Finding Their Way: The Journey from Foster Care to Emerging Adulthood

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FINDING THEIR WAY: THE JOURNEY FROM FOSTER CARE TO
EMERGING ADULTHOOD

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by
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May 2020

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FINDING WAY: THE JOURNEY FROM
FOSTER CARE TO EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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ABSTRACT

FINDING THEIR WAY: THE JOURNEY FROM FOSTER CARE TO EMERGING ADULTHOOD

By Venita Rawal

I conducted a qualitative study prompted from concerns of poor outcomes such as homelessness, lack of employment for youth who age out of foster care between the ages of 18 to 21 with limited to no material or emotional support. However, there are youth who age out of foster care and find themselves on a positive life-trajectory, but little is known about what helped them find their path in life and what helps them stay on this path.

I used a multiple case study design to learn from three participants who self-identified as being on a positive life-trajectory about what helped them reach their current place in life. Three interviews were completed with each participant, with each participant’s narrative analyzed separately. I then completed a cross-case analysis using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as the theoretical lens.

The findings of the study suggest that changes to the current foster care system are needed to help more youth who age out of foster care have positive outcomes as young adults. Counselors can help create this change by the work they do at each level of the ecological system.

Keywords: foster care, emerging adulthood, aging out, trauma, trauma-informed care, systems theory.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation committee for their support as I worked to complete my dissertation and for not letting me give up. I especially want to thank my dissertation chair Dr. Harriet Glosoff for having faith in me even when I questioned myself and pushing me to keep going forward. I really appreciate her willingness to work around my crazy life schedule, including my girls constantly interrupting our meetings. I am also thankful to Dr. Kathryn Herr for helping me learn how to become a researcher, understand the researcher’s role, and the importance of the researcher’s voice when completing qualitative research. For someone who had always worked with numbers, it was a difficult journey, and I appreciate her guidance in helping me learn and grow. I express my gratitude to Dr. Dana Heller Levitt for always being available when I had questions and for her support during my journey. The feedback has been invaluable in helping me highlight the results of my research. I express my thanks to Dr. Matthew Shurts for agreeing to be on my committee and for his thought-provoking feedback as I struggled in developing my dissertation proposal and analyzing my results.

A special thanks to my critical friend, peer debriefer, all-around support, and champion, Meghan Reppert, for her love and support through this journey we have both taken together. We met at the doctoral reception during our first semester in the program and have been together through this journey from beginning to end. I would not have completed this dissertation without your support and pushing me when I needed it, and our late-night study sessions.

I have to say thank you to my family, particularly to my daughters, Anchita and Tanishka, for understanding when mum was busy reading or writing. Thank you for accepting my distraction during vacations and missing out on family time. To my husband and my best friend, thank you for all your support and patience throughout this long journey. Thank you for
carrying the load as I worked on my dissertation and for believing in me. A special thank you to my parents for your love and encouragement. You have always supported me in all my endeavors. I could not have done this without your help, especially my father who helped me in more ways than I can list, including multiple revisions and edits and my mother for her repeated reminders on the importance of achieving my goal.

Most importantly, I have to say a major thank you to the three wonderful ladies who shared their stories with me. I do not have enough words to express how grateful I am to you for sharing your stories. Your honesty and willingness to share so other youth in foster care can be helped is truly amazing and appreciated. I hope I have done justice to your voices and that your stories help youth in foster care find a positive path in life.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my girls Anchita and Tanishka. I love you more than words can describe. Dream big and achieve bigger.
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Finding Their Way: The Journey from Foster Care to Emerging Adulthood

Chapter One: Introduction

What happens to youth after they age out of foster care (FC) and the support systems on which they have depended, often for years, are no longer there? This question has plagued me since I worked with foster care youth (FCY) who were preparing for their transition. As their counselor, I had grave concerns about their ability to function when they left the FC system, as they seemed to lack the knowledge and decision-making skills required to navigate the adult world. My concerns have been echoed by Greeson and Thompson (2016), who asked the question, “What happens to young adults who exit FC after turning 21 in our current care model?” (p. 2).

I conducted a comprehensive review of the literature to answer this question and learned that most recent research has focused on the difficulties youth face in their transition from FC and the negative outcomes they often experience in their lives after. Similarly, my experiences working as a counselor with these FCY also served to highlight the challenges they face. However, some young people aging out of foster care have positive experiences in emerging adulthood and beyond (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010; Lenz-Rashid, 2018). Some FCY reported living happy and productive adult lives (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2010). Although the literature I reviewed provided some insight into what may have helped these individuals experience a positive transition, a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood, and positive outcomes as adults, the current literature is far from comprehensive on this topic.

At the end of 2017, there were approximately 443,000 youth in FC in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). This number represented a slight increase from the number of FCY during the previous two years (U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services, 2018). In 2017, approximately 248,000 youth exited FC. Ninety-two percent were adopted or reunified with their families to a legal guardian. In that same year, however, 8%, or approximately 20,000 youth, transitioned out of FC in a planned or unplanned manner without having a family to call their own (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Family is defined as having at least one adult committed to providing the young adult with a safe and secure parenting relationship (Courtney 2009; Samuels, 2009).

Youth discharged from care without an identified permanent home are often expected to transition abruptly into the adult world without adequate support. Many of these young adults did not have the opportunity to make a gradual transition into the adult world often afforded to young adults outside the FC system in the United States (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007; Dinisman, Zeira, Suliman-Aiden & Benbenishty, 2013; Greeson & Bowen, 2008). This gradual transition (Arnett, 2000) from emerging adulthood, is considered a developmental stage during which young adults slowly assume responsibility for themselves and their lives by obtaining employment, establishing relationships, and contributing to society (Loring, 2011).

In contrast to the majority of FCY, young adults in the United States today frequently receive financial and emotional support from adult caregivers, including parents, guardians, and other members of their biological or adopted families (Barroso, Parker, & Fry, 2019; Courtney et al., 2007; Dinisman et al., 2013; Munson & McMillen, 2009). Young adults who have strong ties to their families, peers, and communities may be able to turn to them in crisis for emotional support, advice, and financial support or resources (Ammerman et al., 2004). In general, youth in their mid-20s transitioning to the adult world in the United States is increasingly dependent on their families for support (Barroso et al., 2019; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Parents are providing varying degrees of support to their children. Larger percentages of both men and women live at
home with their parents in their 20s than they did in the 1960s (Fry, 2015; Settersten & Ray, 2010). In 1960, 20% of young adults resided with their parents; in 2014, this number was at 32% (Fry, 2016). Parents are providing increasing amounts of both emotional and financial support as well as an investment of time in their adult children (Barroso et al., 2019; Settersten & Ray, 2010). There are many reasons for this increase, including a labor market that requires a minimum of a college education for obtaining a decent paying job and difficulties in meeting expenses on a beginning salary (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2014).

Compared to their peers, transitioning FCY often have to take an accelerated path through emerging adulthood as they may not have the support and resources to gradually take responsibility for themselves (Johnson & Mollborn, 2009; Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003; Stott, 2013). They may not have the skills or experience needed to obtain employment (Okpych, 2012), access to family support to assist them as they try to obtain a college education (Okpych, 2012), and support from family to assist them (Stott, 2013).

Also, for those FCY, the emerging adulthood stage of their lives is impacted by their time in FC, trauma histories, and level of preparedness for living in the adult world (Stott, 2013). Arnett (2007) argued that during emerging adulthood, young people tend to be more susceptible to substance use and serious mental health issues due to the uncertainties inherent in this life stage. These impact their transition (Vacca, 2008). Individuals who age out of FC are more vulnerable than their peers (Arnett, 2007) because, along with the difficulties in negotiating their transition to adulthood, they are often simultaneously dealing with the trauma faced during childhood and adolescence.
The challenges FCY face in their transition and during emerging adulthood appear related to their experiences before entering and while in foster care (Stott, 2013). One of the most significant challenges FCY face is the impact of multiple placements they experienced while in the system (Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Unrau, Seita, & Putmey, 2008). Based on a review of 15 studies, Havlicek (2011) estimated that most FCY would experience multiple placements ranging from 2.4% to 9.5%. The attachments that FCY begin to develop at home, school, and community settings are often interrupted by abrupt removals and placements (Singer, Berzin, Hokanson, 2013; Unrau et al., 2008). These disruptions may reduce the abilities of and opportunities for FCY to form lifelong connections decreasing the likelihood they will be prepared transitioning to the adult world (Singer et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2008). Each placement FCY experience potentially interrupts the development of their social networks (Samuels, 2009) by impacting their educational attainment, life skills, ability to obtain vocational training, and adult outcomes (Stott, 2013).

Former FCY also often lack access to crucial emotional and financial resources transitioning to adulthood comparatively more difficult than youth who have not been in the foster care system (Dinisman et al., 2013; Harris-Rome & Haskin, 2019; Loring, 2011). This lack of resources often leaves them vulnerable to a variety of poor outcomes such as homelessness, employment opportunities, legal issues, mental health, and substance abuse challenges (Avery, 2010; Courtney et al., 2007; Loring, 2011; Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelcu, 2013; Zinn & Courtney, 2017).

Additionally, due to lower educational attainment and lesser attainment of relevant vocational skills, former FCY tend to be at a disadvantage compared to their peers (Casey Family Programs, 2008; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Former FCY are three times less likely than
peers to have completed high school or obtained their GED (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Also, 8% of former FCY have a post-secondary degree compared to 46% of youth in the general population (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Along with having less educational attainment, former FCY are less likely to have a full-time job at age 26 than their peers (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Only 48% of former FCY have a full-time job as compared to 80% of emerging adults in the general population (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). According to a recent report by the Annie Casey Foundation (2018), youth aged 21 who experienced FC had significantly lower rates of high school completion and employment than youth age 21 who had no FC experience. However, not all youth who age out of FC face similar experiences and challenges as emerging adults. As noted, there are young adults who, after transitioning from care, obtain a college education, locate employment that enables them to be financially self-sufficient, and do not experience homelessness (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2010; Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Lenz-Rashid, 2018).

Placement stability tends to be correlated with more positive outcomes after leaving FC (Havlicek, 2011; Reilly, 2003). This is especially true for FCY who were placed in kinship care (Havlicek, 2011) with a family member or adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship. Other factors appear to help improve their chances of living productive lives after leaving foster care. Such factors include opportunities to obtain a post-secondary education and training (Havlicek, 2011; Okpych, 2012), having opportunities to gain work experience while in care (Stott, 2013), learning independent living skills (Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019), and obtaining and having connections to at least one caring adult (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).
Although the researchers cited above have identified certain factors or events that have been correlated with positive outcomes for FCY aging out, there is limited information about their journey through emerging adulthood and how their time in foster care impacted their experiences. Missing in the literature is an understanding from former FCY about how they perceive their experiences in foster care and their transition from that system to emerging adulthood. How did these experiences help them or hinder them? What allowed some to learn how to form lasting relationships despite multiple placements? What resources did they need for their transition, and how did they obtain them?

**Statement of the Problem**

A thorough review of the literature outlined the challenges a majority of FCY who age face after transitioning and beyond. Researchers (Collins, 2004; Harris-Rome & Raskin, 2019; Samuels, 2008; Zinn & Courtney, 2017) have noted consistently poor outcomes, as previously defined, for FCY who have aged out. My experience in working with FCY also echoes the findings of current research on the topic. The FCY aged out of the congregate care program, a structured group home where youth are provided with 24-hour substitute care (Freundlich & Avery, 2006), frequently ended up homeless or incarcerated within a few months after leaving the program. During the four years I served as a lead administrator for the program, we made multiple changes in the program design to prepare FCY better for living independently. Our outcomes, however, did not change.

What I noted during my work with FCY preparing for their transition was that we had a select few youth who had positive experiences after their discharge. These individuals maintained employment and had a place to live, at least for the first year after leaving the program. I was never able to fully understand what made these young adults differ from the
majority of my clients who were aging out of FC. I was disappointed upon reviewing the literature by the lack of information about my research question. Although negative outcomes commonly associated with youth leaving the FC system seems well documented in the literature, there is a paucity of research regarding what may assist FCY aging out to experience a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood (Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016). Cunningham and Diversi (2012) noted the voices of youth who have aged out of FC and their perspective on this transition and their life after are missing from the current professional literature.

Cunningham and Diversi (2012) stated that “The inclusion of current and former foster youth’ experiences in the adolescent and emerging adulthood literature may shed some missing light in lives less visible” (p. 600). Hearing directly from FCY who have experienced a positive trajectory during emerging adulthood can provide valuable insight into what helps facilitate a positive transition from FC.

The transition from FC tends to be an abrupt process based solely on the youth's age. The age of transition varies from 18 to 21 at the discretion of the state in which the youth resides (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010; Courtney, Lee, & Perez, 2011; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). The expectation of the child welfare system and its policies is that when FCY transition will be prepared to be self-sufficient and live independently (Propp et al., 2003; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019; Stott, 2013). However, FCY often leave without the needed resources, skills, and knowledge to be self-sufficient (Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019; Stott, 2013).

Federal and state lawmakers have acknowledged that they have a responsibility to FCY as they serve as surrogates or corporate parents for these individuals (Courtney, 2009). Government entities removed youth from the care of their families. Thus the government, through its policies and programs, has a responsibility to develop an environment that helps
prepare the FCY in its care for aging out and set them on the path to success after they age out (Casey Family Programs, 2008; Munson et al., 2013). These policies need to focus on helping FCY establish social supports upon aging out along with the requisite skills and tools to begin the process of establishing themselves in the adult world (Casey Family Programs, 2008).

Federal legislation was passed in 1986 with the Independent Living Initiative to the more recent Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. This has made provisions to meet the needs of FCY aging out. The laws have provided funding for FCY to receive training in living independently, increased the age through which FCY can receive services. They have made provisions to help FCY establish social connections with caring adults. Despite the provisions of federal regulations to help older youth in FC, negative outcomes have obstinately remained the same (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Collins, 2004; Courtney et al., 2007; Samuels, 2008; Zinn & Courtney, 2017).

There are potential reasons why federal policies have been ineffective in meeting the transitional needs of FCY. Reasons include (a) incomplete implementation of policies by individual states, as some states only provide services until age 18, rather than 21 (Courtney, 2009; Stott, 2013); (b) lack of funding resulting in FCY not receiving services and supports they need for independent living (Collins, 2004; Loring, 2011); (c) eligibility requirements to receive services after age 18 (Courtney, Lee, et al., 2011); and, (e) policies that are developmentally inappropriate (Casey Family Systems, 2008). Governmental agencies base current FC policies on the goal of having youth self-sufficient after aging out (Propp et al., 2003). Although these policies provide services that may help some youth transition out of FC, they do not seem to be effective for a large number of FCY.
Leathers and Testa (2006) pointed out that FCY who age out are less likely than their peers not in FC to have completed high school or obtained a GED. Only 42% obtained this educational level. The National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care (2018) noted that 65% of FCY complete high school or obtain a GED by age 21 compared to the 84% for all ages 18 to 24 of non-FCY. Similarly, many FCY who age out also experience struggles in finding employment, especially in finding full-time jobs with sufficient pay on which to live (Loring, 2011; Zinn & Courtney 2017). FCY are at high risk of homelessness. As many as 25% experience periods of homelessness after aging out (Ammerman et al., 2004). Researchers have estimated that between 11-36% of FCY who age out become homeless. Up to 50% experience housing instability (Dunn, 2015). FCY exiting the system without adequate supports are also at high risk for unplanned pregnancies, mental health and substance abuse issues, and involvement in criminal activities (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Further, they are more likely than their peers to need government assistance to help them meet their basic needs (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Youth who leave FC after completing high school and obtaining a post-secondary education or training tend to have more positive outcomes after aging out (Hook & Courtney, 2011) as do youth who are provided with independent living skills (Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999: Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019).

Having a caring, committed adult (mentor, coach, or friend’s parent) in times of need help FCY receive some of the similar financial, housing, and emotional supports that peers receive as they transition into adulthood (Ammerman et al., 2004; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). However, many FCY who have transitioned out have reported a lack of support and report this to be a major challenge in their transitioning (Munson et al., 2013). Also, after leaving FC, some young adults return to reside with members of their biological family (Harris-Rome & Raskin,
2019; Samuels, 2008) do not often serve them well. Often there have been no changes in the family dynamics or other problems that initially contributed to being removed (Harris-Rome & Raskin, 2019; Samuels, 2008). Limited efforts have been made to help FCY with these issues before their discharge (Samuels, 2008). Munson et al. (2013) reported that many FCY end up providing financial and emotional support to family members rather than receiving support. Thus, despite reporting having some support from family, many young adults leaving FC are more hindered by familial relationships than supported by them and continue to struggle in their transition.

In summary, the literature I reviewed outlined that a large percentage of former FCY are at risk of poor outcomes after leaving the system. In today’s society, where most young adults require extra time and support to establish themselves, FCY experience a different or accelerated path (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Most FCY aging out compared with their peers, do not have the extra time and tend not to have the same support to establish themselves as emerging adults. This makes them highly vulnerable to negative outcomes. However, some young adults, including those with multiple placements while in the system, experience positive outcomes after transitioning from FC. It is clear in the literature why FCY are vulnerable during the transition from FC and beyond. What is not clear is what sets those FCY who do well during emerging adulthood and beyond apart from the youth who do not.

**Research Question**

The imbalance of information in the current literature coupled with a desire to see more FCY experience a positive transition from FC led to my research question, “How did individuals who aged out of FC and believe they have forged a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood do
so?” This question was also based on a noted absence of the perspective of current and former FCY in the professional literature (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Unrau, 2007).

The goals of my research were to (a) give voice to youth who have lived in the FC system and self-identified as being on a positive path as emerging adults and (b) allow their shared experiences to inform services for FCY before and after the transition. Through the use of a multiple case study design, I interviewed young adults ages 23-26 who were in FC for a minimum of three years before aging out, experienced at least four placements while in FC, and who self-identified as experiencing a positive trajectory through emerging adulthood.

Rather than using preset criteria for defining positive trajectory, I noted in my recruitment material that I was hoping to interview young adults who self-identified as being on a positive path and happy and satisfied with the current direction of their lives. I hoped to learn what made them happy and satisfied with the current direction of their lives and how optimistic they were about their future and achieving their life goals (Arnett, 2000). I also wanted to learn about the participants’ journey during and after FC, the challenges they encountered while in FC, their transition out of the system, and their successes and triumphs. Additionally, I wanted to learn how they believed their time and experiences in FC impacted their transition from FC to emerging adulthood. I hope that the results of my study will inform services to facilitate future FCY transition.

As the multiple systems impact a youth's journey in FC and beyond, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provided an effective conceptual framework for understanding the impact of these systems on former FCY.
Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory is a conceptual framework to understand better how involvement in FC may impact a youth’s development and ability to make a positive transition from the system. This theory can also help counselors and other providers understand the numerous barriers FCY aging out face as they enter the adult world (Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, Greeson, Powers, & Powers, 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualized the development of children as being impacted by the numerous systems they live in and by more remote systems that indirectly impact their lives. He postulated that both internal and external factors impact individuals, and these interactions were transactional (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004).

Initially, Bronfenbrenner believed that there were four different nested layers of influence on the individual’s behavioral, cognitive, and emotional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). These layers include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). Later Bronfenbrenner added the chronosystem (Hong, Algood, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). Each of these five distinct layers has a direct or indirect impact on an individual’s development, and that impact may have been magnified for those within the FC system.

The microsystem (e.g., a group home, interactions with staff) is the innermost layer of the nested systems. It is defined as the interactions of FCY in the settings within which they spend the majority of their time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the mesosystem as the interactions between different microsystems. For example, when FCY are discussed among staff at group home placement and school personnel. Exosystem interactions such as court hearings and decisions about changes in placements for
FCY are ones in which they are not directly involved, but the events which impact them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the macrosystem as the impact of culture on the individual, for example, policies that regulate what services are and are not available to children and adolescents in FC. One can best describe the chronosystem as the changes in cultural values and economic conditions that impact development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), such as shifts in the job market. These can influence opportunities for emerging adults.

Each of these distinct layers has a direct or indirect impact on the individual’s development, and, for youth in the FC system, the impact may be magnified. For example, the development of youth in FC can be influenced by the number of microsystems (e.g., group home, school) of which they are a part. The number of microsystems will vary based on the number of placements and school changes experienced by an individual (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). Their exosystem may also impact their development by the decisions of the child welfare workers and the courts in their placement and services (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). They may be to move a child from one foster home to a group home setting. I will discuss details of the ecological systems theory and how it can help us understand the development of FCY in greater detail in chapter two.

The ecological systems theory also guided the contributions I made via in improving the adult outcomes of former FCY by providing a basis for understanding the journeys of my participants, the meaning they made of their time in FC, and the impact various systems had on them as emerging adults. This understanding of their journeys can assist counselors and other professionals in targeting interventions to meet the needs of FCY.


Significance of the Study

As noted by researchers Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Samuels, 2009; and Unrau, 2007), the perspective of FCY who aged out is currently lacking in the professional literature. More importantly, the voice of these experiences of those FCY who navigated their transition and created a positive path through emerging adulthood is lacking. The narratives of the participants contributed to the literature and offered a more holistic picture of the experiences of FCY who aged out and are emerging adults. Themes that emerged from my interviews with former FCY have the potential to inform the practices of counselors and other professionals working with emerging adults before and after they transition out of FC. The voices of my participants also provided new insights into the challenges former FCY have faced into emerging adulthood as may facilitative their being able to create positive paths through emerging adulthood.

Their insights created a dialogue among practitioners from across the multiple systems that impact individual youth, as described by Bronfrenbrenner (1979). The findings of my study informed interventions counselors and other child welfare professionals can use to help address past trauma, improve their interactions within the various microsystems, maintain or strengthen their relationships with members of their family or other significant adults, and support them in developing strong positive social attachments.

Unrau et al. (2008) noted the voice of current and FCY is needed to understand better how placement moves impact FCY and beyond. My participants shared what skills and resources young people need to gain while in FC. This helped them believe they can help them upon aging out. They also shared what they wished child welfare professionals and system partners knew about their experiences in FC and after to help generate insight into how current child welfare practices are and are not working. I believe these insights can help address
concerns noted in the professional literature regarding the ineffectiveness of transition planning for youth who will be aging out of FC (Brown & Wilderson, 2010).

I expected the insights participants provided into the types of communication between the relevant microsystems that could best help youth in FC transition out of the system will be useful to care providers across those systems. I believe counselors and other professionals will find the results of my study helpful in considering interventions that may assist FCY develop and maintain social connections, including connections with supportive relationships with members of their biological or adopted families. This will help them needing social supports in emerging adulthood. Ultimately, I believe that the perspectives shared by the voices of my participants can prompt further examination and discussion of potential changes to policies (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012), and direct services (Samuels, 2009) are in place to help FCY transition.

**Chapter Summary**

The majority of FCY transitioning out are at high risk for having poor outcomes, such as unemployment, underemployment, homelessness, and legal issues. Their difficulties in transitioning from FC into the adult world can be related to an absence of committed adults with whom youth have a lifelong connection, lack of necessary life skills, opportunities to participate in activities, opportunities to experience gradual independence, ineffective FC practices, federal policies, and experiences within FC. At the same time, some FCY age out and have positive experiences in emerging adulthood and beyond. Previously conducted research, however, did not provide a clear picture of what may contribute to those positive experiences. The perspective of FC adults who aged out is currently lacking in the professional literature (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Samuels, 2009; Unrau, 2007). My study contributed to the identified gap in the literature by providing the voices of FCY who aged out and are on a positive path in life. The
results of my study will provide counselors and all those that work with FCY with valuable insight to inform practice.

**Dissertation Organization**

I have provided an overview of the outcomes of FCY who aged out and the possible reasons as per current literature for these outcomes. I also noted the lack of research on FCY who experienced positive outcomes and their missing voices in the professional literature. I shared my research question, which I answered using a multiple case study methodology. I shared the significance of my results. I ended this chapter with definitions of key terms.

In the second chapter, I provided a comprehensive picture of the current literature related to the challenges FCY face in aging out and becoming emerging adults as well as offering information regarding factors that may positively influence that transition. I also presented an overview of the ecological systems theory, which provided a framework for understanding the multiple systems that impact the lives of FCY. Further, I offered a critique of current policies that have been written to help FCY prepare for transition.

In the third chapter, I provided the rationale using a thorough description of the study’s methodology, recruitment strategy, and data collection methods, including the interview protocols and data analysis. I included specific details about the participants, three self-identified young adults who aged out as being on a positive trajectory in life. Finally, I listed the steps I had taken to ensure that I have a rigorous and well-conducted study.

In chapter four, I shared the results of my study by providing a narrative on each participant's journey through FC as well as conducting a cross-case analysis to identify similarities and differences between the cases. The fifth and final chapter is a discussion of the study findings. In this chapter, the results were summarized and interpreted concerning the
research question. I discussed how the information learned from the individual cases, and cross-case analyses answered my research question. I also shared implications for practice, the limitations of my study, and suggestions for future research.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

**Aging out.** Process of FCY between the ages of 18-21 leaving the child welfare system without being reunified with their biological family, being adopted, or achieving some form of permanency arrangement (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development, 2008).

**Congregate care.** Group homes where FCY are provided with 24-hour substitute care. Congregate facilities do not include residential treatment centers or diagnostic centers (Freundlich & Avery, 2006).

**Emerging adulthood.** Developmental stage between the ages of 18-25, marked by the exploration of adult roles and responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is characterized by youth exploring all their possibilities, developing self-focus, and identity. Having adequate supports is necessary for this exploration (Munson et al., 2013).

**Foster care.** The federal government’s definition of FC is 24-hour substitute care provided to a minor child for whom state child welfare agencies have a responsibility due to their having been removed from the care of their parents or guardians (Child Welfare League of America, 2007).

**Lifelong connection.** A relationship with a committed individual who provides youth with a sense of belonging and connectedness, as well as being a source of support (Avery, 2010). The lifelong connection is preferably an individual who has known the youth for most of his and her life and is aware of their life story (Samuel, 2008).
Permanency. Having a living arrangement that includes the presence of a committed adult who provides the youth with a safe and secure parenting relationship (Courtney, 2009; Samuels, 2009).

Positive trajectory/positive path. Young adults who self-identify as being happy and satisfied with their path in emerging adulthood. They are also optimistic about their future and achieving their life goals, a common feature of young adults in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Understanding Foster Care

The primary purpose of child protective services is to ensure the safety and security of children (Collins, 2004) and ensure their medical, educational, and developmental needs are met. The staff of child protective services utilizes a multitude of services such as education, parental support and education, counseling, and financial assistance to try to maintain the foster care youth’s (FCY) residence in the home. Sometimes due to safety concerns or the lack of an available caregiver, a child has to be removed from the home and placed in FC (FC) for varying lengths of time (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Collins, 2004).

Youth are considered to be in FC if they are removed from the care of their parent or legal guardian, are the responsibility of the child welfare system and are provided with 24-hour substitute care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Child Welfare League of America, 2007). This care may be provided in the home of a relative or non-relative or a congregate care setting like a group home. Many youth are in FC for a short period, after which they are either reunified with their families or adopted (Collins, 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). However, some youth spend an extended period in FC and eventually age out. Other youth enter FC as adolescents and then age out (Courtney et al., 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

The focus of my study was on FCY, who officially aged out between the ages of 18 to 21. Technically, this means these emerging adults leave FC without being officially linked to an adult who has committed to providing the young adult with support and guidance (Courtney, 2009; Samuels, 2009). FCY who age out are thus expected by current federal and state policies to become independent adults and be self-sufficient after leaving FC (Dion, 2015; Propp et al.,
2003). Though in comparison to the overall percentage of youth who leave FC, their numbers are small, the eventual successes and failure these young adults are the responsibility of society and the government (Courtney, 2009).

At the end of 2017, approximately 443,000 children and adolescents were in FC in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018), of whom approximately 248,000 exited care. 20,000 youth or 8% transitioned from FC without a family to call their own (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). These youth exited FC without an individual who has committed to supporting them as emerging adults.

Youth in FC are, at minimum, the responsibility of the state until age 18, though changes in federal policy allow for states to provide for FCY until the age of 21 if certain conditions have been met (Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney, Hook, et al., 2010; Courtney, Lee, et al., 2011). Once implemented, recent changes in federal policy may allow for states to provide independent living services for FCY until age 23 without current eligibility requirements (Family First Prevention Services Act of 2017, 2018). The current eligibility requirements as per federal regulations to receive services after age 18 are that the FCY is enrolled in school or vocational training, employed a minimum 80 hours a month, involved in a program or activity designed to remove barriers to employment, or incapable of doing any of the above activities due to a medical condition (Courtney, Hook, et al., 2010; Courtney, Lee, et al., 2011). These requirements, while focused on helping FCY obtain their education and vocational skills, may exclude those with behavioral and mental health needs, are undereducated, and do not have employment as they do not qualify to obtain services from the state beyond their 18th birthday (Stott, 2013).

When FCY age out of the system, their transition is sometimes abrupt due to services ending at a set date because they have an unplanned departure or because the FCY choose to
leave the system. Even when FCY have a planned transition from FC, it differs from the more gradual transition into adulthood experienced by most adolescents and young adults in general (Courtney et al., 2007; Munson & McMillen, 2009). A gradual transition from adolescence typically allows young people to be better prepared for adulthood as they can explore adult roles, gain resources and experiences (Arnett, 2004; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

The primary focus of FC is to meet the physical, educational, emotional, and medical needs of children, hopefully in a nurturing environment, while simultaneously trying to reunite with their families or find a permanent home for them. Therefore, there is limited thought and planning given to FCY for the potential of aging out of care (Collins, 2004). Often, the transition process and planning begin after FCY are older and close to aging out (Propp et al., 2003). It is often haphazardly done after the likelihood of finding a permanent home diminishes (Propp et al., 2003). Thus, when the time comes for FCY to transition, many are ill-prepared, lack necessary life skills, tangible resources, and linkage to appropriate supports and adult services (Stott, 2013). As a result, FCY are often ill-prepared to enter emerging adulthood.

**Emerging Adulthood**

In current western society, the accomplishment of the traditional milestones of early adulthood, like completing educational and vocational training, entering into an occupation, gaining financial independence, and living independently are occurring later in general (McMahon, 2014). The time between adolescence and adulthood has extended and can be considered a period of exploration and a developmental stage (Arnett, 2000). For some youth, this is also the time to develop the social and psychological resources required for successfully living as independent adults (McMahon, 2014).
A gradual transition to the adult world is possible when young men and women have access to additional financial and emotional support while trying to become an adult, as well as the ability to return home if needed (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Schook, 2011). Arnett (2000) described this gradual transition into the adult world as emerging adulthood. This developmental stage typically occurs from ages 18-25 and is marked by the exploration of adult roles before eventually taking complete responsibility for fulfilling those roles. Typical tasks involved in learning how to function effectively in the adult world include gaining and maintaining employment, achieving financial self-sufficiency, obtaining independent housing, continuing education, building support systems, and becoming a contributing member of a broader community (Loring, 2011).

Arnett (2004) stated that some standard features for youth during emerging adulthood include identity exploration, instability, being self-focused, feeling in between, and endless possibilities. Young adults in emerging adulthood additionally can become more socially and cognitively mature, and thus able to make better decisions for themselves as they enter adulthood and self-sufficiency (Arnett, 2004). However, Arnett (2007) also noted that the emerging adulthood life stage carries with it the potential for the development of serious mental health issues, due to the lack of structure and clear expectations. This stage can be more difficult for vulnerable populations like FCY aging out.

One of the questions that have arisen about emerging adulthood is whether it is a life stage applicable to all young adults, or only to young adults from certain social-economic or racial backgrounds. Emerging adulthood has been observed in subsets of youth from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Berzin et al., 2014; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). These subsets of youth often experience a different path to adulthood, one that is accelerated, but that
still has the core elements of emerging adulthood (Berzin et al., 2014; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Youth with lower educational attainment frequently do not experience emerging adulthood in the same way as their peers with a higher level of educational achievement (Smith et al., 2015). Landberg, Lee, and Novack (2019) interviewed emerging adults who were enrolled in vocational training and concluded that youth with low educational attainment do experience aspects of emerging adulthood.

**Emerging Adulthood and Current Economic Climate**

Due to the current economic and social climate in the U.S., it is becoming increasingly harder for young adults to leave home at 18 and become self-sufficient adults, particularly economically self-sufficient (Barroso et al., 2019; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Stott, 2013). The trend to leave home at the young age of 18 was prevalent in the United States in the 1950s (Settersten & Ray, 2010). From the 1950s to the 1970s, this was possible as young people could find well-paying jobs after completing high school (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Young adults in this time frame were leaving home at an earlier age, getting married younger, and having children at a younger age (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Gradually, this trend has evolved, and youth are leaving home early and tend to delay marriage and parenthood (Barroso et al., 2019; Settersten & Ray, 2010). One of the primary reasons cited for the current trend is a changing labor market that today requires a minimum of a college degree to find an entry-level position in many occupations (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Additionally, many entry-level jobs do not pay enough to allow young people to be financially self-sufficient (Stott, 2013).

Young adults today are thus increasingly dependent on both financial and emotional support from their family and friends (Gitelson & McDermott, 2006; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Many young people rely on their family for financial assistance while they complete their
education and move back home at various times of their lives as they experience job changes, job losses, or relationship disappointments (Gitelson & McDermott, 2006). Ideally, when exiting emerging adulthood, the support of their family and friends has served to help young people find themselves in a position where they are ready to be independent decision-makers, able to be financially independent, and live on their own.

In the United States today, many more young adults (51%) between the ages of 18-23 reside with their parents (Arnett, 2014). Young adults also are dependent on their families for financial and emotional support as they navigate emerging adulthood. Financial support can include paying part of the rent (Barosso et al., 2019; Davidson, 2014; Raphelson, 2014), including young adults on the family phone plan or keeping them on family insurance until age 26 (Hoder, 2014). This allows young adults to save money for housing costs or to try different jobs until they locate one, they like or even maintain a lifestyle they cannot afford (Davidson, 2014). However, the support they receive during this period is both tangible and intangible and not limited to finances (Gitelson & McDermott, 2006; Settersten & Ray, 2010). At times, the most valuable support provided is guidance and help in navigating adult systems and making decisions (Fingerman, 2017).

Emerging Adulthood and Foster Care

As noted by Arnett (2007), FCY making the transition to the adult world at times struggle with this transition more than non-FCY. Aging out youth often do not have access to viable supports in the adult world and are simultaneously losing the formal supports they depended on during their placement in FC (Dion, 2015; Ferrell, 2004; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Loring, 2011; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Naccarto, Brophsy, & Courtney, 2010; Vacca, 2008). FCY who have aged out of the system may not have the financial means to support themselves.
independently, may struggle with finding a stable place to live, and often lack the supports to help them navigate the adult world (Dion, 2015; Loring, 2011; Vacca, 2008). Their ability to make a gradual transition to the adult world is also impacted if they do not have a natural support system to which they can return in times of need and their formal support systems are no longer accessible after they age out of FC (Dinisman et al., 2013; Munson & McMillen, 2009). Munson et al. (2013) contended that the developmental transition of FC recipients into adulthood is different from their counterparts who are not in FC due to events of their childhood, their involvement in the child welfare system, and their FC placement history (Courtney, 2009; Stott, 2013).

In the next section, I reviewed the overall outcomes of FCY after they age out. I focused specifically on educational attainment, employment, and housing stability as crucial tasks of emerging adulthood along with outcomes in areas of mental health and substance use as well as illegal behaviors.

**Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**

Numerous authors (Ahrens et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Ferrell, 2004; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Reilly, 2003; Zinn & Courtney, 2017) have documented that FCY are at high risk of having poor adult outcomes after aging out. Previous researchers (Ahrens et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Ferrell, 2004; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Reilly, 2003) have primarily examined youth's ability to live independently or to be economically self-sufficient in the adult world. Zinn & Courtney (2017) documented the challenges of FCY who age out in becoming self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency is defined as having employment, a stable place to live, and not requiring government assistance (Collins, 2004). However, a large number of former FCY who were interviewed as part of the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning
of Former Foster Care Youth reported having no employment and needing government assistance even at age 26 (Midwest Study, as cited in Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011).

**The Midwest Study**

Several sources cited in this literature review analyzed primary and secondary data as part of the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Care Youth (Midwest Study, n.d.), hereafter referred to as the Midwest Study. The Midwest Study (n.d.) is a longitudinal study conducted as a collaboration between Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, and public child welfare agencies from Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin participated in the study. Initially, 732 youth (51.1% female, 48.9% male; 56.7% African American, 31.1% White, 9.7% multiracial, and 1.9% other) were 17-years-old and still in FC were interviewed. The initial interviews were considered baseline data and wave one of Midwest Study (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Courtney, Terroa, & Bost, 2004). Wave two occurred when the FCY were 19-year-old. During this phase of data collection, 603 (82%) youth (54.1% female, 45.9% male; 56.5% African-American, 31% White, 10.3% multiracial, and 2.1% other) who were initially interviewed were re-interviewed (Courtney et al., 2005).

The third wave of interviews was completed with 591 (81%) of the interviewed youth (51.6 % female, 48.4% male; 57% African-American, 30.7% White, 9.5% multi-racial, and 2.4% other or unknown) than initially when they were 21 (Courtney et al., 2007). The researchers completed the next wave (wave four) with 602 (82%) of the original participants (53.5% female, 46.5% male; 54.5% African-American, 29.9% White, 4% Hispanic, 5.8% multi-racial, and 1.7% other (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2010). The former FCY were between 23 and 24 when interviewed during wave four (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2010). During the last phase of data collection, the former FCY were between 25 and 26 years old (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011).
collection (wave five), 596 youth (55.7% female, 44.3% female; 55% African-American, 29.7% White, 3.7% Hispanic, 8.7% multiracial, and 2.9% other or unknown) were re-interviewed to determine their outcomes at age 26 (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011).

Overview of Outcomes of Youth Aging Out of FC

There are numerous reasons former FCY struggle to establish themselves as adults, including lack of skills and opportunities (Scannapieco et al., 2016; Stott, 2013), past trauma, and mental health and behavioral health challenges (Loring, 2011). FCY often age out without the educational attainment they need to become economically self-sufficient (Naccarato et al., 2010; Okpych, 2012). Also, as FCY are typically not afforded the ability to learn responsibility by being gradually given freedom and opportunities due to the rigidness of FC and congregate care, they are often ill-equipped to live in the adult world (Stott, 2013).

Currently, there is minimal evidence as to the specific factors that may contribute to positive outcomes for FCY aging out (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). One factor that appears related to improved outcomes of FCY after aging out is the age at which they make the transition (Courtney, 2009; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019). Also, placement stability while in care (Havelick, 2011; Reilly, 2003; Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day, 2015), extensive independent living services, and leaving care with concrete resources (Peccora et al., 2006) appear to be associated with more positive outcomes (e.g., better employment and higher education) for transitioning FCY. FCY also benefit from having supportive adults in their transition (Goodkind et al., 2011; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

There is, however, a scarcity of literature that includes the voices of FCY who aged out, especially concerning the transition and their experiences in emerging adulthood, both negative and positive (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). More importantly, very little is known about the
experiences of youth whose paths through emerging adulthood is positive (Unrau et al., 2008). This information, the focus of my study, will help link what we currently know about challenges FCY who age out as young adults and will provide insight as to what services and supports may assist FCY in their transition and beyond.

**Educational attainment.** Numerous authors have documented poor educational outcomes of FCY (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Ferrell, 2004; Leathers & Testa, 2006; Loring, 2011; Reilly, 2003). Leathers and Testa (2006) reported that less than 42% of the 177 FCY had a high school diploma or a GED. As many as 20% had dropped out of school. The researchers also found that 23% was enrolled in post-secondary education (Leathers & Testa, 2006). Courtney, Dworsky, et al. (2011) reported on the adult outcomes of former FCY who participated in the last wave of the Midwest Study at age 26. They stated that even at age 26, the majority of the study sample (N = 541) participants continued to exhibit poor educational attainment (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Twenty percent (20%) of the study participants did not have a high school diploma or a GED. Also, though 40% had attended college, only 8% had a degree from either a two-year or a four-year post-secondary institution. Courtney, Dworsky, et al. (2011) compared the outcomes of former FCY to non-FCY (based on data collected in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health [Add Health], as cited in Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). They found that former FCY were three times less likely than non-FCY to complete high school or obtain a GED (Add Health, as cited in Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011).

Results of a study completed by Pecora et al. (2006), also known as the Northwest Alumni Study, suggested that former FCY completed high school at a similar rate as non-FCY aged 18-29. Pecora et al. (2006) reviewed case records of 659 former FCY who had been served
by three FC agencies in Washington and Oregon. Two of the agencies were government-run. The third was a private agency. The agencies had to meet the following criteria to participate in the study: had spent a minimum of 12 months in FC, had been in care between the ages of 14 to 18, and had no major physical or developmental disability. Four hundred and seventy-nine (72.68%) of the youth who met the criteria for the study participated in structured interviews.

A report by The Annie Casey Foundation (2018) provided state-by-state statistics on FCY aging out. Their report accentuated the challenges FCY face in obtaining a high school diploma. Overall, FYC had lower educational attainment at age 21 compared to non-FCY (Annie Casey Foundation, 2018). Many factors seem to contribute to the poor educational outcomes of FCY aging out (Hook & Courtney, 2011; Pecora et al., 2006). Such factors included a history of abuse or neglect, multiple school changes, placement in neighborhoods with poor-performing schools, and personal characteristics (Ferrell, 2004; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Vacca, 2008). Homelessness also impacts the ability of FYC to obtain an education as the lack of a stable living environment creates difficulties in enrolling in school due to lack of needed documents and the basic needs like clean clothes and showers. These create barriers to homeless youth attending school (Ammerman et al., 2004).

The federal government enacted specific policies to help increase the educational attainment of FCY through the passage of Education and Training Vouchers Programs as part of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendment of 2001. Once implemented by states, the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2017 increased the age of youth eligible for the Education and Training Voucher Programs to 26 (Family First Prevention Act of 2017, 2018). The training programs currently implemented at the state level provide funding for youth up to the age of 23 who are enrolled in post-secondary education (Stott, 2013). Additionally, trying to
maintain the placement stability of FCY can help improve their educational attainment (Hook & Courtney, 2011). To further help improve the educational outcomes of FCY, I believe it is important to learn directly from former FCY what helped facilitate enrollment in post-secondary educational programs and assisted them in completing these programs post-transition from FC.

Today’s economic conditions require young adults to acquire either a vocational and/or post-secondary education to enter the job market. Many emerging adults depend on their families for support while they complete their education (Okpych, 2012; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Though there are programs available to help FCY obtain a post-secondary education and vocational training through the Education and Training Vouchers Program, these programs are not available for all FCY. They do not, at times, provide sufficient resources for former FCY to complete their training (Okpych, 2012). For example, former FCY in a four-year university will not receive sufficient funds from the program to cover their tuition, room, and board, and living expenses for the length of time it takes them to complete their degree (Okpych, 2012).

There is a positive correlation between educational attainment while in FC and financial stability after FC (e.g., Hook & Courtney, 2011; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2018). There is little in the literature on how these two factors coexist. Additionally, there is no information on how former FCY who aged out without obtaining a high school diploma or GED also believe they are on a good path in emerging adulthood view education. It is unclear what stopped them from getting their education while in FC and what would have helped obtain. Further, we know little about what may help FCY obtain their education after leaving FC.

**Stable housing.** Homelessness is a primary issue for FCY who have transitioned out. Research in this domain indicates that FCY lack the financial resources to afford rent (Ammerman et al., 2004). FCY transitioning often cannot obtain independent housing as they do
not have adequate credit or anyone to cosign a lease (Ammerman et al., 2004). Ferrell (2004) found that 25% of FYC aging out experience homelessness at some point.

According to Courtney, Dworsky et al. (2011), approximately 33% of former FCY who participated in wave five of the Midwest Study reported living independently at age 26 as compared to 48.4% of non-FCY at the same age. Though only approximately 1% of FCY participating in the fifth wave of the Midwest Study reported being homeless at the time of the interview, 15% reported having experienced homelessness since being interviewed at wave four (two-three years before; Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Further, many of these FCY had experienced multiple episodes of homelessness (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Similarly, 22% of youth who participated in the Northwest Alumni study reported experiencing homelessness after leaving FC (Pecora et al., 2006). Though the evaluation of outcomes of FCY completed by Courtney, Dworsky, et al. (2011) showed that youth who live independently does not provide any insight into what helped them obtain housing.

**Employment and economic self-sufficiency.** Former FCY are more likely than non-FCY to be unemployed, underemployed, making less money per hour, and living below the poverty line (Ferrell, 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003; Zinn & Courtney, 2017).

According to Courtney, Dworsky et al. (2011), only 46% of former FCY in the fifth wave of the Midwest study were employed at age 26 as compared to 80% of non-FCY that participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health, as cited in Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Only 70% of FCY in the Midwest Study reported earning any income in the year before the interview (Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011). Courtney, Dworsky et al. (2011) noted this was 16% lower than the percentage of non-FCY who were making an income in the year before data collection (Add Health, as cited in Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011).
Using archival data collected during the Midwest Study, Hook and Courtney (2011) examined the employment outcomes of former FCY to identify the factors that helped explain the differences in their labor market successes. Hook and Courtney (2011) identified the following three broad areas of resources or capital youth need to be successful in the world of work: (a) human capital (education and skillset), (b) personal capital (behavioral characteristics and personal style), and (c) social capital (personal relationship and social networks). They reported that FCY who have aged out lacked in capital in all three areas due to their involvement in the child welfare system. This resulted in their having a disadvantage in the job market (Hook & Courtney, 2011).

FCY are also at a disadvantage in obtaining employment after aging out because many do not have prior work experience (Reilly, 2003). Another sign that FCY tended not to be economically self-sufficient is that a high percentage report used some form of government support to help them live independently (Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006). The most common form of aid received was food stamps (Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011).

The federal government has enacted policies to help FCY improve their level of educational attainment so that they can be economically self-sufficient after leaving FC. The assumption is that if FCY obtain an education while in FC, they will have better employment opportunities in the adult world. However, it is unclear if just having obtained an education while in FC is sufficient to help FCY who age out experience a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood.

The Foster Care Independence Act [FCIA] (1999) originally passed in 1999 and then amended in 2000, included provisions to help youth receive educational, vocational, and employment training (Collins, 2004). Other federally funded programs, such as the youth
services programs and Job Corps, part of the Workforce Investment Act of 1988, included FCY as a targeted population (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Hook and Courtney (2011) noted that despite the enactments of these laws, former FCY are underemployed and underpaid as compared to non-FCY youth. Former FCY who obtain work experience while in FC and complete their education tend to have better employment outcomes as young adults (Rosenberg & Abbott; 2019; Hook & Courtney, 2011).

For FCY who age out and experience a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood, we know little about how they obtained the resources or capital (personal, social, and human) needed to be successful in the adult world (Hook & Courtney, 2011). It is also unclear why some FCY can gain work experience while in FC, while others cannot. Learning this information can address the gap in the current literature and help more FCY gain work experience while in care and develop the resources potentially needed to gain and maintain employment.

**Illegal behaviors.** In a study of 100 former FCY, Reilly (2003) found that 45% were addressing legal issues. Forty-one percent of participants had spent time in jail, 26% had charges filed against them, and 7% were incarcerated at the time of the study. Courtney, Dworsky, et al. (2011) reported that 5% of the respondents who participated in wave five of the Midwest Study at age 26 were incarcerated and that approximately 33% of the males and 18% of the female participants had legal issues at the time of their interviews. Examples of these legal issues included fighting, destruction of property, drug-related offenses, and serious traffic violations (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). In comparison, participants in the Midwest Study reported higher arrest rates after age 18 (41.6% of females and 68.2% of males) (Courtney, Dworsky et
al., 2011) than did participants in the Add Health Study (as cited in Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011) [4.9% of females and 22.1% of males].

**Mental health and substance use.** FCY most typically have a history of past trauma related both to their experiences before entering and while in FC (Stott, 2013). FC agencies try to provide youth with counseling services while they are in care. These issues can be related to past trauma and often continue to impact former FCY in many ways after they age out. The current literature provides limited clarity on how youth who experience a positive path through emerging adulthood have or have not addressed past trauma, nor is it known how the trauma former FCY experienced impacted their transition from care to life after FC. The results of my study provide insight into the impact of trauma on the emerging adulthood of former FCY.

After their transition from FC, youth can continue to experience symptoms of depression, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcohol and substance use (Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006). They are often unable to access counseling and substance use services due to a lack of medical insurance and financial resources (Courtney, Dworsky et al., 2011). According to Courtney, Dworsky et al. (2011), only 60% of Midwest Study participants reported having medical insurance at the age of 26 compared to 78% of the participants in the Add Health Study (as cited in Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Similarly, 33% of FCY who participated in the Northwest Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2006) and 55% of FCY who participated in the study completed by Reilly (2003) reported having no health insurance.

The focus of most of the studies cited above has been on measuring concrete outcomes of FYC after they age out. These are the measures used by the federal government to meet the needs of FYC who will be aging out and are the basis of current policies and programs like the independent living initiatives described below. However, these concrete measures assume that
FINDING THEIR WAY

FYC who leave will live independently after leaving and be self-sufficient adults (Propp et al., 2003).

Though most of the literature on FYC aging out have repeatedly shown the negative outcomes former FCY experienced after leaving the system, there are also glimpses in the literature about factors that may lead to more positive outcomes. Independent living initiatives are perhaps a means to help facilitate such outcomes. These programs allow for FYC to gain skills needed in emerging adulthood (Collins, 2004) and some also provide them with a way to make a supported transition (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Though we know little about how independent living initiatives help improve outcomes, it is helpful to understand these services.

**Independent Living Initiatives to Improve Outcomes**

Through federally funded independent living initiatives (e.g., Fostering Connections Act to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008), the government established programs to teach independent living skills to FCY before aging out; skills that they would require once living independently. Typical skills taught in these programs include money management, credit management, consumer skills, education, and employment-related skills (Collins, 2004). Many newer independent living programs that have been established to help FCY make a gradual transition into the adult system end at age 21 or 23 at the latest (Lee & Berrick, 2014). These programs assist FCY with more than life skills and often provide them with housing options.

There are limited studies through which researchers have examined the outcomes of independent living programs (Collins, 2004). Those studies completed to date have had major limitations due to small samples, lack of comparison groups, and lack of standardization amongst services offered by the different independent living programs (Collins, 2004). Lindsey and Ahmed (1999) conducted a study to determine if FCY in North Carolina who participated in
independent living programs (n=44) had better outcomes than FCY who did not receive such services (n=32). Lindsey and Ahmed (1999) provided FCY with a survey to measure outcomes in four domains: housing and living arrangements, education and training, employment and earnings, and financial self-sufficiency. They reported that 68% of youth who received independent living program services were living independently compared to 4% of FCY who did not receive the services. FCY who received independent living services were slightly more financially self-sufficient, had higher educational attainment, including post-secondary training, and were more likely to be employed. However, these differences were not statistically significant, and there was no difference between the two groups on housing stability (Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999).

Lindsey and Ahmed (1999) reported some positive outcomes for youth who received independent living program (ILP) services. However, some limitations reduce the ability to generalize their results. There was an age difference between FCY who received ILP services and those who did not; FYC who received services were significantly older than those who did not participate in ILP services before aging out. As previously noted, another limitation of the study was its small sample size (Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999).

Cook (1994) completed one of the largest known studies on the impact of independent living skills on adult outcomes of former FCY as part of the National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth. Her team of researchers examined outcomes for 810 former FCY across eight states. Cook (1994) concluded that some combination of life skills training was related to more positive outcomes in the five core life domains measured and were also related to improved adult outcomes such as keeping a job and not needing government assistance (Cook, 1994). Acquiring independent living skills was
related to an increased likelihood of accessing health care and overall self-sufficiency (Cook, 1994). Although Cook's (1994) study is now over 20 years old, it remains relevant as it was one of the most comprehensive evaluations completed in ILPs. Very few additional studies have been completed since then, perhaps due to the lack of standardization of IPLs and the services they provide.

In one of the more recent studies on the effectiveness of IL's, Kroner and Mares (2009) examined the adult outcomes of FCY after transitioning from a transitional living program. FCY served in this independent living program received housing, case management, clinical services, and life skills training typically provided at ILPs. The researchers examined both the characteristics of the FCY they served and their outcomes at discharge. Kroner and Mares (2009) included all FCY served by an ILP located in Ohio between the years of 2001-2006 (N=455). They reported that 60% of FCY had a high school diploma or GED at discharge, 31% were employed or had completed a vocational training program, and 33% lived independently. Results also indicated that the older FCY were at the time of entry into the program, and the longer they remained in the program, the better their outcomes after discharge (Kroner & Mares, 2009). This may be explained by the fact that older FCY were more likely to have completed high school before entering the program and were able to obtain employment while helping improve their post-discharge outcomes (Kroner & Mares, 2009).

Independent living programs, especially transitional living programs that include a housing component, appear to be potentially a good way to help FCY prepare for their eventual transition to adulthood. In some ways, they allow FCY to make a gradual transition into adulthood, similar to that afforded to non-FCY. FCY can work, learn to live in their apartment and gain an education or vocational training while having supports in place from the staff of the
transitional living program (Kroner & Mares, 2009). However, the impact of such programs on
the long-term future of participants remains unknown. Little has been written about which
elements of transitional living programs FCY find to be most helpful in their transition.

Since there are no pre-established guidelines regarding specific services that transitional
living programs must provide, there can be a variety of housing options, case management
services, and clinical services provided to FCY. For example, the Lighthouse program (Mares &
Kroner, 2011) provided FCY with different options as to the types of housing eligible, the level
of case management and clinical services, as well as individualized life skills training. The
Lighthouse program staff also addressed FCY educational and vocational goals on an individual
level (Mares & Kroner, 2011). Participants' insights into their experiences with transitional
living programs shed some light on the benefits of such programs.

Research has also indicated the need for FCY to have social supports as well as tangible
life skills to help them during their transition (Collins, 2004; Stott, 2013). Thus, along with
trying to provide FCY with tangible life skills, housing assistance, educational attainment, and
independent living programs, federal policies such as the Fostering Connections to Success and
Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 have also focused on trying to help FCY develop social
supports.

Social Supports

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 included
language that acknowledged the understanding that FCY who were leaving FC need more than
just tangible skills. They need connections to dedicated adults who can provide them with
emotional support during this transition (Collins, 2004). Part of the legislative language change
included an emphasis on permanency planning for all FCY. Permanency planning involves
having FCY reunified with parents, being adopted, being under legal guardianship, or having another permanency plan before aging out (Courtney, 2009).

The language of the federal legislation has changed over the years to reflect the importance of addressing the social and emotional needs of FCY by focusing on permanency (Courtney, 2009), mentoring (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007), and helping FCY make life long connections (Samuels, 2009). However, service delivery has continued to focus on providing more concrete life skills to older FCY (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Samuels, 2009). Such skills include locating housing, opening a bank account, creating a resume, and completing an interview (Collins, 2004). However, it appears that little to no attention is paid to assisting FCY in improving their relational skills (Goodkind et al., 2011; Samuels, 2009). Even less is given to understanding how FCY maintain and access these supports after they leave care. Additionally, there is a lack of information and focus on how FCY who formed and maintained a supportive relationship before aging out did so and also if this relationship helped them in the transitioning and beyond. The results of my study help fill this gap in the literature by increasing our knowledge of what factors (youth, adults, or environment) or a combination of factors help FCY develop relationships. In contrast, FCY maintained these relationships, and then access needed social supports in emerging adulthood.

**Need for Social Supports**

After transitioning out of the child welfare system, many FCY will face financial hardships or other crises (Ammerman et al., 2004). When faced with a crisis, they often do not have social supports to assist them with the crisis the way many FCY in the general population do (Ammerman et al., 2004) because they are often not connected to supportive adults, resources, and economic supports (Avery, 2010). These supportive relationships are important if
FCY who have aged out is to become fully self-sufficient in the adult world (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014), as being involved in meaningful relationships with individuals and within communities is considered part of self-sufficiency (Goodkind et al., 2011).

**Current Social Supports**

Most current or former FCY interviewed or surveyed within the various studies I have cited reported having friends and family as a support network (Cook, 1994; Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Reilly, 2003; Samuels, 2008). Interestingly, participants also reported a lack of emotional support as one of the more challenging aspects of their transition from FC into independent living (Goodkind et al., 2011; Munson et al., 2013). Courtney, Dworsky, et al. (2011) noted that most FCY interviewed at age 26 as part of the last wave of the Midwest study reported having strong ties to at least one member of their biological family. The family member most commonly cited was a sibling, and the person least cited was the father (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Many FCY in the study by Goodkind et al. (2011) also resided with family members after aging out.

Despite remaining connected to members of their biological families, FCY aging out tend to struggle with their transition. It is unclear through the current research how they obtain the social, emotional, and concrete resources they require to be successful in their transition to independent living (Munson & McMillen, 2009). Samuels (2009) suggested that their struggles in receiving needed supports could be related to their difficulties in building emotional relationships.

There are multiple reasons former FCY struggle with developing meaningful relationships, especially with adults. These include their trauma histories (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014), unresolved issues related to their removal and ongoing issues with trust
(Goodkind et al., 2011), their experiences in FC (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), and their placement stability (Havlicek, 2011) or lack thereof. Other reasons included their limited abilities to participate in activities that will allow them to come in contact with potential supports (Stott, 2013). The participation of FCY in activities, as well as their ability to build long-lasting relationships, are often disrupted through multiple placements (Stott, 2013).

The social networks of FCY are potentially limited due to their inabilities to develop relationships with people, especially lifelong connections; connections to people who have known the FCY for an extended period and are knowledgeable about the FCY and his or her life story (Samuels, 2009). Samuels (2009) found that some of the individuals whom former FCY included in their innermost circle (people whom they were closest to and involved with) included family members with whom they did not have a current relationship. FCY hoped to reconnect with their family members or were in the process of rebuilding a relationship. Although FCY identified these individuals as important parts of their support networks, they were not people the FCY could turn to support (Samuels, 2009).

**Programs to Help Youth Develop Relational Skills**

Researchers and child welfare providers are trying to develop programs based upon best practices to help FCY develop their relationship skills and build lifelong connections (Avery, 2010). Many of these programs focus on providing FCY with mentoring services or finding non-formal mentors (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Munson & McMillen, 2009) who can be a source of support as they age out. Non-formal mentors can be defined as important people in a FCY’s life, such as a teacher or coach, who are willing to mentor the FCY (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Some of the challenges in helping FCY develop mentoring relationships are the same as mentioned earlier in regard to helping FCY establish committed relationships with adults.
Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) examined the outcomes of the Creating Ongoing Relationships Effectively (CORE) program, designed to help FCY develop supportive relationships. The program served older FCY and utilized a model that helped them become empowered through trauma-informed practices with an emphasis on relationships. This three-year study compared outcomes of study participants to FCY who were receiving services in a traditional independent living program that focused solely on the development of independent living skills like money management and job searching.

The CORE model's mission was to help FCY develop supportive relationships that would be long-lasting and help them in their transition into adulthood (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). FCY identified individuals with whom they wanted to establish such a relationship. The individual could have been a member of their biological family or a non-related adult mentor. Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) utilized interviews with participants in the CORE program and two pre-tests/post-test self-report scales to determine program outcomes.

Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) noted that there were limited differences between the FCY who participated in the CORE model (n=58) as compared to those who comprised the comparison group (n = 30) on the two self-report scales. The participants in the CORE group, however, did identify an increased number of people they could count on for support between their pre- and post-tests though this difference was not statistically significant. Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) did not identify any specific reason for this change, noting that the participants in the CORE group were able to identify people outside their biological family as supports. Identifying potential supports is a step in the right direction towards helping FCY in FC develop social supports. However, Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) did not provide information on helping FCY identify supportive adults. Also, there was no follow up
information as to whether the adults they identified assisted them in their transition from FC into emerging adulthood. The results of my study provide insight into what helped participants establish relationships with adults other than members of their biological families. This information will be helpful in the development of an effective intervention designed to help FCY supportive relationships.

Avery (2010) evaluated a program designed to help FCY find adoptive or committed parents. The targeted population for this program was FCY who were residing in congregate care. Trained permanency staff worked with FCY to identify people who were in their lives currently or had previously been in their lives (especially members of their biological families) who could become their adoptive or committed parent. The results of the evaluation indicated that program staff was able to establish permanency for 81% of the participants (Avery, 2010).

We have quantitative data that indicate that FCY who age out with social supports tend to fare better in emerging adulthood. However, we know little about how these relationships were formed and sustained. From my study, I learned how the participants established social supports and maintained them after leaving FC.

Despite policies, programs, and practices designed to improve the eventual outcomes of FCY who age out, it was clear that many young adults that left FC do not achieve desired outcomes and were not able to live independently or become economically self-sufficient (Propp et al., 2003; Stott, 2013). As noted earlier in this chapter, researchers have identified potential reasons that FCY do not achieve desired adult outcomes. Such reasons include, but are not limited to, multiple placements (Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Unrau et al., 2008), inadequate preparation for living independently (Stott, 2013), poor educational attainment (Leathers & Testa, 2006), trauma (Courtney, 2009), and lack of social attachments (Samuels, 2009), the
proposed solutions by policymakers have not created desired results. Perhaps the one key piece that policymakers are missing is that their expectations for FCY who age out are unrealistic given the current economic and social climate in the U.S. (Propp et al., 2003). It is unrealistic to expect an 18-21-year-old young adult, especially with a significant trauma history, to be prepared to live independently as a self-sufficient adult at such a young age.

To help me better understand the impact of FC on FCY during their transition from the system and in emerging adulthood, as well as to learn from the experiences of young emerging adults with a FC background, I am using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory as my conceptual framework. This framework will help me learn and understand the influence of multiple systems, including current policies in preparing FCY for aging out. Before discussing the ecological systems theory, I will first review policies pertinent to FCY aging out of FC. The impact of these policies is based mainly on quantitative studies and evaluation. Few studies have focused on learning from former FCY the impact they perceived these policies had in their transition from FC and their experiences in emerging adulthood.

**Policies**

Following is an overview of recent policies designed to help transition FCY from FC into the adult world. I also examined why policies have changed over time. The federal government has acknowledged the difficulty FCY in FC can face if required to make a direct and immediate transition to adulthood (Collins & Clay, 2009). The dismal outcomes of FCY who have aged out also continue to be a significant concern for child welfare agencies and state and federal lawmakers (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). In part, this concern is due to their realization that they have a "moral imperative of not abandoning" these FCY who were once in the care of the state (Hook & Courtney, 2011, p. 1). The state serves as the FCY's
surrogate parent or corporate parent (Courtney, 2009) through the child welfare system, and its policies have a responsibility to assist FCY in emerging into adulthood (Munson et al., 2013).

The federal government’s acknowledgment of the need to provide services to FCY aging out began with the establishment of programs to provide concrete life skills to FCY. The Independent Living Initiative (1986) was passed in 1986 and amended Title IV-E of the social security act to include the Independent Living Program. Title IV-E of the social security act appropriates federal funds to states to help them care for children in FC (SSA.Gov). The passage of this initiative provided funding to states for Independent Living Programs (Collins, 2004; Courtney et al., 2010). In 1988 this initiative was modified to allow states to provide services to all FCY regardless of their Title IV eligibility. States now could provide services to FCY six months after discharge from the system and until age 21 (Stott, 2013). This change in policy, especially in terms of providing services until age 21, was primarily in response to quantitative research that has consistently shown that FCY who remain in care until later in age have better outcomes upon exit (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2007; Vacca, 2008). The change also affected FCY, who remained in care until age 21 had better educational attainments than FCY who exited 18 or earlier (Courtney et al., 2007). The question, however, that remains unanswered is why when the policy changed (increasing the age of transition from FC to 21), did the outcomes of former FCY remain unchanged? Part of the reason the question remains is that there is little knowledge as to why some FCY who age out at 21 have positive trajectories in emerging adulthood, and others do not. My study addresses this gap by including the voices of FCY who have aged out and are on a positive path as emerging adults. These voices provide a different perspective on current policies and their effectiveness, which is currently missing in the literature.
Considering outcomes for FCY aging out did not change. The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA, 1999), also known as the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, was enacted. As with previous legislation, lawmakers based the Act and the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program on quantitative data that did not clearly explain why the earlier policy had not worked. FCIA (1999) allowed states to use up to 30% of their Chafee Independent Living funds to provide room and board to FCY between the ages of 18-21 who had aged out (Collins, 2004; Stott, 2013). The major change in this law from the prior law was that it included funding to help pay for housing, FC placements, or transitional living placements (Stott, 2013). This provision in the law permitted states to provide housing to FCY even after exiting the system. The goal of this provision was to reduce the number of FCY who faced homelessness after aging out. As of today, this goal has not been met.

Further provisions in the FCIA (1999) also provided states with the ability to use federal funds to provide independent living programs to FCY under the age of 16 and extended Medicaid coverage for FCY until the age of 21 (Stott, 2013). Another goal or stated purpose of the FCIA (1999) was to help FCY transition to self-sufficiency and to help them take personal responsibility for adulthood (Collins, 2004). The law also included reporting requirements allowing the government to gather information on the outcomes of FCY (Stott, 2013).

An additional change in the language of this law was the understanding that FCY who were leaving needed more than just tangible skills. They perhaps needed connections to dedicated adults who would provide them with emotional support during this transition (Collins, 2004). Part of the change of the language included an emphasis on permanency planning for all FCY. Permanency planning involves having FCY be reunified with parents, adopted, be under legal guardianship, or have another permanency plan before aging out of FC (Courtney, 2009).
Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 further amended Title IV-E by enacting the Education and Training Vouchers Programs to provide funding for FCY who are enrolled in post-secondary education to FCY up to the age of 23 (Okpych, 2012; Stott, 2013).

In 2008, the federal government passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008). This act included further provisions to improve outcomes for FCY aging out. Some of the provisions of this act included allowing FCY who were adopted after the age of 16 or became involved in the child welfare system after the age of 16 to have access to Chafee Funds. The act also mandated the development of a transition plan for FCY 90 days before aging out of the system. It allowed for young adults to remain eligible for Title IV-E funds until age 21 and for states to be reimbursed for their placements through Medicaid funds (Courtney, Hook, et al., 2010; Courtney, Lee, et al., 2011; Stott, 2013).

The passage of the Family First Preservation Act of 2017 (2018), while not explicitly focused on FCY who age out, did have some provisions specific to this population. The law increased the age FCY can receive services from the FC system to 23, with no eligibility requirements. The Act also increased the age for which FCY aged out can qualify for Education and Training Voucher Programs to 26. As the provisions of this law have as yet not been implemented at the state level, it is difficult to speak to its impact on outcomes for FCY who age out.

Based on current federal policy FCY still have to transition out at a set age. Extending the age to 21 does perhaps provide them with the opportunity to obtain a higher level of education, enter the job market, and explore the adult world with a safety net. Researchers (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019) have consistently presented that the older FCY are when they age out, the more education, and the greater the
amount of work experience they have gained while in care, the higher the probability that they will have positive outcomes as adults. However, researchers have not established why some FCY who age out at 21 with the minimum of a high school diploma and prior work experience a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood and why other FCY face more difficulties in emerging adulthood even though their transition is at age 21.

Despite the changes in policies, there has been little to no change in the outcomes of FCY aging out (Stott 2013). Some potential reasons that the current policies are not having the intended effect include:

- States are not required to provide independent living services to all FCY in their care who will be aging out (Collins, 2004).
- The eligibility requirements to receive services after age 18 require FCY to be enrolled in school, employed, involved in treatment (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011) and thus exclude those who may benefit the most from receiving transitioning services (Stott 2013).
- There is a lack of funding provided to states to implement transition-related services (Collins, 2004).
- The policies are not developmentally appropriate for FCY aging out in the United States today (Propp et al., 2003). The policies are not designed to help FCY obtain the post-secondary education required in today’s labor market or to support a gradual transition to adulthood (Okpych, 2012).

Ecological Systems Theory

FCY who age out is impacted by the trauma they experienced before entering the system and the trauma so often associated with their child welfare involvement. This involvement adds
differing layers to their developmental process (Munson et al., 2013). A theoretical perspective to understand how involvement in the child welfare system impacts a FCY's development is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualized children's development as being impacted by the numerous systems they live in and the more distant systems that indirectly impact their lives. He suggested that individuals are affected by both internal and external influences and that these interactions are transactional (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner originally theorized four different nested layers of influence on individuals’ behavioral, cognitive, and emotional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). These four layers are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). Each of these distinct layers has a direct or indirect impact on an individual’s development, and for FCY in the FC system, being involved in child welfare may magnify the impact. Later, Bronfenbrenner (1994) added a fifth layer, the chronosystem, and also discussed the biological/genetic influence on development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

**Microsystem**

The microsystem is the innermost layer of the nested systems and is defined by the interactions of FCY in the settings within which they spend most of their time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). For FCY, understanding their microsystem interactions means understanding their relationships within their foster homes, schools, and any other area where they spend time interacting with others. It also means understanding that these microsystems may change due to multiple placements and that after each change, there will be an
adjustment period as both the FCY and the foster family or staff develop a relationship (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). If FCY enter a new school or develop a new peer group, this will also create changes for them at the micro-level (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). Microsystem interactions are also based on the early microsystem interactions FCY had in their biological families or families of origin. These transactions, whether positive or negative, set the patterns for their subsequent interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

**Mesosystem**

The mesosystem is best defined as the interactions between different Microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). For FCY, the primary mesosystem of interest would be their ongoing interactions with their foster and biological families (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). Interaction with the biological family can involve direct involvement or an ongoing psychological presence (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). The interaction between the foster and biological families is also an important mesosystem (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). Other mesosystem interactions that can impact the development of FCY include the disruptions in peer and school relationships and difficulties in reestablishing relationships within such systems. Also, the interactions between foster parents and school officials impact the FCY’s relationships within the systems. FCY are often involved in multiple microsystems that do not always communicate well together, and the poor or contradictory interactions between these mesosystems may have an impact on the FCY’s development and
their trust in systems (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Leonard; 2011; Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005).

**Exosystem**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined exosystem interactions as interactions in which FCY are not directly involved, but the events that impact them. Examples of how events within the exosystem can impact FCY include interactions between different social service agencies, child welfare agencies, and the foster family (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005), which may influence placements or involvement in available programs. FCY are impacted greatly by exosystem interactions as these interactions may result in a change in placement, ability to participate in activities, or obtain needed resources (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007).

**Macrosystem**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the macrosystem as the impact of culture on the individual. It is also about the FCY’s view of self within a broader context (Hong et al., 2011). Cultural definitions of family (Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005), as well as cultural stigma often attached to being in FC (Samuels, 2009), are examples of macrosystem factors, which impact FCY. Other factors within the macrosystem that impact FCY and those aging out of the system include race, disability, policies, and economics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hong et al., 2011; Schwerger & O’ Brien, 2005).

**Chronosystem**

The chronosystem can best be defined as consistency or change in society throughout an individual's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Hong et al., 2011). This can include normative life events but also major economic, cultural, or political shifts that occur over the lifetime. For FCY, examples of chronosystem influences include major policy shifts due to changes in the
The impact of the combination of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem factors on the development of FCY will determine their eventual ability to function in the adult world. These factors influence FCY’s willingness to establish relationships while in FC, their willingness to accept help, and their sense of connectedness with others. These system factors can also determine the degree of connectedness an FCY has with their biological family, prior caregivers, and their willingness to access these resources/social supports after aging out.

**Biological Factors**

Bronfenbrenner (1994) acknowledged the role of genetics in an individual’s development. The genetic make-up of individuals impacts their microsystem interactions and can have a ripple effect on all other systems and their development. For example, the genetic make-up of an infant and the familial environment may impact early interactions between a child and parents (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). An individual’s disposition will also impact all microsystem interactions and his or her future development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). One, therefore, can infer that once the child is removed from the home, the pattern of interactions may transfer to other settings and can result in behavioral challenges in the school, home, and, ultimately, multiple placements. Additionally, the characteristics and dispositions of FCY may also impact their experiences while in FC and their transition from the system. For example, a young person whose innate temperament is easy going may adjust to a foster home and family more easily and thus perhaps experience placement stability. In contrast, a FCY who genetically is more impatient may struggle to adapt to a foster placement and may experience multiple
placements. As Greenfield (2012) explained, individuals' psychological resources can help or deter their ability to maintain themselves within an environment, which can impact their ability to develop further psychological resources.

**Summary**

The research I reviewed indicates that FCY aging out need (a) support in learning tangible life skills such as seeking employment, money management, accessing, and maintaining housing (Pecora et al., 2006); (b) assistance in developing and maintaining support networks that they can access upon their transition from FC (Avery, 2010; Samuels, 2008; Samuels, 2009); and, (c) assistance in resolving past issues with their families of origin as many return to reside with them upon FCY aging out (Avery, 2010; Goodkind et al., 2011). In summary, it appears that programming, such as ILPs that focuses on helping FCY either solely learn life skills or services that focus on the development of social supports, are not sufficient in themselves to help FCY be successful as adults after aging out of FC.

To improve outcomes for FCY aging out perhaps the focus needs to shift from a deficit-based model (focused on why former FCY are not able to meet typical benchmarks associated with adulthood) to a focus on providing services and access to resources that increase their chances to have a positive trajectory through emerging adulthood. My study's results shift the focus towards understanding how to help FCY be prepared for emerging adulthood so that they enter this stage of their life better prepared and ready to engage in the challenges emerging adulthood brings. The study participants, former FCY who have positively navigated the transition from FC and their early years of emerging adulthood, provided information that translated into services recommendations and resource recommendation for current FCY.
In the next chapter of this dissertation, I outline the methodology I utilized in my study, including research questions, population and sample, data collection, and data analysis. I also address my positionality in relation to my research.
Chapter Three: Methodology

My study's primary goal was to gain an increased understanding of youth who, after transitioning from foster care, feel that they are experiencing a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood and are establishing themselves as young adults. I aimed at obtaining this information through the perspective of individuals who have experienced this journey. The individuals I included in my study are those who officially aged out of foster care between the ages of 18-21, who were in foster care for a minimum of three years before aging out, who are currently between the ages of 23-26, and self-identify as being satisfied with their path through emerging adulthood.

As established in chapters one and two of this dissertation, a large proportion of FCY who age out of foster care experience negative outcomes in the areas of education, employment, and housing (Ahrens et al., 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Ferrell, 2004; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Reilly, 2003; Zinn & Courtney, 2017) despite efforts of policymakers, researchers, and service providers. While the literature has primarily focused on the negative outcomes of FCY after they age out of foster care (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007), there are other FCY who, from their points of view, do well after this transition (Courtney, Hook, et al., 2010). However, we know little about their experiences both in and after foster care, and what helped them in achieving what they see as positive outcomes. Additionally, lacking in the current literature is the perspective of FCY themselves who aged out of foster care (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Thus, my research goal is to further our understanding of the journey of former foster care youth through the care system into a positive track through emerging adulthood. Hopefully, this information will inform practices to help create improved outcomes for FCY who will age out of foster care in the future. In collaboration with the participants, I sought answers to the following
research question, “How did individuals who aged out of foster care and believe they have forged a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood do so?”

**Research Methodology**

Because the goal of my research was to gain a more in-depth understanding of how former foster care youth experience emerging adulthood and how this relates to their time and experiences while in foster care, hearing directly from FCY using the multiple case study research methodology was an appropriate qualitative research methodology (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Tight, 2010). While the current literature is plentiful in its analysis of outcomes of FCY after they age out of foster care, it sorely lacks in the voices of FCY who have experienced this transition (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Samuels (2008) recommended that the next step in understanding how young people access supports after aging out of foster care is to employ a case study design. Such a design allows for a more in-depth understanding of the support FCY have during and after aging out and the quality of these supports. Unrau (2007) also noted the limited number of studies regarding placement stability while in foster care that included the voice of foster care recipients.

Similarly, Cunningham and Diversi (2012) discussed the need for systems to be informed more directly by the voices of FCY to create developmentally appropriate policies targeted to assist FCY who will age out of foster care. Using case study methodology provided a way to understand better the road my participants traveled before, during, and after aging out of foster care, the challenges and obstacles they faced, and what has helped them in their journey to emerging adulthood. Additionally, the use of a multiple case study design allowed me to learn from the divergent paths traveled by my participants both in foster care and after aging out of the system. Learning from the commonalities and differences in their journeys led to suggestions on
effective programs and direct services that will help other FCY in similar circumstances to achieve positive outcomes.

**Case Study as a Research Methodology**

The case study is “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriman, 2009, p. 40). The bounded system can be a person, group, program, specific policy, or any unit that the researcher has selected to study and has defined. Another definition of a case or bounded system is offered by Radley and Chamberlain (2012), as follows:

The case comes to be identified less with its pre-determined boundaries than with its singularity, which is the way that the person’s illness or homelessness is recognized in the wider context of his or her life. This singularity emerges from the investigator's interest in such things as the respondent's historical background, social context, observed behavior, and in reflections on his or her past and hopes for the future" (p. 393).

The study of the case is thus the study of a person, event, or structure that is used to increase knowledge of a complex social phenomenon and is used in many forms of social research (Yin, 2014). The qualitative case study methodology is appropriate when the goal of the study is to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through obtaining detailed information on it in its real-world context.

Case studies provide researchers with the opportunity to partially gather detail-rich data due to the emphasis on collecting data from multiple sources. The data gathered may be quantitative or qualitative and can be gathered through interviews, archival records, surveys, direct observation, and interviewing parties related to the case (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Researchers may develop further information on a phenomenon by using a multiple case design in which information is gathered on multiple individual cases and then compared across cases.
(Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 2009). The bounded system in my research was the FCY who described their experiences in transitioning from foster care to emerging adulthood as positive.

**Data Collection**

**Participants**

I conducted three distinct case studies with young women who were in foster care for a minimum of three years before aging out, who officially aged out of foster care, who were between the ages of 23-26 at the time of our interviews, and who self-identified as having forged a positive path through emerging adulthood (i.e., were satisfied with their lives). All participants identified as Black or African-American females. The three participants had been in foster care for an extended time before aging out and had experienced multiple placements. At the time of the study, the participants had earned a minimum of a bachelor's degree, and all were employed full time. None of the participants were married at the time of the study and had never been married. The table below provided demographic information on my participants.

**Table 3.1**

*Demographic Profile of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Profile of Participants</th>
<th>Jaylin</th>
<th>Portia</th>
<th>Alexandria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American/Caucasian</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Employment Status</td>
<td>Fulltime</td>
<td>Fulltime</td>
<td>Fulltime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Living Situation</td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>With Partner</td>
<td>Alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Level of Education</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age entered Foster Care</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 Month</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Left Foster Care</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Plan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Foster Care Placements</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35 +</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools While in Foster Care</td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>15 +</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I had four preset criteria for participants. The first criterion was that the participants identified as being on a positive path in life. As the goal of the study was to learn from individuals who had navigated the transition from foster care into emerging adulthood, I wanted to interview young adults who were emerging adults and had a planned transition from foster care. The desired age range for participants was between 23 and 25. The third criterion was that participants had a planned transition from foster care. It was important to interview FCY who had a planned transition from foster care as I wanted to learn about the supports and services they had received as part of this transition. The last criterion was that the participants had been in foster care for a minimum of three years and had experienced multiple placements. I selected this as a criterion because I wanted to understand the impact of being in foster care on their current life path.

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining approval from my dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board of Montclair State University, I contacted multiple child welfare workers and providers who work with FCY preparing to transition out of foster care for assistance in locating individuals who meet my desired criteria. I contacted providers and child welfare workers primarily in New Jersey, and also in New York and Pennsylvania for assistance in locating participants for my study. I spoke with the workers and explained the purpose of my study and the criteria for participants in detail. I shared that I was looking for young adults who aged out of foster care and consider themselves to be on a positive path in life, that the young adults are happy/satisfied with the current direction of their lives (e.g., are happy with their relationships, employment, and living situation), and are optimistic about their future. I provided workers with
a flyer detailing my study and requested that they distribute it to potential candidates so that potential participants could contact me.

Once potential participants made initial contact with me, I sent an e-mail to schedule the initial phone screening. In the initial e-mail, I stated that I would be recording the initial phone screening. I explained that if they have any questions about my recording the phone conversation, they could ask me either via e-mail or before I start recording the phone interview. I completed initial phone screenings with ten potential participants.

During the initial phone screening, I reviewed the purpose of my study and asked basic demographic questions to determine if the individual met the criteria for the study. I employed snowball sampling by asking potential study participants to share my contact information with other young adults who had been in foster care and who meet my study criteria.

At the time of my initial phone screening, I once again informed participants that I would be recording our conversation. I informed them that if they had any questions about me recording the conversation, they were free to ask before I started the recording. During the phone interview, I engaged in the process of informed consent, including discussing the purpose of the study with potential participants, what participants will do, parameters of confidentiality, and any potential risks. I used the discussion of potential risks as an initial screening to determine if potential participants met any of the exclusionary criteria listed above. They asked the following question: “As part of our conversations, we may discuss things that bring up painful memories. How do you feel about having such discussions?”

Of the ten potential participants, four did not meet the criteria for the study because of their age. One person agreed to participate in the study and then changed his mind at the last minute. One potential participant was unable to meet with me in person, and one potential
participant did not respond to my attempts to schedule an interview. My goal was to interview both men and women from diverse racial backgrounds. However, I had difficulties in identifying potential participants for the study, and thus, my final sample was three African American females.

At the end of the initial phone interview, I scheduled the first in-person interview and asked participants to select a place for the interview. I requested that they choose a place that allowed for privacy and where they felt safe and comfortable in discussing their life journey. All the interviews were conducted in public places like coffee shops and restaurants, as this is where participants felt comfortable meeting with me. I did not feel that our meeting place prevented any of the participants from sharing their life journeys with me openly and honestly.

The demographics of interest to me were young adults who had aged out of foster care after extensive time in care. All my participants had been in the custody of child welfare for at least seven years. They experienced multiple placements while in foster care as well as school transitions. All three participants identified as being on a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood. I feel that my participants, though similar in specific demographic categories have enough differences based upon the age at which they entered foster care and their experiences in care to analyze both similarities and differences in their narratives.

**Approach to Interviews**

During the first interview, I verbally reviewed the informed consent document (Appendix A) with participants and provided them with a written copy. A major emphasis when reviewing the informed consent was on how I would maintain confidentiality and privacy during the research study, as well as all exceptions to confidentiality. I reviewed the potential risks of participating in the study. Once a participant signed the informed consent document, I continued
with the interview. As part of the consent process, I informed my participants that if at any time during the study, either the participant or I (as the researcher), felt that the interview was becoming too distressing for the participant, the interview would end. I also provided each participant with an individualized list of counseling referrals in their areas along with some statewide hotline numbers. None of the participants expressed any distress during the interviews, and none shared any trauma or negative consequences from participating in the study.

I informed participants during the phone screening and again at the first interview that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences. Also, at the first interview, I asked participants to review the demographic sheet (see Appendix B), which I completed during the phone screening, and to make any needed edits and provide any missing information. I asked participants to select a pseudonym that I used to identify them in transcripts, within the write-up of the case, and in storing all transcripts, digital recordings, and artifacts related to them. All interviews with the participants were digitally audio-recorded. I saved the recordings on a password-protected computer and stored it in a locked cabinet to which only I have access. I stored the digital recordings until study completion, at which point I destroyed them. I will maintain the transcripts of all interviews post-completion of the study.

I met with each participant three times to conduct semi-structured interviews (Merriman, 2009; Seidman, 2013) that allowed me to truly understand their journey through foster care, into emerging adulthood, and beyond. I wanted to learn about their process, the meaning they have made of their process, and learn what they felt has contributed positively to their emergence into adulthood. I also wanted to understand the challenges my participants faced during their transition and may continue to face and how they managed or are managing these obstacles.
Further, I hoped participants would share what they would like child welfare professionals and policymakers to know.

I followed Seidman’s (2013) structure for conducting qualitative interviews. Seidman (2013) recommended conducting three semi-structured interviews with each participant, with each interview having a specific purpose. As suggested, each interview was approximately 60 minutes in length (Seidman, 2013). I hoped to complete all interviews within a three to four-month time frame and was successful in this endeavor with two of the three participants. For one of my participants, the interview process spanned eight months due to scheduling challenges. As noted, I began the first interview by obtaining initial informed consent. During this interview, I established rapport with participants. I created an environment that allowed them to feel comfortable enough to honestly answer questions and allowed me to maintain a distance that permitted the asking of difficult questions (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, I focused on listening carefully to my participants' stories and encouraged them to share in-depth their experiences and the meanings they have attached to the experiences.

The following are examples of the questions I asked within the three interviews with participants. Please see the interview guide (Appendix C) for a more detailed list of questions that I used to guide my interviews. In addition to building rapport, the first interview goal was to obtain the participant's life history as it relates specifically to my research questions (Seidman, 2013). Examples of questions for the first interview include: What about my study attracted you (made you want to participate)? I didn’t know you when you left foster care, so I’m wondering how you’d contrast where you were then and where you are now? I know that you see yourself as being on a positive path in life, as making your way. I hope you can tell me more about this.
What, if any, challenges did you experience along your journey, including any you are still facing?

After completing the first round of interviews with all my participants and analyzing the data, I scheduled the second round of interviews. I began the second interview by asking for clarification on the answers provided during the initial interview. I also shared emerging themes I identified from the participant’s first interview, asked for feedback about the accuracy of those themes, and allowed participants to provide additional depth and information. I also shared themes identified from across the interviews with other participants and sought their feedback on if/how those themes resonated with them. During the second interview, I focused on getting richer details of participants’ experiences and perspectives on the foster care system; those experiences participants considered to be most impactful in their journey through foster care and into emerging adulthood. Examples of questions for this interview include: When I think about the experiences of kids in foster care, some of the things I think about are transitions, change. When you think back to a time when you first left foster care, what were your experiences with that transition? How did you make your way? What was the hardest part of being in foster care for you? What has been the hardest thing for you about no longer being in the system?

The third and final interview began similarly to the second. The focus of this last interview was on participants’ reflections on the meaning behind their experiences, and in learning more about how current experiences relate to their experiences in foster care. My focus was on trying to learn how being in foster care influenced their educational attainment, career choices, and current life satisfaction. Examples of questions for this interview included: “We’ve talked about a lot of things. What haven’t we talked about regarding your experience now as an adult and as a former foster care kid?” “How would you say being in foster care influenced your
transition into the young adult you are today?” “If you were an advisor to the foster care system, what advice would, given your experience?” “If given an opportunity, what would you like to tell child welfare workers and those in the child welfare system?” Again, please see Appendix C for additional information regarding my interview questions.

Data Analysis

My method of data analysis was the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009; Ridolfo & Schoufa-Glusberg, 2011). I listened to each recording before beginning the transcription. I transcribed each interview verbatim and read each interview transcript as soon as possible after I completed an interview and also re-read it multiple additional times. The transcripts were stored on a password-protected laptop as a password-protected Microsoft Word document. Duplicate copies of the transcripts were stored on an external hard drive as password-protected documents. When transcribing the digital recordings, I included pauses, emphases, nonverbal signals, and any other sounds recorded (Seidman, 2013). I numbered each line of the transcript to allow for easier analysis and reference.

I maintained a reflexive journal through the entire research process in which I noted my thoughts, questions, and observations regarding each interview I conducted (discussed further in the section in this chapter on trustworthiness). I also used my journal to note questions for future interviews as they arose. The journal is part of my data collection. I converted my hand-written notes into a password-protected Word document to allow for easier use when analyzing the data. All documents related to my research study have been stored in a locked file cabinet in my home when not in use.

Before my second and third interviews with a participant, I wrote up the themes that emerged during my review of transcripts based upon the process described below. I shared the
emerging themes verbally with participants during our subsequent interview. I also asked participants if they would like an opportunity to review a written copy of the themes and the transcript of our last interview, but none wanted to review them. I brought the transcripts with me to the interviews to allow for member checking, clarification, and to serve as a springboard for additional lines of questions. Sharing emerging themes at interviews with participants allowed me to co-create themes with my participants (Bradbury-Jones, Irvine, & Sambrook, 2010). I shared with participants themes I identified during my analysis of interviews with other participants and asked for their thoughts and feedback. This process also allowed me to clarify or better understand the themes of interviews with other participants.

I began my data analysis by reading the transcripts and marking passages or sections that caught my interest (Seidman, 2013). I reviewed the collected data to look for segments that answered all or part of my research question (Merriam, 2009; Ridolfo & Schoufa-Glusberg, 2011). These segments of data were the beginning steps in the coding of interview transcripts and documents. I used both open and axial coding as part of the data analysis (Ridolfo & Schoufa-Glusberg, 2011). I began by coding my first interviews with all three participants. As I coded the interviews, I also noted questions I had or thoughts about responses provided in my journal. I used these questions and thoughts when preparing for my second interview with participants. Once I completed the initial coding, I organized the data segments into themes and broader categories (Merriam, 2009). After I had coded and categorized all the data into themes, and no new themes emerge, I considered analysis complete (Merriam, 2009; Ridolfo & Schoufa-Glusberg, 2011). The next step of data analysis was writing up each case providing rich, detailed narrative in support of the themes that together answer the research questions (Merriam, 2009; Ridolfo & Schoufa-Glusberg, 2011).
As I conducted multiple case studies, I did both within and across case data analysis (Merriam, 2009) to present a clear picture of each case and commonalities and differences between the cases. I initially completed a thorough analysis of each case and then compared the cases to see if there are any themes or narratives that are common to all the cases (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). I initially searched for themes, subcategories, and data segments that were common to all the cases and provided a detailed narrative to support the similarities between the cases and to highlight some of the differences. Additionally, I looked for themes, subcategories, and data segments that were unique to participants. I also used that information to emphasize differences between participants.

**Researcher Positionality, Bias, and Integrity**

I have worked in various capacities with FCY, and I have seen first-hand how the constant disruptions in their lives impact their development, psychological health, and ability to become well-functioning adults. Based on past experiences, one of my concerns was that once FCY are ready to age out of the system, they are "thrown to the wolves" with no supports and resources.

I also have felt that FCY are not adequately prepared to function independently. Whereas I do think that independent living skills like money management have a place, I have, in the course of my work, not found them to be sufficient in preparing young people to manage in the world as adults. I began my study with the belief that two things contribute to the lack of success that many young people aging out of foster care have in the adult world: lack of supports and opportunities. First, they lack supports from consistent, caring people in their lives as they struggle to enter emerging adulthood. They often do not have people they can turn to in their time of need. Second, they are not given opportunities while in foster care to develop
independent living skills, and to learn independence and responsibility. Due to the rules and regulations of the foster care system, FCY are used to having their needs met by an external system. They expect to be taken care of by the adults in their lives and struggle in the adult world as there is no system available to meet their needs.

While I am aware of my biases about the child welfare system and what FCY aging out of foster care needs to help them become successful. I used tools such as peer debriefing, reflective journaling, and member checking (all discussed further in my section on trustworthiness) to manage my biases and minimize their impact on my interactions with the participants or my line of inquiry. I constantly interrogated myself to understand if/how my experiences and beliefs were impacting my understanding of my participants' journey, and also if they are impacting interview prompts. If I thought that sharing my belief or ideas would help me learn from the participants, I did so carefully, and with a commitment to learn more or hear differently. My goal was to ensure that my biases and beliefs did not contaminate the data collection and analysis processes. I also turned to the members of my dissertation committee and peer debriefer for assistance in making sure that my biases did not interfere with my data collection and analysis. My peer debriefer was a doctoral candidate from a counselor education program. She has experience in completing qualitative research but had no prior knowledge or familiarity with my research topic and brought an unbiased perspective to my process. She assisted me in reviewing my interview guide and helped me reflect on my data analysis process to help reduce my biases from permeating the research process.

Trustworthiness

Criticisms of case study research include concerns about the lack of reliability, possible researcher bias, and integrity as the researcher is both directly gathering and analyzing the data.
(Merriman, 2009). In addressing these criticisms, it is important to remember that the goal of the study is to help researchers develop an understanding of a phenomenon and to use that knowledge towards generalization into theoretical knowledge of the subject, not to generalize the results to the general population (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012; Yin 2014). Additionally, these limitations can be addressed using the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013) to establish the rigor of the study. These four criteria are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

**Credibility**

I established the credibility of my study through prolonged engagement and member checking with my participants (Houghton et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2010). As previously noted, I interviewed each participant three times over three to eight months, which is considered prolonged engagement. I also checked my interpretations of the transcribed data with participants at each session. Member checking, or having participants review emerging themes, increased the credibility of the data and allowed for the co-creation of themes with participants (Bradbury-Jones, 2010). Also, I used peer debriefing (Houghton et al., 2013) to establish the credibility of my data further and ensure that my biases did not interfere with either the interview process or my data analysis.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

I established the dependability and confirmability of my data by being transparent about the decisions I made throughout my study and by providing a clear rationale for my decision making (Houghton et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2010). I also used reflective journaling to establish an audit trail for my decision making (Houghton et al., 2013). Reflective journaling involves researchers documenting their thoughts, opinions, biases, and choices to make them clearer and
more visible (Ortlipp, 2008). The use of reflective journaling was important for capturing the choices I made throughout my study, and also assisted in helping me address my experiences, values, and biases related to my study (Ortlipp, 2008). I shared my decisions with my dissertation chair and methodologist, and peer debriefer, making the process more transparent and keeping me, the researcher, more accountable.

**Transferability**

Transferability is defined as the ability to state that the results of the study will apply to those who did not participate in the study. I established the transferability of my results by providing a detailed description of the participants and the themes established through careful analysis of the data (Houghton et al., 2013; Merriam, 2009). As stated earlier, the goal of qualitative research is to increase the understanding of a phenomenon so that it can be generalized into theoretical knowledge of a subject. The understanding gained from my study regarding FCY aging out of foster care can help develop services for all FCY. The use of multiple cases with the study also increased the transferability of the data as the sample was not homogeneous (Merriam, 2009; Tight, 2010).

**Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is that the cases presented are not a representation of all youth who transition from foster care. As such, the results may not provide a holistic view of the challenges and triumphs of youth transitioning from foster care and emerging adults. Qualitative research does not claim generalizability, but the information learned from the participants can help other professionals working with youth in foster care.
Summary

In this chapter, I detailed my research design. I discussed participant criteria, recruitment methods, and data collection procedures. After that, I discussed methods for protecting the data and procedures for data analysis. Finally, I discussed the promotion of trustworthiness, including member checking, bracketing, and data triangulation. In chapter four, I present the findings of this study, including themes and related participant quotes.
Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of my study was to learn from former foster care youth how they perceived their experiences in foster care about their transition from that system and through emerging adulthood. My goal was to learn about how their time in foster care helped or hindered them through emerging adulthood. This led to my research question: How did individuals who aged out of foster care and believe they have forged a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood do so?

The goals of my research as noted in chapter one was to (a) give voice to youth who have lived in the foster care system and self-identified as being on a positive path as emerging adults, and (b) to allow their shared experiences to inform services for FCY before and after they transition from the system. I interviewed three young adults, ages 23-26 who were in foster care for a minimum of three years before aging out, who experienced at least four placements while in foster care, and who self-identified as experiencing a positive trajectory through emerging adulthood. I decided that multiple case study methodology provided me with an avenue to understand better the road my participants traveled before, during, and after aging out of foster care, the challenges and obstacles they faced, and what has helped them in their journey through emerging adulthood. Additionally, the use of a multiple case study design allowed me to learn from the divergent paths my participants traveled both in foster care and after aging out.

In this chapter, I detail the findings of my research. I present each case study individually, beginning with background information followed by themes that I identified from my three interviews with that individual. I then present my cross-case analysis, sharing the commonalities and differences between Jaylin, Alexandra, and Portia.
Jaylin

Jaylin, a 25-year-old African American female, entered foster care at age seven and aged out of foster care at 21. When I met Jaylin for the first time, she shared with me that she was excited to have an opportunity to speak about the positive aspects of her life today, and her goals going forward as it was unusual to be asked such a question. Jaylin had a big smile on her face and was lively as she spoke about her job, her life, and her life goals. Jaylin’s smile became brighter as she spoke about her daughter, clearly her pride and joy. Our interviews were interrupted multiple times as she answered calls from her daughter inquiring as to when she would be returning home.

As Jaylin became more comfortable in sharing her story with me, she spoke about the numerous challenges she faced because of her time in foster care. There were, however, times when she did not fully answer questions posed and other times when she asked for an opportunity to think about her answer as she was not prepared to answer the question. Jaylin was thoughtful and more soft-spoken as she talked with me about her challenges, but one thing I did note through the course of all three interviews, was Jaylin’s tendency to interject humor or laugh even when speaking of her challenges. As I share Jaylin’s story and try to relay my understanding of the meaning she made of her time in foster care and emerging adulthood, it is important to note that there are still missing pieces. There were pieces she was not ready to discuss, and pieces I did not realize until I sat down to share her story were still missing.

Jaylin resided with her mother before entering care, and vividly recalled her removal at age seven and the associated pain and trauma. She shared,

I do recall you know them packing my stuff. I refused to leave. So, the kicking, screaming and them actually you know. It taking two people to, picking me up you know
to carry me out of the house. I remember that. I don’t remember what they said because that wasn’t the way my mind was operating.

Upon removal from her mother, Jaylin was placed with a family friend, the only foster parent with whom she maintains contact today and considers a part of her support system. Jaylin felt comfortable in her first foster home as she already knew the foster parent. She reports a close relationship with her former foster parent. She never revealed the reason for her transition from that home. In retrospect, Jaylin never shared the reason for her transition from any of her placements, including the specific reasons she was removed from her mother’s care, even when asked. All she stated was, “No they (the caseworkers) would tell me - Jaylin, she (the foster parent) can’t care for you anymore because of XY and Z so you’re going to have to move.”

In retrospect, perhaps the reason Jaylin did not share specifics regarding her transitions is that she was unaware of the influence of the courts and the foster care system’s goals in her transitions. In sharing about her transitions in the manner she did, she was able to preserve the positive aspects of her relationships with people.

In speaking of her transitions, Jaylin focused on repeatedly packing and unpacking her belongings (e.g., “Moving homes, yeah it was frustrating you know constantly packing your stuff”). This seemed easier for her to focus on than the emotional aspect of removal, as it was the constant transitions that resulted in her feelings of having no value for as she stated. “In the beginning it was like hurtful like you feel like no one wants you. You don’t have a family. But then eventually honestly, you become institutionalized (laugh) like you get used to it.”

After numerous transitions, at about the age of 15, Jaylin went to reside with her older sister (as Jaylin entered high school) and lived with her until she left for college. Jaylin recalled her time with her sister was like living with a foster parent. I think what struck me about her
comments about her time with her sister was Jaylin’s implication that a foster parent only looks after a foster youth for the money the state provides for their care. She said, “Actually just like living with a resource parent because she (my sister) did not really want me there, but ok so I am going to get paid so just come.”

Even with prompts, Jaylin was very reluctant to speak in-depth about her time with her sister. From some of the comments she made, it became clear that there had been conflicts between the sisters primarily. These conflicts seem due to Jaylin not receiving the emotional support from her sister she desired and perhaps more tellingly, the resentment Jaylin had towards her sister like when she stated, “There is some animosity being there because like why do I have to live with you? Why can’t I live with mummy? You lived with mummy. You know like so that was one of the issues.”

At the prescreening interview, Jaylin had informed me that she had three placements while in foster care, the last of them being with her sister. However, as she shared her story, I learned that she had experienced over ten placements. Jaylin only considered her three long-term placements (those lasting more than a year) as ‘true placements.’ She shared that she stopped tracking her actual number of placements and transitions while in foster care due to the trauma she associates with many of her experiences. She shared, “Some of them were so awful I try to forget them, and I really do until I speak of them, but for the most part I remember the three solid placements that were like good and I liked them.”

Jaylin discussed having experienced multiple types of placements. She resided in foster homes with a foster family, in temporary shelter placements, and kinship care with her sister. As a result of her numerous placements, Jaylin attended anywhere from six to seven schools while in foster care.
Jaylin’s elementary and middle school years were challenging, as initially, she was the unkempt young girl that everyone teased, and once she entered foster care, an outsider in a tight-knit community. Jaylin’s high school years were a positive time for her and essential in helping her get on the trajectory to her current path in life. Jaylin spoke enthusiastically about her high school years, emphasized how the positive attention from the teachers was a motivating factor for her and propelled her to do well. Jaylin graduated with honors from high school but had to take remedial classes upon starting college. She stated,

I went to college and took remedial classes. Yeah, it was worth it because I started in the summertime so by the time, I was in September I was with everybody else English 101 not like English 001. You didn’t want to be in that class.

She shared how she appreciated the experiences and opportunities she had in college. College was an opportunity for exposure to new people, food, and cultures. This was also where she met the father of her daughter and was introduced to substances. Jaylin talked about how using substances was an important aspect of time in college and after. They were also the tie between her and her daughter’s father, as I will discuss later.

Jaylin’s positive thoughts about college appeared to change once she transitioned from foster care. She felt a loss of support during that time. I initially found her comments about the sense of loss she experienced upon leaving foster care puzzling, considering she had not expressed any positive experiences while in care and had spoken in a positive light about only one of her caseworkers. As Jaylin said,

…like I had one worker that I really loved, and I felt like she was really like on top of it. And even like though she was not supposed to even on her personal time she would always, especially as I got a little older, she would send me a text. But when she left, she
got another job. It was like the turnover rate was crazy. After her every year or so there was a new caseworker on my case so and after her it was just like (pause) what am I here for?

Jaylin spoke about how, while in foster care, her caseworkers were never present or active participants in her journey:

They (the care workers) barely saw you unless there was something drastic that happened. More so, them talking to the resource parent briefly. Talking to you but so no. It wasn’t until I started my independent living that I started to become in contact with my caseworker because they had nobody else to talk to so but me. If they wanted to see how I was doing they had to talk to me.

One of the stories she shared with me was about the difficulties she had getting in touch with her caseworker while in college to obtain her stipend or additional assistance. She told me,

Once I got to college at about 17, I started getting my own individual stipends, because I moved out of the last home that I was in. Uh hmm, so you know you want your money obviously. It will be very difficult to get hold of one of my workers, like she would never answer the phone, never answer voice mails.

Considering the lack of support and care she perceived from her assigned caseworkers, I wondered about her sense of loss. I realized, as discussed in further detail later, having a caseworker provided a sense of security and support, primarily material support. Jaylin shared how being in foster care meant that at least there was someone she could call at a time of need, a sense that she lost upon aging out of foster care. As Jaylin said,
When you leave care no matter how bad the workers are no matter what the case may be when it boils down to it when you need them for something they were there to support you, and when I aged out they were no longer there and no one around me was there.

When sharing about the loss she experienced upon aging out, Jaylin spoke about the material support. It seemed that what she lost was a feeling that she was connected to someone or something, raising the question as to the emphasis or lack of emphasis placed by the foster care system on preparing youth for the transition. Upon aging out, Jaylin felt that she was alone in this world. Feeling alone and needing to feel connected to others may also be the reason for some of Jaylin’s life choices.

Today, Jaylin is a single mother working full time for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) as an advocate. Jaylin has a three-year-old daughter and is involved in a romantic relationship. She is working to rebuild her relationship with her biological mother and sisters and is establishing a relationship with her step-father. She mentioned never having known her father, who was deceased at the time of our interviews.

Jaylin expressed that she has hopes of going back to school and getting her master’s degree so that she can support the “big” family she hopes to have as well as create a legacy. “So having a family will kind of come eventually, but I want to be able to support them so I want to get more education, better pay and…” Interestingly, although she has a daughter and greatly values the mother-child relationship, she does not consider this to be a “true family.” Jaylin consistently demonstrated conflict between the realities of her life and her idealistic desires. During our time together, I never really heard Jaylin express the gray areas. She expressed her thinking in black and white terms.
One of the other things that struck me about Jaylin was her commitment to helping others and how her words matched her actions. Jaylin shared,

And that’s always been thing you know, even down to the homeless person on the street, and it’s like here I have change in my pockets here you go so like you know like no matter what it is I’m like I always want to make sure like I can help you and so in doing so and in taking care of myself I put myself in the position to help I will definitely do that to. That is moving forward.

Jaylin stopped and spoke to an unkempt woman sitting on the sidewalk as we were leaving one of our interviews. She sat down next to the woman, had an extended conversation, and walked back inside the coffee shop in which we had met. She had the woman with her. I wondered if her commitment to helping others came from a wish that others would have helped her when she was an unkempt child, so she would not end up in foster care.

In trying to understand how she forged a positive path through emerging adulthood, it is important to understand the ideals she created for herself and the steps she took and continues to take, to try and achieve her idealistic goals. Doing so provides a framework for the path she is currently on and where she hopes to be one day. Similarly, it is important to understand the challenges she faced during her journey and how she managed these challenges while remaining committed to her path (“There’s a lot more I want to do in life.”) and working towards achieving her ideal life. The desire to achieve the life goals she has set, as well as her search for validation or value of herself as a person is the core, interrelated themes in Jaylin’s journey through emerging adulthood and to the positive path she believes she is currently on.
Validation

Jaylin’s journey from foster care into emerging adulthood is partially shaped by her search for validation or her search for value in herself and in her life. Jaylin did not share much about her life prior to entering foster care except to say that, “My mother was a drug addict who was like small faced, small-framed. You know, never dressed. She was like one of those drug addicts on the street where you would just look at her and go ugh.” She also shared that while in school prior to entering foster care, she was teased for how she smelled (“You know Jaylin. She smells. Don’t sit by her.”). Jaylin felt that there were not many positive influences in her life, and she felt a lack of support for herself and a lack of a role model when she was a young child. This lack contributed to her wondering about her value as a person.

Jaylin described a perceived lack of validation or positive acknowledgment (emotional support) from those closest to her, like her mother and sister. She mentioned earlier feeling unsupported by her sister was perhaps one of the reasons for her conflict with her sister while in her care. Jaylin looked for and thrived on positive validation or positive acknowledgment from others. The only validation Jaylin felt she received was from her high school teachers and the one foster parent mentioned earlier. This validation seemed to help her feel valued or perhaps feel as if she had value as a person. Initially, Jaylin spoke about the external validation she received and how that had a positive impact on her life. She further explained how eventually the search for validation became more internal as she searched for ways to make herself feel valued by doing for or giving to others. Jaylin’s search for validation seems to have happened in two stages; initially, through external acknowledgment she received from others, and secondly, by developing her sense of self-worth by doing for others. Each of the mechanisms she utilized to help find validation is discussed below.
External acknowledgement. Jaylin, like most children, craved support or positive attention and validation from others. She discussed how as a young child, her mother was not available to provide that type of validation and that “as a child I always wanted more support...” In care, Jaylin lived with her sister for a few years who provided little more than food and shelter. As Jaylin noted, “she [her sister] wasn’t the type to help you through like expectations.” For example, Jaylin spoke about not having any guidance in her life for making major life decisions like going to college (e.g., “So it wasn’t like you need to go to college.”) or for basic life milestones such as obtaining her driver’s license (“Driver’s license. You know like I had to get all of that on my own.”) Even though she was residing with her sister, and there was a caseworker assigned to her. Perhaps more importantly, Jaylin felt a lack of emotional support from her sister and the caseworkers assigned to her care.

Speaking to the challenges of being raised in a foster care system focused on keeping youth in their care safe and meeting basic needs, Jaylin noted the availability of material support during her time of need, but a lack of the emotional support and life guidance she craved. On those occasions where Jaylin received positive attention from others outside her home environment, it made a huge difference to her and in her view of herself. Sometimes the positive validation was recognition of a task done well, such as in the following:

They’ll (the teachers) see potential. They’ll see what you can do and what you are capable of. They show you things that you never even knew was a good trait to have like they’ll pull you to the side and be like listen, “I read your essay. It was fantastic. What do you want to do when you go older” and that brings a little hope out of you because nobody ever said was like yeah “This essay was really good; this work was really good.” So it’s really the educators and they mean a lot to the kids in the child welfare system.
At other times, it seemed that Jaylin received validation specific to the tasks she completed, for as she said,

So, I think that’s what it was they (the teachers) focused a lot on the kids that were doing stuff the kids that would hand in their homework on time. They would always say like “Thank you, Jaylin, for handing in your homework on time.” That was always good you know, acknowledgment that you did things and that they probably knew that there was nobody there to tell me to do my homework because I’m sure like the caseworker came to the school a few times so they knew and they would say like “Thank you for doing your homework on time. Well, you know what this essay is really good. Like I appreciate it. like I just want to say Jaylin and XXX you guys did great.” That helps because you know if you don’t do great you won’t get that acknowledgment. We (youth in care) are already lacking attention at home. We don’t want to lack attention at school.

Jaylin emphasized the importance of positive validation at school for her as an FCY because this was not something, she was getting in her home environment. She thrived on getting positive attention in any environment. Even the smallest validation and or acknowledgment helped her feel like she was capable of achievement and pushed her to engage in activities that would help her receive more positive feedback and encouragement. As Jaylin told me,

I just liked the attention than actually being able to get good grades and be recognized for it and because of that I like graduated 2nd in my high school class. It was because of that you know. I was like the president of the Honor[s] Society because of that. If they (the teachers) are excited about this, then I’m going to try this.
Finding self-worth in the face of challenge. Jaylin’s need for validation, positive acknowledgment and finding value in her life was a driving force in her journey. Once she entered high school, she completed tasks specifically for the purpose of receiving positive feedback as it provided her with a sense of hope and value. The interactions with her teachers in high school also provided Jaylin with a different view of the world, a glimpse of something different that she herself could also obtain. Going to college, especially in a community outside of where she was raised, further expanded her knowledge of the world, and offered her more options for her future. Once Jaylin aged out of foster care while in college, she lost the limited support she had, resulting in the sense of loss she expressed in the following statement. “So, you feel you really feel all alone. Like you just feel like I cannot call my caseworker.” In response to the loss, she had to change her approach to getting the sense of positive support or acknowledgment that was important to her—learning to somehow move from an external to an internal sense of validation on which to determine her value.

Jaylin struggled when she did not receive the positive validation and emotional support from others with whom she had relationships. She also struggled when her basic needs of living were not met. She spoke of this particularly in relation to her time in college, as she was not emotionally prepared for this transition. She stated,

> When you need them (caseworkers and other support provided by the foster care system) for something they were there to support you and when I aged out they were no longer there and no one around me was there (pause). So I didn’t have them. My sisters, like I told you, they were a dud. Uh hmm, so now it’s like dammit what am I going to do next. What am I going to do.
She also spoke about her one close friend who reached out to her while she was in college and expressed interest in her life, when sharing the following:

I mean you have my friends. One of my close girlfriends. She was like the only support I had. Someone that would call me like I’m so proud of you duh duh duh and I’m like thanks. You know that was the only person I had. So, I got tired of waiting for people to ask me how I was doing. So, I was like let me get out of that phase…

Jaylin reached out to others looking for support in many areas in her life, and when it was not forthcoming, it had a negative emotional impact on her. For example, she noted, “It’s always going to be empty. No one is going to do it, so I’m like you know what maybe if I switch my roles I’ll feel better so that’s what I did eventually.”

Jaylin started to find a different way to fill this void in her life by being the one providing support to others. This was a gradual shift in her thinking and not an easy one. As noted earlier, Jaylin shared that this period in her life was emotionally challenging, a time where she was searching for ways to fill the void in her life in any way possible, a void created when she aged out of foster care and lost the only sense of support or security she had in life. Initially, the ways Jaylin filled the void she felt was through relationships. Jaylin disclosed how it was at this vulnerable time in her life, when she got involved both in substance use and in a romantic relationship with the father of her daughter. Jaylin shared with me that the father of her daughter was the one who introduced her to substances, similar to how her biological father had introduced her mother to substances. She recalled,

Her downfall was she met my father. My father was doing it and so she started and eventually you know smoking weed with him here and the same thing I did with my daughter’s father that’s where I started.
Eventually, Jaylin came to a stage where her thinking shifted from looking for support to providing support, and this helped her feel as if she had value as a person in a manner similar to the external validation. She noted,

I’m waiting for someone to call and see how I’m doing or where I’m waiting for someone to support me and let me just start supporting myself and be the one to ask everyone else how they are doing so I, I switched roles. At the time I was looking for someone to support me to see how I was doing. How’s college going? Do you need anything? And I’m like let me switch it up because it’s always going to be a void.

She started reaching out to others to fill the emptiness in her life from the lack of caring relationships and emotional support. She said,

Let me just get into it and then I became the person that’s calling my nieces. Hey, how’s school going and once I got into that role, I was like this feels better because now I don’t need anyone to support me. I’ll be the support.

Providing support to or doing for others helped Jaylin feel that she had value as a person and created a sense of self-worth. So helping others became Jaylin’s focus both in her personal life and in her professional life, as evidenced in the following statements:

Even now I feel like I can be a positive role model to them (her nieces), but I can be more, do more. I can be in a position to actually help them. Okay, like you need a job. How about you get your degree and I got you. You know what I’m saying? Like that kind of someone. That I’m going to actually be in court and that I’m actually going to be able to talk to the volunteers and advocate and help them. Help the children and if they (the volunteers) drop out then it’s my role (to go to court).
Jaylin focused on how she can help others, but it did not appear as if she allowed others into her life readily. This matches the dichotomous thinking Jaylin has shown in other areas of her life; she can either get support or give support, but both cannot happen simultaneously. Even when Jaylin discussed her relationship with her current partner, she stated that, “Not that I depend on him a lot, but he is definitely my friend, my best friend.”

Jaylin is appreciative of where she is in life today and continues to advocate and to be there for others in her life. In our conversation, one of the realizations she had was “I have that support now that I’m not looking for it,” in part due to her relationship with her biological mother. Jaylin shared, Because now my mum is giving back time, you know she understands and I understand, and it’s not like I’m like so now you want to get your life together. I’m happy for her, and I’m happy that now she’s there for my daughter.

It was interesting to see her come to the realization that now that she was no longer seeking the external support and found satisfaction in helping others, that external support was present in her life.

Central Life Constructs

In her search to find value in herself as a person, Jaylin also developed a vision for her future and the ideal life she wants to live. She has some very clear and concrete thoughts in regards to what she wanted her life to look like when it comes to family, career, and her personal legacy, “eventually opening up my own business, owning a home, things like that. The good old American dream that everyone has going on.” The desire to achieve these goals is a driving force in her efforts to remain on a positive path in life. As she stated, “I do want to be someone who has something you know. I went from nothing to something.”

Jaylin also shared how she thinks having a goal and a vision is a key component of success when she stated, “knowing what I want like I have a lot of vision. I’m like a scrapbook
kind of person.” She spoke about being a person who believed in setting goals for herself and then working to achieve the goals. These were important for her. I got the sense that for Jaylin, setting small goals and focusing on them helped her maintain a future-oriented focus and helped her not think about her current and past challenges. The three subthemes related to Jaylin’s vision for the future include her concept of family, her focus on the positive, and her finding value in herself.

**Family.** Jaylin’s thinking was very dichotomous, in that she viewed the world as black and white and was only now looking at the gray. Jaylin’s thinking, her focus on her goals, are associated with my understanding of her desire to have control of her life; something foster care did not allow or as a system was not designed to allow. Similarly, her framework for what it meant to be a family sounded consistent with the idealized idea of family I have heard many people of a similar age express and did not focus on how she and her daughter are currently a family.

Jaylin’s definition of her ideal family is being married, having children, having a nice home, and having the means to support them. In the following passage, Jaylin described a conversation that she had with her partner regarding her vision of their future together:

I’m not giving. We are not moving in together. We are not doing any of that until we are married and we are going to do it the right way, and we are. So you know everything changed. To being around others, even the women at my job, they are all married with kids and so I’m like that’s—that’s what I want, what they have - their own homes and that’s what I want.

This was not only what Jaylin desired, but the only option she was giving herself and her partner for their life together. She also spoke of how she planned to provide for her family in the
manner she desired. Jaylin felt it was important to obtain further education so that she had the financial means to support her family, to have a home in a good neighborhood, and to send her children to good schools when stating, “You know as far as getting a home, making sure --- goes to a good school.”

Jaylin’s ideals have formed from a combination of her experiences in foster care, both positive and negative. She spoke of a former foster parent who provided her with a vision of what family should be like. She recalled the former foster parent telling her,

‘You’re going to have a house. You’re going to be a mummy yourself. That means you’re going to take care of your own family and how are you going to do it? You know, what kind of house do you want?’ So, she gave me that visual.

The second person that Jaylin sees as a major influence on her is her mother, whom she now holds as a role model. In talking about her mother, Jaylin said,

She started working at a laundromat when she got out of the half-way house. Now she manages it, the whole thing. You know she became the manager and it’s like she’s always been hardworking and dedicated. My mum is driving a freaking 2013 Cadillac right now. You know what I mean. She built her credit. She’s always been that type of person. When I was born, she was just in a dark place and it’s like I think that I get a lot of that from her because now what I know about her right now.

Although Jaylin gives her mother credit for the vision she has developed for her life, she has conflicting feelings regarding her mother and her mother’s parenting. She discussed how not being raised by her mother was possibly a positive, stating,

I built a lot of strength from doing things on my own that I probably wouldn’t have done if she [mother] was so like on top of me. I would have been a rebel. Knowing my
background, you know maybe I would have strayed off onto the wrong path she wants me to duh duh you know a spoiled brat probably.

Further, Jaylin noted that she thought that if her mother had raised her, she would have ended up like her sister, someone whom she does not see as being on a positive path in life. “I have a sister she has six kids and they have all different fathers, and she doesn’t know what she’s doing with her life. I means she’s all over the place.” At the same time, when asked where her vision for life came from, Jaylin stated that her mother was her inspiration for not only how she had rebuilt her life but also for who her mother was prior to her mother getting involved with substances. “My mum wasn’t always a drug addict. My mum was she owned her own home. She had a great job. She was really ambitious, so I think it (motivation) comes from her.”

Jaylin’s conflicting view of her mother, her negative view of her mother’s parenting and her desire to build her own life that is different than how she was raised. This is evident in her current journey in life and her desire to provide her daughter with a legacy different than what she was provided. (“Look you know mummy has this office here. Go ahead and you do that it’s yours (laugh) you know what I mean.”)

Jaylin presented ongoing conflicting views about her mother. At times, she spoke about how proud she was of where her mother is today and appreciative she is of the support both emotional and financial, she is able to provide. However, I heard hints of concern that her mother may relapse again, and that Jaylin would once again lose her mother. “Yeah, she’s great. I don’t even. I’m not even worried about her right now. Hopefully it stays that way”.

I also noted that though Jaylin spoke about how proud she was of where her mother was in terms of rebuilding her career and life, Jaylin maintained her own ideas about life and family, the ideas her time in foster care and her early upbringing had helped create. It seems that she has
not let go of those ideas perhaps because they provided her with a sense of security. This was something missing in most aspects of her life and something she did not trust her mother and her relationships to provide.

Jaylin’s relationship with her biological family has been difficult over the years as she described in the following:

So, the family member I used to live with, she was not very supportive. Uh hmm, so I could never call her and be like hey listen I have no money at the school or like or you know hmm (pause) hmm my meal plan ran out and so I got to eat and I have no money so can you give me this because I do not have it.

She is working on rebuilding her relationship with her mother, who is now actively involved in her life and spends time with her daughter. Jaylin shared,

Therefore, my mum is happy she helps me a lot. She helps me with my daughter and when I get sick you know. She always, she always is on a constant apology shit and she is like and now she’s that person for my daughter. My daughter is super spoiled and I’m like that’s ok.

She is also working on rebuilding a relationship with her sister, noting “now we are like really close.” Initially, her statement surprised me given Jaylin’s negative comments about her relationship with her sister, especially when her sister was her foster placement. Jaylin expanded on this and noted in her second interview that her sister was at her house waiting for her to return from the first interview so they could spend time together. Though Jaylin spoke about the improvement in her relationship, I wondered if that had more to do with Jaylin’s desire to be a positive mentor for her nieces than her relationship with her sister.
Jaylin shared some of the challenges she has faced in trying to achieve her life goals. “I was like dammit. I was trying to beat the odds and somehow, I just got stuck being a single mum, hmm you know a Black single mum.” She also shared how she felt about becoming a mother at a young age. She explained that although it was not what she wanted (in keeping with her desire to build a life for herself different than what she had observed growing up), it also served as a defining moment in her life and changed in many ways for the positive. Jaylin spoke about the change in her life,

So, four years ago I wasn’t a mum and so that drastically changed my life too. So, I think. I feel becoming a mum I became more responsible. I also just became more reliable to everyone else because I wanted to make sure she was situated, which got me situated which helped me be there for other family members that kind of needed it.

Jaylin takes her role as a mother very seriously and spoke about how her daughter is the biggest achievement in her life, stating, “Now, I’ve got to be there for her and if it feels great (laugh). It feels great.”

Jaylin discussed wanting to raise her daughter differently than she had been raised, sharing,

That I’ve never seen that and I don’t know where I got that from either maybe you know, I don’t even know it’s my parenting style (different from what she had observed in care) I don’t yell. I don’t scream and she’s a good kid.

Jaylin shared that having been in care impacts her parenting. In the following excerpt from our interviews, she explained that she worries about if her decisions are always in the best interest of her daughter:
I hate to move but I’m so used to it I move so fast. You know I hate to do it but I’m always like okay let’s go. It’s nothing for me to move. I noticed I did this too, I changed my daughter’s school I don’t mind leaving and starting new so starting fresh like so I don’t care new starts are kind of my thing so. But I was like my baby is probably going to have a heart attack. You know she’s not used to that so thinking she’s just me I was like…

These contradictory views represent the struggles Jaylin experienced in trying to cope with the trauma of being removed from her family, her negative experiences while in kinship care with her sister. Now, as a young adult, she is trying to reestablish her relationships with her biological family while trying to raise her daughter in a manner different from the parenting she experienced.

Jaylin shared her current relationship with her biological family, “Like I’m now in a position where I have my little family back. I have a mum and a dad, and they are both supportive, and you know it’s great.” Jaylin spoke highly of her mother and their current relationship. As with most of the pain points in her life, Jaylin avoided discussing any negatives or current struggles in her life. She was determined to share with me the positive aspects of her life today. She stated during our first interview that the reason she wanted to participate in the study was its focus on the positive.

She talked about having her family at this time. Some of her statements regarding family indicated she experienced internal conflict at times regarding the idea of family and had some rigid ideas on what a family looks like and the steps needed to achieve her ideals. In many ways, though her ideal is representative perhaps of what most young adults strive towards, the rigidness in her thinking in regard to the concept of family is perhaps a direct result of her experiences in
foster care. Jaylin continued to reiterate through all our interviews how having the ideal family is an important goal for her and part of what reinforces her commitment to the path she is currently on. At the same time, she noted how important parenting her daughter is for her.

Focus on the positive. In sharing her story, Jaylin focused primarily on the positive aspects of her life. Even when sharing what attracted her to participate in the study, Jaylin stated, “You know, like us being on the positive track, and not like, you know, how it was depressing for you or anything like that. So, the fact it was pretty positive.”

Jaylin exuded positive energy over most of our time together. She was very upbeat while talking about her present and glowed as she spoke about her daughter. Jaylin’s body language and tone of voice changed and became more subdued as she spoke about her experiences in foster care and about some of the challenges she faced. It was interesting to see how quickly she bounced back to a positive tone. Even when Jaylin spoke about the trauma related to her removal from different placements, her substance use challenges, or her relationship with her daughter's father, she found a way to insert humor into the conversation and lighten up the tone of the interview. As I began to understand Jaylin’s journey and the underlying challenges she had experienced, I came to realize that her focus on the positive appeared to be a way to cope with the trauma she has experienced. This was the lens through which she chooses to deal with multiple aspects of her experiences in foster care. As previously stated, Jaylin initially shared her three positive placements. It wasn’t until speaking further with her that the true scope of her transitions became evident. Jaylin stated,

…moving homes, yeah it was frustrating you know, constantly packing your stuff because you’re just think[ing], about packing all of your stuff again. I remember one
time I was like you know I’m not packing shit. You guys are going to pack it and I didn’t
touch anything.

Jaylin’s reason for not wanting to think or talk about all of her placements also unfolded
as she shared the following:

…where I’ve been for like over a year and I felt like I wanted to stay there, those are the
placements I talk about. But then if conversation comes about, I’m like oh yeah I
remember this group home, it was like a week. So sometimes I will remember them and
sometimes I completely forget about them. The three places that were like home to me
that I thought were permanent homes, those are the ones that are solid in my memory.

Though Jaylin counted her placement with her sister as one of those she remembered, she
also shared that the placement was not positive. She shared how “my sister, me and my sister
we’re like well, it's actually just like living with a resource parent because she did not really want
me there. But ok, so I’m going to get paid so just come”

The same initial emphasis on the positive was evident in her early discussion on school
transitions, “the good is the fresh start.” However, while Jaylin has chosen to focus on the good
in her life, she did discuss some of her more challenging experiences as well. She told me,

The bad is just like, you know some kids are, they’ve been in the same home all their
lives and they went to the same grammar school all their lives, so all of the teachers know
who they are. None of them really know who you are and so its…

Emphasizing the positive or choosing to focus on the positive may be one-way Jaylin
coped with the trauma she experienced while in foster care and which has perhaps helped her
overcome some of the challenges she has faced in her journey. During our interviews, Jaylin
shared some of the hardships she has faced on her journey. For example,
I was, I’m addicted to pot. I didn’t want to do anything afterward. I didn’t want to go out. I just wanted to sit on the couch and waste time when I could be doing something else. At the time, uh hmm I wanted to find another job but once I got out of work and I put--to bed or whatever or maybe if she was gone, I would smoke and like do nothing. You know and I just wasted a few hours where I could have been filling out resumes, I could have been working on my resume. I could have been sending them out. This was, I feel like there was so much missed time.

It was interesting for me to note the change in her tone of voice as she spoke about her challenges. Her voice became softer, more thoughtful, and she made less eye contact in comparison to when she was talking about her current life, her work, or her positive current relationships.

Jaylin shared multiple occasions where she found herself getting off track with her goals and pushed herself back on track. In one such instance, she spoke about how when she was in high school, and she realized that she needed to focus on her future:

I realized how close my future was and how close I was to being an adult and how prepared I was. You know, like do will I be able to have my own apartment? Will I be able to afford it? No, so what do I have to do then college fine I’ll do it.

Another example of challenges she faced and felt she was able to overcome was when she was getting ready to age out of foster care. As she mentioned,

That’s it. So now I got to do this on my own, and now nobody is going to support me.

Yeah, now I really got to get it together like you know like I’ve really got to finish, but I didn’t finish, and it really scared me as I was like damn I don’t have that support anymore
what now you know like I was waitressing at that time and I’m like Holy shit like I got to
I got to do something…

Jaylin also consistently spoke about the positive place she is in her life today. Over the
course of our interviews, I noted that every time she spoke of a challenge in her life, she
subsequently discussed the positive place she is in life today relative to that challenge. For
example, after Jaylin shared with me her struggles with substance use, she spoke about where
she is in life today:

…am like I kind of just got to this place where instead of getting high off other things I
get high off life just like I’m alive; my daughter is healthy. I’m able to take care, and
sometimes I just like to play that back in my head and it like and the things I used to get
so upset about they are not around me anymore. So I learned how to reduce anything that
can stress me out to a point where I don’t even.

Jaylin has worked on addressing challenges such as her substance use and the lack of
support in life by maintaining a positive life focus, finding value by helping others, and
developing a vision for the life she wants to live. She has also defined some clear (albeit black
and white) goals for herself and her life. Her focus on the positive appears as her way to cope
with the trauma she experienced and a way to avoid thinking about the negatives in life. It was
apparent how hard she works at maintaining a positive focus, as evidenced by her avoiding
spending time talking about the challenges she has faced and continues to face.

Defining self. Along with defining her goals when it comes to her family and her career,
Jaylin defined the values by which she wants to live her life, and that serve as the foundation for
the identity she is forming. Her journey in establishing her identity was perhaps shaped by a
sense that she didn’t have control or power over her life. She spoke about how being in foster care impacted her sense of control and power in her life, saying,

You can’t, so it does take away a lot of that feeling of you know the feeling of power and some type of empowerment. It just dwindles as they (youth in care) realize they have less control over what happens in their life.

This was a feeling, she explained, that was made worse by the multiple transitions she experienced. Not only did she feel a loss of control but also, a loss of worth as an individual, mentioning,

You, just you eventually just get used to it. I would say in the beginning it was like hurtful; like you feel like no one wants you. You don’t have a family but then eventually, honestly you become institutionalized (laugh) like you get used to it.

Jaylin felt that she, as a person, had limited value and that her opinions, desires, and wants were not heard and held no value, just as she, as the individual did not. Having this limited say in her life and having a multitude of others telling her what to do, how to think, and what to feel contributed to her challenges in developing her identity and sense of individuality. Jaylin spoke about how different people who were in her life were pulling her in different directions, as she stated,

Yeah, because there was always someone pulling you left and right. What you should be doing and what you shouldn’t be doing. And then you have a law guardian, and you have a caseworker, and you have your therapist, and you have your mentor. Whoever you got is telling you these different things and you’re being pulled in 10 different ways. You don’t even know who you are because you are listening to what everyone else tells you are.
Jaylin utilized certain positive experiences and interactions to counteract her sense that she had no value. She chose to use these positive experiences to help her develop her values. The first time Jaylin expressed having positive interactions was when she entered high school where the positive acknowledgment came from “it was like two teachers in particular that liked moved up with us.” She spoke about how observing the adults in her environment had her thinking about her goals for her future. “They (her teachers) were the reason why I wanted to do more you know, because they all had college degrees.”

Another experience, one that appears to have had a significant impact on Jaylin, was leaving her small community to attend a four-year college. This opportunity really expanded her horizons by providing her with exposure to other cultures and ways of thinking. As Jaylin recalled,

I’m actually more knowledgeable about a lot of things, hmm like college and umm I’ve been to a few places and I actually got out of Paterson too and though it was only 30 minutes away up 17 it was like a completely different world. Hmm and I met a lot of new people. Uh hmm, a lot of new cultures things that I’ve never known about before because when you are here, you’re in a bubble.

Finally, she identified her current position as positive and significant to her life journey. Jaylin communicated excitement about her job and explained that it serves as another means for her to broaden her experiences for as she noted her current job allows her to “gain some experience in my field. I feel like this is a perfect entry-level job.”

Her perceptions of the world around her, as well as her experiences, helped define the values by which she wanted to live. They helped her develop clear opinions about the importance of growing as a person to actualize her values in her relationships. She stated,
Because at the end of the day you are supposed to evolve as a person. You’re not supposed to stay stagnant and I told him that and when you stay where you are you do that, and with me it’s like I’m going to move forward and do better…

Jaylin also spoke of how her perceptions of others and of her experiences influenced the choices she has made regarding her career, noting,

You don’t want to live paycheck to paycheck. Who wants to do that? So whether you think like well you once did it but yeah but I did. I want to stay like that absolutely not you don’t want to live like I have to wait till my next paycheck until blah blah blah.

An important value for Jaylin is giving back to her community and helping her family. Jaylin shared how service to others is important in her personal life. She also shared that helping others in her professional life gives her a sense of pride. “That I’m going to actually be in court and that I’m actually going to be able to talk to the volunteers and advocate and help them help the children, and if they drop out then it’s my role.” Jaylin further communicated that she hopes to have the ability to do more for her family and for others:

Even now I feel like I can be a positive role model to them, but I can be more do more. I can be in a position to actually help them. Okay, like you need a job. How about you get your degree and I got you. You know what I’m saying, like that kind of someone.

This commitment to help others, especially her family, provides motivation for her to stay on the positive path she is on and accomplish her life goals. It also appears to be her way to fill the emotional need for validation from others and helps support her sense of self-worth.

**Working to Support Youth in Finding Their Positive Path in Life**

As Jaylin reflected on her journey after leaving foster care, she shared her insight into what would have made things easier for her in foster care. She also discussed what she is
currently doing to help others and her overall thoughts on how to improve the foster care system in general. The core of all her suggestions intertwined the themes she identified in her journey and focused on her microsystem level interactions, or her interactions with others, the things that helped her start and stay on the path she is currently on in life.

As she noted, “That’s important somebody that’s going to show you that there is, you know, a light at the end of the tunnel. That’s important.” Jaylin went on to say, however, that it is not enough to just encourage FCY. Noting that it is important to help the FCY set clear goals and develop their own ideas and possible ways to achieve them (“It’s like I would show them a path. Like this is your future. You are either going to be here or here”). Along with having a path, Jaylin expressed that FCY also need confidence that they can achieve their goal. “And also to have them feel it’s attainable.”

Jaylin emphasized the importance of FCY feeling heard by someone, anyone due to the lack of consistent people in their lives “The number one thing will be to talk to them you know.” She further emphasized the importance of concrete communication regarding available resources. “Start telling the kids about what they are entitled to uh m because that would help, you know.” She spoke about some of the resources she received that helped her in her journey, most of which seemed to be material in nature (versus emotional support) by sharing,

I was able to get everything I needed. So, I needed a laptop; I asked for a laptop and I got it. You know like I needed security deposit for my first apartment, and they helped me get my first apartment. That was helpful. I got a lot more funding in college than other kids that were with their parents. I got a lot of grants.
Additionally, she felt that providing FCY with positive goals to work towards would help reinforce the hope and the idea that they too can achieve anything they set their mind to, to achieve the American Dream, which has been her own personal goal. As she noted, Kids like success stories. I think, you know, talk about other kids or see other kids in the division’s office that were on the honor roll – they’ll want to be on there and stuff like that you know so…

Again, in sharing the trauma she experienced due to the multiple transitions, she also expressed a belief that FCY need support in how to cope during transitions. Though she spoke at length about her dislike of having to pack every time she was being transitioned from one placement to another, it summed up the emotional turmoil associated with the move. She also shared that it contributed to a sense of being ‘institutionalized,’ a word that in itself implies having no control over one’s life.

Jaylin suggested the need for all the persons involved in the care of the FCY system to be cognizant that the youth may not be responsive to simple tasks such as doing their homework or cleaning their room. She noted that those in foster care might struggle to learn because, as she so eloquently stated,

They have much bigger things to worry about, like moving every two-three months. They can’t sit in class and think about Christopher Columbus or moving a decimal place over two times to the right. Like yeah right, I need to figure out what’s going to happen next here. I hate where I’m living; if I was to run away how would I, where would I go. Those are the things that you think about and sit there and…

In learning from Jaylin about her journey from foster care to the young adult she is today, it became apparent that there were many contradictions between the idealistic positive life she
desired and the struggles and challenges that were the reality of her life. Her focus on achieving the idealistic vision for the life she has created was one of the driving forces for her path in life, as was her search for value in herself and in her life. Jaylin shared her belief that the way to assist more FCY forge a positive path through emerging adulthood was by helping FCY create a vision for their future and a belief that they can achieve any goal they select. Jaylin’s perspectives of her journey from foster care through emerging adulthood were based on making meaning of her experiences and on her interactions with others. Her focus on change to the system was on how interactions with others can help FCY achieve a positive path. In listenning to what she was saying, it was evident that some of the concerns she voiced about the foster care system and the needed changes had to be made at a systemic level and not just in how individuals worked with FCY.

**Portia**

Portia is a 26-year-old biracial (African American and Caucasian) female. She has a master’s degree in social work and currently works fulltime for a state agency as the youth ambassador. When I first met Portia, I felt like I was meeting a friend. She was very warm, friendly, and readily shared her story. I was amazed at her willingness to be so open and vulnerable in front of me, a total stranger. However, I think my desire to hear her story, especially the positive aspect of her story and her desire to share her story, created a common bond between us. As I learned more about Portia throughout our three interviews, I found myself emotionally reacting to her and her words. In hindsight, I think there were times where perhaps I stayed with her in her story as she was telling it instead of prompting her for details that may have helped me better understand her journey. I found myself caught up in her emotions, reacting to her, and I struggled with whether to ask questions or how many questions
to ask for fear of having her shut down and stop sharing. As I reflect on my interviews with Portia, I realize that she vacillated between sharing her journey and trying to share the changes she passionately believed were needed in the foster care system. Portia had a difficult journey through foster care, as shared below.

Portia initially entered foster care at one month of age and was reunited with her biological family when she was about four, only to be removed again approximately two years later. Portia shared that during the time she was reunited with her biological family, she lived with various family members and was eventually removed due to neglect. Portia painted a vivid picture of the violence she witnessed in childhood (“like a fight break out so badly and then somebody brains like literally dead brains blown out and watched firefighters like wash it down the street somebody's brains and I was like I'm never go back to that”), speaking softly and rapidly. As was often the case during our conversations, Portia had tears in her eyes as she recounted her childhood trauma.

Portia has three biological siblings. Her biological mother is deceased. Portia’s memories of her time with her biological family are not positive. She clearly remembers the chaos, violence, and neglect she experienced while in her biological mother’s care. She shared how she had a poor relationship with her biological father, as he never acknowledged her or her younger biological brother. Portia currently has a negative relationship with her biological siblings and stated that she has no desire to be a part of their lives. She described them as “toxic” and noted that she wants none of their toxicity to impact her life. Portia did meet her biological mother again as a teenager. Portia had wanted to meet her biological mother as she was searching for answers as to why she was placed in foster care, answers that she never received. Her biological mother was ill at the time they reconnected and died shortly after.
Portia was adopted at age fifteen and reentered the foster care system at age 18 due to a failed adoption because of her negative relationship with her adoptive mother. Her reentry into the system as a young adult allowed her to access some of the services available to FCY between the ages of 18 to 24. She recalled,

I got adopted when I was 15 and then uh, but then I went through all their programs because my adopted mother. I had a failed adoption so that's why. So that’s why this is so hard.

She had a planned transition from care while in college, and although the career and educational aspects of her life were well planned, it was a tough transition emotionally. Portia struggled with depression upon transitioning from foster care as she shared at various times during our interviews. She told me,

…and in that and because of that, I started kind of, kind of like I felt like I was like losing that part of myself and I needed to find it and (pause) and so I started going into like a depression and things like that and I started losing sense of myself and uhmm, I started getting more anxious uhmm, (pause) and I think a lot of it was because all of the those supports weren’t right there for me and I couldn’t access them on a daily basis so that transition was tough for me for that for that first year.

Portia experienced over 35 placements while in foster care, primarily in a variety of foster homes, all of which impacted her in various ways. She also experienced over twelve school transitions, and though transitions were difficult for Portia, her experiences with school were positive, unlike her experiences in foster homes. “I was able to be more myself in school and it was like my moment to escape from foster care. So, when I got to transition into the school, it felt like a breath of fresh air for me.” School, though at times challenging, was
Portia’s safe space. Portia was very emotional during all three of our interviews as she spoke of her experiences in foster care, at times coming to tears and at other times appearing angry both through the tone of her voice and her body gestures. Portia spoke very emphatically and with limited pauses when she was emotional or passionate about her responses to interview prompts.

Portia currently has many positive people in her life, primarily her partner, whom she credits with helping her stay on the positive path she is currently on. A positive path in life in Portia’s words means:

I think a positive path in life begins and starts and ends with hope and that it always surrounds hope. A young person just needs hope and that if a consistent person in their life can provide them with hope, they are able to thrive. I think in all areas of my life I consistently had hope and (pause) whether it was through sports or through the arts or through just someone speaking to me, I consistently had hope and I didn't -- I didn’t realize it but reflecting back and looking back on it I now know that, that I was given hope, yeah.

She has a master’s degree, is employed full time, and has been in a relationship with her partner for two and a half years. Her definition of being on a positive path in life, however, was based upon having hope and on having a positive person in her life. She did elaborate on her achievements after aging out of foster care. She was most proud of when sharing the following:

I think getting my bachelor's so after 21. Getting my bachelor's, getting my masters, getting accepted into law school uhmm (pause) my job right now. Getting a state level position that's never been created before. I'm really proud of that (pause). I'm proud of the work that I do with my partner. We created a non-profit for pet for animal rescuing.
I'm really proud of the work that we've done there. We rescued over a hundred animals over the last year.

For Portia, her emotional journey is, in many ways the most important aspect of her being where she is today and also her biggest challenge. Portia spoke extensively about the trauma she experienced in and outside foster care and its ongoing impact on her life as well as her hopes for her future. Portia is determined to give voice to FCY and to empower them to find success, the way she has been able to find it. She looked at participating in the study as a means of doing so by sharing her story. Portia said,

I ultimately wanted to help other young people. I knew that my success, (pause) I knew that my success would, (pause) I knew that it wasn't easy getting me to this point and so I knew that the resources that I got I wanted other young people to get access to and so I wanted that voice to be heard. Uhmm and so that kind of attracted me to this and I knew that getting that hoping that would get to a bigger and higher-powered voice and that young, other young people would ultimately be helped through that.

In trying to understand Portia’s journey through foster care and emerging adulthood, it was apparent that her sense of who she is and how she relates to the world is directly related to the trauma she experienced in her life. Portia focused primarily on her interpersonal relationships, both positive and negative, but had little to say about the rules and regulations within the foster care system that perhaps contributed to her experiences. The themes that emerged from her story are (a) developing a sense of self, (b) the importance of connections or relationships, and (c) her path moving forward in life. In all three themes, there is the central construct of hope, a construct that Portia defined as how she measures being on a positive path. She credits hope with helping her through all the traumas she has experienced to date.
Developing a Sense of Self

One of Portia’s life goals is to adopt youth from foster care. She specifically shared, …. that I'm able to provide hope for other young people. I know that I definitely want to foster and adopt other young people and that I want to foster young people that have behavioral issues and that have intellectual disabilities and things like that. Those that are deemed the difficult children.

What drew her to want to adopt the youth who were “difficult,” she shared was because she identified with them; that she had been labeled as difficult while in care. She stated, I was them. I was you know. I was the one that threw the golf ball at my teacher's head. I was the one, that you know, I was the one that threw water on myself when my teacher wouldn't let me go to the bathroom, you know. I was the one that was deemed uhhh, always seen in the hallway, uhhmm or most likely to be uhhmm, or class clown. That was my. I don't know what they're called but they want you get every year or whatever for …

Portia noted that while in school, she got in trouble for her behaviors and was labeled as a difficult child, particularly while in 8th grade. This identity has significance in how she views herself and its ongoing impact on her life and journey. At the same time, it is important to understand that this identity, perhaps, also helped her get on the path she is on today.

Difficult child. As noted, Portia has experienced multiple school and foster home transitions. However, her identifying as a difficult child or as different began perhaps while in the care of her biological family. She shared,

I was like, what the hell, like I couldn’t even go with my father and it was because he always denied me. He was like no. She’s like, my sister is literally you. Like exactly your skin tone or maybe one shade darker and has black hair and so my hair is naturally
very light like almost blond so it’s annoying. It’s not annoying. I love the color but they always. But the part that is annoying is that he from birth denied me and my younger brother because we literally looked like twins and he was like no they are too light to be my kids and so I felt like that is why he didn’t take me and so I felt like the outlier and feeling that from such a young age and then bouncing and then going into foster care that like it reinforced the fact that I’m the outlier.

Though Portia was not the only one of her siblings placed in foster care, it was evident that she continued to feel as if she was different or treated differently. Already feeling different, Portia recalled the negative experiences of foster care and how her placements were very transactional in nature, she murmured,

It’s like, it literally, oh my god, transitions remind me of when I was sold as a child (pause). That’s what it is. It’s like literally a transactional process (pause) and I think that that why they are so hard.

She shared how this made her feel as if she were nothing, had no value, and how going into foster care reinforced the sense of being an outlier. She summarized her time in foster care by saying,

I just added to my spoken word piece and I said that as the years go by I would constantly get high to mask my true feelings of wanting to die because 18 years and over 35 placements, I’ve grew to learn that the system like the detective or an agent and sadly if I have to categorize it I would have to say enslavement.

Portia explained why she considered foster care to be enslavement, noting that her value to her foster parents was based upon what she could provide for the foster parents or what she could do for her foster parents rather than what they could do for her. Portia recalled a foster
mother who kept her out of school on many an occasion to babysit or to complete work for her and said,

I was seven and they made me stay home from school and I had to go to work with her and she was like some sort of caseworker or something like that and she would go from one house to the next. She would write and like fill out this questionnaire thing and would ask people questions about their (pause) like their financial information and their personal life and then when she would bring them back to the house. I would have to rewrite them for her because she said she had sloppy handwriting and she always said I had neat handwriting. Or I would have to babysit her kid for her who was like under a year old.

All Portia desired was a home where she was valued (“I wanted a loving home, like I wanted a home. That’s all I wanted.”). This was something she never found even after being adopted. She reported feeling she was adopted solely for the purpose of her adoption subsidy and the assistance she could provide her adoptive mother, saying,

I was adopted at 15. She continued to get it (the adoption subsidy) for the three years that she had me and then at 18 she was able to be just like get out like because she didn't want to, she no longer needed a babysitter and so that was her excuse for me. But really, I found out it was because the adoption subsidy had stopped. I mean, why I had no idea she was even getting a check the whole time and she wasn’t literally. On Christmas, she would buy my adoptive sister Xboxes and GameCube’s and stuff like that and wouldn't buy me anything or would buy me like one pair of earrings from Walmart that I saw and granted I was appreciative of the earrings had that been the only thing she could afford and my sister, my younger sister got the same thing in comparison. But because she was
getting Xboxes and GameCube’s and stuff like that. It really showed how she viewed me and so it definitely like hurt my feelings eventually.

Portia’s adoption failed, and she realized that her adoptive mother only cared about how she could exploit her and not about her as a person. This realization further deteriorated her fragile sense of value. For Portia, realizing that her adoptive mother cared not about her but only about the money, reinforced the feeling that the only value she had to others was what she could do, provide for them and not for her as a person. Perhaps even more damaging to Portia’s sense of self, her feeling that she as a person has value, was the lack of voice in her life and future. This was reinforced by those who perhaps did not take the time to understand what she wanted, a loving home. Major decisions in Portia’s life were determined by a foster care system that didn’t hear her voice. Staff in the foster care system attempted to implement legislation that emphasized permanency over stability and did not seem to base decisions on Portia’s needs and wants. Portia’s sense of value in herself and her hope for her future came from some unexpected sources.

Finding value. Portia spoke about her experiences both in and outside of foster care and why she considered her experiences negative. She stated, “…as why I always like categorize it as enslavement because like we were doing dishes and like doing and getting beat and just like for nothing.” Portia emphasized how the caretakers in her life cared only about what she could do to help them, not about her and her needs. Portia recalled limited positive interactions with caseworkers and foster families, speaking of her transitions “or like this happened to me multiple times. They know that you’re leaving and they pack your stuff which is usually in a black trash bag, and so you literally feel like you are garbage.” She shared that she could only recall two positive relationships that gave her hope and a positive sense of self before leaving for college,
one with a foster family and the second with a 9th-grade math teacher. As Portia recalled, these were the two times she felt that she was a person; that she had value and had a desire to accomplish something in her life. Unfortunately, neither relationship had a positive ending, but the sense of hope and lessons learned remains.

Portia shared her experience about one foster family and how she felt valued from the moment she walked into the door. She felt valued because the relationship was not based upon what she could do for them but on the family trying to show Portia that they cared about her as a person. She spoke about simple things said or done that caught her off guard in a positive manner, recalling,

She was talking to me while we were shopping and she wanted to learn about me and my experiences and what I had seen and what I had learned and what I want[ed] to learn and where I want[ed] to grow and it was just that felt so personalized that it meant the world to me and then when we had gotten home and see I’m calling it home like her husband then took me out back and we are sitting on like the deck and he was just talking to me. Her was just drinking a beer and I was playing on some like thing that they had and he also did the same exact thing. He was like, “You don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to. I understand this is a scary moment.” and I loved that he then took it back really quickly. He was like “I mean I don’t understand. I couldn’t even imaging this has to be a scary situation for you” and it just made me feel very safe.

Portia was removed from the care of this foster family abruptly and recalled being very hurt as she was under the assumption they would adopt her. Portia learned that she was removed from the foster family’s home because her caseworker decided she needed to be placed or adopted by a Black family. She told me,
and here I found out it was this woman who just assumed that because I’m half Black that I must have to be with a Black foster home and that then makes me seem like I’m some kind of racist or something and I was like it does not matter if the home is Black, White, Indian, Native American. I wanted a loving home. Like I wanted a home that’s all I wanted.

Portia stated that she was removed from the care of this family, placed with multiple Black families after, and then eventually adopted by a White woman. An adoption, as noted earlier, that was not positive. Though Portia did not directly speak about how she identifies racially, it was evident that being Black, or being perceived as Black, impacted Portia’s view of the world and the meaning she made of her experiences in foster care. Portia continues to be upset with the role race plays in her life; from her father not wanting her because her skin color was too light, to her caseworker wanting to see her adopted by a Black family even though Portia was happy with her White foster family. Her angst with the role racial identity played in her life has led to her thoughts on reform in how youth and foster parents are matched. One of Portia’s hopes as she shared was that “there needs to be and there needs to be a better matching system for resource parents and young people.”

Portia also shared the story about her 9th-grade math teacher, who, despite Portia’s best efforts to act as a difficult child, treated her as a person who had value when she inquired if Portia would be interested in babysitting her children. Portia said,

and she asked me will you babysit my kids and I was like what you want me my badass to babysit your kids are you kidding are you serious and they're mad young they were like 5 and 7 at that time.
Portia recalled how shocked she had been by the request considering her prior negative interactions with this particular teacher and was unaware of what the teacher saw in her that made her request that Portia babysit her children. She said,

So, this is the teacher who in 9th grade. I was throwing golf balls; you know you remember. So, she just kept like I felt like nitpicking on me and I was like if you're going to pick on me, I'm going to pick on you and I was like okay. You don't want me to go to the bathroom poured water on myself and stood up and was like now can I go to the bathroom and she would send me to the principal’s office and me and my XXX my best friend she split us up. She put us across the room so we would just be like screaming at each other from across the room like we were just mad, disrespectful. I was awful.

Portia choose to take the teacher up on her offer to hire her as a babysitter and recalled the moment she entered her 9th-grade math teacher’s home and feeling awed by what she saw and her emotional reaction. She noted, “I and just I felt like I was like this is crazy I want to be part of this family. Like this wasn’t just, it wasn't just the house itself … That they were a family.”

Being exposed to her 9th-grade teacher’s lifestyle appeared to make her realize that there were other options in life outside of what she had experienced. Portia drew a comparison between what she had witnessed while living with her biological family and with her adopted mother. She recalled thinking to herself that “this [her biological family’s life] is not the life I want for me” and appeared to make a conscious choice at that time to try to achieve the life or lifestyle her 9th-grade math teacher was living. Portia recalled thinking the following:

When I saw everything, my biological family was going through. When I saw that they were all uh mm living on top of each other and struggling for food and all of that and
then my adoptive mother. She essentially would work and then make just enough, and this is why this was a failed adoption too. She would work, make just enough and then quit her job or get fired and then try and claim unemployment and essentially all of her money was from the uh hmm stipend so we struggled for money and all that stuff and I just knew I just don't want to be that. I don't want to always struggle for money and …..and be a statistic and just and just have to constantly think about it and so I wanted to do better for myself and so that's what drove me.

Aside from showing Portia, that there are other ways to live, Portia’s 9th-grade teacher actively worked to help her set and achieve goals. As Portia shared,

And she really like took me under her wing and just taught me a lot of things and the like value of life and she wrote. She gave me this I remember one day I walked into class and into English class and she gave me a book for my birthday and inside of it- it said “You determine your success and happiness.”

Additionally, Portia’s 9th-grade teacher helped her get into college, helped link with the sports programs there and with the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. Portia stated that her 9th-grade teacher was the only reason she went to college, and the reason she tried to obtain her college degree. Portia said,

She said to me, she was like ‘all of your family is either incarcerated, homeless, multiple children or dead and she was like - is that what you want to be like?’ And I was just like shit and then I took a step back and I was just like I don't want a life like that for my myself and then I looked around her house and I was like this this is how she got this family. It was through her education. It was by her getting an education and her husband. He got his master's degree I think and he's an engineer, so I give credit all to
her and her quote on you to determine your success and happiness and her bringing 
Rutgers to me.

Portia shared that this relationship recently ended as her ex-teacher is no longer speaking 
with her. When questioned about this, Portia said she was unsure of why her former teacher no 
longer speaks to her, but she shared what she suspects might be the reason:

Yeah, she just stopped talking to me. I don't know why but I think I do know why. I 
think it's because me and her son are very close as well as me and her daughter and her 
son asked me to get him marijuana and I did and I think she read some text messages and 
she finds out and which to me is mad disrespectful that you're reading your son's text 
messages you shouldn't be prying like that because he's 21, he's 20-years-old. You know 
what I mean, so basically that's what happened and I think that may be the reason why 
but I'm not that's the only thing that I can think of other than that I have no idea.

Portia spoke of her 9th-grade math teacher having cut ties with her for a year once before 
due to her brother bringing alcohol into the teacher’s car. Portia recalled having to remind her 
9th-grade teacher that she was not responsible for her brother’s actions and felt like the teacher 
should have discussed her concerns with Portia rather than cut ties.

Portia did not at any time appear to realize that her own actions may have contributed to 
the challenges in her relationship with her teacher, a pattern I noted as she spoke about her 
relationships. Her focus was on other’s actions versus her own contributions to the challenges in 
her relationships.

Portia shared how once she entered college, the level of support she had dramatically 
increased. Portia had support and encouragement from multiple sources and considered herself 
lucky in that regard. She said,
So, I remember that the first year of college. During the first year of college, I had so many resources because I played basketball, lacrosse, and cross-country so I had my coaches. I was in the EOF, so a lot of us that are in foster care we are eligible for EOF and EOF gives you a counselor.

This was the beginning of Portia’s journey in finding meaning and value in her life, and this journey continued throughout college.

Portia shared finding and maintaining her emotional regulation was perhaps the most difficult for her growing up and remains difficult. Something that was evident during our interviews, and particularly became clear in our second interview that began with the following exchange:

P: Don’t think I can do this today.

I: Uh hmm.

P: So, what I'm doing is that so I'm going to write down the questions so if I, if I can't answer it so that I can then bring it home.

I: Yeah.

P: And that and then possibly call you later.

I: That's fine.

P: Is that okay?

I: Yeah and if there's any questions that I have that you don't want to answer or can’t answer right now, don’t worry, we still have one more to go so we can always,  

P: Ok.

I: So, we are going to do three we can always push that question.

P: So, can I still write it down?
I: You can write it.

P: So, I can remember it and bring it back.

I: Either way, any way you're comfortable.

P: Okay.

I: So please don't feel.

P: To me what it was, was that I wanted to provide it with you this session so it didn't then overlap to the next one, so you didn’t have so much transcribing to do. Does that make sense?

I: I know, and I appreciate it

P: I like and then I can like and me and my partner can talk about it and then you know so that’s why I felt like this was the easiest way to kind of go about it.

I: Of course.

P: And still provide you with all the information but do it in the most comfortable way.

I: Of course, as I told you before anytime you're uncomfortable just tell me.

Providing Portia with the opportunity to not share unless she felt comfortable appeared to help her feel safe. I believe that this, in turn, allowed her to open herself up to me further, but as I shared earlier also made me further hesitant to probe more deeply to understand her journey and the meaning she has made of her experiences. It also made me wonder if she wanted the opportunity to think through her responses, so she did not share her honest opinion, but shared a response that would perhaps result in a suggestion for change to the child welfare system she desired.
After the exchange noted above, Portia between tears and at times laughter, shared her experiences of transitions between foster homes, schools, and other aspects of life. Portia noted that some of her negative thinking and reactions were so in-built, it was a struggle for her to overcome them and this presented a challenge to her. Portia shared her desire and need for emotional self-regulation.

**Remaining in the present.** Portia’s current goal in life is to obtain a sense of emotional regulation, the ability to remain calm and present even when triggered. She realized it was crucial for her to be able to maintain her relationships and her career. She noted, “My bar is now hey, I want to be emotionally regulated.” Portia feels she faces many challenges in life because she finds it difficult to manage her emotions. She shared that she has trauma-related mental health concerns and said,

I definitely struggle a lot of my emotional regulation skills. I’m, you know I have, I have ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]. I have PTSD [Post traumatic Stress Disorder], and I have chronic PTSD and I think that my chronic PTSD comes in full circle every day of my life.

Portia also shared that she had been hospitalized multiple times for mental health issues and, at times, reacts unknowingly to trauma triggers. She stated that it is difficult for her to take pride in her accomplishments and to accept praise. For example, Portia stated,

I'm just and I'm just proud of myself and I’ve never felt that I would say that because I never was proud of myself. So, I think that's one of my biggest challenges and that's because I've been beaten down so much while I was in foster care and that foster parents were so abusive while I was in care and it’s like how, how do you navigate that and how do you get those core beliefs out of you head.
As she noted, it is very difficult when you have experienced the magnitude of trauma, she has experienced in her life to change her way of thinking and said,

And that’s what it is. These are core beliefs from something that like from the time I was a month old of entering foster care till I was 21-years-old and, and you know being assaulted and you know so it's just like the gamete is so large.

As a result of all the trauma she had experienced, she struggles with positive moments in her life as seen in the following statement:

…because that I used to like look down on myself and things like that but all of my graduation moment and things like that are, when I reflect back on them I'm just like I wish that I was more proud of myself. But I'm able to still be now and that’s, that's okay, but is learning how to do so that's right and I'm, I think, one of the things that is the that I'm the most proud of is my job right now. I essentially travel the state and I speak to young people about their higher education options and uhmm being able to do that it's so rewarding.

Portia’s challenges with trauma trigger impact her personal relationships, her work, and at times her determination to continue on her current path. The one-thing Portia credits with helping her remain on her path, and maintain her forward focus is her relationships with her primary partner, and with others she considers support or part of the family she has created for herself.

Connection

Relationships are an important aspect of Portia’s journey through both foster care and emerging adulthood. Relationships have been both a source of trauma as well as a reason for hope. Portia spoke extensively during our three interviews together about how she always had
one person in her life serving as a source of hope and inspiration. “There was always someone or something that provided hope and just like that I consistently had one stable person and even if that person shifted.” At the same time, Portia shared how relationships were difficult to navigate because of the number of times she had been hurt by the people she trusted the most. She said,

Yeah, because what happened was that all the people that were in my life during here they weren't consistent and that that's what's incredible the person and the person that I never thought would ever, ever, ever leave my life did and that was actually a teacher that helped me the most that helped me when I was in my freshman year [in high school]. She was my freshman year math teacher and she's the one who help me go to college and I was close to her all the way until up to this year and she literally referred to me as her daughter like. I like, I referred to her as a mom and everything and so she just stopped talking to me and I don’t know she understands how much damage that does to somebody who had one had one mother and a biological mother and then that fell off an adoptive mother and that fell off and now you're going to call me your daughter and then just ghost on me.

As I share the challenges Portia has faced both in developing and maintaining relationships, it is important to understand that Portia looks at and defines relationships based on her trauma lens. For Portia, positive relationships are relationships in which she receives from another person. What she receives can vary, but for Portia if the relationship is based more on what she gives to others and not what she is gaining from the relationship. The relationship is no longer a positive direct result perhaps of her experiences in foster care.
Portia faced many challenges in her relationships with trusted people beginning with her biological family, her caseworkers, her adopted mother, and her 9th-grade math teacher. But she also learned how to establish new relationships and create a family for herself.

**Challenges.** One of the primary challenges with relationship has been consistency, people she can count on remaining in her life, beginning with caseworkers. Portia stated,

I think that was just the norm and because we were constantly like I would have different caseworkers at points come and pick me up and bounce me from one house to the next and I would just be like, “Who are you?” and they’d be like I’m here to pick you up and take you to your next place and I would just be like okay I guess I'll be going with you and you really don't know unless you're the teachers are telling you like you have to go with this stranger or something and you just eventually get used to it. But the caseworkers like sometimes they would pop up sometimes they wouldn't and they would either like sometimes drop off a bag of like gifts or something that was like used toys or something like that.

Portia spoke of the challenges she faced with relationships over her life and continues to face today, beginning with her biological family. While in college, Portia contacted her younger brother, however, she chose to cut ties with him due to the toxicity she felt he brought into her life as represented in the following quote:

No, I had contact with my biological brother, uhmm up until a year and a half ago and that was because I literally took care of him. He lived with me and my partner. So, I had to drop him so he was the only family member that I talked to you and no longer talk to anymore and I have no desire to talk to anyone because they're all, they're all either addicted to drugs. They either have mental health issues like severely oppressing mental
health issues or something and so it's just like I don't want [to] surround myself around them because they're toxic.

As Portia spoke about her relationship with her brother, she spoke primarily about his negative behaviors and offered little insight to her actions or behaviors that may have contributed to the toxicity in the relationship. Additionally, Portia spoke about not understanding why so many FCY go back to their biological family:

They go right back home. They're stupid. They are trying to reconnect with their family, all my siblings did it. I was like you really want to [being] stuck in this drama like you are stupid and I always said I'm not returning back there. I'd rather be homeless out on the streets before I return home. I was like you couldn't take care of me what makes you think they can take care of now, you're grown.

Portia also faces challenges in her current relationships with her partner and also in her career due to trauma triggers. Portia consistently works on developing relationships with others, focusing primarily on people whom she feels are positive, defined as wanting to be in her life and contributing to her life. As Portia works on developing these relationships one of the things, I noted was that she has a one-sided view of the challenges she faces in maintaining relationships. During our time together, Portia focused solely on the behaviors of the other person, and never considered her role in building, maintaining, damaging, or repairing relationships. She does not seem to have considered any patterns in the problems of her relationship with trusted people. Instead she chooses to cut them out of her life. Perhaps this was a way of coping she learned due to her multiple placements and a pattern of behavior learned from her time in foster care.
**Defining the bounds of relationships.** Portia’s philosophy in regard to relationships is based upon the following quote,

I remember reading a book or something that said it was defining family and saying that family isn’t biological but it's who you create around you. When I read that I was just like wow, that's really powerful and then (pause), and then I kind of just started building other people and supports around me and I started leaning on my friends more and I started and through that. I started getting more confidence and building myself up more and because I knew exactly what I wanted to do with school uhhmmm (pause) things just kind of fell into place for me. You know it just kind of worked really well.

She chose to embody that philosophy regarding with whom she maintains relationships and those she chooses to end or not with whom to maintain contact. It is important to remember that Portia seems to make decisions about who to establish and or maintain relationships based on what she gains from the relationship. Relationships thus continue to be tricky for Portia. She speaks about the importance of positive relationships in her life. It is also evident that she is unaware of her role in the disruptions of her relationships, be it the relationship with her former teacher, or her relationship with her biological family.

In understanding the work that Portia puts into relationships, it helped to look at her relationship with her partner, a relationship that Portia values and credits with helping her stay on a positive path in life. Portia shared,

so definitely, definitely that relationship gives me hope and a foundation and it gives me a home and that's such an incredible feeling that I've never, I’ve never had before because I never had that and I people have always come in and out of my life and I always push
people out and it was because I was afraid. I was afraid if you didn’t, I was. I had to push you out before you left me.

Portia and her partner have been together for over two years and currently live together. Portia shared how she is amazed daily how her relationship with her partner has grown stronger with each passing day. She spoke about learning, particularly from her partner how to develop and maintain relationships, though she continues to struggle with trust and in seeing her role in her struggles with maintaining relationships. She gives credit, however, to her ability to develop, more accurately her willingness to try and develop relationships with some mentors in a program in which she participated in college and stated,

I built all those relationships myself, and the reason why was because I, I was taught the skills through Ship and Sip. Granted my teacher that just happened to happen, but other than that once I entered Ship and Sip they taught me about “I statements.” They taught me things like how to manage broken relationships. They taught me about trust. They taught me about things like that. Once I learned those skills then I was like okay not everything has to be so dichotomous and then I was able to see through black and white and see that that there was a grey.

As Portia spoke about what she learned in regard to building relationships and trust from her mentors at the Ship and Sip program, I wondered if the message she had learned were about ‘I,’ about what I can gain from my relationship with you.

Portia was very emphatic about needing to provide FCY with the ability to develop relationships, beginning by teaching them how to network (“I think it starts with us teaching young people how to network us giving young people the skills.”) as these skills helped her be successful and get her current job. She shared,
If we teach them properly, they can absolutely be successful because that is how I got everything. That is how I got, how I landed everything that I landed and that's how I am. That's how I got to where I got to.

Portia emphasized not only the need to develop relationships and to focus energy on positive relationships. She also spoke passionately about not understanding why youth in care return home.

I never understood that concept of people returning home. I never did. I never ever did. I don't get it and I never will. I always tell you when people talk about returning home I’m like if they couldn't take care of you then what makes you think that they can take care of you now. They're not rescuers. They're not saviors. They're not anything. You need to be your own savior. One way to be your own savior is to ensure you have one person in your life, in your corner at all times.

Like Portia noted, “a person may change, but by focusing on developing relationships, you can ensure there is always one positive person in your life at all times.” The relationships of which Portia spoke is not the close personal relationships, but more about developing a positive support network that can be a resource in a time of need.

**Supportive relationships.** Portia described positive relationships as maintaining connections with those who want to be in her life. She said,

…and so, and that this point my aunt she wants me in her life and XXX she wants me in her life and so these are people that I just I'm okay with keeping my circle small because I can always build it.

Portia reported how she is realizing and valuing those that want to be in her life and provide her with the support that she needs. She shared,
Absolutely it's a process. I'm learning every day and I'm growing every day and I just have a supportive system of my partner and my aunt and even though I almost said the name even the person. Even XXXX who ran the mentoring program in college, somebody who is literally still in my life every day. She texted me this morning and asked me how my day was going and so she's literally the fact that she still in my life is so incredible. Like, I'm just like are you serious uhmm so I still speak to XXXX who is my first original support coach and XXXX who’s my last support coach. Like these are people that are like the fact that they're still in my life. I'm just, I’m in awe because I never felt that they would, it would be I was like you guys are going to come and go. Portia shared how at different times in her life she had different people who provided her with a sense of hope and support and noted,

I consistently had one stable person and so when I was in high school, I had my math teacher and when I was in college, I had Project Myself. After I left Project Myself, then it became then and it shifted to my girlfriend so consistently I just always had multiple supports and so and or if not multiple ones, one, and so I believe that young people always need one concrete support in that time of need and so if they get that then that provides them that sense of hope and getting that sense of hope will allow them to feel empowered and feel like they have kind of a sense of voice and that in itself and lead to that success.

The need for youth to have a person in their life who is consistent if not in the long term, but the short term, is something Portia emphasized in more than one interview. For example, she said,
So, I definitely think it falls on having that one consistent in your life and so I was fortunate enough too but always have that even if it wasn't always the same person throughout times of my life. So, when I was in high school it was my high school math teacher and then when I got into college I was in the Ship and Sip program.

Portia spoke of the different people who showed up for her when the people she counted on let her down. Interestingly none of these people are related to the foster care system. She had little positive to say about anyone she interacted with who was directly involved with the foster care, noting,

So that's what it is and what it's about and it’s constantly making sure that young people (pause) I believe in like having a primary consistent stable person but making sure that young people have like a backup and so it's not just about like having that one consistent person but like making sure that young people have a few people in their lives so in the event that people fall through they still other people that they can lean on.

Moving Forward

Portia’s journey through emerging adulthood has not been easy. As noted earlier, the trauma she experienced while in foster care impacted her emotionally, and her failed adoption forced her to reenter the foster care system so she could access programs and resources. Reentering the foster care system was a positive in Portia’s life as doing so allowed her to access programs in college that helped her maintain the positive trajectory her 9th-grade teacher had helped her establish. Portia learned tangible skills and perhaps, more importantly, she discovered she had a voice and was able to establish a future orientation that continues to help her move forward. Portia’s view of the world and her future orientation appear to be solely based upon her experiences in foster care and it does not appear as if her education and exposure
to the world outside of foster care has had a major impact on her view of the world keeping her focus and problem-solving ability limited to that framework.

**Resources.** Portia entered college, lacking in her opinion certain basic life skills that she needed to move ahead. I was struck by how unprepared Portia felt to live on her own, and wondered how in all her time in care, she had not learned how to do something as simple as wash or iron her clothes. Portia learned these skills through the assistance of a program in which she participated while in college, as per this example she gave.

So, a lot of my skills I definitely attribute them to a program called Transitions for Youth. Transitions for Youth, they no longer exist, which I think is very unfortunate because that was a program that if I attributed my success to anything in the world, I would attribute it to them. Absolutely I would attribute a hundred percent of my success to them. They were consistent, they were my stability, they were stable in my life they, they when I was homeless during the summer, they provided housing for me. When I needed to go to court for things, they went to court with me. If I was in the hospital for anything they would show up at the hospital during that time before I had my partner who is now my home they were my home and it was such an amazing feeling to have someone like that and these are people that are still in my life today.

The *Transitions for Youth* (TFY) program, along with the tangible skills, served as the source of consistency in Portia’s life during her early college years as well as a source of hope. The staff and participants took the place of the family she did not have, and Portia was very emphatic in attributing her current success to what they provided her. Portia learned valuable life lessons from the counselors in the program and was provided opportunities to move ahead in life. Following is an example of such opportunities.
So, during the summer they would give you and if you were in their summer program they would give you they would give you coaching, they would give you an internship they would give you housing they would give you mentoring and the and the coaching surrounded things like job-readiness, emotional resilience uhmm leadership uhmm stability and these were all skills that we just didn’t know or didn’t learn growing up. So, I remember when they took us to Washington DC I knocked on their door at 5 o’clock in the morning because we had to get ready and I didn't know how to iron my pants so they just took my pants and ironed them for me and then the next day said I'm sorry I was really tired so I just ironed your pants for you but now let me show you how to iron.

One of the opportunities that Portia gained from the TFY program was the opportunity to have a say in what she wanted to do and learn. This was a different experience for her as she was used to being told what to do by either her caseworkers or her foster parents. Placements, transitions, all had been without her input. The TFY program was the first time Portia recalled having an opportunity to express her desire both in the skills she learned and in life, career opportunities she wanted to explore. The program, more than being the place that provided her with tangible skills, also was the avenue through which she formed relationships and learned that her opinion had value. The TFY program, appeared to take the place of Portia’s 9th grade math teacher, by pushing her to find and maintain a positive trajectory in life.

**Assertiveness and self-advocacy.** Along with learning the skills she needed to be successful in life, having a voice in her life helped Portia in her journey through emerging adulthood. As noted earlier, the TFY program afforded Portia with the opportunity to say what skills she wanted to learn and what career interests she potentially had. Portia recalled the program, sharing,
They lift you up and empower you and just give you that give you that youth voice. That you just need and give you the skill set that you need and so all of that not only gave me the skills that I needed but it also allowed me to network and I felt that that was so key because through that internship. They allowed you to do an internship that was in your area of interest so if people wanted to be an engineer they would they targeted they really targeted what you that person wanted and so I remember that I wanted to start going to law school and so they had me going into I went and in like I got to go and uhm do an internship with the head of the public defender's office.

One of the most important skills Portia learned was networking; not just meeting people but learning to follow through on the opportunities presented something most people forget to do. She found that by following through on building relationships, she was able to have a clear career and education path in place for herself. Her challenge was the emotional path.

…right and these and it's for the summer and this is like it's this is your sophomore year of college that you're getting something like this and so now I'm networking and I'm getting all of this experience and so no wonder why I have the job that I have now and that I get the skills that I get it's because of them and uhm so I attribute everything to them.

Portia experienced grief when she was no longer involved in the program. She felt the loss of the emotional support. Because of her clarity about having a career path, however, she was able to maintain her future orientation in life.

**Future and goal orientation.** In learning of Portia’s journey, one of the things that struck me and what I wondered about was how after experiencing such trauma, so many betrayals, was she able to maintain her positive focus, keep herself on her positive path in life.
One thing I learned was that Portia had decided after her interactions with both her 9th grade math teacher and her counselors at college. She became motivated by those individuals to be future orientated and wanted to emulate them, rather than her biological or adopted family members (“So now these are people that have their master's degrees and so in order to be like them that means I have to get a degree”). As Portia recalled, it took a lot more than her 9th grade math teacher taking her under her wing for her to realize she could actually go to college and be someone. She recalls saying the following while in high school when the question of her going to college was raised:

I was like are you kidding me. At that time to me it was like so far-fetched. I was like no I'm a foster kid that's who I was. I was a foster kid. So, I'm like I’m just a foster kid, I’m not going anywhere in life. That’s why I was like I'm going; in my head I was like I’m going to be a garbage woman. I’m going to make that bread because garbage people they're making mad money that’s literally what I was telling people.

Once Portia realized that obtaining her education was her way of living a life similar to those she admired, she focused her attention on doing well in school. With the help of educational funding for FCY as well as scholarships from the university, Portia was able to finance her education. When Portia graduated with her bachelor’s degree in social work, she had been accepted into the master’s program. By the time Portia graduated with the master’s degree, she had her next steps in life in place. She said,

So, I basically set myself up for success from one step to the next. So right after my master's program, I set myself up for uhmm my first full-time job before I had even graduated and so it was from one thing to the next  So, I always make sure that and if I didn't have that I always made sure I had a plan A through Z.
Portia is very appreciative of where she is in life today. She acknowledges the amount of work she has put into getting to this place in life without the support to which non-FCY have access. She stated,

It like it makes me like more appreciative tip and more thankful for everything that I because I have to work 10 times harder to get everything because I don't have like I have people that are there but like when it comes to financial I don't have that one person I can run to and go to and be like hey, can you support me financially and things like that when I needed a scholarship like I was able to get that but you know how like when you are in college like people have mum and dad they can go to whenever they need like if they need a loan for a car or if the need a cosigner for a car or something, I don’t have that person.

Portia spoke about wanting to help FCY learn how to establish relationships so that once they were out of care, they would have a plan in place and, more importantly, they would have access to at least minimum emotional supports. She stated,

…because their cases are closed they don't have that concrete support in time of need that they had in care and most likely like their adoption has fizzled off things like that the foster parents are not in contact with any more like connections are lost and they don't they haven’t built they haven't all learned how to build those skills of maintaining those relationships.

Portia spent the majority of her life in foster care, and the trauma she experienced continues to affect every aspect of her life. She learned through her relationships with others that obtaining her education would allow her to live a life different from what she observed in the homes of both her biological and adopted family. Attending to her mental health issues
continues to be Portia’s biggest challenge. The one positive point in her life, was the presence of a supportive adult. As Portia noted that even though this support and sense of hope were not always from the same person, it was always present.

Alexandria

Alexandria, a 26-year-old African American female, has her master’s degree in social work and currently works full time as a policy specialist for a nonprofit that specializes in policy recommendations on foster care. Alexandria is very passionate about her work for FCY, particularly about addressing the negative statistics associated with foster care. During our first interview, I was caught off guard when Alexandria cited the same major articles and studies on which I based my study. This made me curious about her motive for participating in my research and I found myself wondering how open she would be about sharing her story. Alexandria’s knowledge about the research on foster care, and her desire to change the system influenced the dynamics of all three of our interviews and perhaps shaped some of my prompts and the direction of our interviews.

Alexandria initially entered foster care at birth and was adopted at age two by the family she was placed with as an infant. Alexandria resided with her adoptive parents and siblings until she was unexpectedly removed at age 14. Alexandria shared little information about her time with her adoptive family or her life before being removed from care at age 14. I was, however, able to glean that she did not have a close relationship with her adoptive siblings, that her adoptive mother was a stay at home mother with five children. Her adoptive father was the sole provider for the family. Alexandria enjoys a positive relationship with her adopted parents and openly spoke about their current place in her life and the emotional support they provide her.
Alexandria shared that she had 12 placements in a four-year span upon reentering foster care, before being placed in the Independent Living Program at age 18. Her placements included shelters and foster homes. For Alexandria, her foster care placements were primarily negative experiences due to both the foster parents and her assigned caseworkers. As Alexandria shared,

"Then I entered foster care, and I just didn't like the way I was treated by my, by some of my workers and I can't say all of them because I had a few that was good thank you. But so, but I just didn't like the way I was treated."

It is possible that having ongoing contact with her adopted parents made it harder for Alexandria to adapt to her foster homes as did potentially the interactions between her adoptive parents and the caseworkers assigned to the family.

Additionally, as she did not know, or perhaps more accurately understand, the reason behind her removal from her adopted parents’ care, Alexandria struggled with not being able to return to her home. Her struggle was made worse by the contradictory information told to her by her caseworkers and her adopted parents. As she recalled, “so they [caseworkers] never explained it but then you have your parents tell you why you can’t come home and obviously like it’s going to be their word against theirs [caseworkers] and what your parents say and stuff like that.”

Alexandria shared that she experienced three school transitions while in foster care and remained within the same school district upon initially being placed in care at the end of her 8th grade school year. Alexandria communicated that high school was easy for her, and her only challenge was trying to explain to her fellow students why she missed school for two weeks due to a shelter placement. She shared,
I got along with the kids pretty well and then high school was cool. Uh mm the only time it became a little difficult was like, especially like moving, like when I would have to go to the shelter or something like that and leave like for two weeks at a time and the kids in school were obviously like where were you for like two weeks and stuff like that so to explain.

Alexandria’s challenges with her education began when she entered college as she struggled both academically and in managing her desire to be like her peers. At the same time, needing to work to pay rent at her Independent Living Program highlighted the challenges faced by many youth who age out of foster care. As Alexandria shared,

The hardest part of the time frame was influence of others. Uh hmmm I can definitely say I had issues. Like I’m not the straight A kind of college student. ---- when you get there and so I really, I really struggled with school. School was a struggle for me. I have a lot of influence. I went to a lot of college parties and you know just trying to stay on the right path and trying to juggle work and people didn't understand that I had to like work almost fulltime to sustain my housing and still go to school and study and so that was a difficult struggle.

Alexandria clearly struggled in balancing her desire to be like her peers (carefree) and with what she needed to do to maintain her placement and go to school at the same time. Graduating college is Alexandria’s biggest achievement, and she was very open in sharing both her struggles in getting into the school of social work as well as her sense of pride in finally graduating with her bachelor’s in social work. She recalled the struggle and said:

Well, I am definitely most proud of graduating from college. It took me seven years to graduate with my bachelor's degree and there was a time where I just didn't know or think
I was going to graduate because that was how hard it got. It was like I had tried. I was really determined to get into the school of social work. It took me three times to apply and get in. As it was like I had finished all of my other courses at the university and it was like I need to get into the school of social work to be able to and they were like trying to force me to try a new major and I was like no this is what I want to do. I want to be a social worker.

Alexandria had a planned transition from foster care at 21. At the time of her transition, she resided in an Independent Living Program that allowed residents to remain in the program till age 25, even though they had aged out of care. Alexandria was able to access a limited resource available to youth who age out of foster care. Alexandria resided in the Independent Living Program until age 23. She moved into her own apartment after leaving the Independent Living Program as she was in a position to support herself financially. She told me:

I don't need to live at the Independent Living Program anymore because I am making enough money where I can live on my own and so although I like at the option to stay until 25 it was just like there's no reason for me to hold the spot for somebody else that could come in and use it.

At the time of our first interview, Alexandria was completing her master’s degree in social work and had just started her nonprofit agency. At the time of our second interview, Alexandria was celebrating her graduation from the master’s program, a moment of pride and happiness for her that she shared with me both in her words (“Uhmm and the day it was a great day. So, I had all my family and friends there. Yeah, and my partner … I have some pictures, I’ll show you.”), and in sharing of the pictures her adopted father took at graduation (“Yes, my dad took a lot of the pictures.”). At the time of our second interview, Alexandria also disclosed
that she had accepted a job out of state. Alexandria caught me off guard by reassuring me that she would still be available to complete the third interview, as she would be returning to New Jersey over the weekends. At the time of our third interview, Alexandria had started her new job and shared both the positive and negatives of this new stage of her life.

Today, Alexandria considers herself to be on a positive path in life because she is “able to now sustain life on my own without the system and so I really think that’s what success means.” She further stated that sustaining life on her own means “having my own apartment, having a full-time job, being able to pay my bills, and being able to be interdependent, and have relationships and build relationships with people.” As Alexandria shared her story through foster care and emerging adulthood, it became clear that her experiences in foster care impacted her journey and continue to do so today in multiple ways. She primarily identifies as an ‘alumni of care.’ This sense of being an alumni of care is a core of who she is and a driving factor in her path in life. Another important and core aspect of Alexandria’s journey is her relationships with others.

**Alumni of Care**

Understanding what it meant to Alexandria that she was in foster care is critical in understanding Alexandria’s journey through emerging adulthood and the challenges she continues to face. The way Alexandria explained it, having been in foster care has defined every aspect of being. She noted that only those who have experienced it or truly empathize could understand the impact of foster care on a person. So, only people who have experienced foster care can really understand her. I noted that throughout the three interviews, Alexandria spoke mostly about the negative impact of foster care, the need to change the narrative about foster care, as well as the need to make changes to the system. Alexandria was very matter of fact in
sharing her journey. It was rare to see her openly express emotions during our interviews. Alexandria also generally provided brief responses to the open-ended questions I asked. I noticed animation in her voice mostly when she spoke about recent positive events in her life like getting her job and graduation, or about her passion for addressing the negative statistics associated with foster care. The impact of foster care for Alexandria began from the moment she was removed from the care of her adopted parents at age 14.

**Impact of foster care on sense of self and belonging.** Alexandria was traumatized by her removal from the care of her adopted parents. This has had a long-term impact on her sense of who she is and on her view of others. Alexandria discussed her initial removal from her adopted parents. Not being prepared for it, along with not knowing or being told the reason for removal, increased the trauma associated with her removal. As Alexandria stated, “nobody was there to like debrief us. Like there needs to be some sort of debriefing. Like you need to tell people, like the child, like why they are being removed. That is a traumatic experience.” She felt that the workers did not understand her feelings or perhaps more accurately did not hear her. As she stated, the workers “weren’t hearing that I wanted to go home.” Alexandria shared how not being heard along with no one taking the time to explain the reason for the removal increased her trauma of being placed. She stated,

…there was a reason why obviously and now that I’m in my adult life and stuff like that I understood why I couldn't go home, and I understand what things were wrong and stuff like that, but they never explained that and so they were just like all these….

Alexandria reiterated in all three interviews the impact on her of not understanding the reason behind her removal and the confusion caused by hearing differing things from caseworkers and her adoptive parents. She shared that at times she thought she and her adopted
siblings were removed due to her parents not going to court as expected. “My thing was we got
removed because my parents didn’t go to court.”

Alexandria’s confusion regarding the reason behind her removal, or perhaps her
unwillingness to truly look at the factors leading to removal, lasted into her adult life. Alexandria
finally realized that her parents’ way of disciplining was considered inappropriate by the
division, and was the reason for the removal (“because that was one of the things that I struggled
with because I didn’t think for a very long time I did not think that my parents did anything
wrong because I thought that was just punishment”). Alexandria expressed relief at finally
learning the reason for her removal, while also acknowledging that the trauma and confusion she
experienced were caused more by the lack of information and the reasons for removal she
created in her head. Learning the actual reason dispelled her thoughts that she was the reason for
the removal. The confusion Alexandria experienced was caused by a lack of communication
between Alexandria’s adopted parents and the caseworkers assigned to her care in regard to
sharing information with Alexandria.

Although Alexandria noted that she felt some relief at learning that she was not the
reason for the removal, she never spoke about her parents’ role or responsibility for child welfare
involvement in their home. She never spoke about the events that led to her removal or the
attempts caseworkers made to prevent removal. The way Alexandria shared her story, it seemed
that her family’s involvement with child welfare began at the time of her removal. In some
ways, this seems like a way of placing the blame for all the difficulties in her life on the foster
care system and not on the family who raised her for the first 14 years of her life. It seems, they
were considered to be unfit or abusive by the caseworkers or by the foster care system.
The trauma Alexandria experienced upon being removed from her home and placed in foster care resulted in a change in how she felt about herself. As she noted, “You're known as the kid who nobody (pause) that nobody wanted you.” Alexandria’s initial experiences in foster care, particularly in foster homes, made her feel not valued or understood. She spoke briefly about how foster homes were not a positive placement for her, noting “so the foster homes did not, they did not work for me. That was not the placement that I needed” and, once again that she was not understood. “I just didn't like my foster homes and stuff like that and I felt like nobody understood me.” Additionally, her perceptions of how she was treated in the foster homes (“and it wasn’t like everybody was more so treated equally there wasn't that the foster parent's kid was treated better than you were”) caused her to feel uncomfortable in those settings. Though I repeatedly prompted Alexandria for further information as to her difficulties in foster care, the information was not forthcoming. The sense I got from Alexandria was based upon what she shared; going into foster care at age 14 created a shift in her thinking about herself and her world. Confused and traumatized, she was searching for a sense of belonging, for a place where she felt comfortable.

Alexandria was quickly placed in congregate care. Though, as Alexandria shared, in the field of child welfare congregate settings are considered a negative placement for FCY (“everything and everybody is concerned about the whole congregate care thing like oh young people need to be placed in foster homes this that and the third”). They suited her better than foster homes. She shared,

It was still more family like and uhmm I was around a lot more people again who understood, who had the same story. Uh hmm, nobody was better than anybody else.
Though we try to make it seem that way you know, but nobody was better than anybody else and we all understood it like I, everybody was in the same boat.

For Alexandria, being around others who had also experienced the trauma of removal from their home and had struggled with adapting to residing in foster homes was comforting. In this setting, she felt understood and treated fairly for she, like all the other residents, was a foster child. In addition to feeling most comfortable around others who were or had been in foster care, Alexandria felt best to able to achieve her best when she was surrounded by other individuals who she perceived as having experienced struggles. As a result, they could understand her challenges. For example, she told me how her experience in graduate school was positive and motivating for her because:

…I felt like I was around people that went through different struggles and different thing and that understood we understood each other like and that was probably like one of the best cohorts I’ve been in it we understood each other we all had our different stories, we all had our different struggles and we helped each other.

Similarly, when Alexandria shared her challenges in relocating to a different state and starting a new job, the only positive for Alexandria was connecting with a young woman who was also an ‘alumni of care’. This helped both of them establish an immediate bond. As previously noted, for Alexandria, connecting with someone who has similar experiences to herself, particularly who has been in foster care and understands that experience, helped in making her feel understood and allowed her to more easily establish a relationship, as exemplified by the following statement:

Then we had like self-care like after we like went to the pool and stuff like that and it was really good to hang out with her so I’m probably and she’s been helping me like she told
me about this happy hour that they have in DC for like child welfare workers and people that work in child welfare.

Being in foster care had an impact on Alexandria’s sense of herself as a person, in the relationships she developed, and long term on the development of her career/life purpose. As Alexandria stated, placement in foster care was the driving force behind her career choice (“I wanted to be a social worker because I wanted to help kids [foster youth] understand and stuff like that”). Alexandra’s core identity as an ‘alumni of care’ has provided her with a sense of purpose in life. At the same time, her identity as an ‘alumni of care’ seems to have prevented her from venturing outside the realm of foster care or child welfare both in her career choice and in her relationships.

**Identity development and sense of purpose.** For Alexandria, the term ‘alumni of care’ refers to a core aspect of her identity development and the basis of her career/life purpose.

Actually, one of the challenges I can say, primarily, not with like my informal, formal supports. I would just think with the fact of like being an alumni of care or at one point in time and being a youth in care and being that the youth advocate and someone who's advocating while they're in care and uh hmm, what that looks like to other people.

One of the most life altering moments in Alexandria’s life was the opportunity to attend a funding event in Washington, D.C., where she shared her story with various senators and members of Congress. As Alexandria recalled, that experience created a shift in how she viewed herself and helped her develop a purpose in her life. She shared, “I didn't know that my story meant something at that point and when I came back, I was like I felt like, I felt like I can change the world.” This experience started the shift in Alexandria’s thinking about what she wanted to
do with her life. This thought process was solidified by her work on the youth advisory board of
the Independent Living Program in which she was residing at that time.

Along with running the youth advisory board of the Independent Living Program, Alexandria served on a county youth advisory board that provided policy feedback to child protective services. In the following comments, Alexandria shared that the youth advisory boards helped her stay on track in life as they helped her maintain focus and helped her in the future trajectory of her career.

It gave me something to do. It kept me out of trouble for the most part and yeah so that's how it began and that's where (pause) I kept going and then eventually I got a job with a university because the youth advisory boards from the one from the county, they decided, the State decided they wanted to redo it and so the grant went to a state university and so I was hired at the University’s School of Social Work as one of their youth advisory board ambassadors. Where me and three other alumni and we had a coordinator, we oversaw the southern region counties of the youth advisory board and so that really helped me.

Alexandria’s focus on the needs of FCY helped her finish college and was part of the reason behind her determination to obtain her degree in social work.

Once Alexandria officially aged out of foster care at 21, she continued to work for the agency that ran the Independent Living Program in which she had resided and remained involved in their youth advisory board. After some time, Alexandria struggled with her involvement within the Independent Living Program as well as the agency that ran it. Part of her struggle was based on feeling used by the agency.
For example, like with the agency that ran the Independent Living Program I was pretty much uh mm they capitalized of my story because I was a success in their program, and you know I had done all this advocacy work for child welfare, and I'm doing all these speaking engagements and stuff like that until they capitalized off that, which is.

Along with feeling used, Alexandria struggled with the differences between how the staff at the agency perceived her and how she perceived herself. This feeling held back by her involvement with the program. Alexandria said,

So being seen having been seen still as a young person and was very difficult for me because I was like I'm not a young person. I’m getting ready to graduate with my bachelor's degree. I'm not a young person anymore like I'm like 25 like at the time or 24. Like I'm not a young person and I actually had to I left the agency well actually I stayed with the agency and eventually I did wind up leaving but I went to a whole new different department.

Leaving this job was a difficult decision for Alexandria, but one she felt she needed to make for growth. Alexandria was finding that her world was getting to small and she desired to spread her wings. At the same time, Alexandria’s struggles in making the decision to leave her job was related to her not wanting to venture far from her safety net. Alexandria’s difficulty in making this decision was evident as this was one of the few times she was very verbose and emotional during an interview. She shared that the challenge was because of the various connections she had to the non-profit agency. She resided in a program, worked at the agency, and ran the youth advisory board. Her life was intertwined with the non-profit agency, making leaving a difficult challenge because when she chose to stop working within its foster care unit, she continued to work for the non-profit agency, just in a different department. She stated,
Right, so I left the non-profit agency, I left the youth advisory board at the agency I stopped working for that side the residential portion because I was also a residential or a youth advocate I would go to the residential programs and do groups with the young people there … as well as run their youth advisory board and so I started working for their TANF initiative for parents program for moms so it was like a total I actually started I did my bachelor's internship there and then I actually switch to working there.

Upon leaving her job at the non-profit agency, Alexandria was hired by a university to help train other young people on how to run youth advisory boards. Alexandria shared that she later decided to leave her job with the university because she was experiencing challenges similar to what she experienced at the non-profit she worked for prior.

When I was working for them it was like it was as if we were still treated as young people that were advocating and at that time we're not advocating we're now advocating for the young people that were working with but the young people are really the advocates and so being seen having been seen still as a young person and was very difficult for me.

Struggling with being viewed as a FCY, rather than as the professional she had become, Alexandria not only chose to leave her job as a youth ambassador at the university but for a period of time she decided to stop working on issues dealing with FCY. Alexandria was struggling with what she termed ‘passion fatigue. She shared that she worked for some time at a halfway house with male offenders as well as with other programs. Eventually, however, her desire to advocate for FCY drew Alexandria back into the work. She is now actively involved in advocating for FCY in multiple ways including her current position as well as her role on the board of a nonprofit that advocates for FCY and alumni of care.
Alexandria’s experiences in foster care and her resultant passion to help others in care were driving factors in her journey in life. This is the trajectory she is on today, and where she hopes to go in the future. Along with influencing her career purpose and goals, her experiences in foster care also had an impact on her relationship.

**Sense of Connection**

As noted earlier, Alexandria shared that she defined being on a positive path in life as “being able to be interdependent and have relationships and build relationships with people.” She shared how establishing and maintaining relationships is difficult for her, and stated, so that’s one of the challenges that I think I face is some people not staying for long periods of time, or long things, or things not lasting for long periods of time. Good things not lasting for long periods of time.” At the same time, she spoke about having an extensive support system (“I had a really, really, good support system and so I was having a great conversation with my one of my mentors the other day about young people who age out of foster care.

In helping me understand her two contradictory views on relationships, having challenges in maintaining relationships, and at the same time stating she has an extensive support system, Alexandria spoke about the distinction between connecting with people and trusting them. She noted, “it takes a little time to be able to trust someone. I think the connection is easy,” and how she dislikes networking (“I don’t know how to talk to people, I don’t know how to network [laughs]. I don’t know how I get places but it’s very difficult for me like going to talk to anyone like its weird.”). Alexandria can establish relationships with professionals and those who serve as her mentors but views herself as struggling to maintain close personal relationships due to trust issues. In learning about Alexandria’s views on her relationships, it became apparent there
are stark differences between her professional and personal relationships. Each is colored by her experiences in foster care.

**Personal relationships.** As Alexandria noted, close relationships or personal relationships with family and friends, as compared to professional relationships, were harder for her to maintain.

The biggest challenges right now is just trying to sustain family relationships…relationship with my families. So, I have an adoptive family and I also have my biological family that I was able to locate two years ago.

She spoke about how she has a good relationship with her adoptive parents (“I talk to my parents, my adoptive parents like a lot and my parents are part of my support system”). At the same time, she has a limited relationship with her adoptive siblings “trying to you know my adopted siblings and I we really don't have we have relationships but they're not good relationships.”

She struggled in establishing her relationship with her biological family with whom she got in contact two years ago. She stated how “trying to build relationships definitely with my biological family. It's been tough I thought it would be easy but…I just didn't feel like I fit in.” She learned she had four biological siblings and was able to locate three of them. Her mother is deceased, and though her father is still living, she did not contact him. Alexandria spoke about the separate challenges she faced in her relationships with each of her siblings and also with her extended family. For example, she spoke about her relationship with her older sister and stated, …then it looks as if because she feels some type of way because my younger sister is here and I'm still here and how it's difficult to her sometimes because like it's always negative and I'm just not for the negativity sometimes.
She further shared that she felt closest to her youngest brother, but there were challenges in that relationship as well as she did not agree with some of his life choices (“I'm a part of his life and we've had our difficulties”). Alexandria shared her challenges in establishing and maintaining relationships with her biological family. It became apparent through both Alexandria’s words and how she spoke about her family that she desired to establish these relationships, even though this was difficult.

It was interesting to learn how Alexandria had gone from her initial reluctance to even learn about her biological family to contacting them as she recalled,

So, people have always asked me while growing up and before I went into foster care and after - Oh like do you want to find your biological family and I and my answer was always no why. I like for what like they didn't care. So why should I go and find them and there was somebody else was like you know you might get some family history and what if you want to find your brother and I was okay like okay you know what I will do it for that and so I did it. I filled out the application and everything and then three years later I get this letter in the mail uh hmm saying that I don't have one sibling but I have four and uh mmm that my mother she had passed away and my dad was still alive and so that was just a lot to take in a lot to take in yeah a lot to take in and so I reached out and said that I did want to get in contact with my siblings.

Though Alexandria was initially reluctant to meet her biological family, she displayed a lot of courage in reaching out to connect with them, including connecting with her youngest brother who was incarcerated at the time of their first meeting. Alexandria spoke about the work she put into establishing relationships with her biological siblings and the challenges it presented. Today, Alexandria is working to maintain close relationships despite her fears; “I don't know
what? I'm afraid of them leaving, and that I think that's always something that I've been afraid of within like those relationships is that the person that would leave.”

Outside of her relationship with both her adoptive family and her biological families, Alexandria shared that her closest relationships are with other alumni of foster care. “So all of my best friend my two best friends I met them there at the Independent Living Program.” In addition, her longest-lasting relationships are with her godparents who have been in her life since she was in 8th grade. Alexandria rarely shared details about her personal relationships; mostly, they came up in her responses to other questions. For example, she mentioned her godparents in the context of youth in care developing supports and her friends in the context of leaving the Independent Living Program. Her focus during our interviews was on sharing her challenges in foster care and after leaving as well as her thoughts on changes that need to happen in the system as a whole. The only time in our interviews where Alexandria spoke about her personal relationships was when she spoke about trying to reconnect with her biological family, when she shared her pictures from graduation, and when she spoke about her partner helping her find and furnish her new apartment. Interestingly, her fear of relationships ending and people leaving has not prevented her from developing strong professional relationships or personal relationships.

**Professional relationships.** Alexandria shared about the numerous relationships and support systems she has established over her time in care and in emerging adulthood. She stated,

I was lucky enough to have both formal and informal support and some of my formal supports turned into informal supports when I left care and so I have a plethora (laugh) of mentors. Which is great. I can bounce different ideas off of different ones because they all have expertise in different areas. So, I have a couple college mentors, uh hmm, I have a couple of child welfare mentors that have seen me through my time and care.
Some of Alexandria’s professional relationships are very long standing. Her relationship with the current director of the Independent Living program in which she had resided is one example. She shared,

I've actually known him from before. He was not the program director when I was there, but I've known him since I was in foster care. It's crazy how our paths crossed because he's the youth pastor of one of the churches that I attended when I was in the foster home.

Alexandria also established some of her relationships over her time in foster care as she described below.

I think that a lot of the relationships that I have had were like the ones that I built even with the people like from the agency where I lived and worked. Yeah, the Division placed me there, but I made it what it was.

Some of her other relationships were established in college or while working as a youth advocate. For example, she spoke of the relationships she had established in college through the various programs in which she was involved:

I also had some help from support coach through NJFC scholars that I had as well as it was through NJFC scholars through the scholarship there's a program called Project Myself and so my support coach from there she was an alumni of the school of social work and so she helped me as well.

Alexandra discussed the challenges she faced when she lost those who served as her support system, particularly while in college. Following is an example of what Alexandra shared with me:

The hardest thing was just losing them especially in college when I lost my college supports. So, it was just like at the time I was on academic probation and I was meeting
with the school. I forget what she was but it was somebody that you had to be with like on a weekly or twice a month basis because you were on academic probation to make sure that you were getting back on track and I had built this connection with her and she was great and I and I loved meeting with her and then I also had my support coach at the same time that I that I was meeting with as well and there was another person too I forget who it was, but I had lost like all three around the same time.

Alexandria shared stories about establishing new connections in college and how they were established. For example, she stated, “So, it was just trying to kind of find new people and putting my and that's really where I learned, and this is where you learn how to relationship build and this is where you learn how to network.”

Alexandria’s extensive professional network and the closeness of her relationship with her mentors, professors, and other members of her professional network became clear to me during our second interview when Alexandria shared her graduation pictures and told me all about her day. She stopped by the Independent Living Program prior to the ceremony to celebrate her accomplishment, rejoiced in the presence of her mentor at the ceremony, and spoke about her adopted father’s pride as he took the pictures. Alexandria was more animated when she told me about her graduation than at any other time across all our interviews.

In learning of Alexandria’s personal and professional relationship networks, it became clear that Alexandria had some close relationships. Perhaps the distinction between the two was based upon her sense of emotional vulnerability in the differing types of relationships.

**Moving Forward**

I'm always just trying to enhance the research that has been done. Like there's a lot of research that’s already out there uh hmmm about foster care and foster youth and uh hmmm the
one that everyone usually goes off of is the Midwestern study and however it's Midwestern and so it was only done in the Midwest and so I feel like that's just speaks for all foster youth across the nation and it's really not. It's only those who are those who were in those states and it's not that it's not a good study because it is. It brought out a lot of statistics, but I think that we need to get a full-rounded view…. we know what's wrong and we know the issues and the problems and those were clear. But like how do we go about fixing them and then there wasn't any uh hmm-positive statistics that came out of it uh hmm.

**Stigma.** Alexandria’s concerns about the stigma or negative statistics related to foster care and her desire to address them have helped place her on her current path in life. Alexandria internalized the negative statistics associated with being in foster care, “like I'm tired of all, of always having the negative stigma and statistic.” She is focused on the need for something to change the narrative in the outcomes for FCY, a cultural change to how being in foster care is viewed (“mmm so like the negative stigma, so like a lot of stuff. The foster care statistics that are out there are negative uh mm like for example like the less than 3% of us that graduate from college.”). Additionally, Alexandria spoke about how being presented with negative statistics could have detrimental effects on the youth who were in care:

All these things are like laid for us. It’s like you sit at a table and they (the caseworkers) like lay you out like this is what your life will be like and these are the stigmas and statistics that you have to overcome in order to be like successful.

Alexandria decided she was not going to be a statistic herself (“because I don’t want statistics to define who I am”). This desire not to be defined by the statistics associated with FCY became a motivating factor. She shared her pride in where she is in life today.
You know that I have defeated those stigmas and those statistics. Like I'm not you know homeless. I didn't become homeless, I didn't become pregnant, I didn't become incarcerated, uh hmm and you know I graduated with my college degree.

Alexandria is now focused on helping others not be statistics or for foster care to be known for the negative statistics, as she expressed when describing why she stated her non-profit agency.

…and so, and that's why I created the “So Educated Project” and so the goal is to change the less than too greater uh hmm and so hopefully you know bring awareness to the less than 3% three percent of us that do graduate from college.

She also spoke about what she is doing to address the negative stigma and how the concept of being in foster care has to change to where it is not considered a negative and there is no immediate thought of a negative outcome for FCY who age out. Alexandria shared a comment made to her by a congressional staffer that resonates for her in regard to how being in foster care should not be a negative but rather if you are there an opportunity to achieve any goal or dream you aspire to.

Foster care was the golden ticket. The golden ticket to a new life or to a better life and I was like I never thought about it like that what if it was a golden ticket what if we didn’t have to go through all these experiences and have to make it out. What if we didn’t have to make it out what if foster care was the way out?

For Alexandria, it appears she is trying to turn her time in foster care into a golden ticket into a positive life, but it remains a struggle and a challenge due to the trauma and its impact on her identity and relationships. One of the ways that Alexandria has tried to make her time in foster care her golden ticket is through the meaning she has attached to her experiences.
Alexandria continues to work to reduce the stigma attached with being in foster care and in her way to make being in foster care a golden ticket. It is clear that this is her way of coping with the trauma she experienced both prior to and in foster care, the ongoing impact of this trauma on her life today, and on her plans for the future.

**Goals and personal growth.** The value of education was emphasized to Alexandria from a young age by her adopted parents. “They (her adopted parents) always talked about college; they talked about how they didn’t go to college. They talked about how to like how we would go to school and stuff like that.” She also focused on her education. She noted, “Right, so someone told me that you can have all the accolades, but you won't get the job unless you have your degree and so that's what I had to make my primary focus.”

As Alexandria worked to achieve her education and stay on a positive path in life she shared that at times it was a challenge. (“It took me seven years to graduate with my bachelor's degree and there was a time where I just didn't know or think I was going to graduate because that how hard it got”). It appears that she used pro-social activities to help her maintain her focus and manage the trauma of her experiences.

While Alexandria was in foster care, she spent the majority of her time in school and at work to avoid having to be in the foster homes that she found distasteful. “That’s our safe haven, work and school. I would go to work when I didn't need to go to work just to get away from the foster home.” She shared that though school was her safe haven, it also presented its own challenges.

Yeah, but I got along with the kids pretty well, and then high school was cool. Uh mm the only time it became a little difficult was like especially like moving like when I would have to go to the shelter or something like that and leave like for 2 weeks at a time and
the kids in school were obviously like “where were you for like 2 weeks” and stuff like that.

While in college, Alexandria used work and other activities as her way to stay on track, as she noted in the following:

You know, just trying to stay on the right path and trying to juggle work and people didn't understand that I had to like work almost fulltime to sustain my housing and still go to school and study and so that was a difficult struggle.

Alexandria worked two jobs during college and served on two separate youth advisory boards while remaining focused on her education. However, staying busy in positive activities is what she attributed to helping her maintain her positive path “so yeah, it was a lot to juggle but it's kept me focused.”

Today, Alexandria is working both fulltime, and has part-time employment, sits on the board of a nonprofit organization, and is establishing her nonprofit agency. All of her current activities are centered on advocating for FCY and removing the stigma associated with being in care. Engaging in pro-social activities, not only allows Alexandria to help advocate for youth in care, it helps her cope or make meaning of her struggles and trauma associated with being an FCY.

In learning from Alexandria about her journey from foster care to the young adult that she is today, I realized that her identity, her professional life, and many of her personal activities center around working with or advocating for current FCY or for alumni of care. She is determined to bring change to the system she once was a part of as she is cognizant of the impact both of the trauma associated with being in foster care and the negative outcomes many former FCY experience. The long-lasting impact of the trauma she experienced is apparent in her
challenges in establishing and maintaining her personal relationships and in the narrow path she has set for her life and future goals.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

After I completed the within-case analysis of the interviews with each of the participants, I looked for the similarities and differences among the participants’ journeys. The most obvious similarity between the three cases was the demographic profiles of the participants. All three were females between the ages of 25 and 26. Two of the three have a master’s degree in social work, and the third has her bachelor’s degree in human services and child advocacy. All of these degrees are in the helping profession. All three participants experienced multiple placements in foster care and aged out at 21. The primary differences between the participants were the age at which they entered foster care and the number of transitions (school and placements) they experienced in care.

After comparing the demographic characteristics of my participants, I compared the codes and themes I generated for each participant while doing the within-case analysis. I realized that although the themes were labeled slightly differently for each participant, the meanings behind many of them were similar. For example, all spoke about trauma and shared similar experiences about their journeys from foster care through emerging adulthood. Removal from home, multiple transitions, and aging out of foster care all contributed to the trauma the participants’ experienced, and its impact today. The trauma they experienced affected the participants’ life in multiple ways. Its impact is interwoven in the stories of their journey through foster care and into emerging adulthood.

Being an FCY had a life-altering impact on the lives of the three participants, their sense of who they are as individuals, and eventually their paths in life. All three participants spoke
extensively about how their time and experiences in foster care affected the trajectory of their life. They shared how the trauma they experienced as FCY had an impact on how they viewed themselves and their world. The trauma they specifically spoke of had little to do with what they experienced before entering care, or to the reason for their removal, but was specific to their experienced in care. They shared the impact on them of experiences with foster parents, child welfare caseworkers, and the system as a whole. It was apparent from what they shared that neither the trauma they experienced prior to entering foster care, the reason for their removal, nor the trauma they experienced while in foster care was addressed as part of the services they received in the foster care system. Their experiences of trauma, including multiple transitions, continues to have an ongoing impact on their life today and on their feedback regarding recommended changes to the foster care system.

Along with sharing the challenges they experienced in care, they spoke of the positive interactions they had and the opportunities they were provided in life. These helped them choose to pursue their education and develop a purpose for their life. This combination of deciding to obtain their education and developing a sense of personal agency helped them get on a positive trajectory in life. Though all three participants spoke of the ongoing challenges they experienced in life, their purpose and desire to help others helps them maintain their positive life path.

The participant's narratives reflected awareness of the individual, microsystems, and mesosystems that impacted their lives. However, in understanding their stories from a systems perspective, it is evident that all interactions and experiences take place within the greater context of the macrosystem and ecosystem. Figure 4.1 below demonstrates the arrows indicate the interconnected nature of the various systems. I have included aspects of the individual, microsystem, and mesosystem that were similar in all the participants narratives.
Individual

Participants shared how every experience in foster care affected their view of the world, the meaning they made of their time in foster care, and how those experiences shaped their life trajectory. The participants’ senses of themselves and their world was impacted by their removal from the home of their biological/adoptive family and placed in care. The multiple transitions they experienced, along with interactions with foster parents and caseworkers also influenced how they viewed themselves. Though the participants’ journey to their current path in life is not linear, to present the similarities and differences in their experiences in foster care the information they provided I divided the interactions in foster care that had a negative impact on their sense of self and the interactions that helped them develop a positive sense of self and positive trajectory in life.
Lack of value. All participants spoke about how being in foster care impacted their sense of self and created a feeling that they lacked value as individuals. Alexandria noted that the fact that being a FCY implies that “you're known as the kid who nobody (pause) that nobody wanted you.” A sentiment that Jaylin echoed when she said, “In the beginning, it was like hurtful, like, you feel like no one wants you. You don’t have a family. But then eventually honestly, you become institutionalized (laugh) like you get used to it.” Being in foster care had all three participants feeling that they were not important, not valued by their biological families, their foster families, nor by the caseworkers from child protective services. As Portia said, “or like this happened to me multiple times, they know that you’re leaving and they pack your stuff which is usually in a black trash bag, and so you literally feel like you’re garbage.”

This feeling of not being wanted, of having no true value perhaps outside of what you can give to the resource parents you reside with, deteriorated all three participants’ sense of self and their future goals. As Portia shared, “just like foster parents who did it for the money and just like constantly made us like clean their house or like to do things for them.”

For the participants getting on a positive trajectory in life meant two things: finding a purpose in life and obtaining their education. Obtaining their education helped the participants get on a positive trajectory in life, giving them the ability to live independently and pay their bills.

Finding a sense of self and personal agency. All participants spoke about having a goal in their life. This goal was a driving focus that motivated their staying on their positive trajectory. Finding this focus was a reason to move ahead. It helped them feel as if their lives had value; that they had value. The focus they found involved helping others, particularly other FCY or who are alumni of care.
All three participants choose to obtain degrees in fields that involved helping others. Both Alexandria and Portia are social workers and spoke about wanting to become social workers so they could help others. As Alexandria shared, “So, I wanted to be a social worker because I wanted to help kids understand and stuff.” Jaylin has a degree in Human Services and Child Advocacy. She is unsure as to her long-term goals. She works as an advocate for FCY. Alexandria and Portia spoke explicitly about how helping FCY was a driving force in their lives. Alexandria shared,

I really would like to do some consulting training technical assistance so I can help programs in child welfare systems either implement policies that are coming out for child welfare or just help them in general with how to deal with young people in care.

Portia also spoke about the importance of helping FCY for her, and her life focus. She said, “that I'm able to provide hope for other young people, be able to empower them, and let them know that they are more than that.”

All participants shared how helping others is a motivating factor in their life today and was essential in helping them get on their positive path in life. It is important to understand how they developed this focus or found their personal agency. Alexandria told me how having an opportunity to share her story at a youth conference made her realize that her story had value, which translated to her having value. For Jaylin, it was a slower process that was born from the need to replace her desire for someone to care about her, to ask her how she was doing. As Jaylin shared with me,

I’m waiting for someone to call and see how I’m doing or where I’m waiting for someone to support me and let me just start supporting myself and be the one to ask everyone else how they are doing so I, I switched roles at the time I was looking for someone to support
me to see how I was doing, how’s college going? Do you need anything? And I’m like let me switch it up because it’s always going to be a void.

For Jaylin, filling that void meant reaching out to help others and asking them about their welfare. Reaching out to others helped her feel better about herself and gave her value.

The change in thinking or reacting on an individual level for the participants was similar. The change involved shifting from participants feeling as if they had no value or meaning because they were foster children, to finding a sense of agency that motivated them to establish their current path in life. All three participants shared how their personal agency was related to helping others, particularly FCY. Additionally, all three spoke about realizing that obtaining a college degree was critical in helping them achieve their goals. This shift in thinking about their world and themselves did not occur in a vacuum. That shift was related to their interactions with others and with members of the various systems that were an important part of the participants’ lives.

**Microsystem**

Relationships played an essential role in the lives of the participants in different ways. The impact of relationships on their lives was very different from what I hypothesized based on my review of the literature. Though in my interviews, I did not ask about specific relationships, I had assumed that participants would identify one or two people who had been consistent in their lives, particularly as they transitioned from foster care into emerging adulthood. What I learned from the participants, however, was that while relationships were important, those did not have to be with only one person who was consistently present. I think Portia iterated it best when she spoke about always having someone in her life to provide a guiding hand and who provided hope:
Whether it was through sports or through the arts or through just someone speaking to me, I consistently had hope and I didn't, I didn’t realize it but reflecting back and looking back on it I now know that that I was given hope.

I also learned how participants define relationships is perhaps different from what I envisioned and differed for all three participants. All three spoke about having people in their lives who provided hope, vision, and mentorship, a form of support that appears to have been important in helping them get onto a positive trajectory in life. However, when it came to relationships, it is important to note that the relationships referred to above were not necessarily close personal relationships. They were people in their lives who were a source of inspiration, at times, indirectly. In addition to sharing about the people who were an inspiration, the participants spoke about positive and negative personal relationships that influenced the trajectory of their lives along with the challenges they faced in forming and maintaining close personal relationships. I looked at the impact of relationships on their lives from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and the concept of microsystems for cross-case analysis.

The microsystem of which an individual is a member as a part of their daily life has a major influence on their behavior and sense of self (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The individual constructs the interactions they have within these systems, and that in turn influences the system and the individual. These interactions between individuals and the microsystems they live within are continuous and have an ongoing impact on the life of individuals. For FCY, the microsystems they are involved in and the impact these microsystems had on their behaviors and sense of self that differed for youth who were not in foster care. Not only are the experiences with the biological families important for FCY, so are the experiences they have with the
caseworkers and the foster families with whom they were placed. The participants identified microsystem interactions as being critical to their life experiences and in helping them in their journey from foster care through emerging adulthood. Each participant identified many microsystems as having influenced their life trajectories. The participants identified below as having the most impact.

**Biological/adoptive family.** Interactions with their biological and adoptive family were significant for all three participants in their journey through foster care and after. Perhaps the most important part of these interactions was the events that led to their removal from foster care. Neither Jaylin nor Alexandria shared the specific reasons they were removed from homes. It would appear that the first inkling they had that their home lives were not perfect was when they were removed and placed in foster care. It is perhaps not surprising that they did not speak of challenges before being placed in care, because for them, their experiences were the norm or perhaps because they had little knowledge or understanding of the reason for their removal. Based on their perception of their lives, the information they were provided, and their understanding or meaning-making of events, the participants did not see or understand the reasons for removal. Additionally, by not acknowledging the difficulties in their home lives before entering foster care, it was easier for them to blame the foster care system for all the difficulties they faced in life and continue to face, while still maintaining positive relationships with their biological or adoptive families.

Jaylin and Alexandria currently have positive relationships with their biological and adoptive families, relationships that have evolved over time. Jaylin shared that her sister, who was also her kinship guardian, had not been supportive while she resided with her. Today they have a positive relationship. Perhaps even more important is her complex relationship with her
biological mother. Jaylin was removed from the care of her biological mother due to her mother’s substance use and recalled wanting to return home after her removal. She said, “I ran away a few times I ran back home because I was in school right there so after school when I would see my caseworker, I would just run like I’m going home.”

Alexandria also spoke about wanting to return home after being removed from the care of her adoptive parents and shared her frustration that her desire to return home was not being acknowledged. Both Jaylin and Alexandria shared how being removed from the care of their families and their desire to return home made it difficult for them to adjust to being in foster care and had an impact on their view of themselves and their worlds. Both participants also spoke about the positive relationship they have with their families at this time. They also discussed how these relationships are important in helping them stay on their current trajectory.

Jaylin spoke about how her mother is her role model today. She also provided an inkling to the issues in her life before her removal when she said, “My mum has a brand-new car, my mum has an amazing house, my mum is remarried she like literally everything I wish she would been when I was little but she wasn’t.” Jaylin also shared how her mother is an important part of her support system today.

My financial support too I’d be dammit mum I’m coming up short duh and she’d be like don’t worry about it I got it don’t worry about it what do you need and even now if I need anything she’s always there and it’s like…

Portia’s relationship with her biological family was not positive at the time of her removal. She felt she had no value because her father refused to acknowledge her as his child. Portia said, “I was like what the hell like I couldn’t even go with my father, and it was because he always denied me.” Portia tried to reestablish her relationship with her biological family with
no success and currently has no contact with them. Unlike the other two participants, Portia does not understand why FCY return to reside with their biological family or maintain contact with them. Portia, though spoke of extended family members with whom she has an ongoing, positive relationship. She talked about how she considers them to be part of her support system. At this point, her aunt wants her to be in her life and part of a system that helps her stay on the positive path she is in life.

**Caseworkers.** In speaking of their experiences with child protective services, participants consistently expressed a strong belief that the caseworkers were only doing a job and did not express care or concern for the youth themselves. Jaylin and Portia both shared that their caseworkers rarely spoke with them but instead checked in only with the foster parent. They both commented that having a caseworker come to the foster home meant it was time to move. Jaylin spoke about the lack of connection to her caseworkers. She stated, “After every year or so there was a new caseworker on my case so, and it was just like (pause) what I am here for.” Similarly, Alexandria noted, “It was like but most of the time I only it was like three workers that I can say that really made an impact and one of them was like a transport worker so …”

Jaylin spoke about how the “Division,” as she referred to her caseworkers and the child welfare system, “… definitely really wasn’t a source of help or support at any time over the years.” At the same time, she noted, “the good was that I was able to get everything I needed. So, I needed a laptop I asked for a laptop, and I got it you know like I needed security deposit for my first apartment…”

The lack of connection to the system, the people within the system whom the participants held responsible for the disruption in the participants’ lives increased the trauma of being in foster care. It contributed to the feeling of being less than a person. Though all the participants
had little positive to say about their experiences with caseworkers, it is important to note they all
spoke about having positive experiences with caseworkers. They provided occasions where an
action by a particular caseworker made them feel valued. Jaylin shared about a caseworker who
got out of her way to maintain contact with her. She noted that “even though she was not
supposed to even on her personal time she would always, especially as I got a little older she
would send me a text.” Alexandria and Portia both shared about workers with whom they still
maintain contact and who are now a part of their support system. For example, Alexandria
shared, “some of my DCP&P workers contact me from time to time to make sure that I'm doing
okay.”

The participants shared how caseworkers were more accessible to them once they were
adults and planning for their transition from foster care. Jaylin noted that her caseworker was in
contact with her once she was in college but also reflected that this was because the caseworker
had no one else to communicate with since she was over the age of 18. She said, “It wasn’t until
I started my independent living that I started to become in contact with my caseworker because
they had nobody else to talk to so but me if they wanted to see how I was doing they had to talk
to me.” However, Jaylin also shared that her caseworker did not work with her on creating a
well-defined transition plan from foster care.

Alexandria’s experience was slightly different. She shared that her caseworker helped
her access services and goods to meet her needs as a young adult before her transition. She
recalled, “and the mentor would come and do like the life skills with me and stuff like that and
that's how I was able to access my they say not to call them that that my wraparound funds so
they say not to call them Chafee and so that’s how I was able to.” For Portia, the benefit she
received was linkage to services once she reentered foster care after her adoption failed.
**Foster parents.** When an FCY is removed from the care of their family, they are placed in a foster home. The foster parents thus play an important role in the lives of FCY as they are given the responsibility of caring for them. All three participants expressed concerns with foster parents and the challenges they faced in these environments. As Jaylin noted,

> They should have higher standards for these foster parents because at the end of the day, they are giving them almost a thousand dollars for these kids and they get the right to say, I don’t have a car, I can’t drive them there and take them to this and that, you know.

Alexandria spoke about how foster homes were not a good fit for her. She felt secondary to the foster parents’ biological children. This impacted her sense of self. She shared, “…and it wasn’t like everybody was more so treated equally there wasn’t that the foster parents’ kid was treated better than you were.” Perhaps as shared in her individual case study, Portia stated it best when she spoke about that only value youth in care had to the foster family is what they could do for them.

Though all three participants spoke about the challenges they faced in foster homes, not all of the relationships were negative. Both Jaylin and Portia shared relationships they had with foster parents that had a positive impact on their senses of self. Portia shared her experiences in one foster home where she felt valued and welcomed as an individual and not for what she was bringing into the home. She said,

> so she took me to places that I was used to going to and so but then she was like I want you to also explore some of these spots to and see what it’s like uh hmm which I appreciated. She knew I liked sports so she took me to like the Nike outlet and things like that which was really cool and it was also the fact that she was talking to me while we were shopping and she wanted to learn about me and my experiences and what I had seen
and what I had learned and what I want to learn and where I want to grow and it was just that felt so personalized that it meant the world to me.

Jaylin shared her experiences with her first foster parent, a person whom she credits with helping her realize that just because she was in foster care did not mean she had no future. Jaylin remembered the impact that it had on her when that first foster parent, who is still an important part of her life today.

…you know she would tell me how to like – how do I say this she would always basically tell me when I was feeling down like she would always say like no matter what you are going to be a mum one day and you are going to change the way that you live, where you live what you do you know and you’re not going to have to worry about like where’s mummy. I know that you love your mummy but like you’re not going to worry about that because you’re going to be the mummy.

**School.** All participants shared about relationships that provided mentorship and a sense of hope for their futures. Participants found some of these relationships in the school setting. For example, Alexandria stated,

…so school for young people in foster care back that’s their getaway, that’s our safe haven, work and school I would go to work when I didn't need to go to work just to get away from the foster home.

School was also the environment in which they began to develop a vision for their future, learned the importance of education, and had access to resources that helped them start on the positive path in life they are on today. Jaylin spoke about how her high school teachers were her inspiration. They were the reason she focused on going trying at school and going to college. She shared,
It was just like the people, it was really the teachers, high school teachers they see potential the good ones anyway, they’ll see potential they’ll see what you can do and what you are capable of and those the good teacher the ones that genuinely care passionately care about the kids they show you things that you never even knew was a good trait to have like they’ll pull you to the side and be like listen I read your essay it was fantastic what do you want to do when you go older and that brings a little hope out of you.

Not only did Jaylin speak about how her teachers inspired her, but she also shared how observing the teachers created a desire in her to emulate their lives. Similarly, Portia told me how one of her high school teachers also served as an inspiration when she shared,

So, I walked into her house, yo that thing was gorgeous. It was like nothing I've ever seen before and I and just I felt like I was like this is crazy. I want to be part of this family like this. It wasn’t just the, it wasn't just the house itself –that they were a family.

The support, the vision, and the mentorship the participants reported receiving from the school setting were important in helping them start on their current trajectory in life. It also provided them with an understanding that getting an education was their way to a better future.

**Community supports and resources.** Both Portia and Alexandria spoke about how the support and mentorship they received in college was significant in helping them remain on their positive path in life. Portia spoke eloquently about the level and type of support she received as a young adult in college:

They were consistent. They were my stability. They were stable in my life they. When I was homeless during the summer, they provided housing for me. When I needed to go to
court for things, they went to court with me. If I was in the hospital for anything they would show up at the hospital during that time before I had my partner. Alexandria shared how the people she met in college continue to be her mentors today, helping her with various aspects of her life. I was lucky enough to have both formal and informal support and some of my formal supports turned into informal supports when I left care and so I have a pleather (laugh) of mentors which is great I can bounce different ideas off of different ones because they all have expertise in different areas so I have a couple college mentors uh hmm I have a couple of child welfare mentors that have seen me through my time and care. So, I was one of those lucky ones that was in that type of program and uh mm I actually stayed until I was 22 getting ready to turn 23 and so and I also had some help from support coach through NJFC scholars that I had as well as it was through NJFC scholars through the scholarship there's a program called Project Myself and so my support coach from there she was an alumni of the school of social work and so she helped me as well and I just kept telling her like I'm not taking no as an answer (laughing) like I am getting into the school and she was like okay so she helped me get into the school The relationships and resources the participants accessed as young adults preparing to age out of foster care were important in helping the participants get on and stay on the path they are on today. For both Alexandria and Portia, it was within these settings that their goals to help FCY became an integral part of their life focus, and the opportunities they were afforded then helped them establish their current path in life. The personal sense of agency they developed within these settings helps then stay on their current path in life.
Partners. All three participants spoke about the current partners in their lives and the importance of the support they provided in helping them stay on their positive trajectory and achieving their life goals. Portia was very vocal about the importance of her partner in her life and shared, “my partner who is now my home they were my home and it was such an amazing feeling to have someone like that.”

Mesosystems.

Participants did not share much about the interactions between systems that had a direct impact on their lives. Still, they did allude to certain interactions between different microsystems that either led to confusion or helped them in their lives. The mesosystem interactions that the participants found either helped or hindered them in their journey from foster care through emerging adulthood.

Foster parents and caseworkers. Jaylin and Portia shared how the caseworkers spent more time speaking with the foster parents than to them directly when they came to visit. They both alluded to the fact that being isolated from this interaction had then feel that they were not important. Additionally, they alluded to the fact that having a caseworker come to the home often meant it was time for another transition, indicating that in their opinion, this was a decision made by the caseworker and foster parent solely. As Portia said,

I think that was just the norm and because we were constantly like I would have different caseworkers at points come and pick me up and bounce me from one house to the next and and I would just be like who are you and they’d be like I’m here to pick you up and take you to your next place and I would just be like okay I guess I'll be going with you.

Jaylin also shared a similar experience when she said, “You already know when you get a call or you see your caseworker, they sit you down and you’re like where I am going Like dang what
now.” The information shared between caseworkers and foster parents can potentially impact youth regarding placement decisions and access to services. Additionally, the participants shared that they felt like an outsider in the mesosystem. This may have impacted how they interacted with the foster parent and or caseworkers, thus impacting their senses of self and/or their placement stability.

**Biological/adoptive parents and caseworkers.** The relationships between caseworkers and the biological/adoptive family were also important to the participants. In learning about their experiences, it seemed that this was a relationship they felt excluded from. This perception led to feeling not important potentially allowing them to deflect responsibility for their being in foster care and the experiences they had based solely on the foster care system. A lack of understanding or knowledge of the issues in the home can lead to youth potentially blaming themselves for the removal, as mentioned by Alexandria. She also alluded to the challenges in this mesosystem relationship when she shared “so they never explained it, but then you have your parents tell you why you can’t come home and obviously like it’s going to be their word against theirs and what your parents say and stuff like that and so.”

**Summary**

Based upon my cross-case analysis of the three cases, the similarities in the journeys of the participants were related to the interactions they had within the various microsystems of which they were a part. These interactions had an impact on their senses of self and were also important in helping them develop and sustain their current life path. The relationship FCY have with caseworkers, in particular the level of support they perceive from they received from caseworkers, seems to have an impact on their senses of self. This relationship also appears to impact placement stability as well as access to resources. While the participants spoke primarily
of the interactions that had a lasting impact on their life, they alluded to some of the broader systemic issues that impacted their lives and contributed to their current life path. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of these larger systemic issues and share suggestions for change to the foster care system based upon what I learned from the participants.
Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of my study was to determine how FCY who aged out and forged a positive trajectory in emerging adulthood did so. The goals of my research were to (a) give voice to FCY who self-identified as being on a positive path as emerging adults, and (b) allow their shared experiences to inform services for FCY before and after they transition from the system. The participants in the study identified as being on a positive trajectory in life primarily because they had obtained a minimum of a bachelors' degree, had full-time employment, and were able to pay their bills independently.

Compared to the typical outcomes for FCY who age out, as cited in professional literature, the participants in this study have achieved what are considered positive outcomes for this population. For example, whereas the participants all had obtained a minimum of a bachelor's degree, the outcomes cited in the literature are that former FCY are less likely than non-FCY to have completed high school or obtained a GED (Courtney et al., 2011; Leathers & Testa, 2006). Only 8% of former foster care youth have a postsecondary degree as compared to 46% of non-FCY (Courtney et al., 2011). Another way that participants' experiences stood apart from those referenced in previous studies is regarding employment status. Other researchers (Ferrell, 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003; Zinn & Courtney, 2017) have reported that former FCY are more likely than their counterparts in the general population to be unemployed, underemployed, making less money per hour, and living below the poverty line. All three participants in this study, however, were employed full time and reported being economically self-sufficient at the time of our interviews.

The poor outcomes identified in the professional literature for FCY who age out was the primary lesson I wanted to learn from young adults like my participants. The question I tried to
answer through my analysis of each individual case and my cross-case analysis was, "What if anything helped the participants forge a self-identified positive trajectory through emerging adulthood?" This is something not considered typical for youth who aged out of foster care as noted above. Additionally, I aimed to give voice to my participants' experiences and, most importantly, share their views as to the system they were raised in along with their suggestions as to how the system needs to change so that more FCY who age out can forge a positive trajectory through emerging adulthood.

The focus of the recommendations provided by the participants was not only what was negative with the foster care system as currently designed, but also on what helped them forge a positive path through emerging adulthood. Participants shared specific events and relationships that helped them reach their current path in life, along with what continues to help them stay on a positive track today.

In this chapter, I will discuss my findings in relation to the current literature, share implications for practice, including how counselors can help youth preparing to transition from foster care forge a positive path in life. I then will present the limitations of my study and provide suggestions for future research.

Discussion

I completed the cross-case analysis using my Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory as my lens. As per the ecological systems theory, a youth’s development is impacted by the numerous systems within which they live and or frequently interact as well as distant systems that impact their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The interactions a youth has in these systems impact them on an individual level and then impacts their future interactions within the various system.
Bronfenbrenner believed that there were five different nested layers of influence on the individual’s behavioral, cognitive, and emotional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). These layers are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). The microsystem is the innermost layer of the nested systems. It is defined by the interactions of youth in the settings within which they spend the majority of their time (e.g., interactions within their foster homes and schools) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the mesosystem as the interactions between different microsystems (e.g., between biological and foster parents or teachers and foster parents). Exosystem interactions are interactions in which the youth are not directly involved (e.g., between different social service agencies, child welfare agencies, and the foster family), but the events of which have an impact on the youth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). The macrosystem is defined as the impact of culture on the individual, for example, policies that regulate what services are and are not available to children and adolescents in foster care. The chronosystem is the changes in cultural values and economic conditions that impact development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The cross-case analysis of the three individual cases revealed certain similarities within the participants' experiences. The participants shared the challenges they faced while in foster care and the experiences that helped them start on a positive life trajectory. As shared in chapter four, the participants' narratives focused primarily on the microsystems they were members of and how the interactions within these systems both created challenges and assisted them in their journey through adulthood. In taking a broader look at the cross-case analysis, it was evident that some of the microsystem interactions or experiences were related to the fact that the
participants were in foster care. In understanding how being an FCY impacts their microsystem interactions, it is helpful to look at what was shared by the participants from the broader lens of the ecological systems theory, more specifically from the exosystem and macrosystem level perspectives. Considering that the actions taken by the legal system and decisions made by the foster care system (the primary exosystems for FCY) are based on the legislation and policies established by the macrosystem.

**Macrosystem**

The macrosystem includes policies at the state and federal level that impact FCY (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Schwerger & O’Brien, 2005). In understanding the impact of the macrosystem level on FCY, and on the participants, it is essential first to understand the legislation that drives the child welfare system as a whole. The impact on FCY begins with the enactment of laws that dictate the role of government entities, primarily the child welfare system, in ensuring the safety of children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Collins, 2004). Such legislation leads to the factors taken into consideration at the local or state level regarding the removal of youth from their biological and adoptive families. Removal from the home, as shared by the participants, is a very traumatic experience and can lead to adverse long-term outcomes (Schneider & Phares, 2005). All three participants spoke of the trauma associated with being removed from the home and its long-lasting impact on their lives. It is important to understand how being removed from the home can impact a youth’s emotional development, as it affects how they view themselves and their world. Additionally, it can be beneficial for young people in foster care to understand the reasons for any placement moves and what the process will entail.
Once a youth is removed and placed in foster care, the goal as per the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 is to reunify that youth with their biological or adoptive family as soon as possible. If reunification is not possible or looking unlikely, a concurrent goal is to develop a permanancy plan for the youth. Placement decisions, made by the caseworkers and the court system in regards to FCY, are based upon the desire to either reunify the youth with the biological family or establish an alternate permanency plan for a youth placed in foster care as soon as possible. The goal of establishing permanency for the youth is often the reason for multiple transitions (Katz, 2019). As noted by the participants, they did not understand the reasons behind their transitions and often wondered if it was because of their behaviors. Additionally, being moved multiple times made it harder for the participants to adapt to a new home or desire to be part of a foster family and had a significant impact on their sense of self and on their ability to build and maintain relationships. Placement transitions are noted to impact the ability of FCY to develop lasting relationships (Courtney, 2009; Stott, 2013).

Once an FCY reaches a certain age, there is no permanency plan in place. The goal shifts to independent living and planning for a youth's eventual transition from foster care as a young adult. Perhaps, for those FCY who age out, the most crucial policy consideration then becomes the age until which they can access services and the eligibility requirements to access those services. All three participants shared the challenges they experienced and continue to experience in trying to become financially and emotionally independent after aging out of foster care.

An FCY being self-sufficient at age 21 today is challenging. The majority of non-FCY do not become independent at age 21 (instead depend on their parents and other supports for both material and informational support) (Barroso et al., 2019). Given that, it is concerning that the
expectation for youth who age out of foster care is that they will live independently without adequate or, in some cases, any supports (Dion, 2015; Loring, 2011). For the participants in the study, having access to supports and services assisted them in making the transition from foster care. However, they all wished for additional time and supports in making the transition as they were still in college at the time they aged out of foster care.

**Exosystem**

For FCY, the exosystem has particular importance as many decisions that impact their lives are made at this level, a level at which they have limited say and control over (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gil-Kashiwabara et al. 2007). The decisions by the courts in regard to where FCY may live to achieve permanency, with whom they live, in which activities they can participate, are all made at the ecosystem level (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). These are often driven by information provided by caseworkers. These decisions are often responsible for the placement transitions that the participants described as being traumatic. At times, FCY believe they lacked value. As Jaylin shared, the decision where youth are placed is also often based upon criteria for approving a family to be a foster parent. Similarly, Portia noted that decisions made are focused on locating an adoptive family for a youth.

**Removal.** The decision to remove a child or adolescent from the home of a biological or adoptive parent one that is not made lightly. The decision is made through the legal system and is based upon concerns that the youth cannot be safely maintained in their home environment. Generally, unless there are immediate safety concerns, families are provided supports and services to try and prevent the removal from the home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). If, however, such services are unsuccessful, the youth is removed from the home and placed in foster care. Schneider & Phares (2005) noted that removal from the home is traumatic.
and disruptive for youth and has long term adverse effects. The participants also spoke about the impact of the initial removal on their lives and shared its long-lasting impact on their lives. Alexandria shared how she struggled with being removed from the home of her adoptive parents and is only now coming to understand why she was removed from care. Caseworkers play an important role in determining if youth should be removed from care based upon their assessment of the home environment and on the willingness and ability of the family to keep the youth safe.

**Search for permanency.** Once a youth is removed from the home, the focus of the foster care system is on permanency. Permanency is defined as either reunifying a youth with the biological or adoptive family, adoption, or locating a kinship/legal guardian for the youth (Courtney, 2009; Samuels, 2009). At the exosystem level, decisions about placements, transitions in placement, and whether or not to return a child their family are made based upon this desire to achieve permanency as quickly as possible (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The goal of achieving permanency for youth as soon as possible is on the surface a positive one because research indicates having a stable home environment and supports will lead to better adult outcomes (Singer et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2008). How these policies are often implemented and how placements are handled, however, can be detrimental to FCY as they often result in abrupt and numerous transitions (Katz, 2019). Each transition experienced by a young person in foster care may impact their sense of value, increase trauma, and result in further negative outcomes as shared by the participants and echoed by prior researchers (Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, & Churchman, 2011; Skoog et al., 2014; Unrau et al., 2008).

As the goal for permanency for FCY is a positive one, and driven by caseworkers, perhaps changes to how the foster care system goes around achieving this goal are required. One option is to further consider placing youth with family or community members, as there is some
research (Havlicek, 2011; Singer et al., 2013) that indicates youth placed in these settings have fewer transitions and have more positive outcomes (Havlicek, 2011; Singer et al., 2013). Additionally, when the goal becomes independent living, or a youth will be aging out of foster care, thought into the transition plan for the youth needs to include components that will help them experience a positive transition from care.

**Resources.** In considering resources, two aspects of the current implementation of the foster care system are of concern. The first concern is about the caseloads of caseworkers working within the system. All the participants spoke about the lack of availability of caseworkers and of feeling that they were not important enough for the caseworkers to spend time with, while also acknowledging that caseloads were high. Another concern noted by the participants in regard to the availability of caseworkers was the high staff turnover rate. Portia spoke about how the caseworker coming to her foster home or school at the time of a replacement was often a stranger, making the transition even more difficult. Having a consistent caseworker can help FCY understand changes and not feel as if they lack value when a stranger is involved in placing them in a new foster home.

Participants expressed concerns about the lack of information shared by the caseworkers, especially about why they were being removed and where they were going. For example, Jaylin said, "You already know when you get a call or you see your caseworker, they sit you down and you're like where I am going. Like dang what now." All participants talked about how this lack of information contributed to the trauma of an already traumatic situation, and how this lack of communication had a direct impact on their sense of self.

What participants shared is congruent with findings reported by Rostill-Brookes, et.al. (2011) and Unrau et al. (2008), who also noted that abrupt placement moves and or multiple
placement moves were traumatic for FCY and decreased positive outcomes. As per the stories of the participants, the lack of knowing why they were being moved led to them feeling they were not significant, that they had no value. Rostill-Brookes et al. (2011) reported that participants in their study also expressed this sentiment.

The second aspect of resources is more pertinent to FCY aging out. It revolves around preparing them for aging out by helping them access the services and supports they will need in that transition. The participants spoke about the services they received before aging out, such as assistance with accessing material resources and being connected to programs. They noted that such services not only helped them in skill development but provided them with mentors and supports they could build on as they made the transition from foster care into emerging adulthood. Participants shared how vital these programs were in their transition from foster care and in assisting them in completing their education as well as getting established to live independently after they transitioned from foster care. Currently, these programs are funded through what is known as Chafee funds (Collins, 2014; Stott, 2013) and are part of independent living initiatives or the education and training voucher programs.

As previously noted, the participants spoke about the value of the assistance they received from programs designed to support youth who will be aging out of foster care. Such programs and support services can help youth aging out of foster care have more positive microsystem interactions that can assist them in developing a path for their future and the resources and skills they require to navigate that path. Along with getting services and supports to aid in the transition from foster care it is important to consider the implications of what participants shared about what might help youth currently in foster care forge a positive life path after aging out, as discussed in the next section.
Positive Trajectory

The goal of my study was to understand what can aid FCY who age out forge a positive trajectory in life. Based on the cross-case analysis, it appears that helping children and adolescents in foster care maintain a sense of value and develop a sense of personal agency can assist them in establishing a positive life trajectory. Also evident from the cross-case analysis is the importance of Microsystems in helping FCY maintain a positive sense of value. FCY will age out between the ages of 18 to 21. It is important to consider steps to be taken to ease the often-related trauma of change, and then sustain the positive trajectory in life they are on.

All three participants were still in college when they aged out. The participants shared that at the time of their transition, they had a certain level of support in place, both financial and emotional, to make this transition. Still, they talked about how aging out was difficult for them, particularly emotionally. The participants shared the challenges they experienced upon aging out of foster care and the services and supports that assisted them, particularly upon initially aging out of foster care. Harris-Rome & Raskin (2019) reported that youth who age out of foster care tend to struggle in the initial year after aging out. This was true for my participants, and even though they had a bachelor's degree, were working full time, and could pay their bills more than one-year post-leaving care, this success is very tenuous. This struggle is not uncommon for youth who age out of foster care as they have little to no safety net after aging out (Fowler et al., 2011) and they have lost the formal support of the foster care system (Dion, 2015; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Loring, 2011).

The challenges experienced by the participants, and more generally by youth aging out of foster care, are perhaps similar to emerging adults from disadvantaged backgrounds or lower social-economic status (SES) families. The most significant difference in the emerging
adulthood of FCY who age and those raised in homes of families that reside low-income households is the lack of family supports that FCY who age out have as emerging adults (Munson et al., 2013). FCY raised in lower SES status households struggle in obtaining their education and in becoming financially self-sufficient similar to many young people who age out of foster care but have access to supports from family during this developmental stage (Landberg et al., 2019).

Non-FCY can make a gradual transition into the adult world as they have the financial and emotional support from others (Goodkind et al., 2011). In the current U.S. economic climate, perhaps more than at previous times, this support is needed to make a positive transition into the adult world (Barrosso et al., 2019; Fingerman, 2017). Helping FCY who age out have an opportunity to make a gradual transition into adulthood similar to that afforded to non-FCY may help reduce some of the adverse outcomes observed in youth who age out of foster care.

Gradual transition. Prior research indicates that aging out at a later age can lead to more positive outcomes in emerging adulthood (Courtney, 2009; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019). FCY who remained in foster care until the age of 21 have the opportunity to complete their education, receive financial assistance, and develop independent living skills with the support and assistance of the foster care system (Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019). Though this support is not equivalent to the help and guidance provided to non-FCY, it does provide an opportunity for FCY aging out to have a limited safety net.

All three of the participants remained in foster care until the age of 21. They shared that the assistance they received was invaluable in obtaining their education and beginning the process of living independently. For example, Alexandria and Portia received support in developing independent living skills and learning to navigate the adult world during their
transition. These two participants noted that this guidance was critical in helping them find a positive path in life. Providing extended foster care FCY identified as potentially aging out of foster care due to the lack of permanency options should perhaps be a focus for the foster care system.

As previously mentioned, there have been laws enacted (e.g., the Fostering Connections to Success Act Increasing Adoptions Act [2008]; Independent Living Initiative [1988]) that provide funding for youth who want to remain in foster care till the age of 21. Those laws, however, have not seemed to make a significant difference in the problems in the foster care system, as discussed by participants in my study and cited in previous literature. There are potential reasons why federal policies have been ineffective in meeting the transitional needs of foster care youth. Examples of such reasons include (a) incomplete implementation of policies by individual states, as some states only provide services until age 18 or 19, rather than 21 (Courtney, 2009; Stott, 2013); and, (b) the lack of funding resulting in youth not receiving services and supports they need for independent living (Collins, 2004; Loring, 2011). The Family Preservation Act of 2017 (2018) has provisions that potentially make it easier for FCY to access services as emerging adults. The responsibility for creating further policies and implementing the Act is on individual states. The funding of the Family Preservation Act is a significant factor that will influence its potential impact on the services available to youth aging out of foster care.

**Setting positive expectations.** The goal of the foster care system, as noted earlier, is to keep youth safe while simultaneously developing a permanency plan (Collins, 2004). The focus of the system as an entity is thus on helping the youth in its care survive, not thrive (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Collins, 2004). As such, the expectations for youth in care
are often minimal, and little systematic attention or focus placed on helping them plan for their future (Propp et al., 2003; Stott, 2013). Though there are programs designed to help youth learn independent living skills, these programs do not help FCY plan for their long-term goals and the steps needed to achieve them. Instead, the independent living programs focus more on teaching basic life skills (Collins, 2004; Lee & Barrick, 2014), which though important, are again focused on the mentality of helping FCY survive upon aging (Collins, 2004).

The independent living programs spoken about by the participants were helpful to them in their transition from foster care, especially in terms of learning skills needed to live on their own (e.g., how to set up a bank account, do laundry, manage a budget, etc.). More importantly, those experiences helped participants establish a sense of personal agency, which they attribute in part to their positive life trajectory. Though there is mention in the literature on the benefits of teaching FCY life skills (Kroner & Mares, 2009), there is limited if any information in regard to the benefits of personal agency for FCY who age out. Scannapieco et al., (2016) was one of the few researchers who discussed the importance of having a goal for the future in the outcomes of FCY who age out.

For the participants of my study, their personal agency focused on ‘paying it forward’ by helping FCY achieve a positive life trajectory. They shared the importance of positive expectations from others and having a vision for the future in helping them form a path for their lives. For example, Portia spoke of how one of her teachers helped her realize she can get a college education, and how this teacher’s assistance in getting her into college and accessing resources was a primary reason she is on her current life trajectory.

All three participants spoke about choosing to participate in this study because it emphasized the positives in their lives. They also shared with me about how the only thing they
have heard from caseworkers and others in their lives was the negative statistics associated with aging out of foster care. The negative statistics the participants referenced and are cited in the literature included the limited number of FCY who obtain postsecondary education, the numbers that struggle in obtaining financial self-sufficiency and who are single parents (Courtney, Dworsky, et al. 2011; Zinn & Courtney, 2017). Alexandria spoke at length about how being told about those adverse outcomes can be demoralizing and has the potential to have young people in care become unmotivated to aim for something positive. She emphasized the need to focus on the positive outcomes, to change the perception of foster care from a negative to a positive. Jaylin also spoke about the importance of providing FCY with a vision for their future to help them have a goal to work towards.

As can be learned from the participants' narratives, it is vital to help FCY develop aspirations for themselves, their futures, and aspirations beyond simply surviving. Doing so is challenging in a system where the focus is on safety (Collins, 2004) where multiple placement moves have FCY feeling unwanted and unvalued (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Skoog et al., 2014), and in which FCY have limited opportunities to explore opportunities and learn new skills and ways to think about themselves (Stott, 2013).

**Implications for Practice**

Counselors working in different settings may find themselves working with FCY or with the foster care system. As noted by Alexandria, caseworkers often are not aware of available resources and, as stated earlier, do not engage with youth on their caseloads on a consistent basis. Counselors who work in K-12 schools, however, may be uniquely positioned to see students throughout the week and can regularly engage with youth who are in foster care.
To help the FCY, particularly those aging out of foster care, have a positive transition, counselors must have an understanding of the foster care system and its impact on FCY who are a part of this system. The implications provided below are based on my findings and organized in relation to the various levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, with the ultimate goal of helping youth who age out of foster care have a positive life trajectory.

**Individual Level**

FCY who age out are impacted in multiple ways by the trauma they experienced both before entering and while in care. The various traumas endured by these youth can result in both challenging behaviors and emotional detachment from others due to numerous transitions (Chambers et al., 2018). FCY and those who have aged out experience an ongoing impact of the trauma they experience throughout their lives. Youth who have foster care history are more likely to be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder than individuals without foster care history (Pecora et al., 2006).

Counselors working with FCY or with those who have aged out of the system should be knowledgeable of the unique needs of this population and provide services to them through a trauma-informed lens. Having a trauma-informed perspective involves more than just treating symptoms of trauma. It requires being aware of and addressing the potential impact of trauma on the worldview and expectations of the youth they work with so that they can work to create a safe environment to facilitate growth and healing (Patterson et al., 2018).

Part of providing youth with trauma-informed care includes teaching FCY to become advocates for themselves. FCY have expressed a desire to have the ability to be involved in the decisions made about their lives (Chambers et al., 2018; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). This desire was particularly salient with regard to youth' caseworkers. Similar to findings presented
by Skoog et al. (2014), my participants expressed how they wished to have assigned caseworkers show genuine interest in them. Counselors can work with FCY to express their needs, feelings, and opinions to their caseworkers, foster parents, biological parents, and other professionals. Counselors can also help youth in care process their transitions, and the emotional impact of their placement moves.

A consistent theme for all three participants was the loss of sense of self that they experienced as a result of their experiences in foster care. The participants spoke of feeling like they were not important to anybody. For FCY, their multiple and, at times, abrupt transitions create emotional distress and have them in a state of perpetual insecurity (Skoog et al., 2014). This sense of insecurity and feeling like they do not belong can have a negative impact on the youth' sense of self and, ultimately, their path in emerging adulthood.

Counselors working with FCY can help them develop or maintain a positive sense of self and assist them in developing resiliency that can serve as a buffer to the narratives surrounding the outcomes of youth who age out of foster care. As per the results of this study and the work of Scannapieco et al. (2016), counselors can assist FCY find a positive path in life by helping them plan for the future. The first step towards achieving this goal is with beginning with helping them believe that they have a future (Scannapieco et al., 2016).

A role counselors, especially those in K-12 schools, can play in creating hope, and a future orientation is by exposing foster care youth to vocational and educational opportunities (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galan-Cisnevo, 2015). This exposure can be through activities such as college visits, preparatory services, mentoring, & internships (Gomez et al., 2015). Along with providing FCY with the skills needed to help them obtain and maintain employment, exposing them to vocational and educational opportunities helps FCY learn to be self-sufficient.
Such exposure also provides them with a chance to learn how to navigate adult responsibilities in a supportive environment (Gomez et al., 2015).

Counselors can also assist FCY start on and remain on a positive path in life by being aware of and helping them access resources like independent living programs and supportive housing programs that can help them in their transition from foster care. To assist FCY in accessing these resources, it will be necessary for counselors to form relationships with child welfare caseworkers and others in the child welfare system to learn about these resources.

**Microsystem Level**

Non-FCY tend to receive support from family members, particularly their parents, in the transition to emerging adulthood. Non-FCY will return home if they struggle to try to live independently, especially if they experience financial instability (Barroso, 2019; Loring, 2011). If FCY who have aged out experience economic instability or lack of employment, they often do not have people they can turn to in times of need leaving them vulnerable to negative outcomes (Fowler et al., 2011). Thus, to help FCY experience a positive trajectory, they need access to individuals who can provide them with both material and emotional support after they lose the formal support of the foster care system (Avery, 2010).

FCY often struggle in maintaining relationships due to multiple transitions (Chambers et al., 2018), trauma histories (Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014), and difficulties in trusting others. They also lack opportunities to engage in activities that will allow them to develop new relationships (Stott, 2013). Through the use of individual and group counseling, counselors can help FCY learn how to build and maintain relationships by teaching them about interpersonal skills and ways to navigate relationships. Counselors can also engage FCY in networking activities or social groups where they will meet others and have the opportunity to build
relationships. Counselors can also offer a group specifically for FCY to help them make connections with each other. Alexandria specifically spoke of the benefits of connecting with others who had experienced challenges similar to her own.

As shared by the participants, relationships are meaningful but challenging to navigate. All three participants spoke of the importance of teaching FCY how to network. Mentoring relationships, specifically natural mentoring relationships, have been found to show some benefit for FCY who age out learn how to navigate the adult world and have supports they can turn to in times of need (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Munson & McMillen, 2009). Counselors can create mentorship programs designed to help FCY develop relationships through which they can explore career opportunities and ways to navigate the adult world.

**Mesosystem**

Based on what I learned from participants, the mesosystem interactions that influenced their lives are perhaps the most complex and challenging for them to understand and navigate as they often do not understand the impact of these interactions on their lives. Counselors can have an impact at this level by working as a conduit for relationships between the various microsystems that are impacting the youth, for example, between caseworkers and foster parents. Counselors can assist FCY to understand the impact of their behaviors on the communication between caseworkers and foster parents that may result in a placement change and thus help the youth work to prevent a placement disruption if that is the desired goal. A counselor may also work directly with the caseworker and foster parent to help support the youth's needs.

Another way a counselor can help FCY with mesosystem interactions is by assisting them in figuring out the reality between information provided to them by different people, for example, parents and caseworkers. For instance, Alexandria shared how difficult it was for her
to determine who was telling her the truth, between her adopted parents and caseworkers, in regards to her returning home, and how having someone help her at the time of removal would have been beneficial.

For counselors to help FCY navigate difficult mesosystem interactions, it will be important for them to establish relationships with caseworkers as well as with the foster parents the youth resides with, along with perhaps the biological family. These relationships will lay the foundation for counselors to understand some of the challenges that caseworkers or foster families may be experiencing with the youth and can help be part of the team to address these challenges in a manner beneficial to the youth. Additionally, counselors will benefit from establishing relationships with service providers that work with FCY. This will help them learn about available resources in their communities.

**Exosystem**

Counselors working within the child welfare system have the opportunity to impact the implementations of policies that affect FCY, particularly those aging out. One crucial aspect of creating change or influencing policies is through advocacy at both the systemic and individual levels. This requires that counselors understand and are willing to discuss the unique needs of FCY with caseworkers, judges, lawyers, foster parents, teachers, and other decision-makers.

Two areas worthy of advocacy include helping in the creation of a trauma-informed system by educating all those involved with FCY about various types of trauma, symptoms, and how to work with FCY who have experienced different forms of trauma. Counselors can offer workshops and in-service trainings to caseworkers within the child welfare system and current and prospective foster parents. Workshops for caseworkers around meeting the needs of FCY
assigned to them will be important as it is evident that caseworkers play an important role in the experiences of FCY and on their life trajectory after leaving care.

A second area for advocacy is by helping more FCY aging out access essential resources like the independent living programs with a housing component. As noted earlier, it will be helpful for counselors to network with service providers in their area so that they are familiar with resources available for FCY aging out. Counselors can then advocate for specific youth to access beneficial resources or share concerns about the lack of specific resources for FCY.

**Macrosystem**

Counselors can work with groups like the Annie Casey Foundation (www.aecf.org), or Together We Rise (www.togetherwerise.org) that advocate for new laws and legislation specific to youth aging out of foster care. Some of the needed advocacy is around how to help more FCY aging out have a gradual transition. This involves advocating not only for policies but also for funding of programs like independent living programs with a housing component. These programs can assist FCY aging out have the opportunity to establish themselves, becoming financially independent and emotionally interdependent, and have a positive life trajectory.

**Limitations**

A concern when conducting case study research is that the results will have no value for impacting policy as narratives tend to be too long for people to read, and the information presented may not be transferable to other people or settings (Merriam, 2009). Though my study results themselves will not directly impact policy, I hope that the knowledge gained from my participants will impact intervention and services for FCY. I also believe that my results can begin to change the conversation at various system levels, and thus eventually impact policy.
The primary limitation of this study was that the cases presented are not a representation of all FCY who transition from foster care. Because all participants were female, African American, have a bachelor's degree in the helping profession and are from the Northwest USA, their experiences are not representative of all FCY who aged. As such, the findings may not help provide a holistic view of the challenges and triumphs of youth who have transitioned from foster care and are emerging adults. Additionally, as the researcher is the primary tool of data collection, there is the possibility of researcher bias influencing the interpretation of the data and the data collection itself.

Suggestions for Future Research

I recommend that further research on FCY who have aged out includes a more extensive and diverse sample to see if the themes that emerge are similar to those in this study. It will also be important to assess if the implementation of the Family First Preservation Act has any impact on addressing the trauma FCY experience so they are better able to function as adults.

Currently, the primary narrative about FCY in the literature tends to focus on their being at risk for negative life outcomes. It is thus not surprising that FCY often do not present with or express goals and aspirations for their future. I recommend further research in the area of changing the narrative around what it means to be in foster care. It is worth understanding how to help change this narrative because if the FCY do not have goals and aspirations for the future. It will be difficult for them to forge a positive path through emerging adulthood and beyond. I propose surveying older FCY to help understand their goals and aspirations for the future and their beliefs on their abilities to achieve these goals.

Finally, the participants in this study seemed focused on sharing their narrative based on the trauma they experienced in foster care. I purpose expanding on this and conducting a
research study in which adults who had been in foster care discuss the impact of the trauma experienced before being placed in foster. One avenue to explore will be if the type of trauma experienced before entering foster care has an impact on the life trajectory of youth who aged out of foster care. A second focus would be to explore with participants how, if at all, their pre-initial placement into the foster care system was addressed while they were in care. This study would also include recommendations from participants about

Summary

The purpose of my research was to learn what helped FCY aged out and consider themselves to be on a positive trajectory. As stated in chapter one, there is limited research on what assists FCY who age out with a positive transition. Notably lacking in the literature is the voice of FCY who have aged out and consider themselves to be on a positive life trajectory (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

Whereas there is a plethora of research on the outcomes of FCY who age out (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Reilly, 2003; Zinn & Courtney, 2016), there is minimal information as to how to best support FCY in this transition. Additional research is needed to help understand what can assist FCY who transition from foster care experience a positive life trajectory. The information learned from young adults who have made this transition and consider themselves to be on a positive path in life can help counselors working with FCY who are preparing to age out.

I used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as my framework for completing multiple case studies and cross-case analysis. I used the constant comparative method to help identify patterns and themes from interview transcripts and provided a rich narrative of each individual case. The information learned from the participants' stories and the cross-case analysis contributes to the current literature by suggesting that there needs for counselors to be
agents of systemic changes to the foster care system, particularly for FCY who will be aging out. Finally, the results of this study provide the voice of FCY who aged out and are on a positive path through emerging adulthood, an identified gap in the current literature.
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Appendix A: Informed Consent

CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Study’s Title: Finding their way: The journey from foster care to emerging adulthood

**Why is this study being done?** I am interested in learning from you about your journey from foster care to where you are today. In learning about your journey, I hope to be able to share with child welfare workers things that they can do to help young people who are preparing to leave the foster care system.

**What will happen while you are in the study?** If you agree to participate in this study, we will meet in person three (3) times to talk about your experiences in foster care and after leaving so I can learn about how you became the person you are today. Each interview will last between 60-90 minutes, and our discussions will be recorded (see the information below).

At the start of our first meeting, we will review any questions you may have about this consent form. I will ask you to complete a short questionnaire that has questions about your race, ethnicity, gender, education, current employment and living situation, and some information about your placement experience in foster care (for example, how many placements did you have?). I will then ask you to tell me about your life today. Finally, I will ask you if there is a person in your life who you think has been particularly helpful to you in becoming the person you are today. With your permission, I may interview that person if you and I think that person would help me understand your journey.

During our second and third meetings, I may ask you to clarify points we discussed at our previous meetings. I will ask questions to help you tell me your story about leaving foster care.
and the experiences you consider to be most important in your journey through foster care and into life as an adult. You can decide not to answer any or all questions included in the demographic questionnaire.

I will be digitally recording all of our meetings so that I can go back and transcribe our conversation word-for-word. The recorder will be kept in a locked bag until each interview is transcribed and then the contents of the recording destroyed. I will save each transcript under an alias or a name you will choose, to further protect your identity. The transcripts will be stored as a password protected document on a password protected computer. At your request, I will also share the transcripts with you so you can help make sure have I have accurately documented your experiences.

Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project if we learn of any suspected child abuse, we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

**Time:** This study will about 90 minutes per meeting over a six-eight-week period.

**Risks:** During our interviews, you may feel sad or angry as our conversations may bring back some painful memories. If you experience these feelings or other symptoms in-between our meetings, please reach out to me immediately or contact a local mental health center or hotline on the list I will provide to you during our first meeting. If you experience these feelings, we can talk about them when we meet. If at any time during our meetings, I notice that you are really stressed out, I will help you contact a place on the referral list for services.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for being in this study. At the same time, although talking about your journey from foster care to where you are now may ring up some sad memories, you may also find that talking about your experiences helps you make sense of your
journey. Others may benefit from this study because the information you share may give staff in foster care ideas about and tools to provide the type of services that will help others have a smooth transition from foster care into adulthood.

**Compensation:** To compensate you for the time you spend in this study, you will receive a $50.00 gift card for a store of your choice. You will receive the entire compensation even if you withdraw from the study before it ends.

**Who will know that you are in this study?** Although the results of this study may be used in publications or presentations, you will not be linked to any of these. I will keep who you are confidential. The transcripts of our interviews will be identified through the alias you and I have selected together. Other than me, only the members of my dissertation committee and one doctoral student will have access to these transcripts and information about our meetings. They will not know your name and will not share any information with anyone.

**Do you have to be in the study?** No, you do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. Also, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you. You will still get the things that you were promised for participating in the first in-person meeting. Your gift card will not be affected.

**Do you have any questions about this study?** If you have any questions, please contact Venita Rawal by email at rawalv1@montclair.edu, phone, at 732-956-6987, or mail c/o Glosoff at 3189 University Hall, Montclair, NJ 07043. I am conducting this study under the direction of my faculty advisor, Harriet Glosoff, Ph.D. at Montclair State University. If you wish to reach her, please contact her at 973-655-3482 or glosoffh@montclair.edu. Written communication
should be sent to Dr. Glosoff’s attention at Montclair State University, University Hall Room 3189, Montclair, NJ 07043.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.

Future Studies: It is okay to use my data (the information I share with you) in other studies:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

Study Summary: I would like to get a summary of this study:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

As part of this study, it is okay to (audiotape, videotape, or photograph) me:

Please initial:

Audiotape _____ Yes _____ No

Videotape _____ Yes _____ No

Photograph _____ Yes _____ No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.
Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please review the information on this demographic sheet. It is based on the information you provided me during our phone interview. Please make changes as appropriate.

You will notice space is provided beside your name for a pseudonym that will be used to identify the transcripts of our conversations together. Please choose your pseudonym and write it in the space provided.

**Name:** _______________________________  Pseudonym: _______________________

**Age:** _______  **Gender:** ______________________________

**Race/Ethnicity:** ______________________________________

**Current Employment Status:** (Please put an X in the box that best represents your current employment status)

- Full time ________________  Part time ____________
- Not Employed ________________
- Other (please describe) __________________________________________

**Current Living Situation:** (Please put an X in the box that best represents your current living situation)

- Alone: ________________  With family __________________________
- With roommate ____________
- Other: (please describe) _________________________________________
Highest Level of Education Completed: (Place an X in the appropriate spot)

Master’s Degree or Higher ______  Bachelor’s Degree ______  Associate’s Degree ______  Some College Credits ______  Vocational Training Certificate ______

High School Diploma ______  GED ______

Other (please describe) __________________________________________________

Age you first entered foster care? ______

Age you left foster care? ________________________

How many placements did you experience while in foster care? __________

Types of placements in Foster care (check all that apply):

With Family ________________________

Unrelated resource home ________________________

Shelter ________________________

Group home ________________________

Other (Please Describe) __________________________________________________

How many schools did you attend while you were in foster care? __________
Appendix C: Interview Guide

I will be completing three semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each interview has its own purpose and is designed to be about 90 minutes in length. At the beginning of the first interview, I will re-review the informed consent document that was discussed during the phone screening with the participants. If at this time, they consent to participate in the study, I will ask them to review the demographic questionnaire completed during the telephone interview and request they fill in any missing information (Appendix B). In this questionnaire, I will ask them to select the pseudonym that will be used to identify them in transcripts and other documents related to the study.

The initial part of the first interview will focus on establishing rapport with the participants, putting them at ease, and having them become comfortable with the recording equipment. I will ask participants open-ended questions followed by prompts if needed.

Interview 1: Life History

Question: I really appreciate you volunteering to meet with me and talk about your experiences. What about my study caught your interest? What made you want to participate in my study?

Question: I know that you see yourself as being on a positive path in life, as making your way. I hope you can tell me more about this.

Prompt: When you think about making your way, what does that look like? What does that mean to you?

Question: I didn’t know you when you left foster care, so I’m wondering how you’d contrast where you were then and where you are now?

Prompt: What experiences have stood out to you the most?

Prompt: What are some significant events or milestones you had after leaving foster care?
Prompt: Is there something you have accomplished after leaving foster care that you are the proudest of?

Prompt: What are some of the challenges you are still facing today? How did you manage _____ challenge? What was helpful? What continues to be a puzzle?

Thank you for your time today and for all that you have shared. If at our next meeting you would like to bring something or things that are meaningful to you, like a photograph, letter, or another memento, I would love to see it.

Interview 2: Experiences

I will begin this interview by sharing with participants’ themes that I identified from their first interview and ask participants for their feedback on these. I will ask the participant for clarification on any item needed and also for overall feedback about the first interview and allow them an opportunity to share anything additional. I will also ask them to comment on themes that have emerged from my interviews with other participants. I will begin the interview by sharing with participants the overall focus of the interview. I will begin the interview by stating “Today, I am really interested in learning about your experiences in foster care and how they possibly relate to when you first left foster care.”

Question: Now I want you to think back to the time when you first left foster care. What were you facing? How did you make your way?

   Prompt: What was most difficult for you when you first left foster care?

   Prompt: What helped you in facing/overcoming these challenges?

   Prompt: Was there an individual or individuals who helped you with this transition?

Question: When I think about the experiences of kids in foster care, some of the things I think about are transitions, change. What were your experiences with transitions?
Prompt: What was it like moving to a new setting?
Prompt: What was it like moving to a new school, needing to get your bearings?
Prompt: What was it like being new kid?
Prompt: What was it like needing to form new relationships?
Prompt: What was the hardest [and/or the best part] (as appropriate depending on participants’ description of what is was like to move to a new home) about leaving a/each place?
Prompt: Is there anything that you remember learning from a foster parent or group home staff member that you feel has helped you after you left, is still helping you today.
Prompt: Are you still in contact with anyone former foster parents or group home staff?
Prompt: Is there anything that you remember learning from a teacher, school counselor, or other school staff that you feel has helped you after you left foster care, is still helping you today?
Prompt: Are you still in contact with any former school staff?

Question: In your opinion, do you feel like you left foster care prepared for living on your own.

Prompt: What are some things you wish you had learned in foster care?
Prompt: Are there any things you wish you could have done/experienced while still in care that may have been helpful after?

Question: What was the hardest part of being in foster care for you?

Question: What has been the hardest thing for you about no longer being in the system?

Question: What have been the positives of your life after foster care?

Question: What are your hopes for your future?
Before ending this interview, if participants have not already done so, I will ask them to share any artifacts they may have brought to the interview and ask them to share the story behind the artifact and its meaning to them as it relates to their journey from foster care through emerging adulthood.

**Interview 3: Reflection of Meaning**

This interview will begin in the same manner as the first. I will ask participants for clarifications of specific items and will also ask participants for their feedback on the themes that I have identified through my review of the data. I will share themes specific to my interview with the participant as well as themes identified through my review and comparison of interviews with all participants. I will share the focus of this third and final interview by stating, “Today, I hope to learn your opinion of the foster care system and get suggestions as to what changes you think the system needs to make to help prepare youth for adulthood.”

Question: We’ve talked together a lot; what haven’t we talked about regarding your experience now as an adult and a former foster care kid?

Prompt: What have our interviews made you think about?

Question: How would you say being in foster care influenced your transition into the young adult you are today?

Prompt: Were there experiences in foster care made your transition to the adult you are today more difficult?

Prompt: Were there ways that foster care uniquely prepared you to be an adult?

Question: If you were an advisor to the foster care system, what advice would you offer, given your experience?

Prompt: What are some positives about the system?
Prompt: What are some things that may need changing, based on your experience?

Question: If given an opportunity what would you like to tell child welfare workers and those in the child welfare system?
Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

**INDIVIDUALS WHO:**
- Are currently between 23-26 years or older
- Consider themselves to be on a positive path in life
- Were in foster care for at least three years and
- Had a planned exit

**Are needed to participate in a research study**

**YOU WILL BE ASKED TO:**
- Participate in three interviews in a location convenient to you
- Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes

**Compensation for your time:**
$50.00 gift card to a store of your choosing

Venita Rawal, Doctoral Candidate in the Counseling Department is conducting this study. If you are interested in participating or have more questions, please contact her at (732) 956-6986 or rawalv1@montclair.edu

This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, MSU IRB # IRB-FY17-18-724).