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THE EFFECTS OF FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE ON FOSTER YOUTH'S INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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THE EFFECTS OF FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE ON FOSTER YOUTH'S
INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Britney Smith

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Former foster youth are in the unique position of taking on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, while also carrying the weight of growing up in non-traditional homes, likely away from their biological families. While the causes of a child being placed in foster care vary, inadequate parental care is a factor that exists within each case. Because of this, former foster youth are at heightened risk to experience several traumas associated with being placed in foster care such as teen pregnancy, dating violence, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, and neglect. An area that is often overlooked when discussing the impact that foster care has on former foster youth is the effect that it has on their intimate relationships. Because foster youth typically suffer from inadequate care and problems with attachment, it is very likely that these experiences from childhood would affect their adult relationships.

This raises concern because learned behaviors that are not addressed at an adequate age can quickly become generation long cycles of abuse, low self-worth, and low relationship satisfaction. It is imperative to understand the relationship of previous foster care placement and relationship satisfaction so proper intervention and prevention can be offered.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

When discussing the impact that the formative years of adolescence has on understanding and forming healthy relationships in adulthood, research often overlooks how the experiences of adolescents in foster care can contribute to a different outlook on relationship formation. According to the Children's Bureau of the U.S Department of Health and Human Services (2018), as of 2018 there were an estimated 437,283 children in foster care. This number is significant when taking into consideration that those in the foster care system experience higher rates of teen pregnancy, teen dating violence, psychiatric disorders, abuse, and neglect (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). Studies have shown that for foster youth, romantic partners become a source of support; and they struggle to develop high quality relationships, with reported lower levels of marital satisfaction in adulthood (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019).

The most prevalent reason for why foster youth experience higher rates of teen pregnancy, dating violence, and psychiatric disorders compared to those in biologically reared homes would be the role that attachment plays on early childhood experiences. McLaughlin et al (2011) found that the inability to form a secure attachment relationship to a primary caregiver is directly related to elevated rates of psychiatric disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder,

anxiety, and depression. Alternatively, sensitive behavior, as well as, a constant and rewarding relationship to a primary caregiver or an attachment figure, has been shown to be a precondition for positive mental health (Nowacki & Schoelmerich, 2010). These findings illustrate how difficulties with forming attachment with a caregiver early on can manifest into other areas of emotional and mental health development that are essential for understanding and building healthy relationships.

Because these skills are often not nurtured and built upon at a young age, foster youth are vulnerable to high risk relationships and increased mental health concerns. As of now, foster youth are about two to four times more likely to experience teen pregnancy, and three to fourteen times more likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection (Albertson et al., 2017). Additionally, it has been found that most often either the foster carer or the children have felt discomfort in new foster care relationships (Tankred Luckow, 2019). The statistics referenced show not only how important it is for caregivers to prioritize having a relationship where both caregiver and foster youth are comfortable talking about sexual health, but also how many of these children do not have an open space where they can talk and learn about issues surrounding sex and relationships.

Foster youth are also at greater risk of experiencing dating violence. In a recent study, it was found that approximately 21% of young adults who grew up in the foster care system had reported some type of dating violence. Furthermore, it was also determined that those who experienced violence within

the home prior to entering foster care, as well as, neglect and/or violence by a foster carer, were more likely to be involved in violent partnerships (Katz et al., 2017). These findings suggest that early exposure to violence within the home has a direct correlation to how foster youth perceive what is considered to be acceptable behavior within their own relationships. This can be detrimental toward establishing healthy relationships in adulthood, as well, as detrimental to one's self confidence and self-worth.

While many trainings are required to be completed by the foster carers, there are few that are required to be completed by foster youth. Addressing these problems means that programs need to be created that are required for foster youth to complete on topics surrounding communication skill building, comprehensive sex and relationship education, and therapy. Recent studies have also shown a need for social media training, as it has been linked to increased risky behavior and exposure to early sexual behavior (Albertson et al., 2017). Because foster youth can be placed in multiple homes within a short time span, it can be difficult for families to monitor foster youth's online presence. A social media training program that is tailored to this population could help ensure that foster youth are protected online and encouraged to use boundaries.

There are also steps that can be taken within agencies to ensure that progress is being made within these specific areas. One notable practice is utilizing trauma informed care. By doing this, agencies would be ensuring that they are providing appropriate training, resources, and practices to those who

have trauma exposure within their system (McLaughlin et al., 2011). In addition to providing resources to families, agencies should also be providing resources to the staff. This would ensure staff resilience and longevity, as well as, address any secondary traumatic stress that may occur when working with severe clients.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the role that being in foster care has on intimate relationships for former foster youth. While previous literature and studies have determined that there are clear differences between those reared in foster care and those reared in biological homes, there is little evidence on the direct impact these differences have on the relationships of previous foster youth as adults. This study set out to identify if there are differences when it comes to relationship building for this population, and what specific needs and resources are required to address the specialized concerns and issues of former foster youth's intimate relationships.

Although each foster case is different, each individual was placed into the system due to lack of care or serious need. As stated prior, inconsistent parental care plays a large role in children's attachment, self-esteem, risky behaviors, and mental health. Each of these consequences have a direct impact on how individuals learn to interact with others and establish their own role and boundaries within relationships. Determining what consequences have impacted former foster youth's relationships the greatest will be essential in uncovering

how social work can address these problems within agencies, individual therapy, group classes, and literature before and after they have made an impact.

This study utilized a quantitative research method. Utilization of a survey ensured that the sample has the opportunity to be larger in comparison to other methods, and include greater diversity within the respondents in order to answer the research question.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

As stated prior, the findings from this study help to further illustrate what specific areas foster youth struggle with when it comes to intimate relationships. This study informs both the planning and implementing phases of the generalist intervention process because many foster youth have had experiences early on that require specific needs that need to be addressed. By bringing light to these limitations social workers are better able to enact policies and practices that cater to this demographic.

While a variety of groups and resources currently exist for this population, it is helpful to use the knowledge gained within this study to create groups and curriculum that address the needs of what is currently lacking, and working well within the system in terms of relationship building and satisfaction. Curriculum and resources can also be created to be preventative to be made available to current foster youth; or made to help former foster youth struggling in this area. However, it is important that the knowledge gained within the study be used to address these issues at the root to ensure that former foster youth are properly

nurtured as foster children. Adults also might be less inclined to build on these skills later in life than they would have if required within their program as youth.

With that said, the research question for this project was as follows: What are the effects that being in foster care has on the intimate relationships of foster youth?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will be discussing current literature that surrounds foster youth. The literature topics include relationship satisfaction, abuse, sexual health, mental health, and attachment. The literature will be reviewed and gaps and limitations that exist within the current studies will be identified in order to illustrate what will be addressed within this study. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the theoretical perspectives that will guide this study, including Attachment Theory and Social Learning.

Studies Focusing on Relationship Satisfaction Among Foster Youth

Much of the literature surrounding intimate relationships show that relationship satisfaction is a primary indicator for how mutually healthy and supportive a relationship can be in one's life. Because it is common for individuals to model the relationship dynamic that they grew up watching; foster youth are especially vulnerable to having learned negative relationship characteristics that carry over into adulthood (Forenza et al., 2017). Adolescence is the developmental period where relationships are being explored; and this exploration period is significant in the transition to adulthood in forming positive partnerships (Forenza et al., 2017). While, Colman & Widom (2004) claims that early physical abuse and neglect have been linked to the inability to establish

and maintain healthy relationships for both males and females in adulthood. This is important because it displays the link between healthy relationships and positive modeling. If one develops inside of an inconsistent or abusive home, it is likely that many of the characteristics that were modeled at a young age will be carried over to adolescent and adult relationships, creating a negative cycle.

However, DeLuca Bishop et al (2019), claims that foster youth and biologically reared youth reported similar quality of relationships, and that being in foster care had little impact on their reported rate of romantic involvement and quality of relationships. Even so, it has been determined that foster youth reported lower levels of marital happiness, and were less likely to be involved in romantic relationships, however, the likelihood increased with age; with a reported 28% at 20 years old and 47.5% at 30 years old (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). This information shows that there are some differences between findings in the literature available surrounding relationships. However, the information also determines that while significant differences were not found, evidence shows that there are some differences in relationship satisfaction and romantic involvement between those who were in foster care, and those biologically reared.

Because of the slight inconsistency that exists within the current literature, it is important that research seek to close the gaps created by previous studies. An area that was lacking in the discussion of relationship satisfaction was that of communication. In fact, Forenza et al. (2017) study discussed the importance of

future research to focus on this aspect, as it was reported by foster youth participants to be an area of weakness (Forenza et al., 2017). Broadening this area would ensure that a key aspect of relationships for foster youth is further explored and understood.

Studies Focusing on Abuse and Foster Youth

Because being placed in foster care involves being removed from one's home, it is likely that individuals in the system have been exposed to some type of abuse. Youth in foster care are more likely to have experienced or witnessed maltreatment from a loved one, and are more likely to experience teen dating violence (Forenza et al., 2017). Furthermore, Katz et al (2017) found that 21% of the participants within their study reported being involved in some intimate partner violence at the age of 23 and 24.

This is important because it again shows the impact that modeling has on children, and further exemplifies the likelihood that a cycle of abuse will occur; whether the child becomes the abuser or the one abused. Colman and Widom agreed with these findings and indicated that female abuse victims were less likely to have positive perceptions of their intimate partners and less likely to be faithful within their relationships (Colman & Widom, 2004). While this study was not specifically focused on foster youth, and instead abuse victims in general, it uncovered the importance of dissecting how the data surrounding foster youth differs between males and females. This would ensure that specific gender

differences surrounding this demographic would be uncovered, with a higher probability of accurately determining the effects that being in foster care has on the youth's intimate relationships.

Studies Focusing on Sexual Health and Foster Youth

Sexual health is another area in which studies have shown that foster youth are significantly at risk for poorer outcomes than those biologically reared. Albertson, Moreno, Garrison, Evens, and Ahrens (2017) reported that foster youth are at a 3-14 times increased risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection. Foster youth are also at higher risk due to the lack of an unstable caregiver, as well as, because of the effects that the media has on adolescents (Albertson et al., 2017). On the other hand, Forenza et al. (2017) claims that foster youth that had a positive adult mentor in their life were less likely to be diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection.

These statistics show that a positive adult role model is necessary during these formative years when discussing the topic of sexual health. Because caregivers are often changing in this setting, it is likely that it is difficult for this topic to be addressed successfully. It also explains why foster youth are two to four times more likely to experience teen pregnancy (Albertson et al., 2017). While the literature has listed the important factor of having an adult role model, qualitative data surrounding what information is lacking in sexual health for foster

youth and would be useful in determining how mentors should go about educating on this topic.

Studies Focusing on Mental Health and Foster Youth

Mental health of foster youth is a topic that is largely important when discussing relationships. Katz, Courtney, and Sapiro (2017) claimed that youth in foster care are significantly more likely to struggle with mental health and substance abuse. It was further reported that anxiety was more common in those who have experienced intimate partner violence (Katz et al., 2017). While McLaughlin, Zeanah, Fox, and Nelson (2011) argued that girls in foster care had fewer internalizing disorders due to placement creating a secure attachment.

The differences within the literature show that there are areas that need to be further studied when it comes to the mental health of those within the system. While it is important to further explore McLaughlin, Zeanah, Fox, and Nelson's (2011) concept of foster care creating a secure attachment to a caregiver, it also highlights that the age in which one is placed in foster care plays a large factor in the overall well-being of the child- as this study highlights youth placed in foster care as young children. Katz, Courtney, and Sapiro (2017) provided a more accurate portrayal of the mental health of youth in foster care that have experienced instability. Nonetheless, the limitations of the studies emphasize that it is necessary to determine the age that one was placed in foster care, as well

as, how long there were in a consistent home for, and how many homes they were placed in.

Studies Focusing on the Attachment of Foster Youth

Lastly, attachment is an area that is important when discussing foster youth because it is often the area that is most impacted by being placed outside of one's home. Having multiple care givers throughout childhood, some of which being neglectful, has the ability to make it difficult to attach to multiple caregivers, thus carrying over into adulthood making it difficult to attach to partners. Nowacki and Schoelmerich (2010) indicated that a consistent and rewarding relationship with a caregiver is necessary in forming attachment and is a precondition for mental health. It was further determined that the inability to perform this type of attachment with a primary caregiver increased the possibility of experiencing a psychiatric disorder (McLaughlin et al., 2011).

This is important because the literature connects attachment to caregivers with mental health, which plays a large factor in the overall well-being of an individual, as well as, their relationships. Forenza et al (2017) claimed that foster youth who had formed a secure attachment with their caregiver were also more likely to develop a healthy, intimate peer relationship. While the studies surrounding attachment and foster youth provide meaningful data for how secure attachment plays a role in positive relationships later on, they discuss little on the concept of emotional unavailability or being overly emotionally attached.

Emotional availability is an important idea to discuss when discussing attachment because it can be an extremely polarizing concept in that one can be overly emotionally dependent on a partner because or emotionally unavailable. Utilizing this concept within research will further the understanding of the role that attachment plays in the intimate relationships of foster youth.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Two theories used to conceptualize the ideas in this study are the Social Learning Theory and Attachment Theory. Social Learning Theory, is a theory that was developed by Albert Bandura that essentially explains how observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others influence human learning and behavior (Kytile & Bandura, 1978). This theory helps to explain that the relationships one observes early on in life, shape how they are likely to act in their own relationships. This theory has helped to guide research as it has explained why patterns of abuse and neglect are likely to be carried on to the relationships of foster youth. Much of the literature surrounding foster youth has a large focus on the idea of modeled behavior and the concept that children are the products of their environment.

Attachment theory is a theory that was originally developed by John Bowlby, but later built upon by Mary Ainsworth with 'The Strange Situation' procedure. The Strange Situation is a technique used to assess attachment security within the context of caregiver relationships in children (Ainsworth et al.,

1978). The Strange Situation identified several attachment styles including secure, resistant, and avoidant- and concluded that these attachment styles were the result of early interactions with the mother (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

This theory has helped to guide research that involves foster youth's attachment to caregivers and partners. The absence or presence of secure attachment is largely cited when discussing foster youth and the impact that their caregivers have had on their attachment style. Both of these theories are integral when discussing foster youth and relationships because they both offer a different but similar perspective as to how early experiences and relationships contribute to the behavior that is displayed in relationships in later developmental periods.

Summary

This study explored how relationship satisfaction has an impact on the intimate relationships of former foster youth. Because the literature already began to discuss how foster youth are affected by being in foster care, the study set out to further current research by connecting these disparities specifically to the relationships that they begin to have as adults. Attachment and Social Learning theory helped to guide the study by providing a framework for how responses are analyzed. The study built upon many of the quantitative methods used within the literature and furthered them by adding additional information that was necessary for the presented research question.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study sought out to identify the specific effects that a foster care placement had on the intimate relationships of former foster youth. This chapter explains how this study was conducted using various research methods. The sections discussed will be study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protections of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of the proposed study was to identify and explore the effects that being in foster care has on former foster youth's intimate relationships. While previous research has laid the foundation for the effects that being in foster care has on foster youth, there was still much that this study had to explore regarding the effects that foster care has on intimate relationships; therefore this study was exploratory. For this research project, a quantitative study design was used to address this problem because it allowed for a wider range of data to be collected within the allotted time given, and also made it more accessible to more participants, while protecting participant identities.

The study utilized a survey to collect data from participants. The quantitative, exploratory study was intended to recruit convenient sample to

collect data on demographic information, and various questions surrounding intimate relationships and foster care experience.

Because the survey was a self-reported anonymous questionnaire, a limitation to this design would be that there was no guarantee that the respondents who participated in the survey answered the questions honestly. While a focus group, or interview, may have provided a more detailed account from participants, a questionnaire was a faster tool that had the potential to allow for a wider and more diverse sample.

Sampling

The study utilized a non-probability convenience sampling method. Because of the limited time given to conduct the study, utilization of a convenience sampling method allowed for the primary researcher to have ease in recruiting participants to partake in the study. The participants took part in a self-reported questionnaire accessed through the primary researchers personal social media accounts including Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. There was a maximum of 33 participants required to be at least 18 years old, and have been in a previous foster care placement.

Data Collection and Instruments

Quantitative data was collected through a self-reported questionnaire that consisted of demographic questions, questions surrounding intimate relationships, and questions regarding the foster care experience. The

questionnaire was distributed through the primary researcher's social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok) in order to obtain a larger sample size. The data collected included demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity), relationship satisfaction, years in foster care, and age placed in foster care. The dependent variable studied was foster youth's intimate relationships, while the independent variables included years in foster care, and age placed in foster care. Foster youths' intimate relationships were measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS).

The RAS is an assessment tool that is used to measure relationships and satisfaction consisting of seven multiple choice questions. Response options are measured using Likert scale ranging from 1-5, "poor, average, excellent". The validity and reliability of the scale is also projected within its scores of high internal consistency (.86) and good discriminant validity (Vaughn & Baier 1999).

Utilization of this scale allowed respondents to accurately gauge their responses regarding relationship satisfaction. Foster care experience was measured by years in foster care, and age first placed in the system. Demographic measurements varied, the level of measurement for age was measured with age ranges, both ethnicity and gender were nominal variables.

The questionnaire was created to address the research question, relationship satisfaction and foster care experience. In order to test the reliability of the questions surrounding foster care experience, the primary researcher conducted a pilot test by administering the questionnaire to a smaller sample size

and evaluating the responses. The researcher then made adjustments to the tool, as needed. The questions surrounding relationship satisfaction were included from the RAS and have been previously tested for reliability.

Because a questionnaire is typically easier for individuals to take the time to answer, it was assumed that a larger majority may be willing to participate. Also, constructing a questionnaire that was specific to this research allowed for a better understanding and answer to the proposed research question. The questionnaire was also anonymous, which was intended to encourage participants to respond truthfully without having to worry about whether or not their confidentiality would be breached. However, utilizing a questionnaire may have also been a downfall in that it limited the amount of information that was able to be collected for the research question. There is also a possibility that the respondents did not take the time to thoughtfully respond to the questions due to the fast paced nature of a self-reported questionnaire.

Procedures

A survey was created using Qualtrics, and administered through the primary researchers personal social media accounts including Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. A post was created explaining what the research pertained to, who was eligible to participate, and where the link could be found. This method was the same across all social media accounts, and a link to the survey was placed in the researcher's account bio.

The survey was administered on January 25th and data was collected for approximately one month in order to get the largest sample size. The survey should have taken approximately 5-10 minutes, giving respondents enough time to answer the questions accurately and thoughtfully, while also not being a burden to their time.

Protection of Human Subjects

The greatest advantage to using a survey was the anonymity it provided the respondents. There was no identifying information collected beyond the basic demographic questions asked. Furthermore, each respondent was provided with an informed consent that they must consent to before proceeding. The purpose of the informed consent was to inform the participant about confidentiality, the risks, and a statement informing the participant that they may withdraw from the study at any point; this was also in place to protect the participant, as well as, the primary researcher. The participants were also provided with a debriefing statement explaining the purpose of the study, who the study is aimed for, and any resources that may be needed.

The data collected was completely confidential and only available to the researcher. The data was stored on a locked computer that only the researcher can access, on a file within the researcher's CSUSB google account. All files will be destroyed 3 years after the conclusion of the research.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected in the study was analyzed using SPSS. The information gathered through the self-reported questionnaire was coded numerically, entered electronically, and analyzed statistically. Descriptive statistics and one-way between-groups ANOVA were used to analyze the demographic data of the study including the dependent variable: foster youth's relationship satisfaction, and the independent variables: previous foster care placement, prior relationship experience, age, gender, and ethnicity.

Summary

This study identified and explored the effects that being in foster care has on former foster youth's intimate relationships. A quantitative approach to this research was used to help ensure that a larger sample size could be gathered, while also ensuring anonymity, and timeliness. Utilizing a survey that was constructed to address various aspects of intimate relationships in relation to previous foster care placement sought to help further research within this area, and adequately determine the ways in which foster youth's relationships are impacted by being in foster care.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the general findings of the study. First, the researcher will review the participant demographics and descriptive statistics reported by the participants in this study. Secondly, the researcher will review the data analyzed and discuss the results of the study.

Demographics

In the study, there were a total of 33 participants. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the participants in the study. As shown in table 1, 39.4% of the participants in the study identified themselves as female, 42.4% of the participants in the study identified as male, and 18.2% identified as non-binary or other. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 55 years old. From the sample collected, 87.9% of the participants were between the ages of 18 to 35 years old, and 12.1% of the participants were between the ages of 36-55 years old. When asked what race or ethnicity participants identified with, 30.3% of participants reported to be White, 9.1% reported to be Black, 48.5% reported to be Hispanic, and 12.1% reported to be Asian or other Pacific Islander.

Participants of the study were asked about their foster care experience. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of their experience. When asked if they were ever placed in foster care, 100% of participants reported yes. When asked

about the age that they were placed in foster care, 33.3% reported that they were placed in foster care between the ages of 0 to 5 years old, 45.5% reported between the ages of 6 to 11 years old, and 21.2% reported between the ages of 12 to 17 years old. When asked how many years participants spent in foster care, 60.6% reported between 0 to 5 years, 18.2% reported between 6 to 11 years, and 21.2% reported between 12 to 17 years.

Participants in the study were also asked to report their relationship status. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of their relationship experience. When asked if they were currently in a relationship, 18.2% of the participants reported no, while 81.8% of participants reported yes.

Table 1. Demographics

Variables	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	13	39.4
Male	14	42.4
Prefer not to answer/other	6	18.2
Age		
18-35	29	87.9
36-55	4	12.1
56->	0	0.0
Race or ethnicity		
White	10	30.3
Black	3	9.1
Hispanic	16	48.5
API	4	12.1
Have you ever been placed into foster care?		

No	0	0.0
Yes	33	100
At what age were you placed into foster care?		
0-5	11	33.3
6-11	15	45.5
12-17	7	21.2
How many years did you spend in foster care?		
0-5	20	60.6
6-11	6	18.2
12-17	7	21.2
Are you currently in a relationship?		
No	6	18.2
Yes	27	81.8

Relationship Satisfaction

Descriptive analysis were completed to establish the overall sample's relationship satisfaction using the RAS. The RAS was measured at .85 for reliability. The Means (M) and Standard deviations (SD) for each of the 7 scale items were analyzed. The results presented in Table 2 include: 1) How well does your partner meet your needs? (M=2.79, SD=1.19); 2) In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship? (M=3.18, SD=1.21); 3) How good is your relationship compared to most? (M=3.15, SD=1.15); 4) How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship? (M=3.67, SD=1.16); 5) To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations? (M=2.88, SD=1.17); 6) How

much do you love your partner? (M=3.67, SD=1.27); and 7) How many problems are there in your relationship? (M=2.91, SD=1.21).

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Relationship Assessment Scale Items

Variable	Summed Scores	
	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. How well does your partner meet your needs?	2.79	1.19
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	3.18	1.21
3. How good is your relationship compared to most?	3.15	1.15
4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?*	3.67	1.16
5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	2.88	1.17
6. How much do you love your partner?	3.67	1.27
7. How many problems are there in your relationship?*	2.91	1.21

*This item was reverse coded when calculating the overall scale score

A one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of the age placed in foster care on relationship satisfaction, as measured by The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). Participants were divided into three groups according to their age placed in foster care (Group 1: 0-5; Group 2: 6-11; Group 3: 12-17). There was no significant difference in RAS scores for the three age groups: $F(2, 30) = 1.03, p = .37$. The findings are presented in Table 3.

A one-way between-groups ANOVA was also conducted to explore the impact of the number of years spent in foster care on relationship satisfaction, as measured by The RAS. Participants were divided into three groups according to the number of years they spent placed in foster care (Group 1: 0-5; Group 2: 6-11; Group 3: 12-17). There was no significant difference in RAS scores for the three groups: $F(2, 30) = .10, p = .90$. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Age Placed in Foster Care and Amount of Years Spent in Foster Care on RAS

Variable	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Age placed in foster care			
0-5	11	20.27	5.37
6-11	15	22.73	5.35
12-17	7	24.28	8.26
Amount of years spent in foster care			
0-5	20	22.60	5.72
6-11	6	21.33	4.68
12-17	7	22.00	8.52

Conclusion

This chapter reported the demographics of the participants in this study and the significant findings from the data collection. The findings show that no matter the age placed in foster care, and the years spent in foster care of the participants studied, no significance was found in relation to relationship satisfaction.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the data collected from the surveys of former foster youth. The significant findings of the study will be explained, as well as, the extent to which they answer the research question. The study's limitations and the researchers recommendations for social work practice and policy will also be discussed.

Discussion

The literature suggested that former foster youth are more likely to report lower levels of marital satisfaction and struggle to develop high quality relationships (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). Alternatively, DeLuca Bishop et al (2019) also suggested that being in foster care had little impact on the rate of romantic involvement and quality of relationships. Prior research further suggested that individuals who were exposed to violence in the home prior to entering foster care were more likely to be involved in violent partnerships, thus shifting their view on what would be considered a satisfying relationship (Katz et al., 2017). In this study, the research question sought to address: What are the effects that being in foster care has on the intimate relationships of foster youth? The results of the study suggest that previous foster care experience, measured by age placed in foster care, and the amount of years spent in foster care, have

no significant impact on former foster youth's relationship satisfaction. While these findings align with some of the previously cited literature, they reject the researcher's initial hypothesis that prior foster care experience plays a role in former foster youth's relationship satisfaction. Because the study utilized age placed in foster care and years spent in foster care to measure foster care experience, it is likely that the experience reported did not accurately illustrate the actual experience of being in foster care and the various factors that could impact their current intimate relationships (abuse, attachment, mental health).

There could be various reasons for why this is the case, first being what the individual's perception of what a satisfying relationship is to them. As discussed in the literature, individuals often model the behavior that they are exposed to at a young age; and because of this values and beliefs are often formed based on individuals' lived experiences. This can make studying relationship satisfaction difficult because what would be considered a satisfying versus unsatisfying relationship for one person could be the opposite for another, based on their own perception and experience, thus affecting the results.

Lastly, this study highlights the resiliency of former foster youth. According to the study, over half of the participants were placed into foster care between the ages of 0-11. As discussed prior, these early years are imperative when it comes to relationship formation for individuals. Based on the results, the negative experience endured by the participants had no significant impact on their current intimate relationships. This illustrates that foster youth have the ability to

overcome adverse childhood experiences while building and maintaining satisfying intimate relationships.

Limitations

The limitations within this study include utilization of a survey, limited sample size, and requirements of participation. While conducting a survey allowed for the possibility of connecting to a greater number of participants and ensuring the anonymity of participants; it limited the study in that the questions included did not allow for further elaboration from the participants. A qualitative study may have provided more insight on the participants prior foster care experience, relationship experience, and relationship satisfaction.

The sample size of the study was also relatively small. Because the study only recruited 33 participants, the population represented within the study, while diverse, cannot realistically determine whether or not foster care experience has an impact on relationship satisfaction, the way that a larger sample size could have. Lastly, the participants of the study were required to have been previously placed in foster care. It would have been beneficial to have allowed those who were biologically-reared to participate in the study, in order to compare the results of both groups for a more accurate depiction of the research question.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research can build upon the findings of this study by interviewing participants, or including open-ended questions related to their foster care

experience, or relationship satisfaction. This would allow researchers and participants to explore the implications of their detailed, lived experiences; creating a discussion that would better explore the specific needs of foster youth, surrounding intimate relationships.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy

While this study suggested that previous foster care experience had no significant impact on the relationship satisfaction of former foster youth, it should not negate the fact that this population still requires adequate nurturing and guidance when it comes to relationship building. This study can be informative to professionals in the field because it highlights that for this particular group of participants, adverse childhood experiences had no significant impact on their relationships as adults. This information allows for professionals to continue creating resources, such as, mentor groups, classes, and therapy for foster youth that encourage relationship building, while utilizing techniques that are already deemed effective. It also highlights the importance of shared meaning when it comes to relationship satisfaction, and how important it is to have an understanding of the behavior that is being modeled to children that are in foster care. Lastly, because this study facilitated conflicting results from previous studies, it encourages future researchers and professionals to continue exploring the effects that being in foster care has on former foster youth and their relationships.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact that being in foster care had on the intimate relationships of former foster youth. The study found that foster care experience had no impact on the relationship satisfaction of former foster youth. The study encountered limitations such as utilization of a survey, low participation, and limiting participants to only those with prior foster care experience. This study identified that future research can build upon this study by utilizing qualitative research methods, as well as, a larger sample size to acquire results that better explore the specific needs of foster youth; while also continuing to create and utilize current, effective resources.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY

The Effects that being in Foster Care has on Foster Youth's Intimate Relationships

1. What is your gender?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-Binary
2. What is your age?
 - a. 18-35
 - b. 36-55
 - c. 56+
3. What is your race or ethnicity? _____
4. Have you ever been placed into foster care?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes
5. At what age were you placed into foster care?
 - a. 0-5
 - b. 6-11
 - c. 12-17
6. How many years did you spend in foster care?
 - a. 0-5
 - b. 6-11

- c. 12-17
7. Are you currently in a relationship?
- a. No
 - b. Yes
8. How well does your partner meet your needs?
- a. Poorly
 - b. Slightly well
 - c. Average
 - d. Well
 - e. Extremely well
9. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
- a. Unsatisfied
 - b. Somewhat dissatisfied
 - c. Average
 - d. Somewhat satisfied
 - e. Extremely satisfied
10. How good is your relationship compared to most?
- a. Poor
 - b. Somewhat bad
 - c. Average
 - d. Somewhat good
 - e. Excellent

11. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?

- a. Never
- b. Sometimes
- c. Average
- d. Most of the time
- e. Very often

12. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations:

- a. Hardly at all
- b. Little
- c. Average
- d. Mostly
- e. Completely

13. How much do you love your partner?

- a. Not much
- b. A little
- c. Average
- d. A lot
- e. Very much

14. How many problems are there in your relationship?

- a. Very few
- b. Some
- c. Average

d. A lot

e. Very many

Cited: Vaughn, M., & Baier, M. (1999). Reliability and validity of the Relationship Assessment Scale. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 27, 137-147.

10.1080/019261899262023.

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the effects that being in foster care has on foster youth's intimate relationships. The study is being conducted by Britney Smith, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Yawen Li, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to identify the role that being in foster care has on the ability to create and sustain healthy intimate relationships for former foster youth.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked a few questions surrounding intimate relationships, foster care experience, and some demographics.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary and anonymous. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential, there will be no identifiable information shared.

DURATION: It will take 5-10 minutes to complete the survey.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Li at (909-537-5184).

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library Scholar Works database at California State University after June 2022.

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

_____ Place an X mark
here Date

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



December 24, 2021

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2022-82

Yawen Li BRITNEY SMITH
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
[San Bernardino, California 92407](#)

Dear Yawen Li BRITNEY SMITH:

Your application to use human subjects, titled “The Effects that Being in Foster Care has on Foster Youth's Intimate Relationships” has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements

may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- **Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.**
- **Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.**
- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-82 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

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