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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE: THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH WHO SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATED THIS TRANSITION by Margot Hedenstrom was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing in the School of Nursing in the Byrdine F. Lewis School of Nursing and Health Professions, Georgia State University.

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ABSTRACT

AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE: THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH WHO SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATED THIS TRANSITION

by

MARGOT HEDENSTROM

Foster youth face high risks and poor outcomes after aging out of care resulting in great economic and human costs to society. The purpose of the study was to describe life experiences of children aging out of the foster care system from the perspectives of adults who have successfully navigated this transition. Their life experiences during this period provided meaningful information for this study which helped to identify themes.

Phenomenology was used to describe the experiences of nine young adults who had aged out of foster care. Participant ages ranged from 20 to 25 years old. Audiotaped semi-structured interviews were conducted for the study. Data analysis was ongoing throughout data collection as described by Diekelmann and Allen (1989) and expanded by Minick (1992). Four themes and five sub themes were identified: 1) 'Facing a transition' which had three sub themes of 'abrupt transition,' 'smooth but uneven transition,' and 'smooth transition;' 2) 'Depending on adults for help' which had two sub themes of 'receiving support' and 'asking for support;' 3) 'Making a difference for others; and 4) 'Moving forward with my life.' These four themes highlighted the participants' experiences as they aged out of foster care.

This study contributes to our understanding of the life experiences of former foster youth who are successful after the transition out of foster care. Recommendations for practice, education, and research are identified.

AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE: THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER
YOUTH WHO SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATED THIS TRANSITION

by

MARGOT HEDENSTROM

A DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing
in the Byrdine F. Lewis School of Nursing and Health Professions
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2014

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I must express my gratitude to my late mother, Jane Ragan, who, prior to her death, supported me throughout my education and as I began the dissertation journey. I am also grateful to my sister and stepfather for their love and understanding through the years. I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Todd, and our children, all of whom supported me unconditionally over the years of conducting this work.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CWLA	Child Welfare League of America
USDHHS	United States Department of Health and Human Services

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the background and significance of the problem of youth aging out of foster care. Current information on the outcomes of these youth is presented. This chapter provides information related to the problem, including the incidence of youth aging out of care and the associated costs, both economic and human. In addition, the purpose, research questions, and significance will be discussed. Finally, the framework that will be used to guide this study and definitions specific to the research will be included in this chapter.

Focus of Inquiry and Background

Caring for youth at high risk for poor outcomes as they age out of foster care can introduce great economic and human costs. The focus of this inquiry is on adults who have successfully transitioned out of foster care as youth. Foster children often experience a poor transition into adulthood. Poverty, early parenthood, and homelessness

are among the risks common to this population. Despite great economic investment each year by systems, institutions, and other entities within the United States, poor outcomes persist. The situation requires attention and research to improve these outcomes for young adults aging out of foster care. With greater knowledge surrounding the experiences and factors contributing to their successful transition into adulthood, programs can be designed with a focus on such positive predictors and the most cost-effective use of the resources available to support these young adults.

On any given day, approximately 397,000 children live in foster care within the United States (USDHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2012; USDHHS, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2014); more than 200,000 of this population are between 12 and 20 years of age. Aging out of the foster-care system at the age of 18, also known as *emancipation*, is the goal for approximately 20,000 children annually. Frequently, the day these foster children turn 18, they are expected to live and function independently as adults. Consequently, the goal of independent living is prevalent among these youth, and ensuring this goal is successfully reached is vital.

Children and youth enter foster care due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002; Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2004; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Zlotnick, Tam & Soman, 2012). They are removed from such situations and home environments and placed within a variety of settings including residential or therapeutic kinship care with relatives, or nonrelative home care. Children are frequently uprooted, moving multiple times to a

variety of foster-care or group-home settings, which commonly leads to instability during their subsequent transition into young adulthood and a variety of other poor outcomes.

Youth in foster care experience many life disruptions that can impair and challenge the stability of their lives. Frequent moves while in foster care may disrupt their connections to family, friends, school, and to society as a whole (Ahrens, et al., 2011; Courtney, et al., 2001; Koh, Rolock, Cross, & Eblen-Manning, 2014; Leslie, Kelleher, Burns, Landsverk, & Rolls, 2003;). From 10% to 50% of former foster youth, adult outcomes include homelessness, drug abuse, poverty, and prison (Ahrens, et al., 2011; Child Welfare League of America, 2007; Courtney, et al., 2001; Reilly, 2003; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Those who were unable to become self-sufficient often lack family or social support (Ahrens, et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2001; Kerman, Barth & Wildfire, 2004; Leslie et al., 2003, Oldmixon, 2007; Reilly, 2003; Wertheimer, 2002). The instability facing youth transitioning out of foster care comes at a time when most young people of their age-group are beginning to care for themselves in an independent fashion. Due to the life disruptions of foster care and its long-term impact on normal development, many of these youth do not successfully transition into independent adulthood.

There are many economic costs to society from youth who do not successfully age out of foster care. On an annual basis, \$4 billion are expended within the United States to create positive opportunities for youth aging out of the foster-care system including housing and education support. Yet, little remains known about factors contributing to successful outcomes for this population (Courtney et al., 2001; USDHHS, 2006; USDHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children,

Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2012). Consequently, their reliance on financial public assistance is common (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Oldmixon, 2007; Reilly, 2003; Wertheimer, 2002).

In addition to the financial costs that accrue as youth age out of foster care, various human costs take a toll on this vulnerable population. Interpersonal and life-success skills are often lacking (Ahrens, et al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2001; Dworsky & Courtney 2010), resulting in difficulty connecting and relating to other people. As noted earlier, drug abuse, early parenthood, and homelessness are prevalent risks, as well as violence toward other individuals (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney, et al., 2001). Courtney, Dworsky, and Peters (2009) conducted a study within the state of California on former foster youth who had successfully transitioned into adult independent living. The findings indicated that youth supported for longer periods of time (i.e., up to 21 years of age) encounter reduced risks including a 65% less chance of incarceration, a 38% less chance of early pregnancy, and a 33% higher chance of enrolling in college than peers without elongated support. Higher education for foster youth would result in higher life earnings, thus improving their access to resources (Courtney, et al., 2007).

Few research studies have investigated situations wherein foster-care youth have aged out of this care system with positive outcomes (Ahrens et al., 2011; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Stott, 2013). Although state and federal efforts have been initiated to increase support to this population, research has continued to focus primarily on the quantification and validation of poor transitions experienced by these youth. Therefore, the factors that collectively constitute successfully aging out of foster care remain

unknown. Why some foster children are successful while others are not represents another component requiring research attention. The literature review conducted for this current study indicated that the majority of existing related research has been conducted with a focus on the negative outcomes rather than the successes of these individuals. However, as noted earlier, with greater knowledge surrounding the factors contributing to successful transitions for foster youth into adulthood, more effective programs could be designed to support this population toward increased success with independent living as adults. With thousands of young lives at risk for poor outcomes on an annual basis, research and additional support are needed to improve the transition from foster care into adulthood.

Statement of Purpose and the Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to describe life experiences of children aging out of the foster care system from the perspectives of adults who have successfully navigated this transition. Therefore, former foster-care youth with successful transition experiences were selected as the study sample for their personal knowledge surrounding these experiences. Factors influencing a successful transition from foster care into independent adulthood were investigated among the described sample, and their successful experiences were explored along with the factors associated with those successes. These questions were chosen because knowing what contributes provides the initial information to design interventions to improve success rates for those who age out of the foster care system.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of former foster-care youth that influenced their successful transition from foster care into independent adult living?
2. What factors were the most helpful in the process of aging out of foster care and what factors were detrimental?
3. What was the level of stability experienced during and after the transition from foster care with work, relationships, and education?
4. What personal relationships influenced the successful transition from foster care into independent adult living?
5. Do the majority of former foster youth feel they were successful in the transition into independent adult living and why?

Significance of the Study

As noted earlier, the common adverse outcomes of youth aging out of foster care results in significant economic and human costs (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002; Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2001). Although the need for federal support has spurred research focus, significant gaps in knowledge remain surrounding the factors that impact transition success for this vulnerable population of youth (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Increased understanding of the experiences and factors contributing to such success will enable the development of cost-effective programs targeting specific outcomes and allocating resources more appropriately in support of these youth and young adults. Poor outcomes, including increased risk of incarceration and homelessness, are well documented; yet, minimal study has investigated factors contributing to youth aging out of foster care in a manner that result in a successful transition into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Osgood, Foster &

Courtney, 2010). Further research is needed toward this end to increase the number of successes.

Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap (2009) found that youth who age out of the foster-care system at 18 years of age have a 25% chance of becoming incarcerated, less than a 50% chance of high-school graduation, and a 20% chance of becoming homeless. Those who transition successfully experience an effective integration into society (Courtney et al., 2001). They attend college and obtain employment that allows them to work toward self-sufficiency, avoiding drug use and illegal activity resulting in incarceration. With further research identifying the reasons and specific protective factors that result in such success, programs can be expanded to support other vulnerable youth to increase success rates.

Framework

Emerging-adulthood theory and phenomenology are frameworks relevant to the current study, with promise toward this end.

Emerging Adulthood

The theory of emerging adulthood supports study of the adolescent transition from foster care to independent adulthood (Arnett, 2000). The construct facilitates evaluation of this transition; specifically, with samples of young adults 18 through 20 years of age. The theory supports investigation into the tasks of successful transition to independent adulthood. Arnett and Tanner (2006) incorporated this model in a study of independence, interdependence, role transitions, norm compliance, biological transitions, chronological transitions, and family capacities. This process of development involves five different ages with five different areas of focus—(a) identity exploration,

(b) instability, (c) self-focus, (d) the sense of being in-between, and (e) possibilities.

Although it is considered normative for emerging adults to transition to stability in employment, love, and housing, foster youth have increased risks during the time of transition compared to peers not raised within the foster-care system (Arnett, 2007; Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Tweddle, 2007). The period of life known as emerging adulthood presents opportunities because youth are often relatively free from parental supervision, yet not fully committed to family and work responsibilities (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Emerging adults have the freedom to make their own decisions while maintaining parental support, if needed, due to their relative freedom from parental oversight while not yet firmly immersed in their adult roles. Conversely, many foster-care youth are expected to be living independently upon reaching their 18th birthday (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Samuels, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Arnett (2007) suggested that youth aging out of foster care are more vulnerable than other young adults due to their increased freedom from the frequent lack of family connections and/or adult support. The lack of family connections is a key aspect of the vulnerability of this population of youth. Emerging adults not raised in foster care often leave their families by choice, while still maintaining a connection. Youth aging out of foster care are often forced to leave care and family solely due to their age, immediately expected to live on their own upon reaching their 18th birthday. Arnett emphasized the need for further research on foster youth aging out of care to obtain their own perceptions of this period of their lives. Although the emerging-adult model has been the focus of past research, Arnett (2007) acknowledged the ongoing need for further study of this

construct, as well, including youth aging out of foster care, due to the struggle young adults often encounter through this period of emerging adulthood. He recommended the use of qualitative methods to study this population.

This current qualitative research contributes to the related body of knowledge by interviewing former foster-care youth with a focus on their successful transition into independent adulthood. The study was conducted to explore the experiences of adults who had aged out of foster care during the period of emerging adulthood. As did Arnett and Tanner (2006), participating interviewees were asked if they believed they had reached adulthood. The study defines success as youth who obtained their GED or graduated high school, who were not incarcerated and who did not have extended periods of homelessness. In addition these adults were now employed, pursuing employment, or enrolled in college. Existing literature has supported the risk of increased instability with foster-care youth compared to youth not raised in the foster-care system; hence, this was also a consideration during the course of this study.

Phenomenology

A phenomenological approach was the philosophical model implemented in this research. Following the philosophy of Heidegger, nursing researchers have developed a methodology referred to as an existential phenomenological approach (Benner 1994; Van Manen 1990). Phenomenology entails examination of the lived experience and essence of being through an understanding of experience (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). It is the study of the individual as a being, as well as the being and existence described as *dasein* by Heidegger (1962). Meanings are embedded within experiences and understood through the use of phenomenology (Heidegger 1996; Van Manen 1990). This entails

examining the experience and subsequently reviewing the parts to the whole before returning to the whole once again.

Phenomenology attempts to study social meanings in order to understand the world through the “eyes” of the participants. Through this method, meaning can be made “visible.” Benner (1994) affirmed that phenomenology is useful in moving from what it is to know, to why, to how we know. *Engaged reason* is also applied in the phenomenological approach. Storytelling is a facet of this methodology. Hermeneutics can facilitate a better understanding of self (Thompson, 1990). Three concepts of self, as they relate to phenomenology, are pertinent to this current study. The first is the concept of a unique world, with individual meaning for each participant. The second is the belief that all things have significance and value to each participant. The third is that the individual is a being in time and that time is not necessarily linear (Leonard, 1994).

The concept of a unique world asserts that an individual experiences life separate from others. The *world* refers to relationships, connections, and language that result from cultural participation (Leonard, 1994). This would be distinctive to each individual. For example, youth aging out of foster care might live with a sibling, within a group home, or within family foster care during their entry into emerging adulthood. The experiences and language comprise the individual in this circumstance. Phenomenology relies upon the transcription of interview text and also interpretation of the data to consider the impact of situations and language on the interview text (Van Manen, 1990).

As to the concept of things and experiences having significance and value to individuals (Leonard, 1994), Heidegger (1975) posited that existence and the activities of life help to define individuals. People can be immersed in reacting to life events,

precluding the opportunity to deliberate their meaning. Phenomenology is useful in bringing such meaning to the forefront through the research process. Meanings must be pursued because routine life activities are often not consciously considered as having meaning without this attention (Leonard, 1994). The concept of greatest relevance to the current study is the individual as a being in time. Time, in this case, is not linear, but rather, applied to being and both directional and relational through passages and transition. Being defines individuals through time, by means of items valued (Heidegger, 1962). They are also defined by time and the activities in which they participate.

Phenomenology seeks to elucidate and analyze the experiences of others to draw associated meaning (Benner, 1994). No single set of measures exists for this purpose, but rather, direction in the approach to studying interview text is provided. Familiarity with the research is a key element aiding this process, as is avoiding bias. Dialogue with participants that includes concurrently listening for concerns and experiences throughout the interview, facilitates an effective evaluative process. Phenomenology often includes additional researchers to support interpretation of the data, as well as research questions to guide the study.

Phenomenology is a valuable method for revealing complex meanings within the human experience (Benner, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). The adolescent view of the world may differ from the perspectives of other age-groups, and the process of aging out of foster care is thought by this researcher to hold some commonalities. A core principle of phenomenology is grounded in the existence of shared meanings through experiences resulting from common practices in which all individuals participate (Benner, 1994). These experiences hold significance and value. The goal of phenomenology is to reveal

meaning through text, interviews, and other forms of interaction with study participants throughout the research process.

Preformulated questions help to guide interview sessions. However, a researcher applying phenomenology must always consider what was *understood* from the transcribed text including themes and other “common threads” across the interviews. Unexpected information and new topics are often discovered through the phenomenological process. This necessitates constant analysis, returning to the interview transcription throughout the research process. Returning to prior interviews as additional interviews and analysis are conducted is essential in the phenomenology process.

Writing is also a critical element of interpretation that allows for initial summary, analyses, and reevaluation as additional interviews are completed (Benner, 1994; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). This is an integral facet of *engaged reasoning*, which is a key aspect of phenomenology (Benner, 1994). The goal of engaged reasoning is to reveal commonalities and differences. In this current study, adolescent development and foster care are pivotal cultural factors. Five sources of commonality are explored in phenomenology (Benner & Wrubel, 1989)—situation, embodiment, temporality, concerns, and common meanings. *Common meanings* are those interpretations often taken for granted. In this descriptive study, common meanings are explored for those who have aged out of foster care who comprise the study sample.

Application to Foster-Care Research

Phenomenology is the study of experiences that reveal meaning. Analysis of the experiences of adults who aged out of foster care as youth with positive outcomes can provide information with the potential to strengthen programs that support these youth.

Researchers have postulated that the experience of a positive relationship with one or more adults leads to a positive outcome for children aging out of the foster-care system (Avery, 2010; Courtney et al. 2001; Mallon, 1998; Zlotnick et al., 2012).

Phenomenology is particularly useful for uncovering complex issues embedded within such relationships and experiences (Benner, 1994; Leonard, 1994). This method is chosen as an appropriate one for the current study.

No one specific philosophy or theory is ideal for studying foster-care children. The complexity of this population of youth requires consideration of the vulnerable nature of adolescent development and emerging adulthood in order to support their successful transition into adulthood. Using phenomenology as a guiding philosophy for related research allows a review of the life experiences of former foster youth to reveal their experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences. An understanding of the factors that have led this population to age out of the foster-care system successfully will contribute to improved outcomes for these youth going forward. This can be accomplished by identifying the needs of children who age out of the system and working toward ensuring those needs is met. Through phenomenology, these youth are given a collective voice as their shared experiences are documented.

Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this study and are defined for purposes of the research:

Aging out of foster care. Youth are aged out of foster care upon their 18th birthday when they are discharged from this care system.

Successful aging out of foster care. Youth are viewed as successfully aging out of foster care when they perceive their transition into adulthood as successful, have avoided incarceration and are not currently homeless. Other indicators of success include employment or the completion of high school or general education development (GED). Ultimately, success is “through the eyes” of those who personally experienced aging out of foster care.

Unsuccessful aging out of foster care. Unsuccessful aging out of foster care is evident when youth are fully dependent upon others for their basic needs (e.g., food and housing) after 21 years of age, unless they are enrolled in a technical school, military service, or college. Other indicators include (a) lack of a high-school diploma or GED, (b) incarceration, and (c) currently homeless.

Summary

Billions of dollars are allocated to the support of former foster-care youth on an annual basis (USDHHS, 2006; USDHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2012). Yet, evidence indicates poor outcomes for youth aging out of this care system, which equates to a lack of self-sustenance among this adult population (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney, et al., 2001). Further research and support are needed to ensure the successful transitioning of these youth into adulthood. The application of both emerging-adulthood theory and phenomenology allows an approach to the study of youth aging out of foster care that supports a search for common meanings assigned by these youth to their experiences. Identifying common meanings and experiences associated with a successful transition from foster care to independent adulthood is the first step toward improving the

outcomes and number of life successes within this population. If their specific needs can be identified, this transition can be improved.

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the life experiences and factors that contributed to effective transitions for children aging out of the foster-care system from the perspectives of adults who have successfully navigated this transition. In this chapter, an introduction to the study of former foster-youth experiences in the transition out of foster care to adulthood was provided. The purpose of the study and research questions were provided. The significance of the study was outlined. The method of phenomenology was discussed and explained for use in this study. The next chapter will review the literature relevant to the area of study including adolescent development and foster care.

CHAPTER II

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Existing literature related to the problem of youth unsuccessfully aging out of foster care is reviewed to provide the context of this current study. The theoretical context of the research is phenomenology, which is used in this study to explore common meanings among the research participants who have successfully aged out of foster care.

Literature Review

Adolescent Development

The primary focus of this review of literature related to the current topic of study is on relationships with others during adolescence and through the process of aging out of foster care. Relating with, and connecting to, others in order to form supportive relationships is a subject of much research. Common concerns, such as increases in risk behavior, the likelihood of poverty, and difficulty with obtaining a basic education or stable employment, have been explored. Young adults remaining in foster care beyond 18 years of age is another topic of the research reviewed.

Relating and connecting to others. Strong, effective support relationships through adolescence are essential to life success. The types of relationships commonly studied are familial and peer, as well as relationships with adults such as mentors, teachers, or other key individuals in the lives of youth. Relationships with significant others, family, and friends who are perceived to be supportive have been shown to positively impact future success with aging out of foster care (Avery, 2010; Courtney et

al., 2005; Mallon 1998). Families are important to positive youth development during the transition into adulthood because they are a source of role modeling toward the development of appropriate communication and social competence (Youngblade et al., 2007). Families contribute to building adolescent self-esteem with their inherent connections and support system during the transition to independent adulthood. Youth are gradually less dependent upon their families while often maintaining close family connections during the transition into a healthy adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Conversely, a lack of support or relational connections has been shown to impair adolescent development (Courtney et al., 2011; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Some foster youth may have little contact with their families and thus are at risk for an unsuccessful transition into adulthood.

Peer relationships are an important aspect of normal adolescent life. Peer groups have been found to exert both positive and negative influences on adolescent development. Peer connections are a commonly accepted component of the transition into adulthood. Youth typically become increasingly involved in peer relationships and less reliant on family relationships. Foster-care youth are at high risk for poor peer relationships, largely due to their frequent moves within the foster-care system (Courtney et al., 2001). Support relationships with nonfamilial adults, such as mentors, have been shown to be positive influences on the social and emotional development of adolescents (Courtney et al., 2001; Dubois, Doolittle, Yates, Silverthorn, & Tebes, 2006; Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1997; Rhodes, J. E., 2004; Rhodes, J. & Lowe, 2008; Richel et al., 2007; Samuels, 2008; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002).

When youth are removed from abusive situations, they are disconnected physically and often emotionally from parents, siblings, and others living within their original households when placed in foster care. Living in foster care carries a stigma among populations of youth (Kools & Kennedy, 2003; Zlotnick et al., 2012), coupled with the loss of biological family (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Jonson-Reid, & Barth, 2003; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007; Samuels, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). These factors result in a crisis for youth (Mann-Feder., 2007; Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Samuels, 2008). Siblings are often separated, further disrupting familial relationships (Collins, 2001; Greeson & Bowen, 2008).

Adult relationships. Placement in foster care impacts many emotional connections. Such care sometimes provides a safe environment for youth, but not necessarily one conducive to forming positive relationships or attachments. Support is a critical area of life for foster-care youth and research has begun to explore this area of study (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, P., 2008; Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepinea, Beginb, & Bernard, 2007; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Rhodes, J. & Lowe, 2008). A qualitative study of caseworkers ($n = 5$), is consistent with the researchers above on the importance of meaningful adults caring and supporting youth transitioning from foster care into independent adulthood was identified as a major theme (Hedenstrom, 2007). A relationship with a supportive mentor has been found to counteract some of the stressors and negative impact of foster-care placement (Avery, 2010; Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Adults who can meet this need include foster parents, caseworkers, teachers, ministers, formal mentors, and other trusted adults.

Perceived social support is important for youth development and well-being (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, Terao, et al., 2004; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Hines et al., 2005). The support of foster family, mentors, and friends has been shown to have a positive impact on adolescent development (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, M. E. & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, M., Needell, et al., 2004; Courtney, M. et al., 2001; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; D'Impirio, Dubow, & Ippolito, 2000; Edmond, Auslander, Elze, & Bowland, 2006; Overall, Altrows, & Paulson, 2006; Flynn, Ghazal, Legault, Vandermeulen, & Petricks, 2004; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Hunter, 2001; Jackson & Martin, 1998; LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Mallon, 1998; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Reilly, 2003; Schofield & Beak, 2005). The need for supportive relationships among populations of youth aging out of foster care has been documented within related literature. The researchers of these studies have resoundingly emphasized the need for emotional support and positive relationships during this transition. Further investigation is needed to determine the types of relationships that are most helpful for a successful transition into adulthood.

Importance of support. In studies with samples of foster-care youth, perceived social support has been related to increased resilience (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Flynn et al., 2004). Daining and DePanfilis (2007) conducted research with 189 foster youth and found foster care youth were positively impacted by sensing support from other individuals. Foster-care youth typically have a variety of individuals involved in their lives who they perceive as support relationships including foster parents, mentors, birth parents, siblings, teachers, and caseworkers (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney

et al. 2001; Samuels, 2008). Emotional support is noted as an important factor for future quality of life (Courtney. et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, M., Terao, et al., 2004; Freundlich & Avery, 2006).

Relationships with significant others, family, and friends perceived to be supportive have had a positive impact on the future success of foster-care youth (Courtney et al., 2005; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Mallon, 1998; Koh et al., 2014). Even one supportive mentor can impact outcomes for this population of youth. Ahrens et al. (2008) conducted a national longitudinal study of youth who had been in foster care ($n = 310$). Those who had been mentored exhibited positive outcomes as adults including high self-esteem and good general health. The presence of an adult mentor relationship for a minimum of 2 years resulted in positive life outcomes for the Ahrens et al. sample of youth (i.e., education/employment, psychological well-being, good physical health, and low participation in unhealthy behavior). A successful transition for these youth into independent adulthood was associated with the supportive adults implementing the independent-living programs and connections with other supportive adults.

The influence of one meaningful adult relationship has proven to be a positive factor for both foster-care youth and other adolescents, improving the quality of their lives (Courtney et al., 2001; Everall et al., 2006; Hunter, 2001; Mallon, 1998). However, inherent challenges limit the ability of foster-care youth to access positive relationships. Courtney, Terao, et al. (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of adolescents aging out of foster care and found that 70% of the sample of youth had primary caregivers living with alcohol abuse, drug abuse, poor parenting skills, spousal abuse, mental illness, or

criminal records. As a result of such problems in parental figures and primary caregivers, foster-care youth often lack positive role models within the home (Courtney et al., 2007).

The need for support among populations of foster-care youth was confirmed in a study of 29 young adults aging out of care (Samuels, 2008). The researcher used a theoretical framework of loss, and the findings indicated the need for strong, supportive interpersonal relationships during the transition period of aging out of foster care. The study approach involved a social-network map within which the participating youth identified these relationships within their inner circles, middle circles, and outer circles. The study confirmed the importance of positive relationships with adults, including caseworkers, parents, and other supportive adults, during the period of aging out of foster care. These relationships resulted in improved outcomes for these youth as adults.

In a qualitative study of 52 foster youth and 18 mentors, mentoring programs were found to promote positive outcomes for youth aging out of foster care (Osterling & Hines, 2006). The areas of exploration in the research included relationships, education, and the ability to perform basic life skills. The researchers recommended early mentoring prior to the aging out process to support foster-care youth. Scannapieco et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study of youth aging out of foster care and found that communication and permanent connections were important to the success of this population of youth as adults. The need for support and permanent connections were reflected in the findings. Lack of a relationship with a support person or network was a primary finding among this sample of foster parents, foster youth, former foster youth, and child-welfare workers. Focus groups and individual interviews determined the need for youth involvement in case plans, as well as their need for personal connections.

Risk behavior. Risk behavior is not uncommon among adolescent populations; however, it can impair the transition to adulthood for both foster youth and youth not raised within this care system (Courtney et al., 2001). Adolescents often experiment with risk behavior such as drug use and sexual activity. If pregnancy or engagement in illegal activities manifests, such behavior can impair further development (Benson, 2002; Courtney et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2005). Early pregnancy, substance abuse, and incarceration are potential outcomes of participation in risk behavior, with foster-care youth at higher risk for such outcomes than the general population of youth (Casey Foundation, 2004, 2007; Courtney et al., 2007; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Poverty. Poverty is a risk factor known to be a potential barrier for positive youth development (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Courtney et al., 2001). Youth who lack the basic needs of housing, clothing, and food typically do not experience positive development (Jessor, 1993; Lerner & Galambos, 1998). Reilly (2003) found that, of 100 former foster youth within the state of Nevada, 94% earned less than \$10,000 per year; 69% had a high-school education; 30% were attending college; and 55% had no health insurance. Many pregnancies (i.e., 70) were reported by the study sample, and 50% had less than \$250 when they were discharged from foster care and little or no contact with caseworkers. Kerman et al. (2004) studied the outcomes of 115 foster children who were offered transitional education or housing support during the process of aging out of foster care. These researchers examined the relationships between total expenditures and outcomes. The findings indicated that those with extended financial and other support services had improved outcomes in the form of completed education and avoiding

homelessness. The high rate of poverty for former foster youth is often a difficult hurdle in the effort toward a positive transition into adulthood (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Hines et al., 2005).

Homelessness. Youth formerly in foster care who have experienced poverty have a higher rate of homelessness than other youth. Various studies have indicated that a former experience of foster care is predictive of homelessness with homeless rates up to 33% higher than are indicated for youth not raised within the foster-care system (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney. et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2007; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013). Many former foster youth have experienced a minimum of one or more episodes of homelessness during their transition into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2001; Osgood et al., 2010). Homelessness increases the difficulty of obtaining education and employment and hence hinders the progression toward a self-sufficient adulthood (Courtney et al., 2001).

Incarceration. Former foster youth are known to have higher rates of incarceration than youth not exposed to the foster-care system (Courtney et al., 2001; Osgood et al., 2010). Incarceration also impedes progress toward an independent adulthood (Courtney et al., 2001; Lee, Courtney, & Hook, 2012). Adults who have been incarcerated often have greater difficulty assimilating into society. Once released, former foster youth often have greater difficulty finding employment and continuing their education as a result of incarceration (Courtney et al., 2001).

Education and Duration of Foster Care

The completion of a basic high-school education is important for positive youth development and is an expectation of adolescents (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Lack of this basic education is often associated with poor outcomes in adulthood including incarceration (Courtney et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2012; Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). Many researchers have found that positive social relationships within the school setting have a positive impact on later development (Ahrens et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001). Dworsky and Courtney (2010) used a small study sample to show that those who remain in foster care until the age of 21 are more likely to complete 1 year of college.

One challenge for the positive development of foster-care youth is the typically frequent moves while in this system of care, which are disruptive for youth education. This population of youth frequently moves from school to school, often with little communication between the schools regarding prior-education status and individual needs. A caseworker relayed a story of a youth placed in a lower grade for several weeks due to poor communication of the appropriate grade placement when the child was placed in the new school (Hedenstrom, 2007). Foster youth often have no parental advocate for school matters. Many are in special education for emotional or educational needs, and the lack of positive parental support often impedes their educational placement and progress. Caseworkers attempt to assist with such communication and advocacy; however, they report frustration due to their caseloads and the resulting inability to follow youth sufficiently.

Positive education support reportedly leads to improved academic success for foster-care youth (Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Education has been identified as a factor of positive development for both foster-care youth and adolescents who have never been exposed to such care. The hazard of being in foster care often includes education difficulties and delays for those 18 years of age who lose their care without a high-school diploma (Courtney et al. 2001; Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Merdinger et al., 2005).

Findings of the Midwest Longitudinal Study indicated that youth who voluntarily remain in foster care until the age of 21 are more likely to have a higher quality of life than those who are aged out at 18 years of age (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney, M. E. & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, & Napolitano, 2013; Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, & Peters, 2009; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Compared with young adults 19 years of age who have never been exposed to foster care, foster youth were found to be twice as likely to experience poor outcomes, even after remaining in supportive living care past the age of 18 on a voluntary basis, and three times as likely to experience poor outcomes after leaving care before 19 years of age (Courtney. & Dworsky, 2006). Youth participating in the Midwest Longitudinal Study who remained in care through 18 to 21 years of age were placed in independent living quarters with adult supervision during this time. Lee et al. (2012) reported a decrease in incarceration rates among the females of their study sample. The sample consisted of a small group of foster youth who remained in care after the age of 18.

Literature Gaps

Although a plethora of research has been conducted in the area of youth aging out of foster care and their frequently poor quality of life, further study is needed. Courtney et al. (2005) identified the need for outcome measures with samples of this population of youth. Since that time, studies have continued to indicate poor outcomes for youth aged out of care including homelessness, incarceration, lack of employment, and lack of education. However, many of these investigations did not clearly describe their theoretical basis.

Many related studies have been published since 1990. Unfortunately, however, this body of research presents many weaknesses that limit application of their findings. The studies followed youth aging out of care and documented their outcomes with quantification such as homelessness, employment, and education. Many studies (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, M., Terao, et al., 2004; Courtney, M. E. & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2007) have followed foster-care youth in a longitudinal fashion with inclusions such as demographics and characteristics of former foster youth. Factors such as living arrangements, relationships with family of origin, social support, and foster-care experiences have been evaluated. Education, employment, economic hardship, physical health and health-care access, mental health and utilization of mental-health services, sexual behavior, pregnancy, religion, and mentoring have also been evaluated.

Courtney et al., 2001 conducted a comprehensive, prospective descriptive study of youth before, during, and after they aged out of care. Poor outcomes of the sample of youth were documented, with a final review of the participants when they were 26 years

of age. Minimal focus was devoted to factors related to the success of the former foster youth. Because this was only one longitudinal study, there is great need for continued and expanded research. Recruitment and retention of participants is a major challenge for researchers studying youth aging out of foster care because of the high rate of homelessness and incarceration (Collins, 2001; Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). An analysis of the weaknesses of prior studies, including components such as sample makeup and theoretical framework, is a critical initial step for future research. The dearth of research assessing factors contributing to successful aging out of care is discussed in this current study.

The majority of studies addressing foster youth have small sample sizes, often a convenience sample, which limits the ability to fully explore relationships and offer generalizability (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2007; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005). Additionally, sample attrition rates are often high (Courtney et al., 2001). Youth who age out of foster care move frequently and are difficult to track over time. Some studies report attrition due to incarceration and/or loss of contact from the transient nature of this population (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001).

The majority of adolescents in foster care are members of minority population groups (USDHHS, 2006; USDHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2012; USSDHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2013). A weakness in past sample selection and data analysis is the lack of attention to the inclusion of minority youth. A few studies outline

gender differences within both risk factors and outcomes, indicating females as at risk for early parenthood at a higher rate than males, and males as more at risk for incarceration (Courtney et al., 2007). African Americans who live in foster care currently comprise approximately 25% of youth in care though, few investigators considered this in their research design (Igglehart & Becerra, 2002). Gender and culture differences are documented but not researched to explore possible relationships and targeted interventions.

A second major weakness of studies focused on foster-care youth is that they tend to be atheoretical. Exploratory research is needed, which is not typically theory based due to the need for theory development (Brink & Wood, 1998). In studies addressing adolescent behavior and outcomes, there may be a loose connection to a theory or framework without specifying this aspect of the research design.

A third weakness noted within existing literature related to this topic of study is the lack of research on the relationships between resources used in support of youth aging out of foster care and the outcomes and success of this population as adults (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, Terao, et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2013; Courtney, Needell, et al., 2004; Reilly, 2003; Werner, 1995). Although federal and state funds are allocated to the support of foster-care youth, minimal state or federal research has demonstrated any relationship between resources and outcomes (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, Terao, et al., 2004; Courtney, Needell, et al., 2004; Reilly, 2003; Werner, 1995). One major longitudinal study was conducted within the United States (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, Terao, et al., 2004; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Needell, et al., 2004). A few studies

conducted within Canada and the United Kingdom followed youth aging out of care in a comprehensive fashion (Jackson & Martin, 1998; Schofield & Beak, 2005).

This current research was conducted to contribute to the literature related to the foster youth aging out of care and their subsequent outcomes. Researchers have emphasized that additional study, including that qualitative in nature, is desperately needed (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Courtney et al., 2005; Samuels, 2008). The current investigation focuses on former foster youth who successfully transitioned into independent adulthood. Life experiences, context, and common meanings were explored. The study applied phenomenology and emerging-adulthood theory (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Benner, 1994; Leonard, 1994). This study helped to describe experiences and to document success stories of former foster youth.

Conclusion

Additional scientific knowledge can help repair some of the difficult, well-documented developmental trajectories of foster-care youth and those aging out of the system. Although foster care was designed to remove youth from an environment of risk, this care system often continues to expose youth to continued or different risks. Education, employment, living arrangements, social support, and relationships are important for an effective transition from foster care into successful independent living. The review of related literature conducted for this current study revealed the need for many types of research. Quality of life for this population of youth continues to be problematic. Despite the prevalence of this outcome, research continues to overlook the link between aspects of the aging-out process and outcomes for former foster youth as adults. As reported in the Midwest Longitudinal Study, youth who remained in care after

the age of 18 with support during the life transition to adulthood experienced more positive outcomes than youth who left foster care at an earlier age (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2007).

Foster youth are expected to be “instant adults” upon reaching their 18th birthdays (Dworsky, 2005; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Zlotnick et al., 2012). This expectation is evidenced by the abrupt transition out of care on the date of this birthday (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Casey Foundation, 2004, 2007). The likelihood of risk behavior resulting in pregnancy or incarceration is high due to the frequent inability to adjust to the sudden expectation of independent living.

The importance of connectedness among populations of foster youth cannot be overstated (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2007). Those with positive relationships and connections to society, such as school or work, tend to experience better education and employment outcomes than unconnected youth (Courtney et al., 2006). Foster-care children unable to become self-sufficient frequently become homeless, incarcerated, unemployed, and lacking the financial support and other resources needed for survival (Courtney et al., 2001; English, Stinnett, & Dunn-Georgiou, 2006; Oldmixon, 2007; Reilly, 2003; Wertheimer, 2002). Reliance upon financial public assistance is common within this population (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, M., Terao, et al., 2004; Oldmixon, 2007; Reilly, 2003; Wertheimer, 2002). It is unclear whether foster care, other existing risk factors, or a combination of factors are at the root of the vulnerability of foster youth to negative outcomes (Berzin, 2008).

Courtney et al. (2001) noted the difficulties of researching this population of youth including sample attrition, timing the transition out of care, and methodology challenges. Minimal research has been conducted on the study of successful outcomes of individuals aged out of foster care. The design and methods of future study are of critical importance. Arnett (2007) recommended qualitative research to explore the progress of foster-care youth toward emerging adulthood. Arnett and Tanner (2006) specifically recommended qualitative research to fully explore the experiences of aged-out youth as adults. This current study contributes to filling some of the gaps within existing related literature by moving from a focus on poor outcomes to research exploring life experiences and common meanings among adults who successfully transitioned from the foster-care system. Interviews were conducted to explicate meanings from the experiences of a sample of these adults.

Theory

Phenomenology is applied to find the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a population group (Patton, 2002). This approach allows researchers to identify the meanings assigned by the participants to their experiences and to gain a more complete understanding surrounding the outcomes of their lives. Understanding the experiences of adults who aged out of the foster-care system as youth, as well as the manner in which they currently interact, will allow rich descriptions of shared meanings through interpretation of the data (Benner, 1994). The data in this current study were collected through use of a constant-comparative method and phenomenology to elicit such shared meanings, as expressed by the study sample.

Phenomenology allows the study of social meanings toward an understanding of the world from the perspectives of the study participants (Benner, 1994). Through this method, meaning can be made “visible.” Analysis of the routine daily experiences of adults who aged out of the foster-care system as youth—both during and after aging out of care—will provide insight into the meaning behind this transition (Heidegger, 1962). The recall of this lived experience during the data-collection process of this study also spurred recall of events taken for granted by the former foster youth (Benner, 1994). Meanings were drawn through interpretation of the collected data via phenomenology. Dialogue with the participants included listening and drawing out the practices, concerns, and experiences of the participants through interviews, which also facilitated an effective analysis process.

Assumptions of the Researcher

As a former foster parent who has raised youth through to aging out of foster care, I have direct personal knowledge and have observed the interaction of youth who were both successful and unsuccessful in the transition into independent adulthood. This study was conducted under the following assumptions:

1. Adults who have successfully aged out of foster care are the experts of their own experiences.
2. Recall of the experiences of former foster youth as adults will provide important information to the topic under study.
3. The study of adults who successfully transitioned from foster care will elicit meanings that can contribute to future measures that will promote success in the aging-out process.

4. Former foster youth have had common experiences during the process of aging out of the foster-care system that contributed to a successful transition into independent adulthood.

Summary

This chapter has provided a review of the literature of youth aging out of foster care. Research gaps in the literature and the need for additional research have been discussed. The approach of phenomenology has been outlined. Finally, the assumptions of the researcher have been identified. The research plan for the proposed study is outlined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH PLAN AND PROCESS

Research Design

In this chapter, the research design, setting, participant recruitment and sampling, and data-generation strategies are described. The process for data generation and analysis is discussed. Protection of human subjects was maintained throughout the study. Measures used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study findings are described, as are the measures taken to ensure the quality and methodological rigor of the research. A qualitative design was applied to explore the experiences of former foster youth who successfully aged out of foster care. The life experiences of these youth were explored through open-ended questions posed during face-to-face interviews. Descriptive phenomenology was selected as the philosophical framework due to the minimal data available on the topic of study. The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the life experiences and factors that contributed to effective transitions for children aging out of the foster-care system from the perspectives of adults who have successfully navigated this transition.

Phenomenology provides the philosophical perspective and method for this study. The life experiences of former foster youth represent the phenomenon under analysis; consequently, former foster youth will comprise the sample selected for participation. Phenomenology was chosen as the philosophical framework upon which to guide this

study because there is a need to identify factors associated with successful aging out of foster care. A phenomenological approach will provide a framework from which commonalities and themes associated with this successful transition can be determined (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007).

In phenomenological study, the investigator is a participant (Patton, 2002). As such, self-examination and reflection are an integral aspect of the research process (Benner, 1994; Patton, 2002). Munhall (2007) recommended that researchers journal their reflections and personal experiences to monitor the research process. As a doctoral nursing student with experience as a foster-care parent and mentor to young adults aging out of foster care, I have personal knowledge surrounding this population of youth. I also adopted an adolescent who was in foster care for many years. Additional experiences related to this study include serving as a mentor for two former foster-care youth who have aged out of this care system. A pilot study interviewing caseworkers on their experiences working with former foster-care youth who had aged out of care was conducted in preparation for this study (Hedenstrom, 2007).

Sample and Setting

Purposive sampling was employed in this research to gather data related to the personal experiences of adults who have successfully aged out of foster care. These personal lived experiences provided valuable insight into the perceptions of the participants and the factors that promoted their successful transition into independent adulthood. Their perceptions of the periods during and after their transitions were explored to investigate supportive relationships, education, and workplace stability. Common experiences along their paths toward success were drawn from the study

interviews. The perceptions of the sample were crucial in outlining themes and common meanings having a potentially positive impact on the future success of this vulnerable group. Meaningful and rich data were collected from this study group (Benner, 1994; Patton, 2002).

The participants in this study were recruited from the southeastern region of the United States and were all adults who had aged out of foster care as youth. After the initial contact was made to discuss the research and answer any questions facilitating their decision as to whether to participate, a convenient time and place was coordinated to meet for the study interview with each individual agreeing to participate. A private setting, such as a conference room, was used for each session. Many of the participants chose a location close to their homes, within a library or office setting. One participant asked to meet in a private room of a bookstore close to her residence. I traveled to each interview location selected by each interviewee.

Recruiting participants was challenging due to the lack of an available central database of individuals comprising the target population. Networking and referrals by other young adults, intermediary personnel, and caseworkers who maintained casual contact with former foster youth were used as resources for recruitment. Former foster youth are often lost to follow-up upon aging out of the care system due to the transient nature of this population. Recruitment difficulty was perceived to be encountered due to a lack of trust on the part of potential participants. Great effort was taken to establish the trust necessary to encourage participation including building relationships with independent living coordinators, mentors, former foster parents, and adults who were former foster youth and known to me.

The following two strategies were employed for the sample recruitment in this study: (a) personal contact with the caseworkers of foster youth, and (b) snowballing. The first method involved personal contacts who were caseworkers or foster parents. Independent-living coordinators or case managers working within the southeastern region of the United States with youth aged out of foster care were contacted. As a foster parent, I have worked with case managers and foster youth within both individual and group settings for many years. Youth who age out of foster care frequently remain in contact with former caseworkers or independent-living coordinators (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Hedenstrom, 2007) so these coordinators and similar resources are potential sources of study participants.

Known caseworkers were asked for foster-youth referrals who might be interested in participating in the study. Follow-up contact was initiated with the Department of Family and Children Services via e-mail and telephone. Six participants were recruited through this method. The second method of recruitment involved snowballing, which is to draw potential participants from those who have already agreed to participate. Thus, adults meeting the study criteria who were known to other former foster youth already participating were also recruited for the study (Patton, 2002). Three of the participants were recruited via this second method.

A phone number established specifically for this study will be available to potential participants, as well as an e-mail address, allowing them to contact me at their convenience (see Appendix A). This will also assist in maintaining their confidentiality. After the initial contact is made to discuss the research and answer any questions facilitating their decisions as to whether to participate, a convenient time and place will

be coordinated to meet for the study interview with each individual agreeing to participate. A private setting, such as a conference room, will be used for each session.

The anticipated sample size for this study is between five and 20 participants. This range correlates with the sample size projected to obtain saturation, based upon the literature review and discussion with faculty advisors. The sample size will be reviewed with the dissertation committee toward reaching a satisfactory number of participants. The final sample will be concluded when information becomes redundant and neither new codes nor categories are identified during the constant-comparative method employed.

The offices and group homes were asked to post and distribute the flyer created for the study (see Appendix A). Follow-up contact was initiated with the Department of Family and Children Services via e-mail and telephone. Six participants were recruited through this method. The second method of recruitment involved snowballing, which helped to draw potential participants from those who had already agreed to participate. Thus, adults meeting the study criteria who were known to other former foster youth were recruited for the study (Patton, 2002). Upon completion of the interview process, participants were asked if they knew of any other former foster-care youth who might be interested in participating in the study. They were given information and the recruitment flyer to share with friends and acquaintances who might be interested. Three participants were recruited via this method. Sample recruitment was challenging throughout the study.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to select a specific group of adults to participate in this study who were former foster youth and who had successfully aged out

of foster care. The inclusion criteria included (a) background as a youth living in foster care for a minimum of 6 consecutive months prior to aging out of foster care, (b) currently over 18 years of age, and (c) successfully aged out of the foster-care system. Successfully aging out of the foster-care system is defined as (a) graduating from high school or completing a GED, (b) currently living independently, and (c) currently employed, actively seeking employment or attending technical school or college. All participants were required to be fluent speakers of the English language. Adults with significant developmental or cognitive impairment and not living independently were excluded from the study, as were those incarcerated or living within any institution. Adults with major psychiatric illnesses that impair their ability to complete questionnaires or an interview were excluded.

Former foster youth will provide specific, detailed, and firsthand information on the experiences as children who have aged out of foster care. Because of the familiarity and common life experiences of youth who have lived these experiences, their personal knowledge is invaluable to this study. Narrative experiences and stories are key aspects of study employing phenomenology (Benner, 1994). Such experiences can identify strengths and weaknesses of our social systems and the processes intended to support foster youth. The perceptions of this population are crucial in unraveling the mystery of factors associated with their successful transition into independent adulthood.

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and include the time to complete the demographic questionnaire and interview. The participants selected will have successfully aged out of foster care and will be instructed that, if they experience any emotional distress during the study, the interview process will be

discontinued. Any visible distress would be cause for immediate consult with faculty. The participants will be informed that their confidentiality will be protected by the full extent of the law. Past related research reported no incidences of emotional distress during the study process; consequently, any such risk is viewed as minimal. No immediate benefits exist with participation in the study.

Procedures

Recruitment for participation in this study began after approval from the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board was received. Potential participants were screened for inclusion and exclusion criteria and advised that the interview would consume approximately 1 hour. A \$20 gift card was offered to all participants. This token amount was intended as appreciation for their time, while sufficiently small to avoid the perception of coercion for study participation. The research was partially funded by the STEPS project at Georgia State University.

Upon completion of each interview, the interviewees completed a participant-characteristic form (see Appendix A). This form requested demographic information such as age, gender, current living situation, number of years in foster care, level of education, employment status, and income. Munhall (2007) recommended the collection of such data upon completion of the interviews to avoid distraction from the topic at hand during the interview process.

Data Collection

After informed-consent was obtained from each participant, the interviews were conducted. Each session was audio recorded (see Appendix B), and to support the principles of phenomenology, a process involving open-ended questions was

implemented to document the lived experiences of the participants. The duration of the interviews was between 45 and 75 minutes. Two of the participants reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy.

The following query is an example of the open-ended questions posed in the study interviews: “Tell me about the experiences you had with aging out of the foster-care system.” This question spurred the participants to recall experiences meaningful to them and describe the situations within the context of their lives prior to aging out of foster care. The open-ended approach of the interviews allowed the participants to “walk” me through their experiences (see Appendices C & D). It also enabled them to reflect upon the details of the most meaningful experiences, which were most commonly the seemingly insignificant daily experiences often taken for granted. Some participants described events involving helping others and the activities in which they had participated toward this end. In helping others, the participants were also helping themselves.

Whether it involved a life event, such as speaking at a conference, or simply the desire to open a group home, the interviewees recalled rich and important experiences that were meaningful to them as they participated in the interview process. The open-ended questions allowed them to reflect upon the events during their aging out of foster care. They described their experiences as if they were reliving them so they could be understood by me. Prompts were used by the researcher during the interviews to further explore the details surrounding the stories recounted and to reveal additional context and meaning.

As noted earlier, the interview process was used in this study as a method of exploring the life experiences of the participants. The interviews with adults who had successfully aged out of foster care as youth allowed for a broader understanding of the topic of interest, and this method was consistent with the phenomenological approach described by Benner (1994). As the interviews progressed, the prompts and probing questions were used to elicit additional experiences. An interview guide instilled consistency in the interview process and was shared with the participants (see Appendix D). The phenomenological methods of qualitative research support the concept of the subjects as the experts with the knowledge and experience on the topic under study and primary sources of related information. An open-ended approach provided an opportunity for the subjects to share their life experiences.

The phenomenological approach supported the use of stories to explore the recounted experiences. Interviews with several individuals allowed for a broader understanding of the topic under study and were consistent with a phenomenological approach (Benner, 1994). Interaction and dialogue during the interview facilitated the process (Munhall, 2007).

Phenomenological methods of qualitative research support the premise that it is the subjects who have the knowledge and experience on the topic and who are the focal point of the research. Therefore, an open-ended approach guided the research. This provided an opportunity for the participants to share their life experiences, which were essential to the qualitative process. The collection of practical information through conversational language was a suggested method of phenomenology (Benner, 1994). Interviews allowed participants to tell a story, providing a clear understanding of their

experiences, which in the case of this study, focused on the period of emerging adulthood and successfully aging out of foster care. Concerns and areas of importance to the participants were discovered through this technique. The interview and interview questions facilitated the exploration of their experiences as young adults aging out of foster care (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Arnett & Tanner, 2006).

In addition to the study interviews and researcher journal, field notes will be maintained. These manual interview notes will describe the setting, environment, body language, and other key elements the audiotape will not reveal during the interview process. Patton (2002) outlined the need for field notes to support qualitative research. The notes recorded during this study will include both written notes and information taped by me prior to and immediately following each interview for relevant thoughts, information, and details. Upon completion of each interview, the interviewees will complete a participant-characteristic form (see Appendix A). This form requests demographic information such as age, gender, current living situation, number of years in foster care, level of education, employment status, and income. Munhall (2007) recommended the collection of such data upon the completion of interviews to avoid distraction from the topic at hand during the interview process.

All interviews and other forms of data collection will be conducted by me. The questionnaires and transcripts will be coded with a participant number and maintained within a securely organized study notebook. Protocols for the data-entry process will be consistent. A code book will be accessible solely to me and the dissertation committee members. Data-integrity processes will be adhered to throughout the study. The interview audiotapes will be held in a locked location accessible only by me to protect

participant confidentiality. All audiotapes will be destroyed upon study completion. The consent forms will be stored separately from the transcripts to avoid any inadvertent identification of participants. The consent forms and demographic data will be held in separate locations. A log and record of all study materials will be maintained separately from the transcripts.

Pseudonyms will be assigned to the study participants, such as Participant A and Participant B, to further protect their confidentiality. The interview transcripts will be deidentified and held separately from the list of participants given a gift card. The transcripts will be held in a locked cabinet separate from other study materials. Myself and faculty will have sole access to the key of the locked file cabinet. Computer files relating to the study reside on my personal laptop and will be double password protected with a password required to access the computer and another required to access the files relating to the study.

Data Analysis

Overview

Data analysis began with the first interview and continued throughout the research process. The interview tapes were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by audibly comparing the transcripts with the tapes. Analysis was not a linear process. The first level of analysis was completed after each interview was transcribed. Moving back and forth between the transcripts was required because analysis was ongoing between each interview and throughout the research process. This constant-comparative method strengthened the analysis and provided a more thorough review of the data. Each interview was transcribed shortly after the respective session. The transcript was

subsequently summarized, coded, and compared to previous interviews. Earlier interviews were again reviewed throughout the process as new sessions were conducted.

All of the participants in this study were encouraged to review their respective transcripts. Attempts were made to provide each interviewee a copy of his or her transcript for any corrections and review. Two participants agreed to this review and were provided a copy of their respective transcripts for any corrections or final thoughts or suggestions pertaining to the subject matter. These two participants met with me at the same location as their interviews and expressed their views that the transcripts were reflective of the information they provided in their interviews and no additional comments were needed.

As noted earlier, the process for data analysis began with the first interview and corresponding field notes. Field notes were recorded throughout the interviews and reviewed during the initial phase of data analysis. These notes described the interview settings and any observations such as emotions evident in the participants or in their comments following completion of the interviews. For example, a few of the participants cried or exhibited other visible emotions during the interview process that the transcripts would not have captured. One participant continued to talk after the end of the interview about how she had helped others and described her work on the development of a group home, which the field notes preserved.

Self-analysis for the improvement of future interviews was also conducted through the field notes. For example, following one interview, I noted an additional interview question that facilitated the balance of the sessions by improving the original interview guide. After the interviews were transcribed, the data were analyzed using a

constant-comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). This approach provided a means of moving from the interview data to analysis and back through the process, allowing for interpretation of the meaning of the shared experiences (Diekelmann & Allen, 1989; Minick, 1992).

Process

As noted earlier, after the interviews were transcribed, the data were analyzed using a constant-comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). This approach provided a means of moving from the interview data to analysis and back through the process, which allowed for interpretation of the meaning of the shared experiences (Diekelmann & Allen, 1989; Minick, 1992). Multiple levels of data analysis were completed in this study using the method described by Diekelmann and Allen (1989). The first level was to review the interview transcripts and field notes including any relevant information related to the setting, content, and nonverbal communication. The experiences and meanings expressed during each interview session were summarized in a narrative fashion. In addition to this individual analysis, a comparison was conducted with at least one other research-team member for each transcript. The subsequent summary was shared among the team members.

The interview transcripts were read multiple times due to the need to return to the data throughout the research process. The duplicate review of the transcripts assisted in highlighting areas of improvement for subsequent interviews. For example, one participant described helping others as a facet of her life journey. In later interviews, this emerged as a common theme excluded from the original interview guide. Ongoing refinement of the interview process and questions was an outcome of this duplicative

review of the transcripts. The quality of the overall research process and data analysis was a result of the constant focus on the transcripts, which was a manifestation of the iterative constant-comparative method of analysis. The research team was employed throughout the initial phases of the analysis process. Two doctoral students experienced in qualitative research comprised the team along with me. The team was involved in the first and second levels of data analysis. The chair of the dissertation committee is a faculty member with extensive expertise in qualitative research and worked with me and the team throughout all phases of data analysis.

The second level of analysis in this study consisted of a line-by-line review of the interview transcripts. Quotes and specific highlighted excerpts were coded during this phase. The coding process allowed for a clearer understanding of the meanings behind the text, as well as the context (Diekelmann & Allen, 1989). A code book facilitated the review and tracking. The codes were the smallest unit of meaning and were incorporated in one small section of the data (e.g., a sentence, phrase, or short section). An example of an initial code is helping others. Previous interviews and analyses were reviewed prior to following sessions. This allowed codes and concepts to be identified in the initial interviews and explored further in subsequent sessions. The code book was used to maintain a record of the codes used and their corresponding data through the interview process. This iterative process of analysis provided a more thorough analysis of the data.

The third level of analysis involved a review of each code throughout all transcripts for further analysis and comparison. These codes were reviewed during other phases of the data analysis, as needed, and when the themes were reviewed and refined. The fourth level of analysis involved collapsing the codes into categories, which was

completed by me through the identification of patterns and common concepts from within the codes. The codes were constantly reviewed as new data were collected.

The fifth level of analysis involved my comparison of the categories across interviews. This level of analysis involved collapsing of the categories into themes and then identifying a label for meanings that the raw data suggested. The themes were supported by examples to highlight and elucidate the meaning of the text. Common meanings were identified during the course of the study through this approach and the use of exemplars (Crist & Tanner, 2003). This fifth level of analysis also involved review of the information drawn from the interview transcripts to support the identified themes and as further refinement of the data. The sixth level of analysis involved documentation of the analysis. The dissertation is the outcome of this phase and is based upon the work of the prior levels of analysis. The documentation was conducted during several phases of the research process, and the actual chapters were drafted and edited during data analysis.

In summary, the approach of this research resulted in the first, second, and third levels of analysis being completed with the first interview transcript. Following the second interview, the same process was repeated. Each interview transcript was analyzed and compared to each subsequent interview. The first interview was then reviewed again for codes identified in each subsequent interview. After the first interview was coded, the second was reviewed again, creating new codes. Returning to prior interview transcripts caught any missed codes. This process represented the constant-comparative method that began with the first interview and continued throughout the research. The multiple steps of analysis helped prevent overinterpretation and underinterpretation of the data. This was a thematic analysis involving a constant method of data review. Put simply, the

effective analysis in this phenomenology study required constant-comparative methods including repetitive review of the data to understand the text and its inherent meanings (Benner, 1994).

Credibility and Scientific Rigor

The trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative research process was ensured by adherence to the principles of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Credibility included the ability of the researcher to self-analyze while completing the data analysis. I disclosed past experience and assumptions, including my background as a foster parent, to allow readers to assess the level of researcher bias. Credibility was also strengthened by the two participants reviewing their respective transcripts for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research-team approach also supported the credibility of this study, along with the constant-comparative method of analysis employed and involvement of the doctoral committee with their strong background in qualitative research.

Dependability and confirmability were maintained through the use of consistent and thorough documentation of methods throughout this study. Periodic meetings and phone conferences were held with the dissertation committee to discuss the progress of the study. This also facilitated adherence to the provided guidance during data collection and the rigorous data analysis. These were the key components that led to the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative research process used in this study (Patton, 2002). The interview audiotapes with verbatim transcripts, the field notes and journal entries, the research team, and the participant accuracy reviews of the interview

transcripts all supported the trustworthiness of both the data collection and the study findings (Benner et al., 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Protection of Human Participants

The protection of human subjects was maintained throughout this study. Methods included obtaining approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board of Georgia State University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and identification numbers and pseudonyms were assigned to maintain their confidentiality throughout the research process and documentation. Specific information that could potentially identify a participant, such as location, employer, case manager, or family names, was removed or altered to further protect confidentiality. The list of participants was maintained separately from the interview transcripts. All data were maintained in a password-protected computer file. The list of participants and all audio files will be destroyed 1 year after completion of the study. Ethnic and gender information were included to reflect the variation of the sample and its representation of the target population.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the life experiences and factors that contributed to effective transitions for children aging out of the foster-care system from the perspectives of adults who have successfully navigated this transition. The qualitative research approach of phenomenology was an effective form of inquiry for this study. The study interviews collected rich data surrounding the shared meanings and experiences of the participants. Common meanings among the interviewees were sought through constant-comparative, phenomenological analysis. The participants shared their

lived experiences through the interview process. The data analysis revealed important themes and meanings behind the process of aging out of foster care.

Purposive sampling facilitated the recruitment of a study group of adults who successfully aged out of foster care. Their life stories were gleaned through the interview process to allow a clearer understanding surrounding their lives during foster care and beyond. The constant-comparative, data-analysis process (Diekelmann & Allen, 1989; Minick, 1992) provided an organized method of data interpretation. Phenomenology was an effective method for this research because it allowed for interpretation of the text and an approach to revealing common themes.

In this chapter, the methodology, participant recruitment and sampling, and participant protection were described. The processes used for data generation and analysis were detailed. Measures to ensure the credibility of the study were described. In the next chapter, the findings and discussion of the study will be discussed.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to describe life experiences of children aging out of the foster care system from the perspectives of adults who have successfully navigated this transition. The lived experiences of these former foster youth toward independent adulthood held meaningful commonalities that facilitated the identification of themes. These patterns emerged from the review and the interpretation of the interviews. The participating adults are not identified by name; pseudonyms were used to protect their confidentiality.

Participant Characteristics

The sample recruited in this study consisted of nine adults who were former foster youth who aged out of foster care. The characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. The sample lived within the southeastern region of the United States at the time of the research. Six participants were African American; three were European American. The age range of the sample was between 20 and 25 years of age. One participant had completed a 4-year college degree at the time of the interview. All of the other interviewees had completed their high-school education or a GED examination. Several participants expressed an intention to complete their education in the future; seven had completed at least some college courses.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Number of participants (<i>n</i> = 9)
Gender	
Female	8
Male	1
Race	
European American	3
African American	6
Age	
19–21	3
22–25	6
Total years since discharge from foster care	
1–2	3
2–5	6
Highest level of education	
High school	1
Some college	7
College degree	1
Employment status	
Unemployed	2
Unemployed, full-time student	1
Employed part time	2
Employed full time	4
Health-care-insurance status	
No coverage	3
Medicaid	2
Insurance with employer or school	4
Annual personal income	
None	1
Less than \$10,000	2
10,001–20,000	2
\$20,001–\$30,000	2
\$30,000+	2

(table continues)

Characteristic	Number of participants ($n = 9$)
Current living status	
Alone	3
With husband and children	1
With friends and children	1
With friends or significant other	3
With children	1

The participants in this research had aged out of foster care between 1 and 5 years prior to interview, and they had been in foster care between 5 and 10 years. All of these adults were partially or fully employed, with the exception of two who had recently lost jobs and were seeking employment. They were included in the study because they met criteria for successful aging out of the foster-care system. For purposes of this study, such success is defined as the completion of at least a high-school education or GED evaluation, successful avoidance of incarceration, and living independently unless enrolled in college. Additionally, the adults were identified by themselves or caseworkers as successful. Ultimately, success is “through the eyes” of those who personally experienced aging out of foster care.

Themes

The data revealed four themes that outline the process by which the participants progressed as they aged out of care and became independent adults. The themes are ordered as the participants experienced them during the aging-out process. They revealed the progression of their life paths with the initial period represented by the first theme as working through the initial emancipation (i.e., facing a transition). Three associated subthemes are a) abrupt transition, b) uneven transition, and c) smooth transition. As the transition progressed, the participants revealed Theme 2 (i.e., depending upon adults).

Two associated subthemes are a) receiving support and b) asking for support. Caring adults helped them and in return, the participants felt the need to help others. After reaching out to caring adults for help and support, Theme 3 emerged (i.e., making a difference). Helping others brought meaning and purpose to their lives. As they made a difference for others, they reached the Theme 4 phase (i.e., moving forward). This final theme caused these former foster youth to visualize success and focus on the future. It was an important milestone for the participants in their paths toward success. The purpose and meaning added to their lives encouraged them to move forward and face the future in positive ways (see Table 2).

Theme 1: Facing a Transition

Theme 1: Facing a transition described how former foster youth felt during the period immediately following aging out of care. Each participant faced one of the types of transition. The first was a lonely, abrupt transition. These participants felt the abruptness of leaving foster care, which introduced difficulty for them during this period. The second type of transition experienced by some participants was uneven. The third type of transition was a smoother transition and seems to be associated with kinship care which is foster care with biological relatives. Two participants were in kinship care, which is foster care extended by biological relatives. The support from their relatives served as their foster parents and was consistent before, during, and after the transition of aging out of foster care.

Table 2

Themes and Quotes

Theme/Subtheme	Interview excerpt
1: Facing a transition	Betty: "I was just suddenly on my own."
1a: Abrupt transition	<p>Betty: "Because once I emancipated myself, they did not give me any assistance. I was just suddenly on my own. When you turn 18, you don't have any type of support anymore. You are basically on your own."</p> <p>Hanna: "It was very abrupt, when you sign out of foster care. One day you are in, and the next day you are just, gone."</p> <p>Anna: "During that time period [aging out of care], one day everything was paid for and then was not. Once you are out there on your own [after leaving foster care], you are just a number."</p>
1b: Uneven transition	<p>David: "At times, I had to do things myself that I wouldn't have to had if I had a family as a teen." "Now they [foster parents] are like my real family."</p>
1c: Smooth transition	<p>Ellen: "I'm a totally different situation [aging out of foster care] because I had family. I know people whose struggles are a hundred times worse than mine because they do not have anything or anyone to fall back on. I am lucky that I knew my family. Even though I did not have mom and dad, I always had relatives. I had my grandma; I had my aunt and ncle. I always had people along the way."</p> <p>Carla: "Because my auntie was my foster parent, we were able to stay at my aunt's house. You always have somebody over you, as in if you need someone to talk to; you can always talk to someone."</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Interview excerpt
2: Depending upon adults	
2a: Receiving support	<p>Hanna: “I’ve been fortunate to have the foster parents I have had. They were so good at helping me and also my caseworker.”</p> <p>Gina: “Some people do not have the personal relationships. A lot of people do not have them. So just having those resources and know that you still have it after the age of 2. They are, like, they [are] like Mom and Dad.</p> <p>Fran: “I made sure I at least had one person that I could talk to, no matter what, and let them know how I am feeling. I hear the opinions of how they felt, or give me opinions on what I should do.”</p>
2b: Asking for support	<p>David: “Finally, after searching through a lot of them a big key ingredient was good foster parents. So, I started, I looked for myself. And when I found a family, talked to them about it [being David’s foster parents] and then they decided to go through with it.. And then they stuck to it. After finding the foster parents myself. It was really helpful knowing that I had a foster family to ask for help from.”</p> <p>Iris: And then turning to the people that I really love, confessing to them, “Look I have a problem. I need help.”</p>
3: Making a difference	<p>Ellen: “I help. I’m in a group here called SHIFT—Students Helping Impact Foster Teens—that does fundraisers and scholarships for former foster youth.”</p> <p>Anna: “I do trainings [foster-care youth] and different things that pulled me through, also. If I can, I went through it, and I am going to prevent somebody else [to have difficult transition out of foster care]—at least one other person and my child—then it is worth it.”</p> <p>Fran: “So that is what Empowerment is [supporting young adults in foster care]. We work on making things better for foster youth.”</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Interview excerpt
4. Moving forward	<p>Gina: “I am moving forward with my life to have a better future. I do not look back.”</p> <p>Ellen: “I am moving ahead with life. I always had it in my head, you know, no matter what happened. Those were my goals and those things were going to happen, and they are happening, so you just have to set those goals.”</p> <p>Betty: “It [past experience as a foster child] motivated me to move forward with my life and do something different. What it is teaching you, is going to prepare you and help you for the rest of your future.”</p> <p>David: “To be successful, set your goals, think about what you want out of life and think about why you want that for your future.”</p>

Abrupt transition. Six of the study participants experienced a lonely, abrupt transition. These youth were unprepared for the harsh reality of the sudden requirement to function as independent adults. Confusion and fear were common reactions for them during this period. Many felt abandoned due to the lack of support during this critical juncture of their lives. The sudden emancipation with no parental or other adult support caused a great deal of pain for these youth. They felt that support services were “being pulled out all at once.” They feared for basic needs of survival. They were homeless; jobless; and in many cases, worried about securing their next meal during the initial phase of the transition between foster care and independent living. The study participants cried while recalling these memories and expressed outward signs of pain through their facial expressions. Many felt paralyzed by the lack of support during this vulnerable

time. The sudden abrupt feeling of “the odds being against me” manifested from being suddenly alone and independent upon exiting foster care.

Many fears and heartaches were recounted by the study participants during the period of aging out of foster care. As a result of this sudden transition, most felt ill prepared for life tasks including managing money, paying bills, and finding a job. One participant described “falling flat on her face” after feeling “pushed off of the cliff” into sudden adulthood. Such phrases were commonly used by the study sample to describe the lonely and abrupt transition from foster care to independent living. The majority of the interviewees who were without support became emotional and even angry at the sudden loss of support during the aging out period. Even during this interview years later, the emotion and pain was evident in their facial expressions, voice tones, and body language as they recalled their experiences.

Suddenly feeling alone was commonly expressed by participants as they shared their former experiences of aging out of foster care. Others noted the financial challenges of surviving alone. Betty tried unsuccessfully to juggle school and work during the sudden transition initiated by leaving care. Due to her lack of financial resources, she dropped out of college. The following interview excerpt is her description facing an abrupt transition:

Because once I emancipated myself, they did not give me any assistance. I was just suddenly on my own. When you turn 18, when you come from foster care, you do not have a support system. You do not have anyone. You do not really have any type of adult support anymore. You are basically just on your own.

Betty was struggling to survive with all support immediately withdrawn. She cried throughout her interview as she relayed the sudden difficulties she encountered upon leaving care. She was forced to sacrifice her education goals so that she could work and care for herself independently.

Hanna also felt stunned at the sudden changes involved with aging out of the foster-care system. She recounted,

It [aging out of care] was very abrupt when, you know, when you sign yourself out [of foster care]. It is kind of, you know; it is like one day you are in it [foster care] and then the next day you- are kind of just gone. It was very abrupt. . . . The support that you've had your whole life for however long you've been in it [foster care] is being “pulled out like a rug.”

Hanna felt unprepared because the adult expectations were immediate and difficult. She dropped out of school soon after leaving foster care due to her inability to handle the abrupt move to independent adulthood.

Anna recounted the following experience in her study interview: “Once you are out there on your own [after leaving foster care] you are just a number, as opposed to having an advocate.” Anna described being fully supported one day and suddenly on her own and expected to function independently the next day. Anna further described the abrupt transition as an overnight expectation for her to function independently, while just the day before she was treated as a child and protected. She felt thrust into the role of adulthood the day she left care. One of the failures of this abrupt and lonely transition manifested in the experience of homelessness. Anna explained, “I did not realize how hard it was to pay my rent, so I found myself within a month of being out of care,

evicted.” She placed all of her belongings in a rental truck and drove around “wondering where to go” after she was evicted. She attributed this period of homelessness to the abrupt nature of aging out of foster care. She wept during the interview as she recalled this painful experience. The pain and emotion in her voice, as well as her body language, were clear indicators of the trauma of these life events.

Anna also expressed the fear of living without the money needed for basic needs such as food, clothing, medical care and housing. Her voice shook as she repeated the description of living with care one day and with no support the next day. She felt insulated from responsibility while in foster care, which changed immediately upon aging out of care. Anna stated, “You paid my rent for years and, you know, I’ve had childcare, and I’ve been able to have a schedule in place and do different things, but then you just pull out all at once [financial and emotional support].” The abruptness of the change made a successful transition very difficult.

Fran also struggled with the sudden responsibilities of adulthood upon aging out of foster care. She stated,

Every time I checked the mail there was always a bill, which was depressing. Usually I would receive gift cards in the mail [while in foster care] or something to help me out. Afterwards [after aging out of care], it was like nothing but bills and just depressing things. I was not really ready for adulthood. I did not want to be an adult anymore because I realized all the struggles, especially financially wise, because I did not have a job after that.

Fran lived in an abandoned building after aging out of foster care. She described having no electricity and her first Thanksgiving on her own. Fran felt like a failure. She explained,

I was not prepared at all, and I kind of like fell flat on my face. Um leaving foster care and everything, I kind of ended up homeless at one point in time, where we was sleeping in, like, in a building without lights and stuff. We were pretty much homeless.

The steep decline Fran experienced after aging out of foster care caused her to abandon her educational goals and fear for her life. The sudden transition led to many difficulties in her life.

Iris also recalled feeling unprepared for living on her own after the abrupt transition from foster care to independent living. She did not have a job while in care, nor was she looking for a job or thinking of her future. She recounted,

So I was not taking steps [to plan while in foster care] to, well, “I’m going to, you know, get a job, and then I’m going to, this is what I am going to do when I get out of foster care.” I had no plan. I had no goal. No. I had no goal, no plan. I was just going in blind.

Iris was tearful as she described the trauma of the sudden transition, leaving her unable to cope with the harsh reality of suddenly being required to live as a responsible adult. Iris was acting like a child and dependent upon others while in care. This later led to difficulties in her efforts to survive with no care. As Iris described the abrupt transition from foster care to independent living, her tense facial expressions were accompanied by wringing her hands as she spoke.

A brief period of homelessness during the immediate period of aging out of foster care was an outcome for three of the participants in this study. Despite their later success, the abrupt nature of aging out of foster care resulted in homelessness shortly after leaving care. The shock of the sudden transition was expressed by six of the participants and further described as highly stressful and challenging.

Uneven transition. David recounted an experience that differed from the other study participants in that he had an uneven transition. He graduated from high school, immediately entered college, and subsequently found employment. David did not experience a loss of connectivity with his foster family, although he did struggle with some tasks during the transition to adulthood. For example, David had difficulty completing college applications, finding transportation, and paying for college expenses. He did not experience homelessness or a loss of relationships with adult role models. He received strong support from his foster parents both during and after aging out of foster care. Yet, David did express feeling alone and not having sufficient adult support.

I really had a hard time with several items such as applying to college, taxes, like all these dang forms that your parents are supposed to teach you how to fill out. I had no clue how to fill any of these things out. I was worrying about all of this paperwork, like how to apply. How do I apply to loans? How do I apply for insurance? How do I apply for this? Like, what, how, how do you see when you are getting the best deal? How do I apply for a credit card? How to make sure that you do not get messed over in a credit deal? Like, just basic life stuff that parents teach you . . . I was trying to figure out. So I would have to, like, print off

information everywhere, sit down in my room, and spend an hour figuring out something that I could have had a parent tell me in 5 minutes.

David perceived himself as “one of the lucky few” who had parents when aging out of foster care. He expressed how his foster family had driven him to college, helped him prepare and move into his dorm, and maintained contact with him throughout his college years and through his adulthood. He stated, “They are like my family.” He attributed his success to his foster family and referred to them as “real family now,” and he depended upon them for support with key tasks throughout his transition and adulthood. Therefore, David had a smooth but uneven transition, because he was in multiple foster-family and group-home placements until 16 years of age. He sought his own family to become foster parents to meet his needs. He maintained the connection with this family during his transition from foster care into independent adulthood.

Smooth transition. Two of the participants in this study did not experience an abrupt transition when aging out of foster care because they were in kinship care, which is care provided by biological relatives. These relatives are paid to serve as foster parents and, for the two cases in this study that resulted in a stable home with a smooth transition after leaving foster care. They were not required to leave their foster families after leaving care so the support and relationships remained intact.

Ellen was one of the two study participants who received foster care from a biological relative. She received strong support from her aunt and uncle during the aging-out period. Ellen did not express the severe hardships, including loneliness and isolation, mentioned by others who did not have such support. She felt fortunate to have family and acknowledged the struggles of other foster-care youth. She stated,

Well, I would definitely say that I [was in] a totally different situation because I had a family, but I know many other people who don't have that and their struggles are probably a hundred times worse than mine because they did not have anything to fall back on. . . . I am lucky that I knew my family. I was lucky that, even though I did not have my mom and dad, I always knew some kind of relatives. I had my grandma. I had my aunt. I had people along the way [of aging out of care].

Ellen described three constant sources of familial support while aging out of foster care. She had an aunt and uncle she lived with, and she confided in this aunt, and she had a grandmother from whom she sought frequent help. Ellen went from foster care to independent living while maintaining connections with these relatives. She spoke of returning home to her uncle during holidays and school breaks. Ellen smiled as she spoke of long phone conversations with her aunt and seeking support from her grandmother who had recently died. She described these relationships during the interview. Ellen also smiled when recalling the positive relationships with her family, but she cried openly when speaking of the recent death of her grandmother. Throughout her interview, Ellen shared the support these relationships provided.

Similar to Ellen, Carla lived with relatives during her foster care and maintained these familial relationships after aging out of care. Because Carla continued to live with her aunt after foster care was discontinued, she had a smooth transition into independent adulthood. Carla became a teen mom at 14 years of age long before she aged out of care. She recalled her experience in the following manner:

Because my auntie was my foster parent, we [Carla and her child] were able to stay at my aunt's house. You always have somebody [her aunt] if you need someone to talk to; you can always talk to someone.

Consequently, Carla's aunt was the foster-parent resource for Carla and her child. Carla continued school with the support and guidance of her aunt through her teenage years in care and also after exiting foster care. Carla reported that her aunt expected her to graduate from high school and had generally high standards that she expected Carla to meet. Carla stated her aunt was "always . . . there for me emotionally" and her aunt remained a strong source of support during her adulthood. Carla did not express difficulty during the transition out of foster care and credits her aunt as key to her success. Carla also felt supported by her caseworkers during and after leaving care.

As a result of the kinship care they received, both Carla and Ellen experienced an easier transition into independent adulthood than other foster youth. Carla lived with her aunt while in foster care and maintained that connection after leaving foster care. Her aunt had high standards for her and supported Carla as she worked to meet her goals toward adulthood. Ellen lived with her aunt and uncle and maintained relationships with her aunt, uncle, and grandmother during the transition from foster care into independent living. Kinship care allowed both Ellen and Carla to be parented by biological relatives and supported by these relatives during and after aging out of care. These relatives provided ongoing support in both emotional and financial ways. As a result, both Ellen and Carla experienced smooth transitions from foster care into adulthood.

Summary of Facing a Transition: Theme 1. The period immediately before and after aging out of foster care was an emotionally challenging and stressful time for

many of the study participants. Although the participating former foster youth were selected for this study because they were successful in this transition, many described heartbreaking details of the struggle to survive. They viewed the transition as abrupt and intensely painful. The pain was reflected in tears, tense facial expressions, and labored voice tones as these adults reflected upon this life transition. Although successful, the majority of these individuals felt generally isolated from others and alone at a time when they needed support. Six of the participants felt the agony and pain of this sense of isolation, as well as a sense of despair during the abrupt transition from aging out of foster care. They were uncertain about their survival, as well as other aspects of their futures. The instant change to independent living presented a challenge many years later when the experience was recalled.

One of the participants in this study had an uneven transition due to the support of his foster parents. When he was a teenager, he sought foster parents on his own. He stayed connected with them and felt they were his family throughout the transition period from foster care into independent adulthood. Thus, he had support, so although he experienced struggles similar to the other study participants, he had a family he could always “fall back on.” Therefore, his transition was uneven and not as smooth as participants who experienced kinship care. The two participants who aged out of kinship care did not feel alone and isolated during the initial period of this transition. Kinship care provided “a safe haven” during childhood and a smoother transition into adulthood for these participants.

Theme 2: Depending Upon Adults

Theme 2: Depending on adults described how the participants in this study received help during the process of aging-out of foster care from either a former caseworker or foster parent. These adults who had worked with the youth during their lives in foster care worked to support them during the transition out of care. Those in kinship care were the exception with the continuous support they received during and after aging out of foster care from the biological relatives with whom they lived throughout the process.

There were two primary subthemes of depending on adults. The first subtheme was receiving support from adults. Receiving support is defined as adult intervention to support the former foster youth. The youth was passive and received the support through no direct action by the youth. The adults who provided support to these former foster youth recognized the need for help and actively supported the foster youth during the transition of aging out of care.

The second subtheme was asking for help from adults. As defined in this study, asking for help from adults is defined as an active conscious action on the part of the former foster youth to seek assistance from adults. This is a skill and awareness some of the participants had whereby they knew they needed help, and they sought this help. The youth wanted to maintain the connections they had with caring adults.

Receiving support. Ellen and Carla received foster care within kinship situations that provided consistent support following aging out of care. The adults were “a shoulder to lean on” during trying times as the foster youth progressed through the uncertain

period of leaving care to enter self-sufficiency. The interviewees described support they received from at least one adult while aging out of care.

Although Fran lived within a group foster home, rather than family foster care, she was assigned a group-home caseworker who provided her with support. She described the caseworker in the following interview excerpt: “But I can say that she [her caseworker] has helped me basically through everything. She [has] been there, for the most part . . . every step of the way.” Fran also referred to the caseworker as someone she could count on now to listen and support her after aging out of foster care. Fran explained,

So I make sure I had one person [caseworker] that I could talk to no matter what, and let them know how I am feeling, just so I could hear the opinions of how they felt or give me opinions on what I should do.

Fran realized through her struggle with aging out of foster care, including homelessness, that others have supported her. She expressed her appreciation for her supportive caseworker who helps her even now, years later, into adulthood.

David also expressed how he often felt he and his brother were “disposable kids” that could be “given back” when foster parents were tired of being parents. When David was in the 10th grade and close to aging out of care, he embarked on a personal mission to “find a family.” He found a family within the community where he lived and asked them to be his foster family. They agreed and, to this day, he remains a part of their lives. David was the only male participant in the study.

Hanna also had former foster parents who provided her with a home between semesters from college. Both former foster parents and former caseworkers supported

her after the initial aging-out period. After reconnecting with them, she has felt supported throughout her adult life. Her former foster parents helped her to fulfill basic needs for her apartment, such as food, sheets, and household goods, that were not provided by the State Department of Family and Children Services when she left foster care. Hanna noted that she had a good caseworker when she aged out of care and admitted she did not realize this when she was aging out. She did not immediately seek help from her caseworker and foster parents, but she was financially and emotionally supported by her foster parents after the initial transition, as well as by having a home during semester breaks.

Gina spoke of her caseworkers as being very close to her, even now, 3 years after aging out of the foster-care system. In the study interview, she recalled,

The personal relationship [with her caseworker] helped. . . . Some people do not have the personal relationships with their case managers and especially for a long period of time, and just even aging out, still having the help and resources. A lot of people do not have them [adults who support them]. A lot of people were too afraid to go to their case managers for help [after aging out of foster care]. So just having those resources [caseworkers] and know[ing] that you still have it after the age of 21, they are like mom and Dad.

Gina depended upon caring adults to help support and guide her into adulthood. She spoke of the period after aging out of care, experiencing initial difficulties and connecting with her caseworker for support. She viewed her caseworker as her parent due to the strength of the relationship.

In her interview, Betty described the following experience:

I have a foster parent that I met on my 16th birthday. I moved to her house on my 16th birthday, and I've continued to keep in contact with her ever since. Now she has been supporting for me in times where I felt like "Why is this happening to me; I don't understand." She was someone that I could call and talk to.

Betty was able to have support from both her former foster parent and a caseworker when she needed support during the transition of aging out of care. She lives independently and most often talks to these adults by telephone several times per month. She values her relationships with these adults. Carla also found her caseworkers helpful. She felt she had "grown up under their wings" and she looked to them after her initial period of feeling alone while aging out of foster care.

Anna also described having strong caseworker support. Soon after eviction from her apartment, she contacted her former caseworker who offered Anna a job helping others still in foster care. Anna described this relationship in the following interview excerpt: "She [her caseworker] was also motivational. Just having that, she was the only consistent thing to this day, you know, that never changed." Anna also received support from her caseworker when she reached out for help after becoming homeless soon after leaving care. Anna differs from other participants in this study in that she did not have foster-parent support or other adult support, with the exception of the one caseworker.

Asking for support. Several of the participants in this study asked for support from their former foster parents after the initial period of aging out of care. One participant, David, maintained a strong connection to his foster parent and asked for help throughout his transition into independent adulthood as he depended on his foster parents

throughout this period. David maintained contact throughout the transition, while others, including Hanna, Iris, and Betty, asked for help from their former foster parents during this initial period.

David who had sought his own foster parents as a teen and had worked to preserve his adult foster parent connections, viewed himself as “one of the lucky few” with foster parents he could approach during the transition into adulthood. David worked to maintain a relationship with the family he found after leaving for college and continues contact, visiting them during school breaks. He commented that, during college breaks after aging out of care, “After I searched through a lot of them [David solicited his final foster parents as a teen] I found a family. They are like my real family. It was really helpful knowing that I had a foster family to go back to; that was a big relief.” He realized the value of foster parents during his late teenage years, which is why he sought a family. He spoke of the relief it was to have a relationship with his last set of foster parents throughout his adulthood.

Iris also spoke of her former foster mother who she said she worked to preserve a connection with. Iris shared “I worked on keeping the relationship with people who I love and who cared about me. The people I felt cared about me, their opinions mattered the most.” Iris expanded that she had worked to stay connected to her foster mother who was important to her. She reached out to her regularly after moving out, called her on the phone, and visited her. Iris shared her initial struggles after aging out of care and having difficulty with the transition. As she aged out of care, she maintained a connection reconnected with her foster mother and maintained that relationship. They continue to have a strong relationship.

Summary of Depending on Adults for Help: Theme 2. All of the participants in this study depended upon caring adults for help. In some cases, they found help in caseworkers, while others found support from their former foster parents. David was able to maintain his connection with his foster family throughout his transition into independent adulthood. Two other participants raised in kinship care found continuous support from their biological relatives who served as foster parents. The balance of the study sample experienced the need to reconnect with an adult with whom they had previously depended upon for support. Depending upon adults for help was a strong commonality among the participants in this study. The type of support ranged from telephone contact to financial support and housing during college breaks. Those who received kinship care maintained continuous relationships with their family members. Some of the participants including David, Iris, and Hanna worked to maintain the connection with adults in their life including caseworkers and former foster parents. Having adults to depend upon was found to be a key factor in a successful transition into independent adulthood.

Theme 3: Making a Difference

Theme 3: Making a difference reveals the importance of helping others to find meaning in life—helping others reach success as adults. For the participants in this study, making a difference was preventing others from suffering the difficulties they experienced as a youth aging out of foster care. All of the study participants depended upon caring adults for help during the aging-out process and eight of the nine former foster youth subsequently felt a strong desire to help others avoid the related difficulties they experienced. Some of the participants wanted to prevent their current or future

children from experiencing the trauma and pain they had endured. Others desired to support those in foster care and help them along the path they journeyed.

Ellen is actively helping others. She stated in her study interview, “I am in a group here called, SHIFT—Students Helping Impact Foster Teens—that does fundraisers and scholarships for former foster youth.” She participated in mentoring and fundraising for organizations that support foster children. Ellen also served as a speaker for special events. Ellen shared how this is a very important part of her life, to help others in situations that are similar to her own experience as a foster youth. She provided details of Students Helping Impact Foster Teens and its focus on helping youth who are aging out of foster care. Anna also worked to help children in foster care. She stated,

And a lot of kids look up to me and I go and do trainings [of foster-care youth] and different things, you know, that pulled me through also. So if I can, if I went through it [foster-care struggles], and I am going to prevent somebody else to go through [difficult transition out of foster care], at least one other person and my child, then it is worth it, you know.

Anna described speaking to multiple statewide groups to support youth in foster care. She served as a role model and source of strength to those currently in care to instill hope in their lives. She served as a mentor and a founding member of a support group for foster youth. Anna talked proudly of her ability, mission, and drive to help others in foster care.

Fran helped others by speaking to foster youth aging out of the care system, as well as serving as a friend and mentor for foster youth. She served as a leader within a group known as an empowerment group. Fran took pride in her drive to help others and

explained how it helped her, as well. She commented, “So that is what Empowerment [foster-care youth group] is for; we work on trying to make things better for foster youth.” Fran described the empowerment group as a way to provide the support to foster youth that she and others did not have while in foster care. Her service as a leader within this organization was a way she could help guide teens currently in foster care toward successfully aging out of the foster-care system. Fran shared that her leadership role in empowerment not only helped others, but also helped her. Fran took pride in helping others and shared that she felt this made her a better and stronger person to serve as a role model to others.

David also helped youth in foster care through volunteer work. He described finding that, when he helped others, he helped himself and explained, “So that way, I could help people and give back, and then, what I’ve found is, in the process, I forget about my entire situation [struggles from life experiences in foster care].” David is involved at the state level, speaking to youth who are in foster care. He talked about how he provided something positive in helping foster youth by sharing his difficult foster-care experiences.

Betty exhibited the strongest desire and plan to help others in foster care. Much of her interview focused on her desire to start a group foster home for teen girls. Betty wanted to eliminate the label of “foster children.” She wanted foster youth to blend in with all other youth. She expressed her vision in the following manner:

You know, my first mission [as an adult helping others] is my group home because that just always, that is something I’ve always wanted to do. . . . I have

already obtained the copyright for my name, which is Heaven Sent, and basically, I am going to start with six girls.

Betty described founding a group home that had the feel of a family home environment rather than a group-home environment. Her dream was that each girl in her future group home would have their own room, rather than sharing a room. Betty explained, “The girls will go to college, and they will graduate from high school. In addition, the home will be a family setting where holidays are celebrated together as a family.” Betty envisioned her girls having a stipend for support while they are in school. She wanted all of their books and education to be paid for so they did not need to “juggle” work and school. They would not be forced into the tough choices Betty had to make when she dropped out of college for financial reasons.

Betty hoped that the girls in her future group home will avoid the struggles she experienced. Throughout the majority of her interview, she outlined this dream with plans to help others through this group home as her personal mission. Betty was not the only participant to mention the desire to help others through establishing a group home and offering more emotional and financial support than they had experienced as foster youth. Gina also expressed the same desire. Iris wanted to help others through her interaction with foster youth. She described this interaction in the following interview comments.

I think teaching my knowledge, my strength, and my power to certain people who have been through my situation [foster care], I can help them uplift themselves and pick them up, to show them [foster-care youth] there’s gonna be another day.

Iris also described this desire to help others as a way to give back. She felt a desire to support current foster youth so they would not need to struggle as she had struggled. All of the participants who stated these goals of helping others also described the help and meaning it brought to their lives and their past suffering. Helping others served a purpose for the difficulties they had endured while in foster care.

Summary of Making a Difference: Theme 3. Many of the interviewees expressed how they were currently helping others through situations similar to what they had experienced. The participants wanted to give back and they realized that helping other was important. The interviewees conveyed a sense of urgency surrounding helping others. They smiled with pride as they shared the various ways they had found to assist foster youth. The hardships they had endured leave a sense of responsibility for contributing to the prevention of these experiences by others. In addition, their success created an opportunity for them to make a positive difference in the lives of the foster youth who followed. The need to help others provided purpose and was a consistent common theme among the study participants; eight of the nine interviewees spoke strongly and specifically about the work they were doing to help other foster youth at the vulnerable stage of aging out of care.

Theme 4: Moving Forward

Theme 4: Moving forward addressed how former foster youth were able to envision a brighter future than they had previously experienced. Moving forward with life was a theme commonly identified by the participants as a prevalent mind-set as they worked through the process of aging out of foster care. It took working through the

lonely feelings and dependence upon adults to reach a place of helping others and envisioning a positive future.

Gina desired to enact a brighter tomorrow for both herself and her children. She was currently enrolled in child-care certification to further her employment goals while raising her child and working to maintain a strong marriage. Gina stated, “I am moving forward with my life to have a better future. I do not look back.” She is on that path forward and described her current focus on the future for herself and her family. Gina smiled and shared that she felt proud that her current life path was a “better life” than she had experienced previously.

Ellen enrolled in college on a full scholarship program. She was determined to be successful and visualized her education as a path to a bright, successful future. Ellen commented,

I am moving ahead with life, and, I always had it [my future] in my head, no matter what happened, those were my goals and those things were going to happen, and they are happening, so you just have to set those goals.

From a young age, Ellen envisioned the path to her future, which was grounded in education as an essential goal. Her determination and vision to move forward with her future helped propel her in this positive direction.

Three of the study participants moved forward with their lives by finishing school. Betty stated, “It [being in foster care] just motivated me to move forward with my life and do something different [to help others who were in foster care].” Betty struggled to balance work and school. She viewed completing her education as a way to move forward with her dream to open a group home. Betty felt the trials she had

experienced as a youth were lessons now helping her to further her career goals. She stated,

You know, I am the type of person that I believe I can do anything. I believe there's nothing impossible for me. If you can show me how to do it, and [there are] instructions to where it can be done, I can do it.

Betty described a commitment to her goals and movement toward success.

David also continued forward by setting goals and working toward them in a committed manner. He described his philosophy by stating, "To be successful, set your goals. Think about what you want out of life and think about why you want that."

Throughout the interview, David spoke of having a purpose in life and how that helped him reach success. The constant thought of moving forward while in foster care and after leaving care sustained him through to a better life. David reached his goal of finishing his college degree. David perceived himself as moving forward every day. His advice for others coming from foster care was "Stop looking at yourself [as someone who suffered while living in foster care] and look at where you can be." David successfully completed college and was hired into a job using the degree he earned. He took specific planned steps toward moving his life forward after leaving foster care.

Hanna and Iris worked full time and felt confident in their abilities and the forward progression of their lives following the experiences of aging out of foster care. Both expressed pride in their current life paths while speaking of their future career goals.

Anna moved forward by providing a better life for her daughter. She was determined to create a positive environment for both herself and her daughter. As noted earlier, she experienced eviction and homelessness for a brief period of time, but

described making the effort to move forward from that hurdle of her life. She stated, “Because I have natural survival skills, from what I’ve been through [foster care], I was able to make a comeback.” At the time of the interview, Anna was married, employed full time, and raising her daughter. She described how the challenges of her childhood and young adulthood was a force that helped move her life forward.

Summary of Moving Forward: Theme 4. Many participants in this study realized they had come from challenging situations while in foster care. Despite those difficult situations, the participants were aware they could set goals and change the direction of their futures toward a positive trajectory, “no matter what it takes” while they were in care and after leaving care. Working through the process of aging out of care enabled them to enact their visions. This demonstrated purpose, meaning, and action toward ensuring a future for themselves and their loved ones.

Summary

With the exception of the two participants who were raised within kinship care, the participants in this study felt they were unprepared for living through the abrupt transition of aging out of foster care. They struggled and subsequently reached out to adults who provided support. They later developed a desire to make a difference for others who followed them out of the foster-care system. They revealed the importance of looking ahead and moving forward toward a better future in their adult lives. Theme 1 (i.e., facing a transition) was the first theme revealed from the interpretation phase of this study. The struggles associated with an abrupt transition were quite painful to the study participants especially during the immediate phase of aging out of care. There were three experiences on the path to aging out of foster care. The first was a harsh, abrupt

transition. The second was an uneven transition. Alternatively, the third path was experienced by the two participants in kinship foster care with biological relatives, which was a smooth transition due to the familial support throughout this period and their subsequent adulthood.

The initial response of facing a transition was followed by Theme 2 (i.e., depending upon adults), which indicates that the study participants depended on adults for assistance. There were two experiences of depending on adults. The first was receiving support. The second was asking for support whereby former foster youth actively sought help from a former foster parent or caseworker. Once they were able to depend upon adults for support, they found the help and connection they desperately needed and desired. Although there were life periods during which some of these prior foster youth did not actively preserve their connections with adults, many received support from adults who had been a part of their lives while in foster care. In many cases, it was a former caseworker or foster parent who became a strong resource for them after the initial period of aging out of foster care.

The next theme, making a difference, was important for the study interviewees. Many of the participants now worked to help provide advice and support to those currently aging out of foster care. Some had a goal to help in a more committed way such as opening a group home or providing financial support. The final theme, moving forward, demonstrated the ability of the study participants to overcome the struggles and pain of the aging-out process. This ability to see a stronger future was experienced by all of the participants. The ability to create goals and know they would make it through the difficult period of aging out helped them to persevere through extreme difficulty. They

wanted to move toward a better life trajectory than they experienced as children in foster care, and if they were parents, for the lives of their children.

The four themes found in this study were revealed from the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the nine adult participants. These former foster youth were open with their experiences and feelings about aging out of care, which provided data for this study. The conclusions and recommendations for practice and future research are also important aspects of the research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study was to describe life experiences of children aging out of the foster care system from the perspectives of adults who have successfully navigated this transition. Nine adults who were former foster youth were interviewed about their experiences. Phenomenology was used to interpret the lived experiences of these adults. The data were analyzed using a constant-comparative method outlined by Diekelmann and Allen (1989), and used by others (Minick, 1992; Parker, Minick & Kee 1999).

Four themes and five subthemes were identified. The first theme was facing a transition which described the initial period of aging out of foster care. In the subthemes, participants described three different types of transitions including abrupt, uneven, or smooth transition. During the transition to adulthood, the participants described depending upon adults for help, theme 2. Two subthemes of depending on adults are receiving support and asking for support. Facing a transition and depending on adults is consistent with prior research (Arnett 2000; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2011). Theme 3, making a difference highlighted the desire to help others to help avoid current foster care youth from having a difficult transition as they had experienced. Making a difference by helping others is consistent with research on resilience (Lietz, 2011; Schwartz, Keyl, Marcum, & Bode, 2009). By helping others, these former foster youth realized the meaning and purpose of their lives. Finally, Theme 4 was comprised of data

related to moving forward, which demonstrated the ability of the study participants to visualize success and focus on their future. Moving forward is consistent with emerging adulthood work (Arnett, 2000, 2007). The data obtained from the lived experiences of nine participants provided an understanding of common meanings that seemed to be associated with the success of these young adults during and after aging out of foster care.

Summary of the Findings

Research Questions 1 and 2

Research Question 1 asked, “What are the experiences of former foster-care youth associated with their successful transition from foster care into adult living?” The participants in this study progressed through an aging-out process that included facing a significant transition and depending upon adults for help. They found meaning from their experiences through making a difference for others and were able to move forward with their lives. Theme 1, facing a transition, was experienced by all of the participants. Six of the participants recalled an abrupt transition. This is consistent with prior research focused on this population of youth (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011). These six participants expressed being unprepared for this abrupt transition. Conversely, three of the interviewees described stable foster-parent relationships while aging out of care. Two of these three were raised in kinship care, while one was raised in a foster care home setting.

Theme 2 consisted of the participants depending upon adults for help. In many instances, former foster parents provided that assistance; in other situations, former caseworkers stepped in to help. Making a difference for others, theme 3, was an integral

facet of the life experience described by many of the participants in this study. They found meaning in their lives from helping others and assisted other foster youth currently in care by serving as role models, speakers, or mentors. Participants did not want to see others struggle as they had struggled while aging out of care. The study participants were able to progress ahead with their futures, despite the challenges and struggles they faced while in foster care, and was identified as Theme 4, moving forward. They became focused on school, work, and their own families as adults. They were able to progress towards independence through significant efforts on advancing their education, finding employment and working towards their goals.

Research Question 2 asked, “What factors were the most helpful in the process of aging out of foster care and what factors were detrimental?” Relationships were helpful and helped them transition out of foster care. At times, the relationships of former foster parents or caseworkers were helpful to the participants. Those raised in kinship care drew support from relatives while aging out of care. Kinship care provided stability for two of the participants which is consistent with a matched study reviewing stable and unstable foster care placements (Koh et al., 2014). One participant who had a continuous relationship with a foster parent who was not a relative expressed the supportive nature of that relationship during the transition from care. The other participants also found adults who helped them during this transition into adulthood. Those who were in kinship care had more of a gradual process of aging out which was helpful to them.

Six of the participants in this study endured an abrupt transition after aging out of care and commented that additional preparation for adult responsibilities would have been helpful. The immediate change to adulthood after being protected from

responsibilities while in care just days earlier was associated with anger as they struggled without the tools they needed for success trying to live independently. Many of the interviewees expressed a desire for a greater amount of support and more discussion about the transition prior to leaving care. This is consistent with prior research (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2011). In a review of youth transitioning out of care, Stott (2013) concluded that outcome studies document poor outcomes while recommending that these youth have a need for stability for financial and emotional support while aging out of care. Courtney et al. (2013) recommends a more formal aging-out plan including resources and support measures as tools for success.

Research Questions 3, 4, and 5

Research Question 3 asked, “What was the level of stability experienced during and after the transition out of foster care with work, relationships, and education?” Work, relationships, and education were not stable for most of the participants in this study during their initial period of aging out of foster care as youth. This is consistent with prior research focused on this population of youth (Courtney, et al, 2001; Courtney, & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011). Work was a key focus for many and several struggled with homelessness or near homelessness during the initial aging-out period. Support relationships were not consistently strong; however, relationships were present and all of the participants received help from an adult at some point through either a former foster parent, caseworker, or biological relative who they were in kinship care with during their years in foster care. Education was variable because many of the participants were still in their young adulthood hoping to continue their education. Many expressed a desire for additional education and college; all, with the exception of two,

had their education plans disrupted during the initial aging-out period. Several of the study participants expressed a desire to continue their education, but were unable to do so financially.

Six of the study participants struggled with relationships and stability during the early phase of aging out of foster care; three became homeless for a short period of time during the early process of aging out of care. These six interviewees did not have strong relationships with their former foster parents or caseworkers upon aging out of care. However, the two former foster youth who were raised in kinship care had a supportive, stable transition. One participant found his own foster family after aging out and had stable relationships within his foster family during the transition into adulthood.

Research Question 4 asked, “What personal relationships influenced the successful transition from care into independent adult living?” Relationships with foster parents and former caseworkers were important to the study participants. The two individuals raised in kinship care, as well as the one who remained with a foster family after the period of aging out of care, viewed their relationships with their foster families as key factors in their successful transition out of care. For the six others, the reestablishment of personal relationships with adults after the initial period of aging out of care was helpful in their ultimately successful transitions.

Research Question 5 asked, “Do the majority of former foster youth feel they were successful in the transition into independent adult living and why?” Overall, the majority of the adults in this study did feel, at the time of the interview that they were successful. Two were in kinship care and maintained the relationships when they aged

out of care. During the interview, the two in kinship care verbalized their success was in part that they had help from relatives while aging out of care..

Recommendations for Practice

The recommendations for practice are to focus on educating others who support and interact with foster youth to identify and communicate sources of support to young adults aging out of care. The goal for practice is to reduce the abrupt transition and promote a smooth transition when aging out of foster care. These data suggest that when foster children face an abrupt transition they are at greater risk for negative outcomes such as homelessness. Therefore, the recommendations are to support those in practice who interact with youth aging out of care to identify resources. The importance of caring adults as well as the ability to preserve relationships is a skill that can be taught to youth aging out of care. As part of the aging-out process, providing a list of adults willing to assist, such as caseworkers, former foster parents, and other adults such as mentors or teachers, is recommended. As noted earlier, to the participants in this study, this was a key factor in their successful transition out of care.

In summary, the recommendations are to

1. Providing a resource list for strengthening relationships with caring adults.

Sources of support might include former foster parents, biological relatives for those who are in kinship care at the time of aging out, and possibly caseworkers and other caring adults who have played supportive roles in the lives of the youth transitioning from care.

3. Teaching youth how to ask for help from adults. Work with foster youth prior to them aging out of care on maintaining caring adult relationships that have

been important to them in their life. This is a skill that can be taught to them during the planning process for aging out of foster care.

4. Strengthening skills to prevent an abrupt transition and homelessness to include financial and budgeting skills. Preparing for financial expenses such as rent, food, electricity and other common expenses is important to help foster youth prepare for their independence.

Recommendations for Education

The goal for education is to promote a smooth transition when aging out of care through increasing knowledge of youth, foster parents, and caseworkers. If caseworkers are aware of needs, such as supportive adults upon whom transitioning youth can depend for help, the caseworkers can help identify adult resources to increase the chance of success for these youth. Strategies might include teaching caseworkers and foster parents how to teach these youth how to depend on adults during this period including how to ask for help from adults. In addition, teaching caseworkers about the importance of preparing youth for the transition out of foster care.

Recommendations for Research

This research was an initial step in the study of adults who have successfully aged out of foster care. Minimal existing research has focused on those who have aged out successfully; consequently, additional study is needed to increase knowledge in this area. More in-depth research on the factors and relationships among perceived protective factors, such as stable housing and depending upon adults for help, is needed to further investigate these factors for increased success among this population of youth as they transition into independent adulthood.

Future study is needed to continue research with successful youth to help further develop the science for this population. In addition, research will help explore the importance of helping others as a potential factor that might influence success in aging out of foster care. Finally, research will also help develop and test interventions that reduce the abrupt transition of aging out of foster care.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications

A strength of this study was that all participants met the definition of success, in terms of aging out of care. They attained at least a high-school education and were moving forward in the areas of education and employment, which were common characteristics among those identified as successful in the transition into independent adulthood. Strengths of this study include the use of phenomenology to reveal common meanings. The use of interviews provided rich descriptive data, and the interview process allowed time with the participants to document their experiences as they were recounted by those who lived those experiences. Another strength of this study was the adherence to the qualitative method and its rigor. The use of an audit trail, a research team, and field notes all contributed to a strong method of inquiry.

The findings of this study were limited by the sample selection; geographic location; the small, regional sample size; and the instability of the target population. The sample-selection criteria of a successful transition from foster care to independent living presented a challenge to participant recruitment. Additionally, follow-up attempts after the initial interview for accuracy checks of the transcripts proved challenging. This is a highly transient population; consequently, it was also difficult to arrange second interviews. The study was performed solely within the southeastern region of the United

States; thus, the findings are limited as to their generalizability. As to the composition of the sample, only one male participated in the study; therefore, the experiences of male foster youth could be different from that of the one male participant in this study.

The findings of this study hold implications for education, practice, and research. Two concepts were identified that were not previously reported within existing literature related to the population under study—making a difference and moving forward. Further research is needed on adults who have successfully transitioned from foster care into independent living to decrease the need for public assistance and otherwise reduce the dependency to help them become productive members of society. Continued research could evolve into meaningful interventions increasing the success of transitioning foster youth as they age out of care. The implications for education, practice, and research center on the need to focus on success, rather than failure, to improve outcomes for this population of youth.

Summary

This study contributed to the base of existing knowledge on the difficult transition of foster youth aging out of care. The primary strength of the study is the focus is on those former foster youth who were ultimately successful in the process of aging out of foster care. Further research is needed to help improve outcomes for this vulnerable population. This study contributed to science by providing direct and focused data on the experiences of successful adults. By focusing on the life experiences of these adults, interventions can be developed to support this difficult transition period.

While past research has been conducted with a focus on the outcomes of the foster youth aged out of care, these studies have not concentrated on youth who were successful

in this transition in an effort to find commonalities. Finding these commonalities among this population of youth will allow focused interventions to be developed that could conserve financial resources while also promoting success for these youth. Further research with larger samples of successful youth is needed. A focus on areas identified in this study, such as supportive adults and their connection to these youth, could improve future outcomes for this population, increasing the number of successes. During the aging-out process, interventions ensuring youth have supportive adults in their lives will support positive outcomes.

With limited funding for youth aging out of foster care, focused interventions will not only conserve monetary resources, but also provide an opportunity to follow former foster youth who become adults to ensure their success. With over 20,000 youth aging out of foster care per year (USDHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2012), a tremendous opportunity exists for the improvement of outcomes among this population. This study is unique in its focus on adults who were successful as youth in the aging-out process and provides an opportunity to improve begin to explore successful outcomes for this vulnerable population of young adults. The successful transition of former foster youth seems to be associated with finding purpose by helping other foster children. Although difficult for many participants, they attributed their successful transition, in part, to the help of others. At the time of the interview, they felt they were moving forward with their lives.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT FLYER

Adults Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care as Youth Wanted to Participate in Research Study.

The purpose of the study is to identify and describe the life experiences of adults who were former foster youth and successfully aged out of care.

Participants will be interviewed to glean their life experiences related to aging out of foster care. The interview will take approximately 1 hour.

Participants must be 18 years or older and living independently.

If you are interested, please contact Lisa Hedenstrom, Principal Investigator at fosterstudy@gmail.com or 678-561-6144.

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Georgia State University
Byrdine F. Lewis School of Nursing
Informed Consent

Title: Experiences of former foster care youth in aging out of foster care

Principal Investigator: Ptlene Minick, RN, PhD, Principal Investigator

Margot Hedenstrom, RN, MSN, MBA,

Student Principal Investigator

I. Purpose:

You are invited to take part in a research study. The purpose of the study is to discuss your experience of aging out of foster care. You are invited to participate in the study because you are an adult who aged out of the foster care system. This purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of youth aging out of foster care. We are inviting adults who were former foster care youth who aged out of foster care to participate. The study will take approximately one hour of your time for the first interview and approximately one additional hour of time if a second meeting is needed.

II. Procedure:

If you decide to be in the study, you will meet with me privately to tell me what it was like to age out of foster care. We would meet in a comfortable and private place for about one hour. The meeting will be tape recorded and then typed so that I will use your specific words in describing the study. I may ask for a second meeting if there are questions from the first meeting or interview. You may ask me any questions you have at any point, and stop the interview at any time. At the end of the first meeting, I will give you a form that will ask you to answer a few questions about yourself. In both the interview and on the questionnaire about yourself, there will be no identifying information on either form to protect your privacy. When the study is completed, finished, I will write up a report about the information the participants have shared with me to share with Georgia State University and others to help improve the care of youth

aging out of care. You may receive a copy of the final report. You will be given a gift card for \$20.00 for participating in the study at the completion of the first interview.

III. Risks:

In this study, we do not anticipate that you will have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. However, recalling memories about events can sometimes be unpleasant or stressful. If that happens, we encourage you to contact your healthcare provider for a referral for counseling. If you should need counseling, any expense would be your responsibility.

IV. Benefits:

Taking part in this study may not be of any benefit to you. However, the information and experiences will be shared with persons assisting youth in aging out of care in hopes for support and guidance for foster care youth who are aging out of care. This study will identify what are the important experiences in aging out of foster care and will help health care providers, and social workers improve care and support for youth aging out of care. Overall, we hope to gain information about what it is like for former foster care youth during the life transition of aging out of foster care to living independently. Participation may not benefit you personally.

V. Volunteer Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You have the right not to be in the study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. We will use a false name rather than your name on study records. Only the research team and I will be able to see the information you provide. It will be stored in a locked cabinet in the private home office of the student researcher. The code sheet will be stored in a different place from the data to protect your privacy. Your name and other facts that might identify you will not be mentioned when we present this study or publish the results. You will not be identified personally.

One year after of the report has been written the tape recording of the interview will be destroyed.

VII. Contact Persons:

You may contact Margot (Lisa) Hedenstrom, Doctoral Student at 678-561-6144 or by email at fosterstudy@gmail.com if you have any questions about this study; or Dr. Ptlene Minick can be contacted at 404-413-1155 or by email at nurmpm@langate.gsu.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or by email at svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. You may also request or obtain a copy of this consent form via email upon your request. If you are willing to volunteer for this study and be audio taped, please sign below. Your signature will indicate your voluntary consent to participate in the study.

_____	_____
Participant	Date
_____	_____
Student Principal Investigator	Date

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT-CHARACTERISTIC TOOL

Participant-Characteristic Tool

Please circle nearest answer:

1. **Gender:** Male Female

2. **Age:** 18–19 20–21 22–23 24–25

3. **Total years in foster care prior to age 18:** 0–2 2–4 4–6 6+

4. **Number of years since discharge from foster care:**
1 = Less than 1 2 = 1–2 3 = 2–5

5. **Highest level of education:**
1 = some high school 2 = high school 3 = some college 4 = college degree

6. **Employment status:**
1 = unemployed 2 = unemployed full-time student 3 = employed part time
4 = employed full time

7. **Health-care insurance status:**
1 = no coverage 2 = Medicaid 3 = insurance through employer or college

8. **Annual personal income:**
1 = none 2 = 1–10,000 3 = 10,001–20,000 4 = 20,001–30,000,
5 = 30,000+

9. Number of siblings:

0 = none 1 = one 2 = two 3 = three 4 = four 5 = five 6 = six+

10. Do you have contact with your birth family? If so, with whom (circle all that apply):

1 = mother 2 = father 3 = siblings 4 = aunt or uncle 5 = grandparent

6 = other (please describe) _____

11. Current living status:

1 = alone 2 = with biological parents 3 = with other biological relatives

4 = with foster family 5 = with friends

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Interview will begin with a review description of the study. The researcher will identify her status as a past foster parent who has worked with youth aging out of care. The following questions and probing questions are examples of those used in the study interviews:

- Can you tell me about aging out of the foster-care system?
- Please tell me about your life just prior to aging out of foster care.
- What did you expect would happen when you aged out of care, and can you describe the difference between your expectations and reality?
- What was most helpful to you during the period of aging out of foster care?”
- Can you tell me about your thoughts and feelings during this time?

Prompts (if needed):

- Can you discuss how and why this is important to you?
- Tell me about your experiences with education [or interpersonal relationships].
- Tell me about the support you experienced.
- What was your level of preparation for aging out of care?
- How successful were you in school?
- How did you overcome adversity while aging out of care?
- Were you able to cope with adversity during the period of aging out of care?
- What goals did you have as you aged out of foster care?
- How did you work to meet your goals?
- Did you obtain support from your biological parents, grandparents, siblings, or other relatives during your transition into independent living? If so, please describe.
- Do you feel you have reached adulthood? Please explain why or why not.
- Who was helpful to you during the transition from foster care and why?
- What experiences were not helpful during the aging-out process and why?
- Why do you think you were successful in aging out of care?
- If you could have had anything to help you during the aging-out process what would that have been?
- What was not helpful during the aging-out period?
- Who helped you during the aging-out period?
- Can you tell me more about [situation shared]?

Closing Question:

- Is there anything else you can tell me about (situation or topic) that would help me better understand that experience or how you felt?
- Are there questions I have not asked or topics not addressed that would help me understand your experience in aging out of foster care?

Potential Follow-Up Question:

- Other participants have described [topic or subject]. Is this something you experienced or feel also?