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Former foster youths' perceptions of their life experiences

Yodit Tesfia Zerai

FORMER FOSTER YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF

THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

Yodit Tesfia Zerai

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the
perceptions of former foster youths' life experience
while in foster care and after leaving the foster care
system. The study utilized a qualitative research design
by way of face-to-face in-depth interviews. The sample
consisted of ten former foster youths' who were once in
foster care at one time in their lives. The study found
that most of the participants viewed their experiences in
foster care as negative. The study also revealed that
most of the participants became homeless immediately
after exiting the foster care system and experienced
depression and other mental health symptoms.

Another important finding of this study was that of
the participants who had children later on in their adult
lives faced issues with Child Protective Services (CPS)
for different reasons. One important practice
recommendation was for child welfare social workers to
prepare foster youth sufficiently for adjusting to the
world of adult life after exiting the system by providing
aftercare and other concrete services they may need. It
was also recommended for child welfare social workers to
have contacts with former foster youth on a regular basis

and to provide services as needed even after they exited

the system.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicate to my daughter-Samonie Reed without whose support, love, and sacrifice non of this would be possible, and to all the former foster youth who participated in this study.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter one begins with an introduction of the
problem that is being researched. It will provide general
information about some of the obstacles former foster
youths' face while in foster care and after leaving care,
and their perception of those obstacles and overall life
experience. This chapter will also show how the study
fits within the specialization of mental health. A
discussion of policies, and practice contexts that are
directly related to transitional foster youths' will also
be discussed. Finally, this chapter will address the
study's relevance to the social work field.

Problem Statement

According to the National Survey of Child and
Adolescents Well-being (NSCAW) 2007, over 530,000
children are in foster care in the United States. These
children live in different settings of the foster care
system. For example, some live in homes of relatives,
group homes, temporary shelters, foster homes and
residential housing. Approximately 20,000 out the 530,
000 youths' leave the foster care system on a national

level each year (Davey, 2005). When these children turn eighteen, most states require them to become adults over night and move out of the home they were currently living in. This could be a traumatic experience for some, especially those who are not prepared for real world. Former foster youths' as well as the youths' in the general population experience ups and downs even in the best positions. However, as a result of not being prepared, some of these youth become vulnerable to physical and sexual victimization, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration and public assistance utilization than youths' in the general population (Allen, 2004) In some states, foster youths' are allowed to extend their stay until they reach the age of twenty one but in most stats they are considered fit to be adults at the age of eighteen. According to Pokempner 2003, Youths' who are within in this age range experience confusion. It is at this time where they are attempting to figure out who they are, and where they belong. They are trying to find out what it is they need to do in order to be satisfying the expectations of society. This is especially more difficult for foster youth who face many obstacles that make the transition to adulthood

difficult, because of the lack of support, resource and most importantly the psychological issues they face due to these problems.

It is essential that professionals working with these youths' understand the issues and gain knowledge of the problems that youths' face when they age out of the foster care system. According to NACSW 2007 some of these problems include: depression, homelessness, incarceration, being forced into the welfare system, drug abuse, and potential for violence. All of these problems are a growing concern, not only for the individuals facing them but for society as a whole, particularly for professionals dealing with the transitional youths'. Professionals also need to gain knowledge of the psychological issues that take place after leaving the system in order to provide better services for this population.

According to American Academy of Pediatrics (2000), to develop into a psychologically healthy human being, a child must have a relationship with an adult and experience an emotional bond that is nurturing, protective, and a relationship that consist of trust and stability. However, these youth do not have the

opportunity to experience positive attachment with their biological parents. Once they enter the foster care system, most of them are detached from their brother and sisters, parents, and other family members. This could may also become a concern for their overall psychological wellbeing and the may impact the process of transitioning to adulthood. For example, the prevalence of low self-esteem and depression in aging out foster youth has well been documented in outcome studies. Studies have also shown that depression and self-esteem may cause this population to feel hopeless, unworthy, and unable to find their own way in society which may cause them to lose control of their lives. Depression and low self-esteem may specially be difficult for this population because they are already dealing with the stress of finding their own way into a world they are not prepared for. The issues that were just described are reasons why it is important to provide after care services that are adequate in providing former foster youth the type of services that will help them become ready for adulthood. Professionals need to understand the effectiveness of after care programs, and how they can affect the overall well-being

of aging out foster youth especially later on in their adult lives.

Relatively little existing research has focused on the perception of former foster youths' life experiences while in foster care or after leaving care. It is important to examine what happens to these youths' after losing services that was provided by the state. According to the Department of Children Services, these services include health insurance, education, shelter, food, etc. Adolescents placed in foster care provide a unique opportunity to examine the various perceptions that these former foster youths' may have experienced during their stay in foster care and after leaving care. Evaluating programs that are geared to helping former foster youth can also allow professionals to redirect the current practices that are being implemented or come up with new practices that will enhance the futures of this population. Federal legislators have been trying to bring attention to the issues relating to foster youths' transitioning out of foster care. They are trying to reach out to welfare professionals, and informing these professionals of the trend that is taking place which is becoming more serious thorough out time.

Purpose of the Study

According to Childtrends.org (2009), when children are neglected, abused, or when their caretakers are unable to provide them with adequate care, other people step in to take on the responsibility; usually it is best when that person is a close relative. When finding a close relative is not possible, the courts step in and assume responsibility of the child and place them in some type of foster care. These children then become ward of the court until the age of 18 years old. Once they age out, a significant portion of these youth exiting the foster care system face serious difficulty transitioning to life on their own (Reilly, 2003). Their quality of life is decreases because of the lack of financial support that they need for basic living expenses, and unfortunately most of these children are unable to complete the task of keeping a regular, unable to obtain health care, experiences in early pregnancies, and involvement with criminal acts (Reilly, 2003). The obstacles that these youths' face while trying to transition into adulthood is major problem that may get in the way of their survival and these obstacles may impact what the out come will be for them. These former

foster youths' are mostly impacted negatively if they are
not prepared for the transition to adulthood. Their
self-esteem is also impacted and they are more likely to
experience some type of depression as well (White, 2009).

It is very important that professionals address
these issues by utilizing existing or new techniques that
will be a benefit to these youths'. One of the major ways
that professionals are involved in helping these youths
is through the different programs that are geared towards
helping aging out foster youth. One of the programs is
the Independent Living Program (ILP). According to the
Department of Children Services (DCS), the objective of
the independent living program is to make sure that
foster youths' aging out of the system are adequately
prepared and making sure that they are provided with
enough skills that they can use in the adult world.
Another program that these youths can utilize is the
Transitional Age Youth (TAY) program which falls under
the umbrella of The Department of Behavioral Health. The
program provides aging out youths' with the opportunity
to become well adjusted once they leave the system, and
become more independent. Some of the services available to
these youth within these programs are: mentoring, support

services, mental health services, help with finding
employment, individual therapy, group therapy and
assistance with education.

Studies have shown that there is a significant need
for more aftercare services serving former foster youths'.
Studies have also indicated existing aftercare services
are facing tremendous hardships. For example, one of the
greatest challenges that aftercare services are
experiencing is the lack of suitable and affordable
housing for this population, and without adequate housing
it is more likely that these youths' well not experience
success, especially for older youths' because they are the
ones who have more difficulties support networks and are
more likely to experience a lack of attachment with their
families (Woolsey, Judith & Leavy, 2008). It has also been
recommended that programs such as TAY and the ILP should
allow these youths' to have a say and be more involved in
the type of services that are being provided for them
(Woolsey & Katz-Leavy, 2009).

Finding topics issues related to the perception of
foster youths' was difficult. This is because past studies
have concentrated more on researching the perception of
professionals and care givers servicing former foster

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youths' rather than the perception of former foster youth themselves. However, one study did study the experiences of 55 former foster youth who had been emancipated from the foster care system for long periods of time, in San Francisco and Sacramento Ca. The researcher found that a significant amount of the participants experienced challenges after aging out of the foster care system. The results indicated that half of them had serious financial problems, 33% of the participants were involved in some type of illegal activities just to provide the basic needs for their selves. This study also found that mental health, housing, education; problems with the law, and substance abuse were some of the other issues these former foster youth had struggled with. The study concluded that those who have experienced life in foster care are leaving foster care unprepared, and when they come out of foster care not ready for the world, their chances of survival decreases. This is why it is important to study the perception of former foster youths' because examining their thoughts and perspectives can allow agencies and professionals to change the delivery of services that is currently being provided to these youths' today.

This research project utilized qualitative research design in which the study attempted to explain the perception of former foster youths' of their life experience while living in foster care and after leaving the foster care system. The study examined varies aspects of their lives by asking questions that are closely related to the issues of former foster youths' by face-to-face interviews. The answers obtained were then coded, and closely examined to determine categories and existing patterns.

The participants being studied in this research project were ideal for this study because all of them identified themselves as being former foster youth, and all are over the age of 18 years old. The participants have experienced the transition process from foster care to adulthood. The study intended to find common issues and experiences that these youths' shared and how those experiences may have impacted their lives through out the years. The qualitative questionnaire was anonymous because of the possibility of participants feeling uncomfortable talking about their experiences. Each questionnaire will be identified by a number rather than an actual name. Overall, this study intended to provide this population a

voice that they may have not had before, and give those

working with former foster youths' an opportunity to see

things from the perspective of the foster youth themselves

which could also lead to better services in the future.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This research study is applicable to the social work

profession because it will add valuable information to

current existing research regarding former foster youth'.

Educating the public about former foster youth can also

help the public recognize the seriousness of the outcome

and how it impacts society as a whole. It would also help

take some decrease the stereotypes that this population

faces. Findings in this area of practice can also be

beneficial to other researchers, as researchers only

recently started to focus on the aging out population in

recent years. Although there is some research regarding

different foster youths' topics, there are not many in

the areas of foster youths' perceptions. This study hopes

to provide social work practitioners an insight on their

experiences and journey of growing up in foster care and

where they are now. This study also intended to inform

social workers about the obstacles that may be a barrier

for this population and how these barriers impact their lives. Finally, the desired findings within this research project can also serve as future research proposals.

Another contribution that this study hopes to make is in the area of policies that are related to foster youths'. The study intends to show that foster youths' are coming out of foster care unprepared and experiencing difficulties in their adult lives. A need for change is critical because we as a society have been dealing with the same issues time and time again when it comes to this population. This research hopes to also show a trend that is occurring and hopefully it might influence policy makers to make policy changes to address the issues effecting former foster youth. Overall, this research study examined the perception of former foster youths' of their life experience while living in foster care and after leaving foster care.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Although there a significant amount research related

to former foster youth, most focus on demographics,

characteristics, mental health issues, and after care

programs. However, limited research exists on the

perception of former foster youth of their life

experience in foster care and after leaving care.

Aftercare services play a significant role in preparing

youth for adulthood. However, studies have shown that

even when foster youths' do utilize aftercare services

they still face difficulties in their adult lives.

Irving, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith (1995)

conducted a longitudinal study on foster youths

transitioning out of foster care. The study examined 141

youths who had been placed in the foster care system in

Wisconsin. They studied their experiences in the first 12

to 18 months of them leaving the foster care system. The

results indicated these young adults face various

difficulties during the transition process. They

conducted the study by a three part interviews. The first

interview was conducted while the foster youths' were
still living in foster care. The second sets of
interviews were conducted after they aged out of foster
care system and have already turned 18. Finally, the
researchers conducted the last interview three years
after participates left the foster care system. Some of
the findings indicated that only 60% of the participants
were employed and most of the participants experienced
hardship when it comes to obtaining adequate health care.
A majority of them also experienced difficulties with
housing, which lead them to become homeless. Overall, the
study indicated that a significant amount of the
participant experienced negative outcomes that were
dangerous to their overall well-being and thus an
unsuccessful transition to independence.

There are certain factors that play a role in the
success of former foster youth who age out of the foster
care system and experience a healthy transition to
adulthood. Daining and DePanfilis (2007) identified
personal and interpersonal factors that contributed to
the resilience of foster youths'. The study utilized 100
participants in a computer based, self-administered
interview, about self-sufficiency. This included

educational attainment, employment, housing, health risk

behaviors, criminal activity, and levels of social

support. They found that out of the 100 participants

females were more likely to have a higher resilience

score than males. The researchers also found a

correlation between the age of the youth and high levels

of resilience than those who were younger. They also

found a negative correlation between perceived stress and

resilience. Participants who had higher levels of social

support, and spiritual support from family and friends

showed higher resilience as well. Overall, the study

provided a better understanding of foster youth who age

out of the foster care system. The researchers also found

that resources for transitioning youth can have positive

influence self-sufficiency.

Chamberlian and Reid (1994) studied the difference

in risk factors and adjustment for male and female

delinquents in foster care treatment. They conducted

their study on 88 participants which and out of the 88

participants 51 were males who were referred to a

community based monitoring program. They used the

Treatment Foster Care model in which they involved

families in the community educated them, gave them

support, and in return, the families would then provide a placement for the youth. These families used a daily logging model that was used by to keep records and supervise the foster youth. The foster youth were also involved in a weekly meeting, which involved learning how to improve interpersonal skills, controlling anger and problem solving. The researchers found that males were more likely than females become involved in criminal activities. The experience of the females were of sexual abuse, and disrupted parenting, which gives reason to why they experience a higher rate of out of home placement.

Another study compared males in the general population, to males who were in foster care. The study consisted of 2,213 males entering high school. The method used to conduct this study was through questionnaire tests, which were administered on more than one occasion. During the eight year long study, the last measurement was conducted on 1,628 males that were no longer in high school. The categories used to determine findings were: Individual differences, changes in mean scores, and casual connections. One of the major differences, they found was in their background and ability correlated with their academic attainment. It was found that those who

had advantages in their lives while entering high school were more likely to still have those advantages at least five years after leaving high school. The findings also showed that high socioeconomic background status of the males influenced the high aspirations and ambition they displayed between 9th and 10th grade. In conclusion, the males in the general population had a positive outcome than males who were in foster care. Finally, the study indicated that the older the males from the general population got older the higher their self-esteem grew, however, males aging out of foster care had issues with low self-esteem as well as their overall wellbeing.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

There are a few theories that help us further understand the experiences of foster youth after aging out of foster care. However, two theories were used for the purpose of this study. First theory is Attachment theory, and how it relates to this population. The second theory is Resilience theory which can also be used to help further understand the coping mechanisms used to over come some of the obstacles former foster youth faced in their lives.

Attachment theory was proposed by Bowlby (1969), and many different theories have added to his original work, such as Mary Ainsworth. Attachment theory suggest that children's early emotional experience would stay with them later in life and have an impact on their emotional, psychological, and mental well-being. Attachment theory is a significant theory relating to former foster youth because of the lack of attachment they experience while growing up in the foster care system. Instability is a major factor to the lack of attachment. They are constantly moving from one home to another, and this makes it difficult gain stability and influences their ability to build strong relationships with others.

Mcwey (2004) studied the predictors of attachment styles of children in foster care, as well as using the model to work with families. The researcher's purpose of conducting the study was to use the findings to inform professionals working with this population, and to educate people of importance of attachment styles. The researcher conducted the study using children in foster care who were receiving supervised visitations with their biological parents. He used 287 children, and out of the 287 children, 100 were randomly picked which were enough

samples to represent the population under study. The parents of these children were deemed unfit which lead to the removal of their children for various reasons. Findings showed that attachment began in infancy as Bowlby stated in his theory, attachment is most important during the infancy stage. However, it was different for those children in foster care, which had an interruption of the attachment process. Results showed that the longer the child was out of his, or her home and away from their biological parent, the more it interfered with attachment to the parent thus, causing them to experience a lack of healthy attachment.

Another study that further explains the complications of attachment theory among foster youths was studied by Schofield and Beek (2005). The researcher reported that children spend a significant amount of time in foster care face many challenges, especially those who come from abusive families, and who experience psychosocial adversities. The study indicated that children who came from these backgrounds were more likely to be wary, distrustful, and controlling when they entered foster care system (Schofield & Beck, 2005). The researchers studied 52 children who were placed in foster

care, and had no chance of returning back home with their biological parents. The researchers were able to interview social workers and other professional who worked with these children to obtain information. Most of the children suffered from mental issues, learning difficulties, physical illness and were victims of parents who were drug, and alcohol abusers (Scholfield & Beck, 2001). The study indicated that the issues were brought upon from the loss they felt over losing their families. The study also found that attachment theory promotes security and resilience in these children. However, the researchers did sate that although attachment theory was helpful in making sense of their research, the theory needs to be expanded, tested and translated into learning materials that professionals working with children can use and evaluate.

Another theoretical perspective that is related to foster youths is the Resilience theory. Resilience theory is a popular theory among social workers and it is believed that the social work profession is grounded in resilience perspective, even though it may not be called that (VanBreda, 2001). Resilience theory can also help provide an understanding of risk factors within the foster

care system. According to Benard (1991), children who have resilience have cretin attributes, such as social competence, the ability to solve problems, autonomy, and sense of purpose of the future (Benard, 1991).

Resilience may be the reason to why some foster youth become more successful than others. Foster youth with resilience are able to separate the negative experiences they faced during their stay in the foster care system. A study that supports this theory was conducted by Hass, & Graydon. The researchers studied 44 young adults who were ward of the court and were placed in foster homes. They gave each participant a multiple survey questions that were put in place to examine their internal and external resource which influenced some of the positive outcomes of some of the participants. Some of the participants even went on to post-secondary educational programs. The researchers found that those who beat the odds had a sense of which they were and were they wanted to go in life. What made these participants more successful then those who didn't have resilience were the protective factors that played a role in their success. These protective factors included social support, personal strength such as faith, counselors,

therapists and grants, and scholarships. They also
indicated that although these youths had strong social
support, they still had doubts about their future.
Overall, this research showed the importance of community
based intervention or programs aimed to help aging out
youths.

Summary

All of the literature discussed related to foster
youth helped to make sense of this research study.
However, there is needed to be for more qualitative
studies aimed at determining the perception of the youth
themselves. It seems that these youth do not have a
voice, and researchers are concentrating more on the
perceptions of professionals and caretakers working with
these youths. Researchers also focus issues such as, risk
factors; community based interventions, demographics etc.
rather than researching the individual's perceptions.
Studying the perception of former foster youth can
provide a better understanding of the foster youth, and
most importantly the whole foster system as a whole.
Overall, resiliency is a great attribute to have,

especially among foster youths because it helps them beat
the odds.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This research project employed a qualitative design
to examine the life experiences of former foster youth.
The study utilized standardized open and closed ended
questions by a face-to-face interview. This chapter also
consisted of discussion of the procedures, rights of the
participants and a plan to ensure confidentiality.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore former
foster youth's perceptions of their life experiences in
foster care and after leaving care. Related literature
has shown that there is a need for change in the foster
care system. This study examined perceptions of former
foster youth in order to examine the obstacles that these
foster youth faced, and to understand how these obstacles
impact the lives of former foster youth.

This study employed a qualitative survey design with
face-to-face interviews. Data were collected from ten
former foster who have experienced the hardships of
transitioning out of foster care. Conducting face-to-face

interviews with these former foster youth increased the effectiveness of the study, in understanding their true perception of their life experiences in foster care. The questions that were asked included open and closed ended questions which allowed the participants to answer in depth. Another reason why using a qualitative face-to-face interview can be effective is because it allows the researcher to follow up further, on the questions in order for the participants to elaborate on the information they are sharing. Utilizing qualitative design can also be effective in that the researcher can account for the complexity of the individual's behavior, as well as allowing the researcher to identify recurring patterns of the behavior that the participant themselves cannot recognize. However, there are limitations to utilizing a qualitative design. One of the limitations is that the sources or subjects may not all be equally credible. Another limitation is that researcher bias can compromise the design of the study. These participants may not have represented the larger population of former foster youth. Finally, this particular population may not feel comfortable trusting a stranger in having to share personal information of their past.

Sampling

The participants who participated in this study were recruited from a social network website. This researcher advertised a status update on facebook asking for the participation of former foster youth to contact the researcher if they are interested in becoming a part of it. The sample consisted of ten former foster youth. Each participant were determined eligible for the study after this researcher established that they met the criteria, and made sure each participant was a willing participant. The ten participants varied in ages from 20 to 35. They were also diverse in ethnicity, the sample included participants from different backgrounds and culture. Furthermore, sense the purpose of this study is to examine the perception of former foster youth's life experience, these participants were ideal for this study because of the range in ages. It allowed the researcher to explore their experiences from the time they aged out of foster care, until now. The sample also consisted of both male and female, their grade level in school varied, and the length of time they spent in foster care. The challenges that this study experienced during the process of recruitment was not knowing the true identity of the

individuals who identified themselves as being former

foster youth. Using a social website made this even more

difficult because there is no way to be sure whether the

participant were being completely honest about their

identity as being a former foster youth.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data for this study were collected using

face-to-face interviews with former foster youth who were

recruited from a social network site. Before the

face-to-face interview was conducted, an email with an

attachment of the consent form was sent to each

participant. They were asked to send the consent form

back to the researcher before conducting the interview,

to make sure that consent was given. They were also asked

if they would consent to being audio taped prior to the

interview. The researcher utilized an interview guide

with twenty one questionnaire, including demographics.

The questions were used to inquire certain information

about their life experiences while in foster care, and

after leaving care. The interview guide was used to

inquire the perception of former foster youth regarding

they type of services they received after leaving care as

well. An example of some of the questions that were asked
are: Do you feel that your experiences in foster care
were more negative than positive? And why? And did you
use any child welfare services after leaving the foster
care system, and if yes what types of services were
available to you? The questions that were employed in
this study consisted of open and closed ended questions.
The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to obtain
more information from the participant, and the responses
were in-depth. Furthermore, some of the questions were
asked in a way that allowed the participants to reflect
on his or her past. This was beneficial to the study
because the responses were likely to have purpose and
thoughtful in nature. Overall, the instrument was
utilized to gain comprehensive information relating to
the life experiences of the participants.

Demographics were collected and further explained in
chapter four. The background information of the
participants varied in the different aspects of their
lives, which included information of their age,
ethnicity, gender, level of education, work experience,
martial status, and living arrangements.

Procedures

An approval was obtained by the IRB of California
Sate University San Bernardino. Once approval of the
study was determined the researcher screened each
participant to determine if they met the criteria of
being a former foster youth. The determination was made
based on the length of time he or she spent in foster
care, in order to gain more information on their
experiences. Once participants were recruited a
face-to-face interview with at least two participants a
week was conducted in a five week period. The interview
guide consisted of twenty two questions regarding the
perception of former foster youth's life experience. The
interview lasted about thirty minutes for each
participant. The interviews took place in different
locations such as the participant's houses and other
places that were private and quite, in order for the
participant to disclose information openly. Once the
interviews were completed, the process of putting the
data collection together took a few months to complete.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Participant's identities were protected because no names were used. Each participant was identified by a number. The information collected was then placed in a safe place where they were protected and remained in the possession of the researcher at all times. Participants were informed that they would not be identified by their names; they were also informed that they didn't have to answer questions that they felt uncomfortable discussing. An informed consent was provided to all the participants who explained the purpose of the study and informed them of their rights as participants. A debriefing statement was also provided to all the participants who informed them about where they can obtain the outcome of the study after was completed.

Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative data analysis technique to collect information. A descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographics. Data was collected from a face-to-face interview with ten former foster youth and the information obtained was then

transcribed verbatim. A journal was used to record each participant's response and major categories were identified from the data set.

This study used qualitative research method where a face-to-face interview was conducted. Participants were obtained through a social network site. The sample consisted of ten former foster youth who have faced different challenges through out their experience in foster care and after leaving care. There was a range in age, education level, ethnicity, gender and living arrangement. The face-to-face interview consisted of open and closed-ended questions that allowed the participant to answer in depth. Overall, this study hopes to examine the perception of former foster youth of their life experiences, and explore the positive and negative aspects of growing up in foster care and examine the challenges that may occur after leaving care.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter describes the findings of the data that
was collected. This chapter was being divided into two
sections. The first section consisted of demographic
information, and the second section provided a discussion
on the perception of the participants and their life
experiences of living in foster care and after leaving
the foster care system. Recommendations fro social work
practice policy and research will be presented as well.

Presentation of the Findings

All ten participants in this study have all
identified themselves as being former foster youth from
various counties. Of the ten participants that were
interviewed, 70% were female and 30% were male. The range
of the participants ages were between 23 and 38 and the
average age of the participants was 32 years old. The
findings for ethnicity consisted of: 30% of Black not
Hispanic, 30% Hispanic, 10% White not Hispanic, 20% Asian
or Pacific Islander and 10% identified themselves as
being "other". One participant of participants who

identified themselves as "other" was of a mixed race, Cuban/White and African American. The least represented ethnic within this population was White not Hispanic at only 10%.

In regards to the level of educational, 20% of the participants identified "High School" as being the highest level of their education, and 40% completed "community college/some college," another 40% identified "college/university (undergraduate level" as being the highest level of their education. In terms of living arrangements, 60% identified themselves as "live alone," 20% identified themselves as living in "government assisted housing," and the remaining 20% identified themselves as "live with relative." For employment status, 70% of the participants answered yes, while 30% answered no. In terms of mental status, 10% identified themselves as being "married," 80% identified themselves as "never married," and the remaining 10% percent identified themselves as "divorced,"

The categories were discovered in this study by analyzing the data collection. These themes were all a product of the similarities of answers given by the participants. Some of the questions that were asked in

this study had more similarities in responses than other questions in the interview guide. The themes will be discussed for each question that was asked during the face-to-face interview.

All ten participants entered the foster care system at different ages. Only 30% of the participant entered the foster care system in their adolescent life stage. While 70% were all under the age of 12. The average that the participants entered the foster car system was 11 years old.

Housing

When participants were asked of whether or not they had access to housing once they aged out of the system, participants responded no. When a follow up question, "where did you go when you aged out of the system?" was asked, the most prominent response was "homeless." Out of the ten participants who were interviewed, 40% identified themselves as being "homeless," 30% of the participants identified themselves as "living with biological parent/parents" after leaving the foster care system, and the remaining 30% of participant identified themselves as living with "friends" until they were able to save up enough money to obtain their own housing.

The terms used to describe their experiences while they were homeless includes: lost, alone, and confused. These three categories were used 17 times throughout the entire interview.

The term "lost" was the most frequently cited term used when asked about housing after leaving care. For example, participant 1 responded in the following way:

No I did not have housing after leaving care. Um, I stayed on the streets. I guess you can say I was basically homeless and confused. I felt lost and didn't know what to do until I got a hold of an old friend whose family took me in and let me stay until I was able to get on my feet. (personal interview, April 2011)

Participant 7 had this to say:

Hell, I was homeless. Once you turn eighteen they don't care where you go or what you do, you are basically alone. I stayed in the streets for almost a year. I was able to convince my mother to let me come home until I found a job. I was completely lost and confused on what to do. I felt so alone at times. Let me tell you though being homeless were a humbling experience, but I don't really regret going

through that though because it changed me in so many

ways. (personal interview, April 2011)

After Care Services

When participants were asked about using aftercares

services after leaving the foster care system, 80% of the

participants identified themselves as not having used any

type of child welfare services. The frequently cited

reasons used were: "I didn't know", "no one told me" and

"I didn't think they would help me".

Participant 7 responded in this way:

I wish I did use some services to help out when I

got out but I did not know of any, no one told me

about any services. The only services I used were

the Salvation Army, but other than that I wasn't

aware of any services other than medical. (personal

interview, April 2011)

Participant 9 offered this response:

When I first emancipated from foster care they gave

me a list of services I can use but I didn't think

they would help me. I always thought you had to have

kids to be qualified for welfare services. Back then

we didn't have the type of services that they offer

foster youth today. I hear there are even places

where you can go and they will house you and
everything you need is provided, it's like being in
foster care all over again. (personal interview,
April 2011)

Mentorship

When participants were asked questions related to
mentorship, 70% of the participants identified themselves
as never having a mentor or anyone they looked up to
while living in foster care or after leaving the foster
care system. However the remaining 30% did have a mentor
who they identified as someone that helped them through
the process of transitioning to adulthood.

Participant 10 said:

I did not have a mentor while I was living in foster
care or after I left. None of the people around me
had the time or showed any interest, and plus I
never seen viewed anyone around me as someone that I
wanted to be like. (personal interview, April 2011)

Participant 1 offered this response:

I remember a counselor that was very close to my age
and she was once a former foster youth her self, and
we had similar experiences. Once I got to know her,
I felt close to her and I wanted to know everything

that she did to get to where she was. I guess you

can say she was like a mentor because she made me

realize that there was hope for me. (personal

interview, April 2011)

Contact with Biological Parents/Parent

When participants were asked about having contact

with biological parents while they were in foster care,

or after leaving care, only 20% of participants reported

that they had physical contact with their biological

parents. However, they reported that even though they had

contact with their parents/parent, the relationship they

shared with them was not a healthy relationship. The two

participants stated they had some type of conflict with

their biological parents/parent. One of the participants

had parents that were deceased, while the remaining 70%

reported that they had no contact with their biological

parents.

Participant 3 responded with:

My parents lost their rights to have any contact

with me while I was living in foster care. But I did

see them a few times after I left the system. They

were ordered to take a few classes in order to see

me again but they never did. I hated them for that

but you get use to it after awhile. (personal

interview, April 2011)

Participant 8 offered this response:

I did see both of my parents while I was in foster

care even though they were not together at that

time. They always came together though which was

hard because they didn't get along very well. It's

funny how they tried to act like actual parents

while I was living in foster care but couldn't do

their job at home. I rarely see them now, we never

really worked on our relationship, and there are too

many unresolved issues I guess. (personal interview,

April 2011)

Legal Issues

It was surprising to find that none of the

participants had issues while living in the foster care

system because previous research indicates that they

usually do. However, 20% of the participants did have

minor issues with the law after leaving care.

Participant 4 had this to day:

Yes, I did have a few legal problems but nothing

serious. Once I got in trouble for petty theft, and

the second time was for a DUI. Both times I was let

go after they took my finger prints so I never

really did any jail time. (personal interview, April

2011)

Participant 2 said:

Yea, I did run into some legal problems after

leaving the foster care system. I went to jail for

72 hours once for fighting and the girl said that I

used a bat when I didn't. The other time was for

public intoxication but I didn't do any jail time

for that. (personal interview, April 2011)

Mental Health Issues/Substance Abuse

When the issue of mental health came up, the most

frequent problem these former foster youth have faced and

are still facing is depression. Seventy percent of the

participants reported that they experienced high levels

of depression while they were in foster care and after

leaving the foster care system. While the remaining 30%

reported that although they were sad at times it was

never a problem in their lives. Terms such as sad, hurt,

and withdrawn were most frequently used to describe their

depression. Drug abuse was also high among these

participants. Eighty percent of the participants have

experimented with marijuana, meth, cocaine, and alcohol.

While the remaining 20% have only tried alcohol.

Participant 2 offered this response:

> I did have issues with depression while I was in
> foster care, not after leaving though. I kept to
> myself a lot and I was always sad. I didn't
> participate in many activities. I was pretty much
> withdrawn and I didn't like going to school much. I
> did receive help for my depression while I was in
> foster care. I saw a therapist twice a week for
> several months. It helped a lot. (personal
> interview, April 2011)

Participant 4 said:

> I have always been depressed ever since I can
> remember but I think that my depression got worse
> when I became an adult because I always felt hurt
> and sad. I remember I use to always cry because I
> was so frustrated and angry at the world. I felt
> that I wasn't prepared for anything when I aged out
> of the system. But um, yea to answer your question I
> was very depressed. That's when I started drinking a
> lot more than usual. (personal interview, April
> 2011)

Participant 8 said:

> Yes, lots. The first time I got drunk was with my
> father and he always smoked weed with us. When I got
> into the system it was not a big deal but I saw kids
> that were worst than me. I did PCP, crack, crank,
> cocaine, and alcohol. The alcohol is what got me in
> trouble with the law in the first place. I used more
> when I was depressed because it always made me feel
> better. (personal interview, April 2011)

Participant one said:

> Yes, I did experience depression while I was in the
> foster care. I just remember feeling really hurt
> because my mom would always miss visits. She never
> came to see me on a regular basis but she always
> would make promises that she would. I remember
> always sleep a lot and not eat and always cried over
> the smallest things. I hated being around others and
> I was always withdrawn from the rest of my peers.
> (personal interview, April 2011)

Perception on Overall Experience

Participants were asked if their experiences were
more negative or positive and to give reasons to why they
picked one of the two. Sixty percent of the participants

identified their experience in foster care as being more positive. Only 20% identified their experience to be more negative and the remaining 20% identified their experience in foster care as both positive and negative. The most significant reason why some of the participant identified their life experience in foster care as being positive was because they felt they learned a valuable life lesson. Those who identified their life experience to be negative were due to the lack of support they received after leaving the foster care system. Finally, those who identified both negative and positive offered the following response:

Participant 10 said:

> I have to say it was both. Sometimes it was positive because if you really take advantage of the services they have for you while you are in there you could grow up to be successful but as teenagers you don't know that and when you age out its to late because no one helps you then. It was negative to me sometimes too because it can be very depressing living there, especially when you see the other kids at your school with parents and a regular life. (personal interview, April 2011)

Participant 6 offered this response:

Um, I would have to say it was....I don't know, I
guess you can say it was both. It was positive
because I had somewhere to stay and if I didn't have
a place to stay who knows where I would have ended
up. Then again it was negative for the way it made
me feel. I was insecure and felt abandoned, like no
one wanted me or something. (personal interview,
April 2011)

Participant 3 said:

I can't think of anything positive about growing up
in foster care. I'm not going to say it was all bad
but I would lean more towards negative because I
never got the same experiences as my peers from
school that lived at home with their parents. I
always felt like I was missing something. (personal
interview, April 2011)

Participants 7 said:

I would say it was more positive because it taught
me how to be strong. I was one of those kids who
listened to adults and I did what they told me to
do. I was fortunate to have been placed in good
group homes because I know a lot of my friends who

had really bad experiences. (personal interview,

April 2011)

Challenges

There were significant similarities related to the challenges and obstacles that these former foster youth faced. Seventy percent identified stability as the number one challenge that they were faced with. Twenty percent of the participant identified being away from family as the second most challenging aspect of growing up in foster care. While the remaining 10% identified the lack of close relationships as the third most challenging aspect of growing up on foster care. When a follow up question of what they did to deal with these challenges was asked, 50% of the participants reported they acted out, and misbehaved to gain attention. Two participants reported that they took advantage of the free therapy that was offered to them and the other 30% reported they ran away as a way of dealing with the challenges they were faced with.

Participant 7 offered this response:

I guess um, the most challenging thing was moving

around from place to place never having a solid

foundation and not being able to build solid

friendships. I dealt with it by running away. I did

a lot of running away. I did not know how to deal

with the problem so I just ran away. (personal

interview, April 2011)

Participant 4 said:

The most challenging thing for me while growing up

in foster care, I guess for me was like not having

stability, moving back and fourth was difficult. I

acted out when I was faced with this challenge. I

did the only thing I knew how to do which was to be

bad. (personal interview, April 2011)

Perception of Caretakers

When this question was asked seven participants

identified the caretakers as not playing any significant

role in their lives. The terms that were most frequently

used within this question were "pay check", "like a

friend" and "too young".

Participant five said,

I'm not sure what their role was supposed to be but

how took it was that they were just there for a pay

check. Plus they were heck of young and we always

clashed because they try and act like they were all

that. I wasn't close to any of them, I noticed some

of the other youth were but I just never trusted any of them at all. They always made me feel like they were out to get me rather than helping me. (personal interview, April 2011)

Participant Two said,

I saw them as just young students trying to get through college and earn a pay check. The counselors I had were all working toward a college degree and working in a group home is so easy and they always did their homework and stuff. They never played any attention to us but when they did it was more on a friend level. I didn't see them as authority figures; it was hard when you got someone 2 years older than you telling you what to do. (personal interview, April 2011)

Emotional Bonds

All ten participants identified their peers as the people they built emotional bonds with. Eighty percent of them reported that they still have strong bounds with former foster youth that they grew up with. The remaining 20% identify new relationships and bonds they built with other, after leaving the foster care system.

Participant 2 said:

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Of course, people say that you can't pick your

family but you can. I have people that are related

to me by blood that I don't even care for but I have

met some people in the system that I would give my

life for. You can't help but grow together when you

are in the system together experiencing the same

things. (personal interview, April 2011)

Participant 6 offered this response:

Yes, I built life time friendships with at least 20

people who I lived with in shelters and group homes.

We are like sisters and brothers. (personal

interview, April 2011)

Life Lessons

When the question regarding life lessons were asked

80% of the participant reported a positive and valuable

lesson that they learned throughout their experience in

foster care, even those who had a negative experience.

The most frequent lesson that was learned among these

former foster youth was "self love" The following is some

of the response.

Participant 1 said:

I learned not to be a victim of my pain and to love

myself. Release the pain and let it go, once you let

go of the hurt you won't be hurt no more. (personal interview, April 2011)

Participant 8 offered this response:

I learned to love myself and to appreciate life. Before I didn't care about life, and if I died it wouldn't have made a difference. But being in a group home, I learned coping skills with counseling and I got help for all the issues I had. Today, I still have to deal with those issues but it gets easier and easier through time. I gained hope, self respect, self awareness of your actions, and you learn to care more about yourself and caring about other people's feelings. You learn to become more aware of what is going on around you. (personal interview, April 2011)

Summary

This chapter consisted responses of former foster youth and their perception of their life experience in foster care and after leaving care. Participants in the study expressed their concerns about how the foster care operates, and how it has impacted their lives. They shared the negative and positive aspects of their life

experiences and how they have overcame these challenges in their adult life. The responses were obtained from a 38 page transcripts, which were obtained from a five hour face-to-face interview. Overall, the findings indicated that former foster youth who spend a significant time in foster care are more likely to be impacted negatively later on in their lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five consisted of a discussion of the

findings. A presentation of the major categories that

emerged from the narrative data will be discussed.

Furthermore, limitations of this study will also be

discussed. Finally, recommendations for policy and

research for social work practice will be presented.

Discussion

This study was conducted to better understand former

foster youth's perception of their life experience during

their stay in foster care and after leaving the foster

care system. The findings from this research study

indicated that these former foster youth experienced

similar challenges and difficulties. Most of the

participants shared the similar struggles and common

perspectives on how their experience in foster has

impacted their lives as adults.

The results of this particular study reveled that

one of the most challenging issues of their experience in

foster care was not being prepared to transition out of

foster care, once they turned eighteen. Participants

shared their thoughts about not having adequate housing,

education and health care. These three issues were major

challenges for almost all of the participants. All ten

participants felt that lack of housing, education and

health care lead to the dysfunctions of their lives. Most

of the participants even reported of becoming homeless

for up to a year after transitioning out of foster care.

There are many studies that confirm the findings of this

research project. For example, Dworsky and Courtne 2009,

studied homelessness among foster youth. The study

related with the findings of this research project in

that foster youth are not receiving adequate housing

during their stay in foster care and after leaving the

foster care system. The researcher recommended that

states use funds to educate foster parents, and

professionals working with this population in order to

ensure the success of these youth.

Another issue that these participants felt was most

challenging during their experience in foster care was

the lack of emotional bonds with their biological

parents, and caretakers who worked in the homes that they

lived in. Participants reported acting out and feeling

depressed as a result. They also reported having issues with their children today, and have had issues involving CPS for various reasons. However, there were a few participants who did not have contact with their biological parents during their stay in foster care who grew up to become better parents than their own parents. Those who did not have issues with parenting as adults reported that the reason they became better parents than their own parents was because they promised themselves that they would never put their kids through the challenges that they had to go through as children. However there were some learned behaviors that were difficult for some of the former foster youth to get rid of as adults. For example, spanking was used frequently to discipline their children, and some admitted that at times they might have gone too far with the spanking. Some also reported that there was a lack of communication between them and their children. This is due to the fact that they had not had the opportunity to learn effective communication skills as former foster youth. Overall, emotional bonds were an issue because it has impacted the relationships they have built with others in their adult live, especially their own children.

Finally, the overall findings of this study indicated that foster youth had many different challenges in their lives during their stay in foster care and after leaving care. The findings showed that almost all of the participants were not aware of any aftercare services. This finding indicated that caretakers and those involved in serving these youth need to be aware of the challenges these youth face. This study also indicated that having adequate aftercare services are critical to the overall well-being of former foster youth.

Generally speaking, the interviews revealed mostly negative perception of life experiences in foster care. Most of the participants felt abandoned and alone. They also felt that they did not play a role in the decision making process of the everyday life situations that affected their lives. An overwhelming of the participants stated that they felt unheard, and decisions were being made for them everyday without their input. This affected them once they became adults and moved out of foster care. Most felt that they were unable to make decisions for themselves and they were unsure on how to become independent. Overall, most of the participants had negative perceptions of their life experiences in foster

care, and most of them felt that the participation in aftercare services would be a more effective way of preparing foster youth for the real world.

Limitations

This study was limited in different ways. One of the major limitations in this study was regarding the small sample size. There were only ten participants which can be a barrier to the study because these ten participants may not represent the experiences of the general former foster youth population. Another limitation that this study had was related to gender. There were only two males in this study which can also be a barrier because previous studies have shown that males have different perspectives on their experiences in foster care. Finally, the participant's ages may have been a limitation because almost all of the participants were over the age of 30. This could be a limitation because the experience of transitioning out of foster care in the early 90's could be a different experience today. All the new programs were not available to them back then, which might have reinforced their negative experiences in foster care.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The findings in this study indicated many different challenges faced by foster youth while living in foster care and after leaving the foster care. This brings up the issue of better aftercare services available to foster youth that will promote better education, health care, housing, education etc.

One of the most significant recommendations based on the findings of this study is the issue of decision making process. From the way that these participants described their experiences in the foster care system, it seems that the foster care system is disempowering the youth by not involving them in the decision making process. The youth should be involved in planning their placements, or at least be informed of where they will be staying to make sure the placement is a good fit for them. It should not be decided solely by the social worker. Recommendations for policy change would be that professionals working with foster youth need to be more empowering and make changes in the system that would allow foster youth to become more independent and allowing them to make choices for themselves.

Other recommendations for policy change would be the issue of preparation for transitioning out of foster care. Most of the participants did not know where they were going to go when they aged out of the foster care system. More efforts need to be made to prepare these youth for adulthood. An effective way to do this would be to start working with these youth at an earlier age, rather than waiting until they are closer to eighteen years of age. Transitioning to adulthood can be difficult for any adult. It was also recommended for child welfare social workers to have contacts with former foster youth' on a regular basis and to provide services as needed even after they exited the system. These youth are expected to become responsible for them almost overnight and this may not be fair to the youths' especially if they were not ready to be on their own in the first.

Conclusions

This study examined former foster youth's perception of their life. The study found that all ten of the participants in this study did have experience many different challenges while in foster care and after leaving the foster care system. This study also found

that the lack aftercare services and emotional bonds played a significant role in the dysfunction of the participant's lives. Furthermore, more research is needed using a larger sample to examine the perception of former foster youth of their life experience, in order to have a better understanding of the foster care system, and what changes can take place in order effective in helping foster youth successfully transition to adulthood.

Finally, foster youth leaving the foster care system need to be given opportunities to be a part of their own decision making process that may have an impact on their lives. It is more effective for professionals to gather information about their clients, find out their wants and desires, goal, and future plans and present them with ideas. However, the youth themselves should be the ones making the final decision. When they are allowed to do this, they may become more independent and feel more optimistic about their future.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic

1. How old are you?

2. What is your gender?
   1. Female
   2. Male

3. What is your ethnicity? (please **check only one**):
   1. White not Hispanic
   2. Black not Hispanic
   3. Hispanic
   4. Asian or Pacific Islander
   5. American Indian/Alaskan Native
   6. Other (Please Specify): _____

4. Please check the highest level of school completed:
   1. Elementary School
   2. Middle School/Junior High School
   3. High School
   4. Community College/Some College
   5. College/University (Undergraduate Level)
   6. Graduate or Professional School

5. What is your current living arraignment/situation?
   1. Live alone
   2. Live with a spouse/girlfriend/boyfriend
   3. Live with a friend/roommate
   4. Government assisted housing
   5. Live with a relative
   6. Other (Please Specify): _____

6. Are you currently employed?
   1. Yes
   2. No

7. What is your martial status?
   1. Married
   2. Never married
   3. Divorced
   4. Separated
   5. Windowed

Interview guide

8. How old were you when you first entered the foster care system?

9. When you aged out of the system did you have access to housing?

10. Did you have any financial support when you aged out the system and if yes what was the source?

11. Did you use any child welfare services after leaving the foster care system, and if yes what types of services were available to you?

12. Did you have a mentor while you were living in foster care, or after you left the foster care system?

13. Did you have contact with your biological parents while if foster care, or after leaving the foster care system?

14. During your stay in foster care, or after leaving foster care did you have any legal problems?

15. Did you feel you had issues with depression while in foster care or after leaving foster care?

16. Do you feel that your experiences in foster care were more negative than positive? And why?

17. What kind of things were most challenging for you while growing up in foster care? And what did you do when faced with these challenges?

18. How would you describe the role of the caretakers of the previous foster home(s) you been in?

20. Did you feel that you had emotional bonds with friends, family or care takers during your stay in foster care?

21. Have you ever experimented with any controlled substance while living in foster care or after leaving the foster care system?

22. Do you feel that you have learned any life lessons from growing up in foster care? And if do you want to share what they are?

Developed by Yodit Zerai

APPENDIX B

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

.

"Foster Youth's Perception of Their Life Experience"

Debriefing Statement

The study you have just participated in was about the perception of former foster youth of their life experience while growing up in foster care and after leaving care. The researcher was particularly interested in examining negative and positive effects of former foster youth's life experiences. The researcher was also interested in finding out how these experiences impacted the former foster youth later on in their adult life. It is hoped that the information obtained by this study will help after care agencies improve and expanded their program to help transitional youth receive better services to increase better outcomes.

Thank you for participating in this study. If you feel uncomfortable or distressed as a result of participating in the study, you are advised to contact Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184. You may also contact Janet Change if you would like to obtain a copy of the findings of the study after it is completed.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

You are invited to add your opinions to a study on former foster youth's perception of their life experience. The study is being conducted by Masters of Social Work (MSW) students from California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) under the supervision of Professor Janet Chang at CSUSB. The study has been approved by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand the perception of former foster youth's life experience and examine the negative and positive aspects of their lives, in an effort to improve services for this population.

Description: If you take part in this study, you will be asked a series of questions in a survey form about the experiences of growing up in the foster car system and the challenges that you may have faced after leaving the foster care system.

Participation: Participation is totally voluntary, and you are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer or questions you do not feel comfortable answering at any time.

Confidentiality: The information you give will remain confidential. No record will be made or kept of your name or any identifying information. A random number will be assigned to every survey packet. The information will only be viewed by the researcher, as well as the research adviser Dr. Janet Chang.

Duration: Participating in this survey should take about 20-30 minutes.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to taking part in this study.

Benefits: It is my hope that this study will give social workers the opportunity to better understand this population and give them a different perspective of what life is like through the eyes former foster youth. This could lead to better services implemented at agencies that serve this population.

Contact: If you have any questions or concerns about this study you can contact Dr. Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184.

Results: the results of the study will be available at the CSUSB library after the summer of 2011.

By marking below, you agree that you have been fully informed about his study and are volunteering to take part.

_____   _____
Place a check mark here   Date

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