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No way home: Former foster youth and their families of origin

Vanessa Hilary Crayton

NO WAY HOME: FORMER FOSTER YOUTH AND THEIR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

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

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to investigate former foster youths' attitudes and feelings about contact with their families of origin as they were aging out of the foster care system. Participants consisted of 5 adults between the ages of 18 and 35 who were in the care of the child welfare system at the time of their 18th birthday, and who received Independent Living Program services prior to emancipation. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions in an interview format to discover their attitudes and beliefs around the time of emancipation. Responses were transcribed, and the resultant data analyzed for trends and themes across interviews. A common definition of family was found across participants' responses, as well as a shared perception of the importance of this construct. A difference was found in perceived and actual social support available during late adolescence/early adulthood, dependent upon the type of placement the youth left at the age of emancipation.

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I would like to acknowledge the following people for their assistance during this project: Dr. Herb Shon, my advisor, who answered countless emails and diffused multiple crises; Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, who provided an open ear to questions and firm guidance through this process; Heidi Lockhart, Director of the Cadena/Transfer Center at Fullerton College, for her assistance and determination in expanding the opportunities of transitional age youth; and my colleagues, who provided referrals, suggestions, and a sounding-board for ideas over the past year. Finally, thank you to all the foster youth, now and in the past, who have given their participation to increase our knowledge through studies such as this.

DEDICATION

For Donna DeValle: each gray hair was worth it.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an overview of current foster care Independent Living Programs (ILPs) and how they came into existence. It illustrates the current need for increased social support, especially from families and relatives, of adolescents aging out of foster care. There follows a description of the proposed study's qualitative research design, and how this study's findings will be applicable to the field of social work.

Problem Statement

Under our current system of child welfare, children aging out of foster care are expected to be self-sufficient adults at the age of 18. However, studies have found that these youth are not ready or able to live on their own without support at the age of majority (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Therefore, federal and state law mandates funding be set aside at the state level for foster care Independent Living Programs (ILPs) to help these youth increase their independent-living skills and gradually decrease their dependency on the welfare system

(Collins, 2004). Even with these supports in place, youth emancipating or 'aging out' of the foster care system lag behind their peers in educational achievement, job skills, and general social support (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). All of this combines to create an adolescent who is ill prepared to care for her or his independent self.

One reason for this lag, from which many former foster youth never recover, is that they are released into the world with no primary support system in place. Other adult children can return to the families they have left for assistance, advice, a place to stay, and ongoing emotional support. These are kids who have been taught little lessons their whole life by growing up in a family and watching the adults around them cope with life.

Children in foster care have no such incidental learning available on a consistent basis. Their families of origin, from whom they were removed, may be a distant and unavailable memory; and the home that they 'left behind' may be a group home or residential facility or foster home with no place for them any longer. This is compounded by age at entry into the child welfare system, number of placements/moves, length of time out of their home, possible severed contact with family of origin, and

other factors (abuse, prenatal substance exposure, learning and behavioral difficulties) all impact the social learning these youth are exposed to, and the degree to which these lessons are absorbed.

Current trends in emancipation and ILP services do not have ways to 'make up' this gap in social support. Instead of an 'independent' approach to emancipation, a focus should be brought to teaching these youth how to be interdependent, and develop relationships (including those with the youth's family of origin) that will sustain her or him in young adulthood.

Continued dependency on state welfare programs is not a goal of emancipation; state and federal welfare systems are working to alleviate the problems foster children face at the age of majority with new legislation and increased funding streams (Collins, 2004). It was not until 1986 that ILP services were authorized by the federal government under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act [PL 99-272] (Murray O'Neill & Gesiriech, n.d.). In 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act [PL 106-169] replaced "ILP" with the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), which made services more comprehensive and extended the age of

eligibility for services to 21. This was amended in 2001, authorizing a new educational/vocational training program for older youth leaving foster care (O'Neill & Gesiriech, n.d.).

California law has changed as well, in light of federal mandates. In contrast to the financial focus of nationwide legislation, state law has focused on transitional housing programs (AB 1198), extension of Medi-Cal benefits (AB 2877), oversight for placement and transitional care (SB 933, AB 1979, AB 427), and most notably for continued contact and visitation among siblings in the child welfare system (AB 2196, AB 1987) (California Youth Connection, n.d.). Even with these statutes in place, the focus of all legislation in the past 20 years, since ILPs and older foster youth have come to the fore, has been on instrumental support that can be given to these youth. Very little attention has been paid to their socio-emotional needs and connection to the significant people in their lives.

Purpose of the Study

This study was an inquiry into the needs of adolescents in foster care during the transitionary

period of young adulthood. Research in this area since the 1980s has demonstrated a need for support from the families of origin of these youth in order to augment transitional services as they age out of the foster care system (Barth, 1986; Carbino, 1990; Courtney & Barth, 1996; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Whiting, 2000; Collins, 2004). This research has also demonstrated that many of these emancipated young adults reunite with their families with little formal support or assistance (Mech, 1994).

Past studies have focused on the efficacy and gaps of the current welfare system as it pertains to adolescents. This study was the first step in directly assessing former clients' perceptions regarding the role families of origin can and should play in their adult life. This study asked former foster youth, now adults, if, when, and how they reestablished these ties, the extent to which formal assistance was offered, and if they believed this type of social support should be a formal component of permanency planning.

As Whiting (2000) states, "many foster children are realistic about the need for care and what has happened at their biological home. Nevertheless, like all people,

they want to feel listened to and understood," and from this understanding ILP services can be shaped to better meet clients' socio-emotional needs, and not just those of self-care.

Little attention has been paid thus far to this aspect of defining oneself against one's family and society. Rather, the focus has been on the quality and utility of already existing services (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). This study can begin to fill this gap in knowledge.

The use of open-ended, marginally structured interview questions allowed participants to describe experiences and emotions that are not easily quantifiable. By allowing these young adults to tell their stories, "the story metaphor describes meanings and themes rather than causes which is a good fit with qualitative research" (Whiting, 2000). By listening to those most fully invested in the successful implementation of child welfare policy, the adolescents cum recipients of service, those in the social work profession can more clearly identify gaps and mobilize resources that may otherwise be overlooked or discounted by those not directly affected by the system.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

It is the responsibility of social workers to help programs shape themselves around the newly recognized needs of clients. Because there are gaps in the literature, there will naturally be gaps in service provision. The history of adolescents in foster care Independent Living Programs is relatively brief; this research project was a first step in assisting the profession in assessing more fully the overlooked needs of these young adults. The assessment stage of the generalist model was informed by this study. In this way, programs already in place can be better structured, and their clients better served.

This type of inquiry is best suited for the field of social work due to its focus of person-in-environment, and not person-as-independent. Although removed from their family homes, youth in foster care still maintain emotional ties to their relatives and loved ones. This family of origin, even when absent, continues as a presence in these young people's lives. By taking a full measure of this presence, the profession of social work can legitimize, maintain, and improve its importance

where necessary. As Reilly (2003) states, "social workers are in a unique position to develop effective strategies for nurturing positive support networks for this population" (p. 732). By acknowledging that people live in an interdependent society, not an independent one, our youngest adults can be taught how to live in such a world.

This study attempted to answer the question: What are the experiences of youth aging out of the foster care system regarding reintegration with their families of origin?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter assesses the degree to which adolescent foster youth and their experiences with ILP services have been researched in the literature. Pertinent to this body of knowledge is history of federal legislation, literature regarding ILP services over the past 20 years, clients' perceptions of the helpfulness of such programs, and finally, how ILP services fit into the broader scope of human development as these adolescents strive to develop their adult identities.

History of Federal Legislation

It is only in the recent past that the federal government has taken the needs of adolescents into account, mandating funding to be set aside at the state level for independent living programs (ILPs), housing assistance, and transitional services as a 'safety net' to help these youth increase their independent living skills and gradually decrease their dependency on the welfare system (Collins, 2004). The Social Security Act

of 1935 authorized the first federal grants for child welfare services, but it was not until 1986, under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (PL 99-272), that ILPs were authorized as transitional support for older teens in the child welfare system (Murray O'Neill & Gesiriech, n.d.). In 1999, this program was renamed and expanded to include youth up to 21 years of age, and defined ILPs as an option, not an end-all solution, for older foster youth (Murray O'Neill & Gesiriech, n.d.). Finally, on the federal level, in 2001 a new education/vocational training program was authorized for this same group of teens (Murray O'Neill & Gesiriech, n.d.).

Past Research on Independent Living Programs

Prior to the mid-1980s, scant attention was paid to adolescents in the child welfare system. The main focus of intervention, research, and legislation was on pre-teens. Studies that did consider other areas of the life span generally assessed the adult functioning of former foster youth (Barth, 1986).

Once PL 99-272 mandated the establishment of ILPs for older foster youth, most programs focused on the hard

skills teens would need to live on their own after 18. Sims (1988) described ILPs of the era as providing transitional housing, subsidies for rent and utilities, scholarship programs, and support groups. And although similar services had been developed for mental health and developmental disabilities programs (Barth, 1986), the US Department of Health and Human Services was slow to react to this legislation. Sims (1988) noted that by June, 1987, regulations had not yet been established. Even at this early stage of development, researchers in the field were already noting the untapped resource potential of families of origin for foster youth (Barth, 1986; Sims, 1988).

In the 1990s, after more time to establish and evaluate ILPs for foster youth, precious little new information had been gathered. The bulk of research illustrates that little is known about the long-term effectiveness of these programs, and points out that comparing current results to past studies is ineffective due to the mandated changes to these services since the 1980s (Courtney & Barth, 1996; Collins, 2004). There was a continued push to look beyond the child and include the

family of origin when planning for life after emancipation.

Both McMillen & Tucker (1999) and Courtney & Barth (1996) indicate that current child welfare and emancipation programs need to take into account kinship issues and the possibility of reunification with family of origin. These two pairs of researchers also found that even with the ILS program goal of independence at 18, many youth return to the homes from which they were removed rather than live on their own after emancipation. Augmenting ILS curricula with 'survival skills' training in familial substance use, mental illness, and poverty may help these youth reintegrate into their families of origin as young adults (McMillen & Tucker, 1999).

With close to 20 years of implementation on which to draw, more recent studies continue to evaluate the extent to which ILPs ease the transition to adulthood. Reilly (2003) surveyed former foster youth in Nevada, and found that while the majority had participated in an ILP prior to discharge, they also reported receiving little concrete assistance or actual services at discharge. Further, more than half of the participants surveyed were

not satisfied with the services they did receive (Reilly, 2003).

Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger (2005) compared foster youth in California who were enrolled in an ILP prior to emancipation with a group that was not. These researchers found adolescents who had participated in ILP experienced more placement instabilities, were less likely to have the support of relatives while in the foster care system, and may have been more likely to need educational assistance, suggesting there may be a disparity in who and how clients are connected with services (Lemon et al, 2005).

Choca et al. (2004) corroborated this multi-system approach to emancipation services as a prerequisite for successful independent living. Focusing on the need for adequate housing, comprehensive services that include training and "access to jobs that pay a living wage with health care benefits cannot be emphasized enough as a key way to address the housing challenges these young adults face" (Choca et al., 2004).

A new thrust in this more recent research is the recommendation that transitional ILP services be continued after release from care (Kerman, Barth, &

Wildfire, 2004; Choca et al., 2004; Reilly, 2003). In fact, Kerman et al. (2004) indicate that post-emancipation services may be necessary due to a lack of family-of-origin, which has been a running theme with this population. Mirroring the popular adult well-being studies of the past, Cook-Fong (2000) found that, even with the added support of transitional programs, adults raised in foster care show lower levels of martial happiness, less intimate relationships with their families of origin, and a higher incidence of social isolation, none of which are addressed by current welfare programs for this population.

Clients' Perceptions of Care

Another trend with research involving older foster youth is to survey their subjective opinions about the services they received while aging-out of the foster care system.

McMillen, Rideout, Fisher, & Tucker (1997) conducted several focus groups of emancipated youth about the perceived helpfulness of ILP services in Missouri. Participants emphasized that leaving care was a difficult and abrupt change in most cases. They also felt less

isolated and de-stigmatized by meeting other teenagers in their same situation. The authors indicated these results underscore a gradual transition from care coupled with a strong support network and a system of after care services.

Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith (2001) found that emancipated youth felt unprepared, and this "was also reflected in the problems the young adults faced after discharge." Like other researchers (North, Mallabar, & Desrochers, 1988; Choca et al., 2004), they found that an array of gaps in housing, health care, material support, and social support are faced by emancipated youth.

Many youth surveyed report feeling isolated and lonely both in and once released from placement. Courtney, et al. noted, "youths aging out of out-of-home care might experience disruptions in the level of social support they receive from various people in their lives, particularly their out-of-home caregivers" (2001). This is compounded by a lack of formalized reconnection with family upon release from placement. These authors found that families continue to be involved, whether or not

this relationship is formalized through ILS or welfare services.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Mech (1994) points out that the transition to adulthood is a critical period, as defined by human development theory, as relationships with social supports are being redefined. At this point in development, self-sufficiency is not expected or normative. In fact, no other adolescent group in our society is seen as a 'finished product' at 18, 19, or 21. But this is expected of former foster youth at the age of majority.

Thus far, all available literature points to a care system that leads to self-sufficiency and independence, or at the most, interdependence, by the age of majority (generally 18 years old). However, there is support for a more gradual transition from care, over a longer period of time, utilizing familial relations to ease the youth into adulthood. According to Erik Erikson's theory of identity development, late adolescence is the time that one identifies with, and contrasts one's self against, "significant persons and with ideological forces, which give importance to individual life and to ongoing

history" (1968, p.23). In this way, people develop a sense of self that is individual and unique to how they navigate their way through adulthood, while at the same time investing and connecting their individualism with the broader community and society as a whole.

Erikson (1968) describes this time as being "a psychosocial moratorium, of some form and duration between the advent of genital maturity and the onset of responsible adulthood, [which] seems to be built into the schedule of human development" (p. 10). Therefore, it is necessary during this time to have the freedom to try out different roles and different responsibility in order to 'know' one's adult self. A secure bond to parents allows an adolescent to successfully explore and develop in this way. Hurrying a youth through a set of courses designed to achieve instrumental competency in the activities of daily living (e.g., banking, shopping, cleaning) clearly overlooks this psychosocial development.

Carbino (1990) indicates that families of origin are not a focus of these transitional services because they are not seen as a resource outside of reunification or placement. This author points out that reconnecting with one's family is "an important step toward interdependent

living, one that has the potential to help solidify an adolescent's identity" (1990, p. 107) through social connection as well as tangible artifacts such as family history and photos.

If this development is not allowed to proceed, Erikson (1968) warns "the prime danger of this age, therefore, is identity confusion, which can express itself in excessively long moratoria" (p. 23) where the individual shows a marked lack of connection to others or to one's self (Cook-Fong, 2000; Kerman et al, 2004). In terms of a developmental perspective, programs that expect a self-actualized adult at 18 years of age are unrealistic.

Summary

As can be seen by a review of the literature, much of what is currently known about foster care ILP services has been developed in recent social service history. The development of these transitional services has been spurred by federal mandates, which has impacted the scope and length of services offered. Since 1997 researchers in this area have begun to question former foster youth themselves as to the effectiveness of current programs.

However, one clear theme runs through the current body of literature: the lack of sustained contact and use of families of origin as a resource for adolescents in the foster care system. When analyzed via Erikson's psychosocial model of identity development, it is clear that this lack can and does have long ranging effects on the adult functioning of these youth.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter describes the method of inquiry designed to explore former foster youths' familial experiences as they aged out of the foster care system. Explanations of study design, sampling procedures, data collection, and data analysis are included. Special attention was paid to issues of confidentiality and minimizing the possible stigmatizing effects of contacting this vulnerable population.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of foster youth as they age out of the child welfare system and transition into the 'adult' world. Specifically, this study asked participants to look back and reflect on the extent their families of origin played a role in their early adult years. Although alluded to in the literature (Barth, 1996; McMillen & Tucker, 1999), this question has never been posed directly to current or former foster youth. This study attempted to fill this

gap in knowledge. Before services can be designed or implemented to meet this objective, an assessment of need from within the service population (i.e., foster youth) must be taken.

To assess participants' experiences, a qualitative study design consisting of a set of open-ended interview questions was used. These questions were presented to participants in a face-to-face interview setting. It was unrealistic to assume participants would be willing to write long explanations for the types of questions being asked. This format allowed participants to express themselves in their own words, and the researcher was able to interact in this process, probing or inquiring for deeper levels of information where material seemed particularly rich, something not possible with a paper-and-pen instrument.

There was the possibility of researcher bias, however, when administering the interview questions face-to-face. Participants may have given responses based on what they thought the researcher wanted to hear. During each interview, the researcher had to be wary that her attempts to clarify or probe did not lead the interview in ways not intended by either party. In addition, due to

the limited time available for research, only a small sample was interviewed for this study. This unique study design attempted to answer the question: what are the experiences of youth aging out of the foster care system regarding reintegration with their families of origin?

Sampling

This study sought the input of 5 former foster youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years old. Due to the type of transitionary services offered by ILPs, only youth who were in care until their 18th birthday were interviewed. Youth who "emancipate" are legally deemed independent adults before the age of majority (18), and were not appropriate for this study because many standard ILP services were not offered to them. In addition, adults older than 35 aged out of a child welfare system that did not have a standardized ILP system in place (Murray O'Neill & Gesiriech, n.d.). Therefore, those who left the system prior to 1988 would not have received qualifying services, and were not appropriate for this study.

Participants for this study were recruited from a college success program targeting former foster youth in suburban Southern California (see Appendix A). This

program was a jumping-off point for recruitment because there is no tracking system for youth once they leave the system as adults. Therefore, a snowball sample, with participants referring other possible participants, was used.

Because this study was reliant upon volunteers to identify themselves and other potential candidates who fit the eligibility criteria, the sample size was small, with only 5 completed interviews. In addition, interviews were conducted between January and March 2006. Due to this limited timeframe, it was unrealistic to expect many more interviews to be completed.

Data Collection and Instruments

To investigate former foster youths' experiences with their families of origin, participants were asked a series of nominal demographic questions followed by five retrospective questions about their experience when leaving foster care. These open-ended questions invited participants to explore the extent, desire, and definitions they had given to the role their families of origin played around the time they aged out of the child welfare system (see Appendix B for Interview Guide).

This project was a needs assessment of one aspect of unstudied services provided to a relatively understudied population in child welfare. As a result, no standardized instrument was located for this study. Based on a review of the literature, a list of questions was compiled. This list was reviewed as a means of pre-testing the instrument by three persons: a social work colleague, the faculty advisor supervising this study, and a former foster youth with knowledge of this field of study. Even with this review of the instrument, the probative questions may have been misunderstood by participants. Careful attention was given to participants' responses and nonverbal cues during each interview so the interviewer could ask follow-up questions for clarification. Finally, although care was taken to present questions in a sensitive manner, participants were able to decline to answer any question if they felt uncomfortable, which may have led to a less accurate picture of their experience.

Procedures

Participants for this study were solicited from a college success program for former foster youth located in a suburban area of Southern California.

Flyers (Appendix C) were provided to the Program Director, outlining the details of this study, eligibility criteria, and contact information for participation. Once volunteers made contact, eligibility criteria were reviewed to ensure they were appropriate candidates for this study.

Interviews were conducted in a private office on the grounds of a local community college. This researcher proctored all interviews and collected all data herself. Data was collected in two forms: demographic data was marked on an Interview Guide dedicated to the current interview, and spoken responses were audio taped.

Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes, dependent on the amount of information each participant provided. The reason for this study was explained prior to beginning data collection, and an Informed Consent document (Appendix D) was reviewed with each participant. Once consent was secured, the researcher began taping the interview, and questions from the Interview Guide

(Appendix B) were asked, along with furthering responses where more detail seemed appropriate. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were given a Debriefing Statement (Appendix E) listing area resources and thanking them for their participation in this study. A flyer with contact information was offered as a means of recruiting other participants when appropriate (Appendix C). Contact was made in the same way with persons referred by interview participants, and the same college office and resources were used for interviewing procedures.

Protection of Human Subjects

Due to the stigma that may be associated with having been a "foster kid", care was taken to ensure participants felt protected and safe when participating in this study. To ensure they understood their rights as a participant, each participant was given an Informed Consent form (Appendix D) prior to participation. She or he marked the form with an "X" to indicate assent after reviewing the document.

Interviews were conducted in a private office located in the library of a local community college, and

were scheduled so that no participant 'bumped into' another. However, sampling relied on word-of-mouth referrals in some cases. This researcher asked that her contact information be given to potential participants so she or he could make initial contact, and thus lessen the chances of a breach of confidentiality. Anonymity in participation of this study was not possible; confidentiality of responses, however, was.

Each interview was tape recorded on a separate, blank cassette. Both the Interview Guide and cassette tape for each interview was labeled as "#1", "#2", and so forth, to keep data together and ensure anonymity of participants' responses. The collected data was kept in a locked box in the researcher's home. Each tape was transcribed by the researcher, and any names or clearly identifying information was censored from the transcribed documents.

Once the interview was completed, a Debriefing Statement (Appendix E) was given to participants stating when and where the study will be available for review, and outlining community resources for follow-up care, if needed.

Data Analysis

Two types of data were collected in this study. First, demographic data such as current age, gender, and years spent in the child welfare system was collected in written format at the beginning of the interview. This data was counted (how many males, how many females) for any apparent skewing of the sample (more females than males, for example).

The second type of data, interview transcriptions, was analyzed for common trends and themes appearing across interviews. The meaning of constructs such as "family" and its relation to other trends were particularly scrutinized. Constructs thought likely to emerge from the analysis of this study's data may included the definition of family, social support networks, family contact, the role of family in late adolescence/early adulthood, and the value individuals place(d) on these constructs.

Summary

This study explored former foster youths' experiences with and views about family involvement as they transitioned out of the foster care system. A series

of open-ended questions, posed in face-to-face interviews, were asked to assess the potential need for additional modifications to ILP services currently in place.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter describes the data gathered from four interviews with former foster youth. First, demographic data of the participants is given. This is followed by a grouping of responses to each question during the interview. Direct quotes from participants have been used to illustrate the individual thoughts and feelings presented during the interviews.

Presentation of the Findings

Five former foster youth were interviewed for this study. After collection, one participant requested her/his data be removed from the study due to a conflict of interest. Therefore, the data set described below constitutes the interviews of four persons, two females and two males. All four participants answered all questions willingly, in many cases elaborating on their answers in detail.

Of the participants, two had recently exited the child welfare system (aged 19 and 20), and two had some

distance between aging out and their current life situations (aged 26 and 31). All participants had received Independent Living Program (ILP) services prior to the age of 18. In terms of county of residence, two currently reside in Orange County, one in Los Angeles County, and one in San Bernardino County. During the interviews, county of placement was mentioned by each participant: one was placed in Orange County, one in Los Angeles County, one in San Bernardino County, and one indicated her/his case had originated in Los Angeles County but was placed in Orange County.

Participants were asked to briefly describe their understanding of the reasons they had entered foster care, and their age at first placement within the system. Reasons varied, and often each participant cited multiple causes. Sexual abuse, voluntary relinquishment, substance abuse, illegal activities by parents (prostitution), neglect, and incarceration of caretakers were all given as reasons. Age of entry into the system ranged from two years old to preteen (two years, four years, nine years, and 12 or 13 years old).

Description of family structure at time of placement varied as well, with three respondents listing siblings,

parents, and grandparents as parts of their family unit. One participant reported being an only child living with her/his mother at the time of removal. Although not requested, during the course of each interview participants stated the type of placement(s) they lived in before the age of 18. Two reported being placed with family members (e.g., kinship care); for one, the home was a permanent placement, and the other 'bounced around' several relatives' homes before turning 18. The other two reported multiple placements in both foster homes and group homes during their childhoods. One participant reported securing a long-term foster placement in her/his mid teens and remained with this family until the age of majority. The other participant reported aging out of a long-term group home placement.

After providing demographic data, each participant was asked five open-ended questions. Question #1 asked, "How do you define 'family'?" All participants differentiated between blood relatives and others in their answers, and indicated that the definition is not determined by a blood relationship with others. One participant stated, "I have blood family, but I have closer family that isn't blood." Another described this

as, "It doesn't have to be relatives, because I don't have any." A third replied, "[It's] more of a feeling, than 'blood' relatives…I've learned you can't depend on blood." Three participants furthered their definitions by describing an emotional connection with another person. One participant stated, "It's the people you care about - that show they care, and do things for you and care about you. I consider my foster mother my 'family'." Another said, "[It's] an emotional bond between people - respect." And a third participant commented, "[It's a sense of] belonging, a connection with someone that no matter what happens, they're going to be there for you."

Additionally, all participants talked about the importance of family in their definition. Two commented on the importance of identifying and relating to a referent group as "family". One participant explained, "[It's] the most important thing you can have…without family, you're nobody." A second participant stated, "I believe that family is important - I really really do," following up with, "Without family, I don't think I would have made it through the system." Two participants spoke of making one's own family within the child welfare system. The participant who aged out of group home care

stated, "If you don't have family you need to make one - find an 'adopted' family, take people who really care about you and make one." And the participant who lived in a foster home stated, "[In foster care] you make your own family."

Question #2 asked, "How did you feel when you were approaching 18, when you aged out of the system?" Responses to this question varied, and each participant described feeling a mixture of emotions. One participant stated, "Kind of excited - I was ready to take the next step…part of it was because I knew I was a burden to [caretakers]." Another participant asked, "I was ready but I wasn't. How do you be ready for something that you've never experienced?" One participant described her/his conflict in terms of child welfare services received:

> [I was] scared, afraid of what was going to happen. I thought I wouldn't have any place to go - who would take care of me? At the same time, [I was] glad to be rid of all the rules, the visits, my social worker telling what to do.

Other participants discussed how child welfare services had filled in for other supports in their lives.

One participant said, "[I felt] kinda scared, because I didn't know what was out there…if I'm ever going to need help, can I go back and get help?" A second participant echoed this sentiment by stating, "In a way I was free because I was tired of seeing the social worker…[it was] a hassle…but it was a part of my life and I had grown attached to it."

In addition, two participants also talked about their ILP experiences in relation to their feelings of preparedness around the age of 18. One participant commented, "My [ILP] training was good, but I didn't have the money or the skills to get myself an apartment." A second participant explained, "I was told there was a college fund waiting for me, but [social worker] couldn't find the paperwork for it."

Three participants also talked about experiences with their social workers when they were preparing for exit. Each of their long-term workers left one to six months before the participants' exit from the system, and they each stated how difficult it was to address this in the midst of all the other imminent life changes. One participant said, "My social worker was the best social worker in the world, until she left…and then I got

another lady - it was rough." One spoke of the disruption this change in worker caused for placement options while exiting the system:

> [I'd had] the other worker for two or three years, then she just left…I was talking with my mom [up to that point] and the social worker thought maybe I could go back and live with her, but my new worker had to 'check it out' and I felt like I was running around, 'Oh, come on!'

Another participant experienced a similar disruption in exit planning. This participant said, "My social worker was awesome - contacts for everything, got me money for [training program], then he left, and suddenly they couldn't find the paperwork or anything. I ended up doing a lot of it myself. It was just easier."

Question #3 asked, "How did your social worker handle family contact as you were leaving the system?" Responses fell into two groups: those who had established contact with parents and relatives at a younger age, and those whose social workers made an attempt to connect the youth with some type of social support system prior to exit. Two participants stated their parent(s) had been involved in their lives after placement, and they

believed that their social workers did not need to do any additional work to establish family contact for them. It is interesting to note that both of these participants lived in kinship placements (with extended family) while in the system.

The other two participants had lived in long-term foster homes and/or group homes. They indicated that their social workers had attempted to connect them with appropriate outside supports prior to the age of 18. One participant explained, "[Social worker] arranged one visit with my mother when I was 17…I went because the county could do the leg work, and if I decided I wanted to find her later on I wouldn't know how." The other participant, who left group home care, stated, "[They] tried to hook me up with aftercare [services], but that was a joke." Neither of these participants had had contact with their primary family members (parents, siblings, grandparents) for at least six years prior to the age of 18. Both participants indicated that these attempts were unsuccessful, and neither participant continued contact with the chosen parties after these interventions.

Question #4 asked, "Were there people you wanted to have more involved with your life (family members, teachers, friends' families, foster families, staff)?" Responses varied, but the prevailing attitude from all four participants was that they each had the people in their lives that they wanted, and no one felt anyone was 'missing'. One participant stated, "[My] social worker managed to make everyone that I wanted and needed to be there…I had everybody that counted." A second participant indicated, "There was no one else I wanted in my life…everybody I wanted involved was already." A third echoed this sentiment, and stated, "The people that I had in my life were the ones I wanted - no one else." The fourth participant commented on her/his own efforts in this regard, explaining, "I built up a lot of connections with cousins and aunts by moving around among them [while growing up]."

One participant stated that she/he had wanted contact with two family members but was unsuccessful in connecting with them. This person indicated the blame lay with the individual family members and/or life circumstances, and was no fault of the social worker.

Question #5 asked, "Who do you have contact with now?" The responses to this question were very individualized, based on each participant's perceptions and current situation in life. There also appeared to be a difference in contact with those who were placed in kinship care (and still had contact with relatives) and those who were raised in group home/foster family care. The two participants who were raised in kinship care stated they still have contact with both immediate and extended family members. However, the two participants who had exited from non-familial placements indicated that they still had contact with some of the youth they had lived with and the adults who supervised them. One participant succinctly stated, "My life's moved on from there - mostly, its friends I've made after I turned 18 and left [foster care]."

In addition to the set of open-ended questions in Appendix B, each interview ended with the question, "Is there anything else you would like to add, that you want me to know but maybe haven't asked?" Two participants responded to this prompt. One stated, "I wish I hadn't moved around so much in the system - there were foster families and staff I liked, but they're gone to me now."

The other participant expressed a desire to have more of a relationship with an older brother whom she/he has not had much contact with since the brother left foster care.

Summary

The data collected in this study came from four one-on-one interviews with former foster youth. Two females and two males were interviewed; a fifth interview was completed but that data was pulled at the request of the participant. Participants gave general demographic data about themselves, then answered five open-ended questions regarding their definition of family, family of origin contact, and perceptions of need in regards to social support networks around the time of emancipation from the foster care system.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter describes the themes in the data collected from the interviews with four former foster youth. Limitations based on sample size, selection, and availability are addressed, and suggestions are made for further study in this area. Finally, implications for social work policy and practice are presented, based on the implementation and analysis of the current research study.

Discussion

Based on the data collected from the four participants in this study, several themes regarding the definition of family and the family's role in late adolescence emerged. All participants defined family as not a blood tie to others, but an emotional bond one shares with other people. This definition broadens the boundary beyond strict family of origin ties, and was given regardless of whether the participant had been raised in kinship care (by relatives), in foster homes,

or in a group home setting. As a result, the trend among those interviewed appears to be a looser definition of family, allowing other relationships (friendships, mentorships, non-relative caregivers) to fill emotional need.

Participants also emphasized the importance of family in their answers. Even though they had been removed from their families of origin, all participants indicated that the idea of family and of belonging to a family was primary to their own identity. This was especially true for the two participants raised in foster and group home care; they reported a need to 'build' a family of their own making, based on their own definitions, while living within the child welfare system.

This importance, feeling emotionally connected to a referent group outside of one's self, also appears to have impacted how two participants felt as they neared emancipation. They cited a need to know that 'someone' would be out there to help them if they needed; a connection with a family-type support system would have provided that needed security during this time of transition.

Another trend common across all participants was the perceived need for family or other contact during and after their stay in foster care. Those in kinship care reported having long-term relationships with both their families of origin and with other relatives prior to aging out of the system. Those cared for in foster or group homes indicated they had had no contact with their families of origin or other relatives for most of their childhoods. This may indicate differential treatment depending on the type of placement secured for these youth. Those raised in kinship placements, with familial contact throughout childhood, indicated that they maintain these connections into adulthood. Those without family relationships indicated that they do not have relationships with their families today, and that the attempts made around the time of emancipation were not emotionally fulfilling enough to be continued.

Regardless of type of placement, all four participants indicated that at the time of emancipation, they could not identify any additional persons with whom to remain in contact. Even in hindsight, all participants stated that everything that was in place at the time they left care was all that they needed. And yet, two

participants mentioned that there were, in fact, relationships with siblings, foster parents, and other professionals that were meaningful enough to be remembered with sadness.

All four participants spoke of the struggles they faced during early adulthood, and of feeling a lack of support once they exited the child welfare system. This may point to an unmet social support need that remained unidentified by the professionals who oversaw their emancipation. And this may be direct commentary on underlying beliefs regarding the need for social support and a sense of family that are held by those in the arena of child welfare services.

It is obvious that these participants' views have been shaped by their experiences within the child welfare system. However, it is not clear from this study to what degree their needs could have been better met, and the deeper meanings these experiences have held for them. Clearly, "family" is a value all hold dear, and have all defined in a similar fashion. All described ways in which they defined that emotional bond with others, and how that definition appears to have little connection with their families of origin. Instead, some focus was given

to the most primary relationship they had as they transitioned into adulthood: the relationship with their child welfare social worker. Those that experienced a change in worker near the time of emancipation spoke of the emotional impact this loss of transition object had on them.

Based on these few interviews, it is clear that the idea of family holds sway over the lives of foster youth, and impacts how they view their future as adolescents, and as adults, view their past. Previous research has indicated that families of origin can play a role, especially as their children grow older and need less tangible and more emotional support from others (Barth, 1986; Simms, 1988; Carbino, 1990; Courtney & Barth, 1996; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Whiting, 2000; Collins, 2004). Although alluded to, no previous study has described how or to what extent family of origin ties may have meaning for older foster youth transitioning out of the child welfare system. Therefore, the trends found in this research study do not yet have outside validation.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation in this study was sample size. Four interviews do not constitute enough data on which to base broad generalizations about foster youth and their perceptions of family. Although these four participants represent different genders, different placement options, and different stages of adulthood, they simply cannot be assumed to represent the views of the majority of current and former foster youth in the state of California.

One especially important issue regarding diversity within the sample is the apparent split in opinion and experience between those raised in kinship care by relatives, and those raised in foster/group home care. Even with the limited data from this study, a clear line can be drawn between these groups in their definitions of and attitudes toward family. However, these differences may not hold true if a larger sample of each group was surveyed.

In addition, three different counties' child welfare agencies served these adults. Some of their experiences may be due to different styles of administration, availability of resources, and prevailing political

climate within the counties where they were raised. A larger sample of former foster youth from each county may be able to pinpoint differences between and within the counties of Orange, Los Angeles, and San Bernardino child welfare programs.

The style of data collection used in this study may also be considered a limitation. Because this study was an exploratory and preliminary needs assessment within this population, one-on-one interviewing appeared to be the best method of data collection. However, upon completion of the interviews, a single semi-structured interview format appears to be too limiting to full exploration of participants' experiences and views regarding their transition out of the child welfare system. Past research in this area has used both interviews (Cook-Fong, 2000; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001) and focus groups (McMillen, Rideout, Fisher, & Tucker, 1997) for data collection. But these studies focused on the efficacy of Independent Living Program (ILP) curricula, and not an investigation into the individual experience of foster care.

As well, relying upon referrals from participants was hit-and-miss. It appeared that if the former foster

youth had not personally met the researcher, she or he was reluctant to volunteer for an interview. However, there is no real means of tracking former foster youth once they leave the care of the child welfare system, so contact with this population relies heavily on self-identification. The most successful referrals came third-person through those who knew both the researcher and someone raised in foster care. Previous research has also acknowledged this problem, choosing instead to rely on case files of foster youth over attempting to locate and connect with adults who lived in the system (Barth, 1986; Courtney & Barth, 1996; McMillen & Tucker, 1999).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

This study has barely scratched the surface of study in the area of adolescents in foster care and their relationship with their families of origin. But it is one documented step toward addressing a need that has been identified in the literature but never truly investigated. Past studies involving transition-age youth and adults' reflections on their experiences has focused

on the effectiveness of Independent Living Program (ILP) services and curricula.

Based on the findings of the current research study, conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the importance of family of origin relationships during the transition from foster care to independent adult life. However, the data collected in this study seems to indicate that the concept of family is important to these youth, and even the definition of this term strays from common and legal definitions. And as evidenced by these individuals' experiences, the actual practice of family connection (however it is described) was not realized in their lives as they made the transition into adulthood.

This may echo underlying beliefs in the current practices of California's child welfare system. How the family of origin is addressed within the system, how professionals view the family, and how larger society views these families and provides commentary all impact foster youths' value-based evaluation of their families of origin. Although recent California legislation has mandated contact for siblings placed in foster care (California Youth Connection, n.d.), no formal effort has been made within or to the system to keep youth

emotionally connected with those they define as family. More in-depth research into this definition and its meaning to these youth is warranted, to institute policy changes to make the system more attentive to their needs.

In addition, this study has uncovered a difference in world view between those raised in kinship care and those raised in foster/group home care. This division has not been addressed in the literature in any substantial way to date. This finding points out the need to work with foster youth as individuals, with unique stories, views, and definitions of the world around them. Grouping them all under the umbrella of "foster care" or "child welfare" does them a disservice; this one label does not define them, and should not define how they tell their individual story or impact which services they receive. As caring practitioners, social workers must attend to the individual nature of these youths' experiences.

Further research should not only touch on a wider variety of youth (in terms of county of placement, gender, ethnic and/or cultural identity, type of placement, and so on), but should make the effort to attend to the individual stories these youth have about their lives and their perceived place in society. In-

depth interviewing, stretching over several meetings, can attend more fully to the meaning each individual gives to the people and events that have shaped them and their world views. This type of understanding is virtually impossible to develop in a brief, one-time interview or focus group format.

If anything, this study emphasizes the importance of listening to the population, and not only the researchers' opinions regarding the direction of policy and program services. Legislation impacting the delivery and scope of child welfare services should be guided by this personal, direct-experience viewpoint. It is not just a program or population that is being served: it is an individual life that is being shaped, one opportunity at a time.

Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, little can be drawn regarding the role of family in the lives of older foster youth. It does, however, point to a need for further investigation in this area. A large-scale study, taking into account the different types of placement options available through child welfare, which probes

more in depth the meaning of family and how older foster youth relate in the past and currently to their family of origin and other defined family members could more fully address this need as indicated in the literature. In this way, social work policy can be better shaped to meet the needs of all foster youth, in all types of settings.

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INTENT

FULLERTON
COLLEGE
Cadena/Transfer Center
Heidi Lockhart
Director

November 22, 2005

To whom it may concern:

Vanessa Crayton has my permission to conduct research via the Guardian Scholars program at Fullerton College of which I am the director. The students who participate in the research will do so on a voluntary basis and all issues in regards to confidentiality will be respected. In addition, I am aware that Vanessa is conducting this research under the guidance of her advisor, Dr. Herb Shon, at California State University, San Bernardino.

If you should have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (714)992-7543.

Sincerely,

Heidi Lockhart
Director, Cadena/Transfer Center

Phone **714-992-7543** fax **714-992-7041** http://www.fullcoll.edu
321 East Chapman Avenue • Fullerton, CA 92832-2095
North Orange County Community College District

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Participant #: _____

Current Age: _____ Gender: F M

County of current residence: _____

Did you receive ILP services? Y N

Age at entry into the system: _____

Family structure: _____

Reason(s) for being in the system: _____

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1. How do you define "family"?
2. How did you feel when you were approaching 18, when you aged out of the system?
3. How did your social worker handle family contact as you were leaving the system?
4. Were there people you wanted to have more involved with your life (family members, teachers, friends' families, foster families, staff)?
5. Who do you have contact with now?

APPENDIX C

FLYER

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!

Are you between 18 and 35 years old?
Did you participate in an ILP program?
Have experience with the foster care system?

Graduate student is looking for volunteers to be interviewed as part of a research project. Participation will be confidential. You may not have had a chance to talk about your experiences and opinions; don't let this opportunity pass by!

If interested, please contact Vanessa Crayton at (714) 609-7496 to set an appointment and let your voice be heard!

This research study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Herb Shon, faculty member of CSU San Bernardino, and has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the the CSUSB Institutional Review Board. The results of this study will be presented as a final research project for the Masters of Social Work program at CSU San Bernardino in June, 2006.

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being invited to participate has been designed to assess former foster youths' perceptions of social support, particularly that of their families, as they aged out of the foster care system. If you decide to participate, you will be asked several background questions (such as your age) as well as five questions about your thoughts and feelings, as well as you can recall, when you were transitioning out of the foster care system around the age of 18. There is the possibility that this interview process will bring up old feelings or memories that are uncomfortable to face. The researcher can provide referrals to local mental health services if needed. However, this is also a forum for you to talk about your experiences with the foster care system and educate the professional community with this knowledge.

Your answers will be audio taped as part of the interview process. Please be assured that any information you provide will be strictly confidential. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. All interview forms and audio cassettes will be

identified with a number only, and the information will be kept in a locked cabinet, accessible only to the researcher and research supervisor.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Some of the questions may seem too personal, or you may be uncomfortable with the information being asked. You may answer as many or as few of the questions as you desire. If at any time you wish to discontinue the interview, you are free to do so. You may remove any data at any time during this study. The interview is expected to take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

This study is being conducted by Vanessa Crayton, a graduate student in the Masters of Social Work Program at California State University, San Bernardino. The project will be supervised by Dr. Herb Shon. Dr. Shon can be reached at (909) 537-5532 to address any concerns regarding this study.

The Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board has approved this project. The results of this study will be presented as a final research project for the Masters of Social Work Program at CSUSB. The results will be available in the Pfau University Library after September 2006.

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

Mark:_____ Date:_____

APPENDIX E

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for your participation in this exploratory study into young adults' experiences with the foster care system. This study is the first step in assessing the need for improved Independent Living Program (ILP) services, and especially how it relates to families and other important persons in the lives of adolescents in foster care.

After participation in this study, if you have questions or need someone to talk to, please contact

* New Hope Telephone Counseling Center

  (714) 639-4673, available 24 hours a day.

* Straight Talk Counseling Center

  5712 Camp St., Cypress (714) 828-2000

* Gary Center

  341 Hillcrest St., La Habra (562) 691-3263

This study was conducted by Vanessa Crayton, under the supervision of Dr. Herb Shon, faculty at CSU San Bernardino. If you have any questions about this study you may contact Dr. Shon at(909) 537-5532. Results of this study will be available in the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after September 2006.

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