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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FOSTER CARE EMANCIPATION
IN AN ADULT POPULATION: HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN

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

Elizabeth Waldon .

Debbie Ann Davis .

June 2001

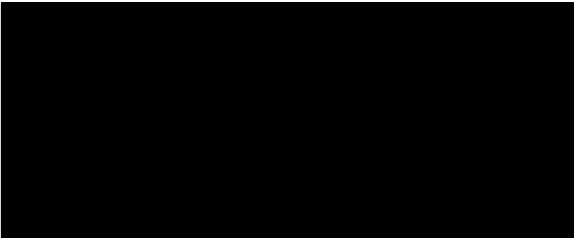
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Approved by:


Rachel Estrada, Faculty Supervisor
Social Work


Date

6/10/01


Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the foster care emancipation experiences of adults who had "aged out" of the foster care system. A snowball sample consisting of twenty-four adults who emancipated from foster care was comprised. A semi-structured interview instrument with open-ended questions was conducted. Ericksonian development and attachment theories informed and guided the study.

This study found that foster care had negative impacts on participants' ability to form attachments while in foster care and in their adult relationships. Additionally the findings supported the hypothesis that the foster care system does not adequately prepare individuals for emancipation.

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Debbie Ann Davis

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Elizabeth Waldon

DEDICATION

To all the participants in this study for their courage in sharing difficult times and their willingness to reach out to youths who are or will be in the foster care system.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Transition from Adolescents to Adulthood

The adolescent years are acknowledged as a crucial time of growth, differentiation and preparation for adulthood. Teens must prepare for adulthood by becoming proficient in many areas including academics, social skills, budgeting, and employment acquisition. This time of development is considered to be one of the most difficult periods of life adjustment. It is the transition between childhood and adulthood. Most children vacillate between dependency and independence as they develop adult identities and learn coping skills of responsible adults. In the most optimum family circumstances and individual adjustment, adolescence is often a time of turmoil, conflict and crisis. Once the young adult leaves home, he or she must be able to apply the skills learned in adolescence in order to survive in the world.

Foster Care Youth and Emancipation

This pivotal period of human development becomes significantly more problematic if the adolescent is a foster child. The foster child must face this developmental stage with the added burden of knowing that they do not have a family system to fall back on. Foster children enter adolescence and young adulthood with the personal history and attendant trauma of neglect and/or abuse. As the adolescent prepares to emancipate, once again, families of origin systems are missing or insufficient to provide needed emotional, physical, and/or financial support.

Foster care adolescents have survived the loss of their original homes and they must now face the loss of their foster homes as they approach emancipation. As they encounter a second significant loss of home, the burden is now on them to find and maintain a new home. The same child welfare system, which initially intervened into their lives and removed them from harm's way and has sheltered, feed, and clothed them, ceases to provide care when these youths' become legal adults.

Problem Focus

Across America young adults well beyond the emancipation age of eighteen are returning to their parent's homes. Due to the high costs of shelter and basic costs of living, many chose to live with their parents. In some ethnic cultures, adolescents may be expected to live at home until they marry. In many middle class and wealthy homes young adults remain financially dependent on their parents while they pursue college degrees and profitable careers.

The perception of the age range of young adulthood has also changed in America. The upper range of adolescence and parental dependence has been noted to be as high as twenty-five years of age. Realities of necessary educational attainment have also changed. A high school diploma simply does not guarantee a decent living wage any longer. A four-year college degree is the prerequisite for many entry-level jobs with a future.

There have been numerous studies, which have identified negative adult outcomes of youth emancipated from foster care. However, very few studies focused on the interconnection of human development as the genesis of the problem. This exploratory study focused on the

emancipation of foster care youth as perceived by adults who "aged out" of the foster care system. The research sought to comprehend the dilemma faced by emancipated foster care youth from human development, and attachment theoretical models. The impact of trauma, loss of their family of origin, and experiences in foster care were explored.

Literature Review

Currently, there are 500,000 children throughout the United States in foster care (Nixon 1999). Approximately 20,000 adolescents age-out-of foster care each year (Stevens, 2000; Fagnoni, 1999; Nixon, 1999; Wiggins, 1999, and Mech, Ludy-Dobson, & Spannhulsemann, 1994). According to Nixon (1999), adolescents make up thirty percent of all out-of-home placements in the nation's foster care system.

Research has indicated problematic sequelae for adults who have emancipated from the foster care system (Stevens, 2000; Fagnoni, 1999; McMillen, 1999; Mech & Che-Man Fung, 1999; Nixon, 1999; Wiggins, 1999; Benedick & Somerfield, 1996; and Barth, 1990). Various studies have indicated an increased risk for homelessness

(Pilivan, Sosin, Westerfelt, & Matsueda, 1992). Fangnoni (1999) and Wiggings (1999) stated twenty-five percent of emancipated foster youth have been homeless for one night or more. A 1990 study of emancipated foster youth revealed that thirty-three percent of subjects spent their first night out of foster care, on the street (Barth, 1990).

Many former foster care youth start adulthood in poverty. A study conducted by Benedick & Somerfield (1996), found forty-five percent of their subjects earned less than \$10,000 a year. A New York study of emancipated foster youth, stated thirty-three percent were on AFDC or general relief (Barth, 1990, Colca & Colca, 1996).

According to the Westat longitudinal study of 1991, and other research, a factor contributing to former foster youth's poverty is that less than fifty percent had their high school diploma (Stevens, 2000; Fagnoni, 1990; McMillen, 1999; Nixon, 1999; Scannapieco, Schagrin, & Scannapieco, 1995; and Barth, 1990). Another factor was that these youth had no job training or work experience before leaving foster care (Fagnoni, 1999; McMillen, 1999; Mech & Che-Man Fung, 1999, Nixon, 1999; Wiggings, 1999; and Barth, 1990). Aged-out-youth have had trouble

with the law (Fagnoni, 1999; Wiggins, 1999; Colca & Colca, 1996; and Westat 1991). Colca and Colca (1996) found sixty-percent of inmates in prison had been in foster care. Stevens (2000) found twenty-five percent of males and fifteen percent of females who aged-out of foster care had been in prison. In Barth's 1990 study, thirty-one percent of the sample had been arrested and twenty-six percent had been in jail or prison. Barth also found that fifty-six percent of study participants had used street drugs since leaving foster care. Conversely, various studies indicate about one-third of these youths had been victims of violent crimes after leaving foster care (Nixon, 1999 and Barth, 1990).

Many emancipated foster care youth do not know basic living skills such as how to use a checkbook, cook, do laundry, budget, and take care of personal hygiene (Fagnoni, 1999; Courtney, Piliavin, and Gorgan-Kaylor, 2000 and Barth, 1990). Research found sixty-three percent of emancipated youth felt social workers did not help them transition to independent living (Courtney, Piliavin, & Gorgan-Kaylor, 2000 and Barth, 1990). Nixon (1999) stated emancipated youth felt thrown-out by the system.

In order to understand the dilemmas faced by this population, an understanding of human development is essential. This study was guided by the following theoretical models (1) the human development model as identified by Eric Erickson and (2) Attachment theory.

According to Erickson, the task of the teenager is to develop an identity as opposed to role confusion (Erickson, 1950; Erickson, Erickson, & Kivnick, 1986). As the teenager navigates this tumultuous psychosocial period of development, he or she must strive to form a social identity and prepare for adult life. This model asserts that each stage of development revisits unresolved conflicts of former stages (ibid. p. 40).

Key to the successful resolution of this developmental period is the successful resolution of previous developmental periods. According to Herman (1997), "Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor's lifecycle" (p. 211).

Various theories account for the basis of child abuse and neglect (Farrington, 1986; Zimron, 1984; & Tzeng, Jackson, & Karlson, 1991). No one theory accounts

for all cases of abuse. However, it is an indisputable fact that whatever the cause of child abuse and neglect, children who suffer from it enter into the child welfare system having exited environments where their needs for safety, protection, and nurturance have not been met.

Most children enter the foster care system prior to adolescence with the majority currently in care during their adolescent years (Barth, 1990; Hornby, 1981). Many endure multiple placements and a significant number "grow up" in foster care (Barth, R., 1990).

In light of Erickson's developmental theory, it is readily evident that adolescents who emancipate from foster care have enormous difficulties confronting them. They have been forced to forge their identities with the specter of personal histories marred by dysfunctional family systems and subsequent abuse or neglect. They are challenged with the task of developing an identity while at the same time facing their own family and personal histories.

Although the adolescent may find him or herself removed from family of origin, the experiences within that family are still with him/her. Even in the absence of the abusive or neglectful parents, the teen is still

in a relationship with the parents. The child may not see the parent at all, but her relationship is still there. The child may be related to the absent biological parents via a variety of emotions including anger, regret, remorse, hate, or love. The child may also have regular or tenuous reminders of the severed parent-child relationship. Some biological parents do remain in touch with their offspring through visits, gifts or cards. Most, however, do not. Some foster children are simply abandoned physically and emotionally.

Bowlby's work on attachment theory is particularly applicable to youths emancipated from foster care. According to the attachment theory model, as children bond and develop attachments to their parents or primary caregiver, they establish a pattern of human relatedness which impacts their personalities and the manner in which they engage the world (Bowlby, 1988). Disordered patterns of attachment are likely to develop in situations of abuse and neglect. These patterns influence how that child will communicate, relate to others, and perceive their existence. The communication patterns developed during the attachment period tend to be life-long in nature and are difficult to alter. The attachment

patterns learned in infancy and childhood influence how the child will function in new relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

Purpose and Design of the Study

This study was designed to add to the growing body of knowledge of foster care emancipation experiences. The study consisted of adults over the age of eighteen that entered legal adulthood as emancipated foster care dependants of the juvenile court. The sample size included twenty-four mixed gender participants. A snowball sample was utilized to identify participants.

For a system of care to be effective in helping emancipated foster youth successfully adjust to adulthood, both the service provider's knowledge and the former foster care population experiences need to be understood. This study focused on foster care wards using a post-positivist, qualitative research design. The vehicle for data collection was structured, face-to-face interviews. The guiding question of the study was the foster care emancipation experiences and what services helped or hindered their success. Participants were also asked about their issues of trust and relationships in foster care and as adults.

Sampling

A snowball sample was generated from four known former foster care dependants who are known to the researchers. Persons who agreed to participate were asked to refer other former foster care dependants to the study. Instructors and social workers that worked with the study population were asked to refer possible participant.

In order to participate in this study, participants met the minimum age requirements of eighteen and had emancipated from a formal foster care placement. The rationale for these criteria evolved when the literature review revealed that there was a limited body of first hand accounts of individuals leaving foster care at emancipation.

Because the participants were not easily known or accessible, an exploratory qualitative research design was chosen. Through the use of a non-probability, snowball sample, a database of twenty-four participants was obtained.

The researchers conducted the face-to-face interviews and were guided by the following principles: (1) only ask questions stated on the questionnaire, (2)

the posture of the interviewer encouraged disclosure by the participants, (3) the interviewer did not react to answers given, (4) clarification of responses were asked for when needed, and (5) answers were read back to the participants to insure accuracy.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data for this qualitative study was collected utilizing a structured interview schedule. The instrument was designed to elicit self-reported data concerning five areas of focus. Section one addressed demographic information including current age, gender, marital status, number of children, and educational attainment. Section two addressed participant's experience in foster care covering the age of admission and length of time in foster care, the stability of the participants' placement, parental visits, counseling experiences, and the interviewee's perceptions of the foster care experience. Section three collected data on preparation for emancipation and relationships. Section four of the interview schedule focused on adult outcomes including employment status, homelessness, and relationship difficulties. In the final section, participants were

asked what services are needed to assist current foster youths facing emancipation.

Procedure

The purpose of this study was to investigate trends in the self-reports of post-adolescent foster care clients.

The research was designed within a post-positivist paradigm. As participants were added to the snowball sample, contact was made by phone or E Mail to arrange a date, time, and place for the interview. On the interview date, the researcher presented themselves at the time and place agreed upon.

The interviews were conducted in a comfortable setting providing privacy for the respondents with a single research person. At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the study was explained and the participants were asked to read and sign the informed consent form (Appendix A).

The interviewer then asked each participant individually to select a legal sized white envelope from a stack of similar envelopes. The envelopes were numbered from one to seventy. The number they chose was written on

the informed consent form and on the first page of the instrument.

Permission to audiotape for the purpose of accuracy was obtained. Each participant was informed in writing and orally that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time including during the actual interview and may withdraw from the study at any time thereafter. Participants were informed that the audiotapes were only for the purposes of transcribing by the researcher and would be destroyed afterward.

If the participant agreed to participate and have the interview audio taped, the interviewer turned on the audio recording device. The interviewer asked the interviewee to acknowledge their understanding of the consent form and their permission to audiotape the interview. The researcher then read the interview questions to the participants and allowed time for answers.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked to place the recorded tape in the envelope selected, seal the envelope, and place it into a large manila envelope. This was for the purpose of identification of the

interview. This procedure guaranteed the confidentiality of each participant.

At the conclusion of the interview the participant was read and given a written copy of the debriefing form (Appendix B). The participants were then told how they could contact the researchers and how to obtain a copy of the results. In addition, they were given resources for counseling services in case the study questions and/or subject matter caused them any concern.

The recorded tapes were transcribed and checked for accuracy. After transcription, each tape was removed from its case and the tape was cut into small pieces. The pieces were then put in the garbage.

Data Analysis

The content of the interviews were analyzed for the identification of trends and differences among the participants. Respondent's answers to each section's question were combined into one document. Central trends were noted and comprise the body of the findings portion of this research report.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

Demographics

The study sample consisted of twenty-four participants with an age range between eighteen and fifty-two years old. Of this population, twenty-three were females and one was male. There were thirteen Caucasian subjects, three African American, two who identified themselves as Hispanic, three as Latina, one Native American, one Mexican American, and one Asian American.

Current marital status indicated that twenty of the respondents were single, one was married, one separated, one divorced, and one was widowed.

Self-reports of siblings ranged between one to eight siblings. Out of twenty-four respondents, one participant stated that their sibling was not placed in foster care.

Thirteen participants had children and eleven did not. The range in number of reported children was from one child to four children. The children's ages ranged from six months to over eighteen years of age. One

participant reported being the parent of a deceased child.

Educational attainment was found to range from seventh grade to completion of a master's degree. Nine participants did not earn a high school degree, seven received a high school diploma, four had some college or trade/vocational training, three completed a bachelor's degree, and one individual earned a master's degree. Areas of study included Business, Communications, Cosmetology, English, Investigations, Law Enforcement, Social Work, and Sociology.

The age range reported by participants when they first entered foster care was between two and sixteen years of age. Seventeen percent entered foster care between the ages of two and five, fifty percent entered between the ages of seven and twelve years old. Thirty-three percent entered foster care between thirteen and sixteen years old.

The following is a breakdown of the reasons participants stated they were placed in foster care. Some participants provided multiple reasons.

Table 1. Reasons for Placement

| Reason for Removal | Number of Respondents |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Domestic violence | 1 |
| Physical abuse | 10 |
| Emotional abuse | 3 |
| Sexual abuse | 11 |
| Neglect | 12 |
| Incapacity of parent | 1 |
| Parental drug use | 1 |
| Parents died | 1 |

The length of stay in foster care ranged from six months to seventeen years. Five of the participants stayed in foster care between six months and four years, fourteen between five and eleven years of age, and four between thirteen and seventeen years.

One participant reported no placement in a foster home. They were directly placed into a group home. Six of the participants lived in a group home for some of the time they were in foster care. Two individuals experienced only one group home placement, three experienced two group home placements and one stated they had fifteen group home placements. Foster home placements ranged from zero (one participant went directly into a group home) to twenty different placements. Fourteen of the participants experienced between one and five foster

homes, eight experienced between six and nine foster homes and one participant experienced twenty foster home placements.

Experiences in Foster Care

In this section, participants were asked questions concerning their experiences in foster care, the experience of moving from one foster home to another, parental visitation, and counseling experiences they had while in foster care.

A predominant trend for the overall experience of foster care was the perception of its difficulty. Former foster care children used words such hard, scary, hated, stressful, hurtful, and prison to describe it. They also spoke about feelings of being unwanted, being treated differently from others, and feeling different from other children. Not trusting others was a central theme. One participant described their foster care experience and the ability to trust as, "It was awful. Number one, I couldn't stay in any home to learn to trust with one person or you know, to learn to trust a person period, 'cause I was switched from home to home. No one really helped me with the trust issues." Another participant

described her experiences in foster care and trust issues as, "Then, when I would start to trust someone, like one family I started calling them mom and dad, I got attached to them . . . and she kicked me out . . ." One former foster child summed up their experience by stating, "I felt like nobody wanted me and I didn't want anyone."

Many in the study related feelings of being unwanted in statements like (1) it made you feel unwanted, (2) there was no bonding or affection, (3) people don't care, and (4) I was teased by the family's children and the kids at school and even the adults treated me like I was different". One participant said, "I wanted to die sometimes". Several of the participants described themselves as objects: (1) I felt like trash, (2) I felt like a baseball, (3) I felt like crap, and (4) I felt like a ping-pong ball.

Others in the study linked their feelings of rejection and lack of warmth to money and possessions: (1) they were just in it for the money, (2) the natural children got our money, (3) Christmas, we didn't get anything and everyone else did [referring to the biological children of the foster parents].

Other experiences shared by participants included:

- (1) they'd [foster parents] left us at home while their family went out,
- (2) you get treated really bad, like we were all money.
- (3) when we graduated from High school, the money stopped and she (the foster mother) kicked us out,
- (4) it was not like what a real home should be like,
- (5) it made me depressed. I wanted to die all the time,
- (6) I never had any clothes to call my own or any personal things,
- (7) things got stolen and the foster parents didn't allow me to ever take anything with me when I left, and
- (8) I think it was worse than what I had at my real home. They [referring to her biological parents] were not perfect, but they were mine.

Eighty-three percent of the participants reported no visitation with their parents while in foster care. The participants who reported visiting with their parents reported problems with that experience. One participant described her visits with her mother, "I remember being angry with her. I wanted to leave there (the group Home). I wanted to take it all back [the disclosure of sexual abuse]. At 16 my heart had gotten so hard against her. She brought me some books and dresses. We never talked about the issue." Another participant echoed mixed

feelings, "Fun, yet sad. I never could understand why I had to go back to the foster care. My feelings were never part of the consideration". Still another participant shared, "She [her mother] could only see me when she was on good behavior".

Eighteen participants received some form of counseling. Six participants did not. Three stated that they felt counseling would have been helpful, two felt it would not have helped and one participant had no opinion.

Although the hope for counseling was to help the foster children, according to the participants who received counseling, most often it was not helpful. Counselors were often changed which interfered with the formation of a therapeutic alliance and added to a sense of abandonment. One former foster child said, "They told me to spill my guts and then they would change the therapist. That upset me. Do they think kids are footballs?" Others claimed they experienced harmful and judgmental clinicians who compounded the problems of the foster youth, "Some counselors said, "Why do you do that?" They used words like 'Anti-social' and 'Horrible.' It was prejudging from the start. I was even told that I

was going because I was so 'bad'. I was the one who was to blame."

Leaving Foster Care

In this section, participants were asked what preparation they had for leaving foster care, what was helpful and not helpful about their preparation and how they would change the emancipation process. They were also asked if their foster care experience had an effect on their ability to be close to others.

Forty-one percent of the study group participated in an independent living program (ILP) before moving out of foster care. Of this group, sixty-eight percent learned of the ILP from other foster youths and not service providers.

Twenty-two percent received help in preparing to leave foster care through a teacher, mentor, or another adult figure. Thirty-seven percent stated they received no preparation for leaving the foster care system.

Of the respondents who received help in their emancipation process, the most helpful thing was that the ILP program helped them save money and/or helped pay rent on an apartment. The majority of individuals who received

services from the ILP, stated that staff and counseling made a positive difference in their lives.

When the participants who received help in emancipating from foster care were asked what was not helpful, only two types of answers were given. The most frequent answer was that their social worker was not helpful. The second type of response was that, "The ILP. . .kind of lowers the standards. . .to tell kids it's okay to just survive."

The central trend, when asked how they would change the emancipation process, was that they needed more time to prepare for living on their own. One person shared that a foster teen cannot join an Independent Living Program (ILP) until they are sixteen. This individual said that the program should be open to youths when they start their freshman year in high school. Regarding a longer time to prepare for independent living, a participant stated, "I would change that they threw you out when you are 18. An 18 year old isn't equipped to live on their own." Better screening and training of foster parents was the second most common response. Thirteen percent of the respondents stated that the foster care system should be "thrown out." They suggested

that family intervention occur before a child is removed from their home.

When asked if the foster care experience had an impact on their ability to be close to others, sixty-seven percent said yes and thirty-three percent said no. The central trends for the individuals who said yes listed issues of trust, feeling rejected, and a lack of permanency. One participant stated, "You look at everyone as temporary." While participants spoke of trust issues indirectly, forty-two stated it was the experiences in foster care that taught them not to trust people. A participant summed up most trust issue responses when they said, "Look around me and see how many failed relationships I've had, both in friendships and intimate partners. I believe they are out to sell me out or get something from me."

Adult Outcomes

This Section of the project elicited participants' experiences about life after foster care, their adult relationships, and the over all impact of the foster care system on their adult lives.

The general trend for employment was that keeping a job was difficult. The majority of jobs paid minimum wage and were in the fast food or service industry. One participant's statement summed up the experiences of the majority of the respondents, "I've have too many jobs to tell about. None were good. I get jobs and then get fired for being late and stuff like that. I have a hard time keeping them."

Seventy-five percent of people interviewed were homeless at some point after leaving foster care. When homeless, they lived on the streets, at homeless shelters, in abandon buildings, in parks, and/or open fields. The average period of homelessness was a year, and the range was from six months to two years.

For those participants who experienced homelessness, all stated their homelessness could have been prevented if they had a family, emotional support, and a good job. One person suggested there needs to be, "A place for people when they get out of foster care at least for a little while, like a dorm when you go to college."

A central trend for most participants was not being able to trust others. A participant shared, "I don't trust very easy. I don't have many friends." Another

participant stated, "I really don't trust anybody. I'll give them a chance, but I don't trust them." Two extreme answers about adult relationships were, "Violent and twisted" and "I'm angry at people. I think about jacking them."

A trend for women in the study was an inability to trust men. One woman said, "With men, I love them and leave them." Another participant stated most of her relationships with men have been abusive. She added, "I feel intimidated by men because of my experience."

Thirteen percent were able to find meaningful adult relationships. One individual found a partner who, "Turned my life around. I was anorexic. He got me eating food again, you know, regularly . . ." Another participant stated, "They (relationships) are pretty good. I don't complain. Right now I am working on me."

Overall, the participants experienced the foster care system as harmful. Their experiences in foster care reinforced feelings of low self worth and self-esteem. Examples of responses included, "In the beginning, it turned me to drugs." Another said, "I saw the falseness of people who could be one way, you know, the face they

put on for the social worker. They were just in it for the money.”

For some participants, the experience in foster care made them more determined to succeed in life. One individual stated, “Because of the way people judged me, said I wouldn’t be anything, because I was in foster care or didn’t have a family, it makes me try harder.” Another person shared, “My experience in the system made me stronger . . . I was the only sibling who made it.”

Services Needed by Youth Emancipating from Foster Care

This section of the research instrument was designed to provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on what services are needed by youths to successfully emancipate, advice they thought was important for young people still in the system, and opportunities to tell professionals what youths in foster care need.

Participants were also asked their ideas of what a successful Independent Living Program (ILP) would offer and an opportunity to share any last thoughts or comments before the interview concluded.

Several themes emerged regarding what foster youth need to successfully emancipate from care. Those who were participating in an Independent Living Program (ILP) found the program necessary to being a successful adult. "The ILP program helped me find this apartment." Some participants focused on life skills, such as budgeting, cooking, and job interview skills.

Many stated the importance of getting an education or career. One participant reflected, "I think foster care should help teens get a stable job. The foster homes aren't stable. At least if you have a job, that part of your life would be stable." Many stated that finishing high school was necessary to having a successful life. One person stated, "Finish school or life is finished."

The most frequent responses were about emotional needs. Most respondents expressed the theme of being cared about, someone to talk with, someone that loves you, having a loving home, and hope. One participant stated, "People who care. You can't find many people who care. That's what they need, someone who cares."

In the area of advice to current foster youth, the central trend was not to give up, to stay in school, and to be strong. Many participants expressed that they cared

about youths aging out of the system. One person said, "I would tell them that there are lots of us and to try not to take all that has happened as personal. It seems personal and it feels personal, but try and not take it that way. That's the reason I survived."

The participants acknowledged that they were on their own in their adult life. A primary trend on how they coped with not having a family to lean on was, "If you don't have a real family to help you grow-up, pick somebody you want to be like and start to act like them." Others offered, "Make a choice to do good things every day," Another point made by the participants was a tribute to their resiliency. "Don't sell yourself short," and, in reference to life, "Anybody can get through it especially people like us."

Participants were clear that their experience with professionals, especially social workers had not been helpful. The primary theme was that professionals did not listen to them and did not treat them with respect and dignity. In speaking about professionals, a participant stated, "You're there to help people, not just put them down. Try to give 110% on your job . . .just give these kids everything you got to offer. Let them know and feel

you care." Many participants shared, "Treat all these kids with respect. Give them that dignity. Some kids are hard, but they've been hurt." Another shared, "Give all the kids a chance, not just the ones you think will make it." One participant wanted professionals to, "Put yourself in these kids situation. Try to think about what they are going through. Don't be so hard on them. Give them a lot of support."

Each participant was asked, if they created an Independent Living Program, what would it look like. The trends were in three areas; emotional support, learning life skills, meaningful employment, and the basics needed in starting an adult life.

Most stated their program would have a caring, supportive atmosphere and staff. To the participants, it would be a place they would be accepted and welcomed. Everyone who came to the program would be treated with dignity and respect. One participant said, "I would try and structure it a lot in making it loveable, clean, and friendly." Another said, " It would be bright and cheerful. The home would be welcoming. I would make it a place they could come and freely talk."

The majority of participants' answers reflected their need for higher education and job development. Several individuals stated their program would have field trips to colleges and job sites to give youths exposure to various opportunities. About the importance of education, one person said, "If they didn't have their GED, to get into my program, they would have to be getting it. They can't get a good job until they at least have a GED."

More than eighty percent of participants said their program would provide basic essentials such as food, clothing, furnishings for an apartment, affordable housing, bus tickets, or a car. One person stated, "I'd have a matching savings program toward furniture, clothes and a car."

At the end of the interview, participants were asked if there was anything else they wished to add. Thirty-nine percent of participants said they had nothing else to add. Twenty-five percent said they hoped this research project would be helpful in making things better for the children in foster care. A participant shared their wish for every foster child, "I sure wish that every child in foster care could head out into the world with the

feeling that they are beautiful on the outside and valued for their thoughts on the inside. These things are not taught, they are learned by being raised in a home and not an environment."

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

Discussion of the Research

Erik Erikson's theory of human development provides the framework for this discussion. The most prevalent general trends observed in the statements of the participants concern issues of trust, insecurity and feeling rejected. Trust, security, and acceptance or absence of rejection) are the cornerstones of Erikson's model of human development and the quintessential elements of healthy human development. They are in fact essential to this study, designed to ascertain general trends concerning the experiences the participants had in foster care and emancipation. However, prior to the removal from their biological homes and entry into foster care each of the participants suffered some sort of child abuse and or neglect. Such an event in a child's life often leads to trauma with its attendant aftereffects. These events hinder and may halt normal child development. Instead of maintaining and building upon the successful completion of previous stages the child must

put all their energy into survival. They become as one participant put it, "A stranger in an enemy land."

Erikson (1959), stated adolescents need a sense of sameness and continuity to help them master the stage of Identity verses Role confusion. Most participants stated that being moved from one foster care place to another was difficult. Many stated it was hard, scary, that they felt unwanted, rejected, and/or depressed. Some felt foster care did not give them a sense of permanency, stability, or consistence in their lives.

Erikson (1959) also stated that how successful one is in the next stage depends on mastery of the previous stage. This may explain why so many of the participants were having difficulty with relationships with others as young adults.

Another significant finding was that eighty-three percent of the participants had no contact with their biological family after being placed in foster care. Many individuals in the study were still looking for a loving and caring family. When a child in foster care has the opportunity to visit with their biological parents, the fantasy of loving, capable parents is shattered and the youth can begin to deal with that reality (Hineky, 2001).

Therefore, the youths in this study were not able to begin dealing with making a life for themselves until they were close to the age of majority.

Foster youth did not have the opportunity to look at their family of origin and begin the process of trying on various identities that create their biological and psychological identity. The role models they had were people who were paid to take care of them and in a living situation with other foster children. Additionally, they did not have the possibility of guidance from grandparents, uncles or aunts that are naturally part of a family system. This may have made it difficult for the participants to form their own sense of self.

Another issue that may have hindered the formation of a strong sense of self was the realization by the youth that they could be placed in another home without notice. If they acted out they risked being moved. If they attempted assertive behaviors, they risked being moved.

It could be assumed that some participants chose to behave as the foster parents wished them to behave. This compliant behavior may have limited their ability to try out different identities. Always, in the back of their

mind was the knowledge that the foster home was temporary.

In this study, forty-one percent of the participants received Independent Living Program (ILP) services. Of that forty-one percent, sixty-eight percent learned about ILPs from other friends. This statistic is of concern. Social workers are to educate foster care wards' of the ILPs. At the same time, many participants named their social worker as one of the people they had the least help from.

Since many participant found Independent Living Programs (ILP) to have the resources they needed to live independently, it is disconcerting that with these participants, their social workers did not refer them to ILPs. This study supports the concept that social workers who work with youths in the foster care system should be mandated to tell youths about ILPs, not only as advocates, but as educators.

The main trend for participants was that they felt a lack of time to prepare for leaving foster care. This is no surprise, as young people who live with their parents usually launch from the parental home in their mid twenties.

Most participants said they had significant trust and/or security issues in their life which negatively impacted their ability to make meaningful and intimate adult relationships. Erikson (1959) wrote, ". . .only after a reasonable sense of identity has been established that real intimacy. . .is possible. . ." (p. 95).

The participants were very clear about what they believe successful adults need. They stated the following: (1) life skills, (2) an education, (3) a career, (4) to have emotional needs met and to feel cared about, (5) a loving home, and (6) hope. The participants either had learned life skills or were in the process of learning them and some did express feelings of hope. None of the participants had, at least those in their early twenties, a career nor did they have a loving home.

The participants had advice to give youths currently in foster care. Their word of encouragement included; (1) don't give up, (2) don't sell yourself short, (3) stay in school, and be strong. It may be assumed from the advice that the participants had told themselves the above words. It speaks for the respondents' resiliency in spite

of their foster care experience and it may demonstrate their empathy for young people in the foster care system.

Twenty-one percent of the participants appeared to be well on the road to establishing their identity. When asked what they wanted from professionals, they listed (1) respect, (2) dignity, (3) support and caring, and (4) resources. The first two answers are about having a sense of self, in that one wants to be respected and treated with dignity.

The participants were asked what they needed to live as adults. They listed (1) life skills, (2) job training/career/college, (3) basic needed of food, clothing, and a place to live, (4) some family to go to for holidays, and (5) privacy. While many young people are exploring whom they are, getting in touch with their feeling, and falling in love, the participants were struggling with meeting basic needs for food, clothing and shelter. According to Preble (2001), one cannot concentrate on the decoration of life, like recreation, hobbies, and intimate relationships, when one does not have a roof over their head or does not know where they will get their next meal.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included a small sample size, the predominance of female subjects, the lack of socioeconomic data for the family of origin, foster families and adult outcome families. Because the research design only included interviews with the direct recipients of foster care services, there was no research design to interview the biological or foster parents, or the caseworkers' of the participants. Therefore, the accuracy of the data is limited to what events the participants were able to recall at the time of the interview.

Implications for Social Work

The results of this study suggest implications for several areas of social work. Child welfare agencies can benefit from this study in that it corroborates the findings of other researchers who have also found that the experience of being removed from home, placed in foster care, and foster care emancipation is a difficult and major life-altering event. This study also highlights the need for the initial trauma of placement to be addressed during the course of the child's stay in foster

care. The means to address this need are not clearly defined. Methods to address the initial event(s) of parental abuse and/or neglect need to consider the child's need for meaning and thoughtful incorporation into a life narrative. Efforts to counsel children in foster care need move beyond the scope of current emancipation programs.

The results of this study also suggest implications for other areas of social work practice including clinical counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, and all areas where the former foster youth may seek services. Clinicians practicing in mental health areas should be diligent to assess the impact of the foster care and emancipation experience on adult functioning.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Thousands of children are annually removed from homes where they are abused and/or neglected. They are harmed by the very persons whom society expects will love and protect them the most; their parents. Society in its increasing recognition of the harm that this abuse causes children has created legislation, provides funding, and authorizes child welfare professionals to help protect these children.

Foster care is the alternative to abusive homes, and hopefully provides a stable, safe, clean temporary home for these children. However, often the foster care experience causes further harm, hurt and alienation. It is an imperfect answer to a formidable life challenge for these children.

After foster care, many emancipated youths are unprepared to live on their own. Not only do many enter adult life unprepared for emancipation on a physical level including necessities, but they also emancipate from foster care with the accumulated and unresolved burdens of their original abuse.

Although designed to help foster youths, programs such as Independent Living Programs are not reaching enough children. Either the foster youth do not hear about them, or they are not encouraged enough to attend. At adolescence many youth may not be fully aware of the importance of availing themselves of such programs. Adolescence is a time of human development when in search for an identity many young people do not possess the developmental maturity to take advantage of programs such as ILP. These children should not be punished. Efforts to expend ILP services for young adults who have emancipated from care require consideration. Non-means tested services including counseling should be available. Counseling service should be a part of the ILP program with social workers trained in the dynamics of child abuse, neglect, foster care limitations and the techniques identified as helpful to this population.

Although the best social workers in the world will never be able to remove the original traumas associated with child abuse and/or neglect, they must strive to provide the child a temporary safe home. Human beings need to have meaning in their life. To neglect this essential need is to deny the fundamental developmental

facts of human development. Humans seek connections and in those connections we seek meaning. Harmful events must be woven into life stories in a thoughtful and meaningful way. It is only then that foster care children can resolve and integrate their experiences into a meaningful and productive life.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to study the experiences of foster care emancipation. Elizabeth Waldon and Debi Davis, MSW students at California State University San Bernardino are conducting this research under the supervision of Rachel Estrada, M.S.W., with guidance from Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Professor of Social Work. The Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board of California State University San Bernardino has approved this study.

In this interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences in foster care, experiences leaving foster care, and adjustment after foster care. Some of the questions may make you recall uncomfortable or stressful events.

This interview is voluntary and confidential. You may stop the interview at any time. Later, if you decide to withdraw your interview, you may call the researchers at (909) 687-7072 and request your interview be withdrawn.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded. The information gathered in this study will be held in strict confidence. Participants will not be referred to by name or any other identifying information. Any references or comments that could identify participants will be discarded or modified. Benefits to participating in this study might include contributing to the understanding of the effects of foster care and related emancipation experiences. Increased understanding

may serve to help other youth have improved experiences and increase awareness of foster children's needs by professionals. The completed research study will be available at CSUSB at the Pfau Library after June 2001.

Questions about the study, participant's rights or research-related injury may be addressed to Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, (909)880-5507). Participants may contact the San Bernardino County Department of Mental Health at (909) 397-7171 to receive counseling or for other concerns.

By my mark below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study. I freely consent to participate. I am at least 18 years of age

Participant's Mark

Date

APPENDIX B
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

You have participated in a study that sought to explore the foster care and emancipation experiences of adults who were once in foster care and who also emancipated or "aged out" of that system. Elizabeth Waldon and Debi Davis conducted the study as partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's level degree in social work at California State University, San Bernardino.

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of the emancipation process as experienced by those who know it best: the actual young people who lived it. It is hoped that this study may contribute to an increased awareness of the needs of youth who are emancipating from foster care and, therefore, improve their lives.

Due to the personal nature of the study, you may have already experienced or may experience in the future, emotional feelings about the study or about your foster care and/or emancipation experiences. If you have concerns or need for counseling you may contact the San Bernardino County Mental Health Department at (909) 397-7171. If you have concerns about this study, you may contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin at California State University San Bernardino, Department of Social Work (909) 880-5507.

You have the right to withdraw all or part of your interview from inclusion in the study without any consequences.

The research study will be available after June 2001 in the Pfau Library at California State University San Bernardino.

The researchers wish to thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Waldon and Debi Davis

APPENDIX C
RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Thank you for participating in this research. What you tell about your experiences after leaving foster care, will help policy makers better understand what will be helpful to youth who are in the process of leaving foster care. Your name will be kept confidential and the method for doing so was in the informed consent form you signed. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just tell me and we will move on to the next question. Please let me know at anytime, if you wish to take a break.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section I: Demographics

The first set of questions are demographic questions. If you do not wish you answer a question, just tell me and we will move on to the next question. Is this all right with you?

- 1) When is your birthday?
- 2) What do you consider your ethnic background?
- 3) What is your gender?
- 4) What is your marital status?
 - A) If married ask:
 - 1) How long have you been married?
 - 2) Have you been married before?
 - B) If separated ask:
How long have you been separated?
 - C) If divorced ask:
How long have you been divorced?
 - D) If widowed, ask:
How long have you been widowed?
- 5) Do you have any siblings?

If yes, ask:

A) How many?

B) Were they placed in foster care?

6) Do you have any children?

If yes ask:

A) How many children do you have?

B) From the oldest to the youngest, how old are your children?

7) Education

A) What is the highest education you have completed?

B) Have you attended college or a trade school

C) Do you have a college degree or training certificate?

If yes ask: What is your degree or training in?

SECTION II EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE

This next set of questions asks about your experience in foster care. Can we talk about your foster care experience?

[If the interviewee states no, ask if there are concerns they wish to ask the interviewer. Respect the right of the participant to end the interview at anytime]

2) How old were you when you first entered foster care?

3) What was the reason you were placed in foster care?

4) How long did you live in foster care?

5) Some children in foster care were moved to and from different foster or group homes.

A) How many foster families did you live with?

B) How many group homes did you live in?

6) If you were moved to different foster families or group homes, what was that experience like for you?

7) Overall, what was the experience of living in the foster care system like for you?

- 8) While you were in foster care, did you visit your parents?
- 9) If your parents did visit, what was that like for you?
- 10) While in foster care did you ever receive counseling to help with any problem(s) you might have had?

[If a yes response was given, go to question
If the answer was no, go to question 10 A]

Do you think some type of counseling would have been helpful? If so, why?

- 11) What was your experience in counseling?

SECTION III LEAVING FOSTER CARE

These groups of questions are about leaving foster care.

- 1) What kind of preparation did you receive to help you leave foster care and live on your own?
[If the answer is none, go to question 4]
- 2) What was helpful?
- 3) What was not helpful?
- 4) If you could change the foster care emancipation process, what would you change?
- 5) Do you think your foster care experience had an impact on your ability to be close to others? If so, how?

Section IV Adult Outcomes

This section asks about experiences you have had since leaving foster care.

- 1) Please tell me about your employment history since leaving foster care.
- 2) After leaving foster care, where did you live?
- 3) Have you been homeless since leaving foster care?

[If the answer is no, go to question 4]

- A) What lead to that situation?
- B) Where did you sleep when you were homeless?
- C) How long where you homeless?
- D) What would have prevented you from being homeless?

- 4) How would you describe your relationships since leaving foster care?
- 5) Please tell me about any other experiences or situations that have impacted your life while in foster care and/or emancipation from foster care.

Section V Services needed by youths emancipating from foster care

This final section asks your thoughts about improving the foster care system.

- 1) What do you think youths in the foster care system need to be successful adults?
- 2) If you could talk to a foster care youth who just turned eighteen, what advice would you give them?
- 3) What advice would you like to give professionals who are helping youth emancipate from foster care?
- 4) If you were in charge of creating an independent living program for young people leaving foster care, what would that program look like?
- 5) Before ending this interview, is there anything you wish to add?

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where author's collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Assigned leader | <u>Elizabeth Walon</u> |
| Assisted by | <u>Debbie Ann Davis</u> |

2. Data Entry and Analysis

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Assigned leader | <u>Debbie Ann Davis</u> |
| Assisted by | <u>Elizabeth Waldon</u> |

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings

a. Introduction and Literature

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Assigned leader | <u>Elizabeth Waldon</u> |
| Assisted by | <u>Debbie Ann Davis</u> |

b. Methods

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Assigned leader | <u>Debbie Ann Davis</u> |
| Assisted by | <u>Elizabeth Waldon</u> |

c. Results

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Assigned leader | <u>Elizabeth Waldon</u> |
| Assisted by | <u>Debbie Ann Davis</u> |

d. Discussion

Assigned leader

Debbie Ann Davis

Assisted by

Elizabeth Waldon