive extended care as providing relational or interpersonal support as they navigated the transition into their adult lives.

This chapter introduced the participants of the study and presented the themes that emerged through data analysis. The experiences of extended-care foster youth in the study aligned to the assumptions embedded within Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Participants highlighted difficulties trusting others, asking for help and viewed adulthood as standing on their own without support from others. Finally, participants did not include themselves in supportive, relationship networks that fostered reciprocal growth. The following chapter presents a discussion of the findings and recommendation for future practice and research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This narrative ethnography aimed to understand the experiences of foster youth as they navigate the transition from adolescence into adulthood while remaining in extended care. One purpose of the study was to determine whether foster youth view their adult identities as grounded in independence and standing on their own as Survivalist Self-Reliance asserts (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), or were foster youth influenced by relationships and networks of support that align with the assumptions of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018).

For the study, I interviewed five foster youth who participated in extended foster care through California's AB 12. Upon completion of the data analysis, the following themes emerged: (a) youth felt responsible for their own development and safety while also disconnecting from the people in their lives; (b) participant's lack of trust in others lead to difficulty asking for help and balancing life's challenges; and; (c) a lack of growth-fostering relationships. The following sections highlight findings, potential implications, and recommendations for both practice and future research.

Discussion of Findings

The experiences identified during interviews with the five participants aligned to the assumptions of Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and the need to stand on their own even when experiencing difficulties navigating their adult lives. Participants in the study all perceived they had to be self-reliant and found it difficult to ask for help. When they relied on others for help, this diminished their ability to view themselves as adults. Rather than creating lives full of success, self-reliance shaped experiences of academic difficulties, lack of balance and loneliness. Participants highlighted difficulties trusting others and asking for help.

Additionally, youth viewed adulthood as standing on their own without support from others. Participants did not include themselves in supportive, relationship networks that fostered reciprocal growth. Participants cited similarities between their experiences and the findings from the CalYOUTH study (Courtney et al., 2018).

Self-Reliance. Research delving into help-seeking experiences of foster youth found negative relationship histories reinforced the idea that they must be self-reliant (Pryce, Napolitano, & Samuels, 2017). These researchers found youth felt they could not count on others because they believed adults are independent. This belief in self-reliance subsequently undermined their ability to build meaningful and supportive interpersonal relationships. This included hiding emotions and personal difficulties from everyone in their lives. Overgeneralized self-reliance increased struggles for foster youth because it prevented them from asking for help when they needed it.

In the interviews with participants in this study, only one single supportive relationship existed with another adult for each participant. When things were not going well for participants, they all made an effort to hide this from the people in their lives, including their one supportive relationship. Despite having access to services and professionals through extended care, this would seem indicate participants only viewed extended care as offering financial support, and did not view social workers, case managers, or college personnel as sources of emotional or interpersonal support.

Berzin et al. (2014) and Goodkind et al. (2011) found transitional services and programming that focuses on independent living skills and self-sufficiency exacerbates disconnections for youth. Additionally, Independent Living Programs (ILP) focus on messages of independence, undermining the capacity to normalize relational interconnections. Earlier

research by Geenen and Powers (2007) discussed the need to move away from life skills training to the development of supportive relationships to address the needs of TAY. Additionally, the current study found interpersonal needs of participants remained unaddressed.

During interviews, participants recognized the benefits of remaining in foster care, but they did not indicate they gained interpersonal support nor did they recognize the relational advantages having access to professional social workers and case managers provided. This demonstrates that the focus on material benefits and life skills through Independent Living Programs leads foster youth to see these professionals as simply gatekeepers for resources. Perhaps these same professionals do not see their roles as providing interpersonal support, and therefore do not provide this to foster youth. However, Zinn et al. (2017) found foster youth experience a marked benefit from networks of support. Additionally, social connection is found to benefit foster youth with trauma histories or deficits in social emotional competencies. It is speculated that programs which focus resources on life skills and benefits miss the opportunity to connect foster youth with social supports and networks.

This is not to say that youth did not benefit from their independence, self-reliance, and the material benefits of extended care. Youth in this study had many positive adult characteristics including working, attending college, living on their own with roommates, and paying rent and bills. However, participants did not consider themselves adults because they admitted at times they still required help and support. Participants attempted to isolate and pull away from help, which created further problems; when they needed support they resisted seeking it out. It is unknown whether their histories in foster care contributed to this resistance or if other factors including mental health and trauma were at the root. Rather than viewing adults as requiring help and support, and viewing this as a natural progression of interpersonal relationships, participants

believed this support pointed to their inability to manage their lives. In their view, adults are self-reliant. As other studies have demonstrated (Morton, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2018), participants in this study shied away from seeking support and building relationships, exacerbating life's difficulties by eschewing help to go it alone.

I'm Not an Adult Yet. I'm Transitioning. All participants described the definition of an adult as a person who stands on their own and does not rely on others. "Being an adult is doing everything on my own," stated Isaiah. Therefore, in spite of managing their own finances, paying rent, and living independently, participants repeatedly did not feel they were adults because they felt stifled by the need to rely on others. As Andrew stated, "Being an adult, it's like you're completely responsible for anything and everything you do...I'd say I'm transitioning. I'm not quite there yet. I'm not enough to be on my own yet." While this independent spirit assisted participants in moving them forward in the face of substantial barriers, it also created a dichotomy. Seeking help prevented participants from viewing themselves as adults but the lack of seeking help prevented them successfully navigating their lives, and sometimes created additional barriers.

Extended-care programming ensured participants found themselves embedded in a network of services and benefits. But participants did not see extended care as offering supportive relationships. While AB12 offered them housing assistance and financial assistance, there remained a perception from youth that it was wrong to seek out emotional and interpersonal support. When things were not going well this also played out as causing difficulties with their educational aspirations.

A College Education. Participants discussed their desire to obtain a post-secondary education. Only one participant had not enrolled in college at the time of the interviews, while three participants had already dropped out of college. All indicated college was something they wanted to experience. Embedded in their plans for the future was the need for job training through a certificate program or the completion of a bachelor's degree and beyond. Molly framed college as a path to a different life from her family, "I don't want to turn out like my mother, and well, graduating high school would be one difference between us, but college is one step further." She continues to view an education as a defining difference between her and her biological mother. In addition, participants understood many careers are inaccessible without advanced training and a degree. Even though participants described many barriers, college continued to be a dream for their future.

The CalYOUTH study (Courtney et al., 2018) found that allowing youth to remain in extended foster care in California increased the likelihood that they completed their high school diploma or GED. However, the CalYOUTH study also found college-bound rates for former foster youth remain low, with those graduating from college representing an even smaller percentage. By the age of 19, 71% of CalYOUTH participants had completed a high school diploma, and 86% of participants cited a desire to complete a college degree. However, only 3% had completed an associate's degree and 1% completed a bachelor's degree by the age of 21 (Courtney et al., 2018). The Midwest study, one of the largest longitudinal research projects conducted with foster youth in the Midwest, found only 40% of foster youth completed a year of college by age 26, and only 8% overall earned a degree from a two- or four-year institution (Courtney et al., 2010). Other themes that emerge from studies looking at college attainment for foster youth highlighted barriers including lack of academic preparation (Geiger & Beltran,

2017), unresolved mental health needs (Morton, 2016; Salazar, 2012), financial instability coupled with food scarcity (Kinarsky, 2017), and lack of supportive relationships (Day et al., 2012). Many former foster youth are reluctant to identify themselves due to the stigmatizing and negative experiences of being in the child welfare system (Salazar et al., 2016).

The hard reality for foster youth is that the more aligned they are to being independent and self-reliant, the less likely they are to remain in college. Recent studies of college enrollment and persistence of former foster youth found that the more distance foster youth maintain in their relationships, the lower the chances of persisting in college and earning a degree (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Morton (2018) found among former foster youth attending universities a commitment to self-reliance led to academic troubles including low self-confidence in the classroom, lack of motivation, academic failure in multiple classes, and loss of financial aid and campus housing due to lack of academic progress. In contrast, studies of academically successful former foster youth highlight that when young adults are willing to trust relationships with adults, they are more likely to remain in school (Day et al., 2012; Morton, 2016).

Unrau et al. (2012) found foster youth viewed post-secondary education as a way to rewrite their lives as adults. When asked why going back to college was important to her, after multiple semesters of dropping out, Molly stated, “I didn’t want to turn out like my mother...graduating college would be one step further.” However, most former foster youth enter college academically under prepared and require a tremendous amount of supplemental support to earn passing grades (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Participants in this study talked about different programs available to them for post-secondary planning; however, they did not indicate that these services were of value. While programming may address strategies to assist foster youth to remain in college, participants were not taking full advantage of these supports.

Participants in this study all cited the desire to attend college and earn a degree or career technical certificate, even though they were academically ill prepared for college and lacked a substantial support system. Participants described difficulties balancing attending school and managing their lives as well as patterns of dropping out and re-enrolling. In spite of these troubles, there remained a drive to finish their education.

CalYOUTH. The advent of California's AB12, extended foster care until the age of 21, recognized the need to address benefits and tangible support for transitional-age youth to ensure basic needs. CalYOUTH (Courtney et al., 2018) was a five-year (2012-2017) ongoing study designed to evaluate the impact of extended foster care on youth outcomes. The CalYOUTH study followed 732 foster youth to evaluate the impact of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act on outcomes for foster youth during their transition to adulthood. CalYOUTH painted an early, descriptive picture of the AB12 experience of foster youth. With the third wave of data collected, Courtney et al. (2018) described the following four findings: (a) most TAY opt into AB12 and are fairly satisfied with services; (b) extended-care youth continue to demonstrate poor outcomes; (c) extended-care youth are diverse; and (d) extended-care youth are primarily people of color.

Participants for this study aligned to the findings within the CalYOUTH study. Participants cited satisfaction with extended care services, highlighted primarily by the financial and housing services AB12 provided. Isaiah stated he saw extended care as important because,

This is my second shot at AB12. I was kicked out before. Its worth it because it's useful. Just keeping a roof over my head right now, a place to sleep and resources. I wouldn't be here if I was on my own. I wouldn't be able to support myself yet. If I wasn't here,

literally, I wouldn't even be going to school because I grew up in a broke family so if it wasn't for here, I would still be at home working in the fields.

Participants understood the need for these financial resources and were willing to abide by the eligibility requirements to remain in extended care. Rose shared,

I did AB12 because I felt I needed the extra help. Because the monthly checks would help me into getting my own place. I ended up just moving to Nevada, with my boyfriend at the time, and then we moved back six months later. I wanted to go to school and the program helps me.

Andrew also found opting into extended care useful,

It [AB12] motivated me to keep a job, because you either have to be working or you have to be in college or you have to be actively searching for a job. That's what they told me.

It helps me because I do live with my family but I don't live here for free. I put in my share to live here. It does teach me a little bit about being a young adult because I've been learning how to pay bills and stuff. Every month I go pay the light bill, I go shopping for the family.

Similarities existed when comparing educational attainment and employment of participants and the CalYOUTH findings. Participants struggled with staying enrolled in college, and found working and finding employment difficult. Isaiah shared, "I dropped out [of college] and decided to try to look for full-time work and that also fell through because it turns out finding work is a lot harder." CalYOUTH found transitional-age foster youth opt into AB12 but this group continues to have outcomes tied to poor educational outcomes and unemployment. Participants in this study experienced dropping out of community college and unemployment.

Recommendations for Further Practice and Research

While this research study had the limitation of interviewing only five participants, the lived experiences shared by participants suggested areas to conduct further research. The information provided by participants may offer ideas for potential changes to practice for professionals working with transitional-aged foster youth. Additionally, stories shared by the participants suggest possibilities for policy and programming change. This narrative ethnographic research is not generalizable to all transitional-aged foster youth; it does however, offer an emergent understanding of the lives of foster youth opting into extended-care programs.

Practice. The data analyzed from interviews suggested the need to address the ideas surrounding self-reliance and the interpersonal needs of older foster youth. While young adults require agency over their lives, the ability to ask for help and seek support in others is equally of value.

Those invested in the lives of older foster youth must provide an alternative story about adulthood, one that firmly embeds individuals in relationships that are mutually beneficial and authentic. Unfortunately, the idea of supportive youth development through relationships is not a new concept. Zinn et al. (2017) highlighted the need for supportive adult mentors to develop positive measures of wellbeing that impact employment, educational attainment, physical and mental health, and economic sufficiency. Ultimately, programing for transitional-aged foster youth needs to challenge the notion of independence by changing the perception of self-reliance and adulthood among foster youth. Participants from the study cited that the lack of trust in relationships develops from a multitude of experiences stemming from being in foster care. Learning to identify trustworthy relationships and receive assistance with conflict resolution

have the possibility of arming foster youth with the ability to build better relationships in their lives.

Opting into AB12 triggers financial support and housing assistance, but participants did not acknowledge the benefit of having access to case managers and social workers. I acknowledge housing and financial assistance are important benefits extended to foster youth, as they would otherwise find themselves completely on their own. But the material benefits alone proved insufficient to alleviate all of life's difficulties for foster youth. This group of foster youth does not readily ask for help. Since they define adulthood as not asking for help and the mantra that adults take care of themselves programming which focuses on independent living skills and self-sufficiency exacerbates disconnections for foster youth (Berzin et al., 2014). Therefore, those professionals engaged in working with this population must recognize the need to connect with youth even when they report they are doing fine. Otherwise waiting for youth to seek assistance means many opportunities for interpersonal connection will be missed. New ways to engage youth in interpersonal supports could provide a needed outlet for foster youth in extended care. Social workers, educators, case managers, college personnel, and CASA volunteers are not merely gatekeepers to resources but adults invested in assisting young adults in interpersonal ways. As professionals who work with older foster youth, it is important to be mindful about invitations of assistance and the messages we send about what it means to be an adult: independent and self-reliant. Interpersonal supports have the potential to benefit the educational aspirations of AB12 youth as well.

AB12 is still relatively new and continues to evolve as subsequent waves of TAY opt into and age out of the program. There remains tremendous opportunity for AB12 to address the needs of foster youth in California.

Research. This research study included a small sample of five foster youth, and the stories of their lived experiences suggest where further research may be completed.

Few studies have followed foster youth beyond their 18th birthday, and there is a need to collect data from this group to understand the long-term effects of aging out of foster care. In addition, as more states develop programs to extend foster care beyond the age of 18, evaluation of programming will require continued research efforts. There continues to be a need to invest in foster youth programs, which effectively build the capacity for interpersonal development among older foster youth so they may become successful, productive adults. The current policy focus on housing and financial benefits beyond the age of 18 for foster youth, places the need for interpersonal supports in the dark. Policy makers should consider language supporting interdependence to increase the capacity of these young people to develop positive relational skills as they embark on their journey into adulthood. These skills are of equal value to housing and financial benefits.

CalYOUTH is a recent large-scale study in California that evaluated the impact extended foster care has on youth outcomes (Courtney et al., 2018). Questions posed by the researchers focused on the important influences during transition to adulthood for foster youth, the factors influencing the types of support youth receiving in extended care, and how services influence the relationship between extending care and youth outcomes. Although AB12 extended foster youth benefits beyond the age of 18, counties are responsible for developing their own programming to address mandates. Additional research may assist more people working with transitional-aged youth to understand the complexities TAY face when transitioning from adolescence to early adulthood and to assist with the development of interpersonal supports and programming.

A second recommendation is to review programming for older foster youth to understand what messages youth receive about self-reliance and independence. All adults need people to rely on, to listen when life is challenging. As the research has suggested, when youth are entrenched in self-reliance, isolation leads to the inability to navigate the complexities of life (Morton, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of transitional-aged foster youth who opted into extended care through AB12 and to explore their experiences as young adults who remain in foster care as they navigate their early adult lives. Of interest was how youth viewed their own self-sufficiency and relationship networks, as these concepts are tied to ideas rooted in Survivalist Self-Reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018).

After reviewing the literature surrounding transitional-aged foster youth and the recent advent of extended foster care in California, I developed an interest for my narrative ethnography to understand how foster youth experience remaining in foster care past their 18th birthday. Influenced by my current work as a school counselor and my previous volunteer experience as a Court Appointment Special Advocate, I had an interest in understanding the perceptions of transitional-aged foster youth as they opt into extended care. Of particular interest was the idea of self-reliance identified by Samuels and Pryce (2008) in their work with foster youth. I wanted to understand how youth viewed their independence while voluntarily remaining in foster care past their 18th birthday, and what supports they found helpful in navigating their lives.

This study revealed opting into extended care provided needed financial and housing support for foster youth. Participants did not view extended care as providing relational support

due in part to their view of adults as self-reliant. Participants highlighted the belief that relying on others prevented them from fully becoming an adult, and therefore avoided seeking help from others. With limited social supports in place, participants struggled to balance life's commitments and as a result, their transition into adulthood remained imbued with the need to experience this transition alone. Extended foster care was not the answer to create successful adults because participants equate AB12 with benefits and housing support, not relational support.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter of Consent for Participating Students
Foster Youth in Extended Care: A Narrative Ethnographic Study

Dear Student,

My name is Sarah Pennington and I am a student in the Doctor of Educational Leadership program at George Fox University in Oregon. I am also a School Counselor in Visalia, California. As a requirement of my program in Oregon, I will be conducting research and have chosen to examine the lived experiences of foster youth in extended foster care who are attending Community College.

You are invited to participate in an interview regarding your experiences in school and to share the ups and the downs of becoming a young adult while remaining in foster care. The interview questions are open-ended and relate to your school experiences and the important relationships in your life that provide support. I hope that the findings of my interviews reveal insight into the experiences of foster youth as they become young adults and navigate college. Each participant who agrees to sit for an interview will be provided with \$40.00 cash.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The interview questions are general in nature and therefore, the interview should not create any discomfort. Nevertheless, please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary and you may decline to continue at any time or decline to answer any question at your discretion.

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes, which may include presentations at a professional conference and/or academic publications. Personal interviews will be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Information will be analyzed and presented in an anonymous manner and no individual will be personally identified, either by name or by personal details. I will keep any personal information and identities confidential.

All research materials (i.e., audio-recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms) will be locked in separate, secure locations for a period of no less than three years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials. After three years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete the audio recordings.

Thank you for your time in considering this project. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at (559)731-2206, or my advisor at George Fox University, Dr. Scot Headley at (503.554.2836) .

If you understand the use of this research and agree to participate, please sign below.

Participant signature_____ Date: _____

Researcher signature_____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Guide Questions

1. Tell me about your journey through foster care. How many years have you been in care?
Do you remember how many foster care placements you had? How many schools did you attend before completing your high school diploma or GED?
2. Think back as far as you can, maybe elementary school or perhaps high school and tell me about a time when you had a problem or struggled in school. What did you do? Why? What or who made a difference? What did you learn from this experience?
3. Picture yourself when you were in high school...Tell me about what your plans were after graduation. Have your plans changed?
4. Tell me about why you decided to stay in foster care after you turned 18.
5. Describe what it means to be an adult? Why?
6. What has been the most challenging thing about being a college student? Have you talked to anyone about this challenge? Why or Why not?
7. Who are the people in your life who supported you in the past year? What did they do to support you?
8. When you think about the people in your life, can you describe how you give and receive support to these people?
9. When things are going good in your life, who knows? Why?
10. When things are not going well, and you are struggling, who knows? Why?
11. What is the biggest thing you worry about for your future? Who knows you have this worry? Why or why not?

12. When you think about the future, describe what you see for yourself in the next year, 2 years, 5 years.
13. As you imagine this future, are there people in your life that you think will remain in your life? Why or why not?
14. Can you tell me what you hope for in your future?

Appendix C

Hello,

My name is Sarah Pennington, and I am currently working on my Doctorate in Education. This program requires I complete a final research project called a dissertation in order to fulfill the requirements to graduate. My dissertation will focus on foster youth in the central valley.

So you know a little about me, I am a school counselor, and for the last 8 years I have worked at a charter high school located on the campus of College of the Sequoias. I was born and raised in this area, but I spent many years attending college and living in Hawaii.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. I anticipate the interview to take between 1-2 hours. Once the interview is completed, I am offering an incentive of \$40.00 at the completion of the interview for your time.

In this packet, you will find the following documents:

1. Letter of Consent for Participating Student
 - a. This letter must be signed by you the student/participant and returned to me the researcher.
2. Guide Questions
 - . These are the questions that will guide my interview, and what you can expect me to ask. I may ask additional questions not listed if I need to clarify anything we talk about during the interview.

I would like to make contact with you prior to the interview to introduce myself and so we can decide on a place for the interview.

I look forward to working with you this semester.

Sincerely,

Sarah Pennington

Appendix D

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY HSRC INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Page 6

Title: Foster Youth In Extended Care: A Narrative Ethnography

Principal Researcher(s): Sarah M Pennington

Date application completed: 11/29/18

(The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)

COMMITTEE FINDING:

For Committee Use Only

☒ (1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved.

☐ (2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the **HSRC** on a _____ basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.

☐ (3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:

☐ (4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.

Cape

12/14/18