

DISSERTATION

“THE PAST COLLIDING WITH THE PRESENT”:

A GROUNDED THEORY OF FOSTER CARE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2024

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ABSTRACT

“THE PAST COLLIDING WITH THE PRESENT”:

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Through their contributions to thought pieces, advocacy activities, and presentations, several individuals with experience in foster care have affirmed the presence of a foster care identity that persists into adulthood with continued significance after exiting foster care and after graduating college. Likewise, several studies have contributed findings related to a foster care identity in the context of foster care or college, while others have alluded to the continued presence of a foster care identity after college graduation. Yet, there is a paucity of research that has considered how college graduates with experience in foster care (CGEFC) make meaning of developing a foster care identity over time. The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care and to identify the critical influences on the meaning making process. Data were collected through a series of three semi-structured interviews with nine participants who all experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday, had graduated with a bachelor’s degree, and identified as having a foster care identity. The extant literature and a conceptual framework guided the initial directions of the study and provided the sensitizing concepts that I drew on and departed from as I co-construct the interviews with the participants, analyzed the data, and engaged in theoretical sampling.

The result of this study was an emerging theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity grounded in the experiences of the participants. The

emerging theory includes five components that can be understood as sub-processes of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity including: (a) experiencing disrupted developmental environments, (b) seeking a sense of self, (c) becoming aware of a foster care identity, (d) doing the healing work, and (e) finding meaning in experiences. Each component is explained by three dimensions that describe and characterize how the component comprises part of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. The components and dimensions are critically influenced by three contextual factors: (a) micro-macro level perceptions of others, (b) variations in family privilege, and (c) time. The emerging theory is intended to be dynamic in that it is not a stage-based ordinal model of identity development, rather it represents how participants uniquely made meaning of developing a foster care identity with increasing complexity over time. The emerging theory is nuanced as participants' meaning making process of developing a foster care identity differed as some individuals experienced some but not all the components or dimensions of the theory, participants experienced the components or dimensions in various orders, many participants experienced some of the components and dimensions repeatedly, and frequently the experiences in one component and dimension had impact on the other components and dimensions. The findings of this study inform recommendations for how the child welfare system and higher education institutions can support youth and students with experience in foster care through the process of developing a positive sense of self, and more specifically support their development of a foster care identity in a positive and affirming manner. Further, this study affirms a foster care identity is a construct worthy of exploring in future studies with further consideration of a foster care identity at the intersection of other personal and social identities and with attention to additional contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is the culmination of a series of moments that have made this one possible. Alexis and Angelina, at 14 years old recognizing the rights we all had safety and wellbeing is where my own foster care journey began. I hope now, as young adults, you are safe, loved, and thriving. Selene, you have always been more than a caseworker to me and so many others. As a teen and young adult, you kept me safe, made sure I had access to opportunities, and helped me believe a life beyond foster care was possible. To the families who were an important part of my journey—Brandle, Wilson, and Urbani, you provided me love, protection, and belonging when I needed it most. Geoff, you have relentlessly cheered me on, giving me my first piece of CSU Rams gear, engaging in foster care awareness, and listening as I endlessly talked about school.

To my biological family—while reconciliation may not be directly possible with those who are no longer with us—rest in peace my biological mother Elizabeth, maternal grandfather Gerald, and father Bob, I am grateful for the forms of generational restoration I’ve experienced that I did not expect was possible within my lifetime. Grandma Jackie, thank you for the unconditional love you have shown me since we found one another. To my cousin Kelly, I’m so appreciative of you being the hype woman I needed these last few months of writing, and I cherish the pseudosisterhood we have developed and will continue for years to come.

To my sweet kiddo Ellis, I love you. The greatest generational restoration for me has been loving you as gently and bravely as I can. You’ve grown in me and with me, and you have given me the most important role I’ll ever have, being your mom. Because of you, I engage the world differently. I notice the textures, the sounds, the whole and the parts, and the spaces in between. You create beauty in the mundane and the abstract from the concrete, and you show me

it's okay to progress at a pace that's all our own. Every day I see your bravery, kindness, and wisdom grow, and it is the greatest honor of my life. I hope you'll continue to solve life's many puzzles, be passionate about your interests, and engage others with gentleness.

To my husband, Joe, I love you. You shared your belief in me from the moment our paths crossed and always saw me as the scholar I aspired to be, even if I wasn't her yet. You kept my pursuit of a doctorate at the forefront of our lives as you graduated with yours, and you didn't let me delay during the times that would have been easy to do. With each of our family's moves you made sure I had writing nooks set up, and as we became parents you happily called dibs on the duty of Ellis' naptimes and bedtimes so I could write. You tolerated my clacking keyboard at all hours of the night and have always been the first to celebrate every milestone with me.

To the members of my fur family—Powder and Elsa (and Kirby, rest in peace), you were a constant presence as I researched and wrote. Curled up under my desk, on my lap, and in nearby chairs, you offered reassuring snuggles and frequently reminded me to take breaks.

To the 2017 cohort, Bri, Chad, Eileen, Kelsey, Nick, Nikki, Pamela, Rye, Sarah, Sean, and Yvette, the opportunity to know each of you, to have journeyed alongside you, and be influenced by the brilliance of each of your scholarship is a gift. Nikki, you are a true Admissions Wonder Woman, and I will always be grateful for the kindness you extended to me. Sean, our trips to the donut shop and walks to class are fond memories from our residencies. Bri, thank you for the authentic care you've shown that embodies the love and accountability that are so necessary to one another. Eileen, I've valued learning from your scholarship, thought leadership, and bravery dedicated to creating more just spaces. Nick, as the first graduate from our cohort you showed all of us it was possible to complete this journey with grace, laughter, and

poise. Thank you for being my reading, writing, and editing partner as we navigated the doctoral journey after coursework.

Dra. Susana Muñoz, I will never forget my first winter residency when you offered to be my advisor and dissertation chair. Having left my first summer residency with so many doubts, your belief in me and my writing helped me find a sense of place. Your commitment to creating humanizing spaces in the academy guided me and the 2017 cohort through many difficult times. Further, your humanizing approach to scholarship has offered beautiful and deeply moving examples of how to affirm the humanity and identities of participants and evoke changes in the hearts and minds of readers in ways I can only aspire to emulate. Thank you for encouraging me to think bigger than I initially thought possible as I embarked on this dissertation. You have helped me stretch the bounds of what I thought I was capable of, while reminding me that my whole life's work needn't be completed within a single study.

To the members of my dissertation committee, thank you for guiding me on this journey. Dr. Jennifer Johnson, I appreciate you serving as co-chair through my preliminary exams and the support you provided me throughout the campus residencies. Dr. Tara Opsal, it has been affirming to encounter you as a scholar at CSU doing research in support of independent status students and I thank you for bringing a thoughtful sociological perspective to this work. Dr. Ryan Barone, I am appreciative you said yes to joining this committee and for offering such thoughtful feedback on my work from your perspective as a scholar, practitioner, and former foster parent. Dr. Louise Jennings, I value the deep methodological expertise you have offered me including your reassurance that some methods would evolve and take shape during the study.

To the Foster Scholars community at large, and specifically Drs. Jamie Bennett, Sara Gamez, Kizzy Lopez, and Molly Sarubbi, thank you for showing me this degree can be achieved

and for offering insights, love, laughter, and camaraderie along the way. Dr. Julie Segovia, I'm grateful our paths also crossed and value the intentional ways you engage our community and open doors for others. To scholars, allies, and advocates who have offered friendship, words of encouragement, insights on this work, and partnered on projects during this journey—Maddy Day, Drs. Mauriell Amechi, Sheila Bustillos, Ciara Collins, Royel Johnson, Darnishia Morris, Rachel Naasko Canvasser, Amy Salazar, Lori Tiller, Toni Watt, Kenyon Whitman, and so many more, thank you for your partnership.

Drs. Keith Edwards, Ellie Ash-Bala, and Antonio Duran-Leftin, thank you for offering beautiful examples of how to structure an identity-focused constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study in the context of higher education through your own dissertation studies. Your use of CGT to understand college men's gender identity, emerging white accomplices, and the intersecting identity experiences of Queer Students of Color respectively, informed my use of CGT in this study and provided examples of how to move my analysis to greater levels of abstraction while grounding the findings in participants' experiences.

Thank you to the faculty of the Higher Education Leadership program at Colorado State University that I had the pleasure and privilege of learning from, especially Drs. Kari Dockendorff, Susana Muñoz, OiYan Poon, and Darin (D-L) Stewart, who each in their own way supported my decision to center people with experience in foster care in my research and nudged me to share this work at a larger scale through an independent study, conference presentations, speaking engagements, and publications. Likewise, your own areas of scholarly inquiry and advocacy have left their mark on me and the perspective I brought to this study.

To the organizations that shaped this journey—the Blavin Scholars at the University of Michigan, you reaffirmed for me the importance of approaches that center students with

experience in foster care. ACPA and ASHE, thank you for providing validating spaces that embraced me authentically in ways that moved my professional development and scholarship forward by allowing me to be joyful while also critical, supported me in centering social justice, and challenged me to be a better change agent. To the many other organizations and colleagues along this journey, thank you for understanding how important this work has been to me and supporting me in making space for it.

Lastly and most importantly, to the participants of this study, Ashley, B, Clare, Danisha, Elyse, Kim, Simone, SL, and Veratta, you have shared the gift of your time, parts of your story, and many of your inner reflections with me, and I am immensely grateful. Without you, this study would not have been possible. Each of you, with your varying experiences and perspectives, affirmed in different ways that there is a meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and that it is as unique and nuanced as our community. You so thoughtfully put to words your experiences in a manner that is sure to ignite change in individuals and systems. Moreover, you shaped my own reflections on my meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in ways I will forever be changed by. With gratitude for the many moments that led to this one, thank you.

DEDICATION

For you. For me. For us.

For our community.

*For those who have come through the system before,
And for those who will come through the system after.*

*With authenticity and vulnerability,
towards restoration for generations.*

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I begin with a Land Acknowledgement to honor the relationship of Indigenous people with the lands on which I have crafted this dissertation to affirm Indigenous sovereignty and examine my relationship both to the land and settler colonialism. I wrote the proposal for this dissertation in the Chequamegon Bay region of what is now known as northern Wisconsin, the Anishinaabe homelands, and ceded territory established by the Treaty of 1842. I completed the dissertation interviews and final manuscript in southwest Montana, the original homelands of the Niimiipuu, Piikani, Seliš, and Agai-deka peoples. In both locations, from the shores of the Gichigami to the heart of the Rocky Mountains, Indigenous Peoples are the original stewards of these lands and have offered enduring care for the interconnected land, air, waters, and beings here. I strive to honor and respect the Indigenous Nations and Peoples connected to these lands, past, present, and future, and maintain conscious awareness that my actions in these places and communities have a lasting impact on this Earth for generations to come.

In crafting this dissertation, I have confronted how my pathway to and through the academy upholds white settler colonialism and the acquisition of property in the form of the academic credential which I seek. Completion of this dissertation is bound to my pursuit of educational property in the form of a doctoral degree at a land-grant university, the very type of institution that has benefited from the forced removal of Indigenous peoples through the subsequent stolen land grants such institutions received and continue to benefit from. However, within this context, I aim to put my “own justice projects in relation to others” (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 11). I strive to act with intention to put this dissertation focused on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates with experience in foster care in

relation to decolonizing efforts. In putting this work in relationship with decolonization, I strive to do so in a manner that does not co-opt or separate decolonization from the specific context of Indigeneity and the dismantling of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012), but in a manner that acknowledges the ways the foster care system has been and can continue to be a tool of white settler colonialism that has caused disparate harm to Indigenous communities, as well as other historically marginalized populations. My dream towards decolonial ends (la paperson, 2017) is that this dissertation study, may be a catalyst for future research directed toward understanding a foster care identity more specifically at the intersections of Tribal and Indigenous identities, particularly necessary as Indigenous peoples have historically been disproportionately separated from their families of origin and impacted by the foster care system and acts of forced removal that preceded it.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has intersected with foster care knows that to do so is to expose oneself to heartache, to joy, to anger—in other words, to any number of profound and affecting emotions that have lasting implications. (Rymph, 2017, p. 15)

During the 2022 fiscal year, over 263,000 youth entered foster care and nearly 689,000 youth in total were served by the foster care system in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2023). At the end of the fiscal year, on September 30, 2022, over 437,000 youth were in foster care, providing a snapshot of approximately how many youth are in foster care on any given day across the United States (DHHS, 2023). While data are not maintained on how many people living across the United States in total have experienced foster care at some point in their lives, these prevalence numbers for the 2022 fiscal year alone indicate the number of individuals with some experience in foster care is considerable. The magnitude of young adults impacted by foster care is further evidenced by Wolanin's (2005) early projection that if youth with experience in foster care (YEFC) were enrolled in higher education at the same rate as their peers, there would be at least 100,000 more students enrolled in higher education.

When youth enter foster care, they experience separation from their family unit and are conferred the ascribed identity label of “foster youth.” The experience of foster care and application of the corresponding label of “foster youth” is often accompanied by systemic power and oppression interrelations that minimizes the voice and agency of youth, sends messages about their worth, and affords them little input on a multitude of decisions impacting various aspects of their lives (Bruskas, 2008; Kools, 1997, 1999; Perry, 2006). Although foster care is

intended to be a temporary living arrangement provided as a service by states for youth who are removed from their families of origin, until they can be reunified with their family or be permanently placed in another family setting, many youth linger in the foster care system without permanence and experience repeated transitions with effects on many dimensions of their well-being (Frey et al., 2005; Frey et al., 2008). Too many youth experience multiple placement changes, restrictive placement settings such as institutions or group homes, are separated from their siblings, must change schools, and have diminished access to participate in normative youth development activities (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens et al., 2017; Pecora et al., 2005; Simmons-Horton, 2017; Unrau et al., 2008; Wulczyn et al., 2015). Such placement instability and corresponding impacts are particularly common among teens in foster care. Occurring notably during a time that is critical to identity development, this leaves some teens with disrupted family relationships and without critical support as they transition to college and adulthood (Rest & Watson, 1984; Samuels, 2008, 2009; Stott, 2012; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

When the foster care system fails to achieve legal permanency for youth who reach the age of emancipation set by their state—in other words does not reunite them with their family of origin or does not formalize a relationship with another family through guardianship or adoption, youth are “discharged to ‘self’ rather than to a family they can count on and call their own” (Frey et al., 2005, p. 1). Each year, close to 20,000 young adults, typically between the ages of 18 and 21, exit the foster care system through emancipation, often referred to as aging out (Berzin et al., 2014; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Hedenstrom, 2021). Although the aim of the foster care system is evolving with a greater focus on permanency to ensure that YEFC have stable and enduring lifelong connections with a family (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012; Frey et al., 2005; Samuels, 2009), too many youth exit foster care without permanency (DHHS, 2021). Seita

(2001, 2014) used the term family privilege to describe the often-unnoticed benefits that accompany being a member of a stable family. Society, including K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and other entities largely maintain a systematic assumption that youth and young adults have the support of a stable family and perpetuate limiting beliefs about who a family includes, how a family is structured, and what a family is (Blome et al., 1997; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Horn, 2020; Letiecq, 2019; Seita, 2001). Therein, varying degrees of family privilege can impact the lives of those with experience in foster care, before, during, and well after foster care.

Despite findings that the vast majority of YEFC aspire to go to college (Kirk et al., 2013; McMillen et al., 2003), studies have reported high schools are graduating less than 70% of people with experience in foster care (e.g., Courtney et al., 2010; Sarubbi et al., 2016) and colleges enroll less than 38% of this population and graduate less than 11% with a bachelor's degree (e.g. Courtney et al., 2011, Pecora et al., 2006a, 2006b; Wolanin, 2005). These educational credential rates are a fraction of those for the general population and are also significantly lower than samples of first-generation college students from low-income families (e.g., Day et al., 2013, Unrau et al., 2017). These findings underscore that while YEFC are often first-generation low-income students their experience in foster care constitutes a different, albeit intersecting identity status, that encounters unique barriers to achieving educational success and well-being outcomes in adulthood.

Acknowledging the unique experiences of this population, some colleges and universities have created campus support programs (CSPs) to provide resources to improve college, access, retention, degree attainment, and overall well-being for students with experience in foster care (SEFC) (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Emerson & Bassett, 2010; Okpych, 2012). Moreover, some

CSPs are guided by the Casey Seven Life Domains framework (Casey Family Programs, 2001; Emerson & Bassett, 2010) of which one of the domains is personal and cultural identity, affirming the importance of identity development in the holistic well-being of SEFC. Likewise, a college graduate with experience in foster care (CGEFC) retrospectively reflected how her prior involvement with a CSP supported her with (re)defining her foster care identity as she “started to see [her] struggle as [her] strength and [her] story as resilience” (E. Schultz, personal communication, November 13, 2018). Recent research has also indicated that students may (re)make meaning of their foster care experience and a foster care identity as they move from foster care to college, and from college to life after graduation with a postsecondary degree (Amechi, 2016; Fitch, 2019; Gamez, 2017; Horn, 2020; Medlin & Jaeger, 2021; Okumu, 2013, 2014; Salazar et al., 2016b; Sarubbi, 2019). When considered collectively, these findings suggest a foster care identity may develop and change over time, particularly in relation to the college environment, for people with experience in foster care.

Problem Statement

Being ascribed the identity label of “foster youth” and experiencing foster care can be understood as a series of significant life events that impacts youth’s sense of self (Bruskas, 2008; Kools, 1997, 1999). Even after exiting foster care, the foster care experience continues to impact the lives of many individuals as they are ascribed a new label, “*former foster youth*,” an identity that continues to face and defy societal expectations of having a normative family structure and is accompanied by stigma and stereotypes about people who have experienced foster care (Blome, 1997; Hallett et al., 2018; Kinarsky, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Toblowsky et al., 2017; Unrau et al., 2012). Yet, amidst the challenges this population faces, scholars have also identified many people with experience in foster care have honed their resilient capacities to overcome

adversity and have (re)constructed a positive sense of self in relation to their foster care experience during their transition to adulthood (Horn, 2020; Fitch, 2019; Medlin & Jaeger, 2021; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Salazar et al., 2016b; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Sarubbi, 2019).

Some CGEFC have affirmed the presence of a foster care identity into adulthood and have described its significance in their lives (e.g., Daniels, 2015; The Foster Scholars, 2020; Whitman, 2016). At a community conversation among CGEFC, Demontea Thompson, a doctoral student panelist shared, “My foster care identity will never leave me. That's who I am ... I take salience in that identity and that's important to me” (The Foster Scholars, 2020, 50:30). Likewise, some researchers have affirmed the need to understand and support the identity development of people with experience in foster care (Fitch, 2019; Kools, 1997, 1999; Okumu, 2014). Yet, despite there being college student identity development theories that explain how college students develop in a general sense and with attention to a number of identity dimensions including but not limited to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, faith, disability, veteran, and athlete identities (Jones & Stewart, 2016; McEwen, 2003; Patton et al., 2016; Torres et al., 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2012), there is not a student identity development theory that explains how CGEFC may develop and make meaning of a foster care identity prior to college, during college, and continued after college graduation.

Making progress toward better understanding the identity development of people with experience in foster care in the context of college is especially urgent given the vast majority of YEFC aspire to attend college (Courtney et al., 2004; Kirk et al., 2013; McMillen et al., 2003; Wolanin 2005), yet they face barriers to enrolling and graduating (Davis, 2006; Okpych & Courtney, 2021; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Wolanin, 2005). Further, several studies have highlighted the importance of support for SEFC during college and CGEFC after graduation to promote

successful transitions and well-being into adulthood (Gamez, 2017; Hallett and Westland; 2015; Salazar et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2020). Despite several studies that have documented components of a foster care identity in the context of foster care or college, or have alluded to the continued presence of a foster care identity after college graduation (Fitch, 2019; Johnson, 2021; Kinarsky, 2017; Kools, 1997, 1999; Miller et al., 2020; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Okumu, 2013, 2014; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), to date and to my knowledge, no prior studies have considered how CGEFC make meaning of their foster care identity over time.

Purpose

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. The intended outcome of this study was to develop an emerging theoretical perspective on foster care identity development, grounded in the experiences of participants.

Research Questions

One primary research question and one sub-question guided this study:

1. What is the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates formerly in foster care?
 - a. What are the critical influences in the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study have resulted in a grounded theory on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity that can contribute to theory and practice in three primary ways. First, this study addressed the absence to date of an identity development theory

describing the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity by presenting an emerging theoretical perspective grounded in the experiences of CGEFC. In the absence of an existing theory to explain the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, the findings of this study support a preliminary understanding of how this population makes meaning of a foster care identity, with increased complexity, across time with consideration of critical influences and contexts including during foster care, college, and into adulthood. In particular, the emerging theory resulting from this study integrates identity development concepts that previously have been studied in isolation from one another, providing an opportunity for continued research that can expand, modify, and nuance how existing concepts can be applied to CGEFC.

Second, the findings of this study can enable practitioners in the child welfare and higher education settings to be more effective in supporting the identity development of people with experience in foster care. This emerging grounded theory can inform child welfare caseworkers, legal professionals, foster parents, healthcare providers, advocates, legislators, educators, and higher education and student affairs professionals' efforts to support and partner with this population (Jones & Abes, 2011). Patton et al. (2016) suggests a role of student development theory is to help those serving students address "needs, design programs, develop policies, and create healthy college environments that encourage positive growth in students" (p. 8). Thereby, this emerging grounded theory on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, can help constituents achieve such aims specifically with SEFC in mind. Moreover, the presence of a theory on foster care identity can substantiate the need for tailored programs and resources for SEFC and affirm the role of child welfare agencies and higher education institutions in supporting the positive identity development of SEFC (Fitch, 2019).

Third, as “theorizing is a form of meaning making” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 4), the resulting emerging grounded theory co-constructed with the participants in this study, can be a resource to support people with experience in foster care who read this work with further meaning making of their foster care identity. While student development theory is often positioned as a tool for student affairs and higher education practitioners (Patton et al., 2016), it can also be of great use to students and graduates as a resource to guide their understanding of themselves. As the emerging theory resulting from this study is grounded in the experiences of nine participants and is not intended to be overgeneralized or present the identity development experiences of CGEFC as a monolith, it may still hold value to CGEFC as a tool for reflection and meaning making with consideration of the ways their own identity development experiences may be represented in the emerging theory or the way their experiences may depart from those represented in the emerging theory.

This emerging theory that centers CGEFC and acknowledges their experiences has the propensity to validate the existence of this population and the presence of a foster care identity (Fitch, 2019). This is a research aim that is particularly meaningful since foster care as an experience and identity can be otherwise hidden, invisible, fragmented, unknown, marginalized, and invalidated (Bruskas, 2008; Havlicek & Samuels, 2018; Johnson & Menna, 2017; Westland & Trotten, 2018; Whitman, 2018). In this way, this study’s primary aim and research question that focuses on a foster care identity is not intended to essentialize a foster care identity or present a foster care identity as the singular identity salient among CGEFC, rather it is intended to offer an initial contribution toward an emerging and tentative understanding of a foster care identity that is nuanced through the co-constructed interviews and the intersecting identities and experiences participants shared with me that are represented within the findings. Moreover, the

emerging and tentative theory from this study may hold value for the way it could be adapted and further engaged and considered alongside other identity development theories.

My Experience with the Meaning Making Process of Developing a Foster Care Identity

This research study is informed by my personal, professional, and scholarly experiences. As a young child, raised in poverty by my single mother who experienced physical and mental health challenges, the threat of me being placed in foster care loomed over us. In my younger years, caseworkers frequented the trailer park and later the subsidized housing community we lived in to follow up on a combination of maltreatment reports and financial assistance and disability service needs. My biological mother often told me if I were to tell the truth about our life and her treatment of me I would become a “foster kid.” I wasn’t sure what being a “foster kid” entailed at the time, but I understood it was a threat that implied the experience could be worse than the harm I faced with her.

Despite my family’s challenges, further slipping through the cracks of social service support while simultaneously being embedded within the child welfare system, my biological mother herself became a licensed foster parent, just as my grandparents had done when she was a child. During the time my biological mother was a foster parent, I experienced the foster care system as a foster sibling and de facto primary caregiver to the young children placed in our home. I saw how my foster siblings were treated differently by teachers and service providers, how they missed their parents and siblings they were separated from, how despite me caring for them the best I knew how as a young adolescent, the care they received was likely inadequate at best. I also saw how they, like me, experienced harm in our home, a place I came to understand we all deserved to be loved and safe. In many ways, witnessing the experiences of my foster siblings affirmed what I had been taught to fear about foster care, that foster care did not ensure

the absence of harm, just the absence of your family. What is more, I witnessed the intersection of identities and the ways my multiracial foster siblings experienced a different kind of harm at the hands and mouth of my biological mother who was white. The harm I endured growing up, for them, was layered with racial slurs and hate-based physical violence and mental degradation. While such harms were likely the result of my mother's battles with mental illness, that did not make the harms my foster siblings endured any less grave or egregious.

At the age of 14, as I reached a level of cognitive and emotional maturity that helped me identify the treatment my foster siblings and I were experiencing at home was not "normal," or acceptable I found the urgency and courage to report an incident impacting all of us after a particularly violent night at home. That evening my foster siblings were removed and an agonizing week later as Child Protective Services continued the investigation of my mother, I was removed after enduring continued harm made worse by the fact I had reported the acts of neglect and violence against my foster siblings. My foster siblings and I were separated, despite me being the only caregiver my infant and toddler foster sisters had come to know, and I too became a "foster youth." I was faced with comprehending the complexity that foster care had all at once "saved me" yet thrust me into a systemized unknown and constant state of ambiguity.

Over the course of the next four years of high school, I experienced various foster care placement types, decisions that often-included little input from me, including relative/kinship placements, non-relative foster homes, and a few temporary placements. I experienced further abuse and sexual harassment in some placements. Once, a placement intended to be temporary, much to the dismay of my foster parents, ended up spanning months when my caseworker left the agency unexpectedly, leaving my case as a 17-year-old, "hard to place" teen unattended. Over the years, I went to mandated counseling, psychological evaluations, and a visitation with

my biological mother, and testified in court to the judge presiding over my case, all of which were against my wishes. I navigated disclosing (or not disclosing) my “foster youth” status to friends, significant others, medical providers, and teachers, and regardless of whether it accurately described our relationship, I rushed to call some of my foster parents “mom” and “dad” well before a social emotional connection was solidified and before permanency was discussed to have a sense of what I thought was normalcy and to avoid disclosing my “foster youth” status to others.

When I did disclose my status as a “foster youth,” I attended to the varying reactions I received from others, ranging from pity to empowerment, unease to love, disbelief to compassion; along the way, learning to adjust my narrative to be more palatable. On occasion, I shared my identity and experiences in affirming spaces, finding it could be cathartic after holding the feelings of shame that accompanied the lies I had been coached to tell about my home life throughout my childhood to appease my biological mother’s demands to “make it look good.” I took in the messages I received from others about my new identity as a “foster youth” often conflicting judgments that I was undeserving, unappreciative, a victim, lucky, or resilient. Sometimes it was a combination of coded messages layered with deficit assumptions, like when one of my few caseworkers told me when I was placed with relatives to watch my grandparent’s behavior that resembled my mother’s because, “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” While my caseworkers warning wasn’t wrong, this left me to wonder, still today, what that statement implied about me—an apple—who has fallen from the same family tree. Through my years in foster care, I grappled with my foster care identity and questioned when I would shed it. In high school, to be “normal” became my aspirational goal, and to be “normal” was not to be “foster care.”

As reunification with my biological mother and adoption by another family became unlikely (and undesirable to me), my case plan changed to preparing me to age out of foster care when I turned 18. I was invited to participate in a county organized youth advisory board (YAB) for young people with experience in foster care that aimed to prepare teens for the transition to adulthood. It was through the YAB that I met other YEFC, gave back to other YEFC through service activities, received a stipend for sharing my experiences at trainings for foster parents, caseworkers, and legal professionals, and received the support of the caseworker coordinating the YAB in navigating my college search, FAFSA completion, and other state aid. While I still struggled with feelings of shame and stigma, the YAB was a space that positioned my identity as a “foster youth” in a positive manner, compensated me when I disclosed my story as an act of labor, provided me a sense of agency over my foster care identity during a time of great instability, and gave me hope that college and a life beyond foster care were possible. It was because of my involvement with the YAB and my advocacy and service to youth in foster care I was awarded a scholarship that made my enrollment in college possible.

In my transition to college, while I thought my ascribed identity of “foster youth” had formally come to an end, I quickly learned the effects of my experience in foster care carried into the present and continued to shape my evolving foster care identity. I participated in the new at the time, extended foster care program in Michigan, which provided a level of continued resources until I turned 20 years old. Participation in the program also meant that at least monthly a caseworker with a padfolio in hand, came to my residence hall to verify my living arrangements and well-being. Although well intended and a requirement of receiving access to the system resources, the presence of my caseworker drew many questions from my peers and left me to navigate disclosure of the foster care identity I thought I had put behind me when I

moved to college 400 miles and eight hours away from my “hometown.” Figuring out where I would spend breaks when the residence halls closed, navigating financial aid verification as an independent status student, annual family weekend events, and an array of well-meaning but inaccurate assumptions layered with family privilege, near-daily brought my foster care identity to the forefront of my life. As a psychology major, I found ways to retrospectively explore my foster care identity and reflect on it in the present through course readings, assignments, and an internship I completed with the local foster care agency. Interwoven with feelings of stigma and shame, I also felt a sense of developing strength, self-awareness, and even a degree of survivor’s pride. The complexity of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions encompassed by my developing foster care identity baffled me then, as in many ways, they do still today.

Graduating summa cum laude with my bachelor’s degree, and hearing “congratulations, follow summa” from my most rigorous faculty member as I crossed the graduation stage, marked another point in my life I believed I would close the door on my foster care identity. I had defied the touted statistic that had motivated me for so long, having an awareness that reports estimate only 3% of young people with experience in foster care graduate with a bachelor’s degree (Day, 2023; Pecora et al., 2005; Sarubbi, 2019). I had proved wrong a set of foster parents who had told me I wasn’t smart enough to go to my desired college, and I pushed aside messages that, as a foster youth, I was destined to become pregnant at a young age, homeless, incarcerated, or struggle with substance abuse. Yet, I still could not deny the part of myself that had experienced foster care and the corresponding foster care identity that followed me into graduate school, professional work, and relationships with others in my life. Most days, it felt like my prior experience in foster care continued to influence my life in a significant way, and far more regularly than I anticipated I had to choose between omitting my foster care identity from

conversation, rendering a portion of myself hidden, or vulnerably share my identity and leave myself exposed to the varying reactions of others. On occasion, I would uninhibitedly share my foster care identity, hoping if I put it out there and made it known, I might avoid the pain of encountering an offhand deficit comment about “orphans” or “foster youth,” though I quickly learned my strategy of “proud disclosure” at times made no difference in deterring such incidences and in some cases only made them worse. While some individuals were affirming of my experiences and even saw them as a strength, I continued at times to feel different from others. I experienced instances of real and perceived stigma, navigated the effects of my foster care experience on my mental health and self-worth, and navigated continued symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Amidst this, I felt compelled to advocate for the next generation of young people in foster care, address assumptions of family privilege, and increase normative awareness in society of the presence of people without stable family support across varying contexts. Initially distancing myself from my foster care experience in my master’s studies, I tried out focusing my course projects on other areas, yet in my final year I was drawn to write my integrative capstone paper on the role of student affairs practitioners in addressing the challenges SEFC face in accessing higher education, and disclosed the ways my foster care identity informed my perspective on the topic. After graduating with my master’s degree, I further integrated my foster care identity with my role as a student affairs practitioner working professionally with CSPs serving SEFC.

Prior to working with CSPs, to that point in my life I had rarely encountered near-peers with experience in foster care on a regular basis and as a teen I typically only had interactions during the monthly YAB meetings. Until the drama series *The Fosters* began airing on television in 2013, I seldom saw media representations of real or fictional portrayals of people with

experience in foster care. On the rare occasion people with foster care were featured in the media, they were often portrayed in a deficit manner that replicated stereotypes or in a way that reduced them to a singular foster care identity rather than presenting experience in foster care as one of many significant facets of their life or a testament of strength and resilience. During my time in professional roles supporting SEFC and through my doctoral studies, I have met other individuals who experienced foster care. Being in community with others who share this experience and identity has been pivotal to the development of my own foster care identity as I have experienced how we individually and collectively make meaning of our many intersecting experiences and identities. A group of us reclaimed the ascribed label “foster youth, referring to our group as *The Foster Scholars*, developing it as a community of scholars with lived experience in foster care who are engaged in research, advocacy and practice that supports SEFC (The Foster Scholars, n.d.). Being in relationship with others with foster care experience, I have found my own foster care identity both validated and challenged in consequential ways as I continue to make meaning of this aspect of my identity in relation to my other identities, including being a white, cisgender, pansexual, temporarily able-bodied woman who is a mother, partner, friend, member among chosen family, a scholar-practitioner, educator, and advocate.

My experiences and identities comprise my positionality that uniquely shaped this research design in four primary ways. First, my position in relation to this study provided direct experience with developing a foster care identity both personally and through past experiences witnessing the development of others. These experiences both substantially informed my preliminary understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and underscored the significance of this research topic not only to me but to my community of peers and colleagues with lived experience in foster care. Second, my positionality supported my

understanding that the development of a foster care identity is a dynamic process that occurs both within and among individuals embedded within the contexts of society, aligning with a constructivist approach that knowledge is contextualized and co-created through experience (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 2015; Lincoln et al., 2011). Based on this understanding, through this study, I sought to co-construct the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity with the participants and was committed to creating a research environment that centered participants' experiences, validated their identities, and affirmed their personhood. Third, many participants confirmed that my insider status (Chavez, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as a person with experience in foster care shaped their willingness to participate in the study and share their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity with me. Amidst similarities, I was also conscious to attend to how my experiences and identities simultaneously positioned me as having outsider status with the participants, such as differences in our respective foster care experiences, personal and social identities, and contexts (Charmaz, 2014; Chavez, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Fourth, my position as a foster scholar-practitioner facilitated my access to possible research participants through the relationships I have with staff of campus, state, and national programs for SEFC and my personal involvement in such groups.

To summarize the way my experience, identities, and resulting positionality informed this study, I identify as a foster scholar-practitioner, dedicating my scholarly acts and praxis to understanding the experiences and development of people with experience in foster care. Moreover, as this research study was deeply personal, I drew strength and inspiration from Shahjahan's (2014) words that "writing is an exercise through which we heal, make sense of, and strategize social change" (p. 223). I earnestly aspire for the findings of this study to guide further understanding of people with foster care experience and advocate for systemic change in child

welfare and higher education that supports the positive identity development and well-being of youth and students with experience in foster care. As there is limited research on the identity development of people with experience in foster care, I also hope this CGT study informs and inspires future research conducted in partnership with people with experience in foster care and at the intersections of a foster care identity.

Approach to the Study

As this study sought to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC and there is an absence of existing theory to describe this process, I employed qualitative CGT methods. This methodology allowed me to co-construct the process of developing a foster care identity with participants and ground the study and resulting theory in participants' words and experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014, Crotty, 2015; Lincoln et al., 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study was informed by a conceptual framework that considered the integration of: (a) symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969), (b) Cooley's looking glass self (1902), (c) Kegan's theory of the evolution of consciousness (1982, 1994), and (d) Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1993). I used a series of semi-structured interviews to understand and co-construct participants' experiences with the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity through the rich description of our dialogue in interviews (Charmaz, 2014). This methodology supported the development of an emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity (Charmaz, 2014). The methodology of this study is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Delimitations

In this section, I define the delimitations of the study. Delimitations are "limitations actively put into place by the researcher in order to control for factors that might affect the

results, or to more specifically focus on a problem” (Terrell, 2016, p. 42). This study was delimited to include participants who met all the following criteria: (a) experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday, (b) graduated with a bachelor’s degree, and (c) identified as having a foster care identity. Next, I explain why these delimitations were applied.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid, for many years has included a variation of the question that in essence has asked, “At any time since you turned age 13 were you in foster care?” (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Per the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, the question identifies students who qualify for independent student status and do not have the support of their family for the purposes of financial aid at colleges and universities (Federal Student Aid, n.d.; Okpych & Courtney, 2021; Opsal & Eman, 2017). Some institutions use this question to identify students who are eligible for participation in CSPs (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Geiger et al., 2016) and some state, local, and private organizations rely on this minimum age of foster care experience threshold to determine eligibility for their services (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2008; Evans & McCann, 2020; Parker & Sarubbi, 2017; The Link, 2018). Further, those who were in foster care as a teen may have a different memory of their time in foster care and different experiences with the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity than their peers who exited foster care before adolescence. Therefore, the threshold of experiencing foster care on or after the 13th birthday was used in this study in alignment with several other studies (e.g., Cazares-Minero et al., 2022; Fitch, 2019; Gross et al., 2020; Rest & Watson, 1984).

In addition, enrollment in college has been described as providing a unique context that shapes identity development (Patton et al., 2016). For SEFC, college may be a place in which a foster care identity is reckoned with through coursework, interactions with faculty and staff, relationships with peers, and involvement in CSPs and other campus activities (Geiger et al.,

2016; Horn, 2020; Fitch, 2019; Jones & Dean, 2020; Kinarsky, 2017; Okumu, 2013, 2014; Rassen et al., 2010; Watt et al., 2013; Westland & Trotten, 2018). While identity development also occurs outside of higher education and in other educational contexts such as technical, certificate, or associate degree programs, the pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a college or university constitutes a unique experience for SEFC, particularly with consideration of the small number of SEFC who make their way to and through bachelor's degree programs (Courtney & Okpych, 2017; Day et al., 2021; Day et al., 2022; Okpych & Courtney, 2021). Moreover, there are variations in outcomes among CGEFC who have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to those with an associate degree as their highest earned credential (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). As such, experiences during and after the pursuit of a bachelor's degree, can uniquely shape the development of a foster care identity. Further, this study was delimited to college graduates so they could reflect retrospectively on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity over time—while in foster care, during college, and after graduating from college.

Lastly, as this study specifically sought to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC, it was important for the study to be delimited to those who identify as having a foster care identity. Having a foster care identity in this study meant the participant self-identified their experience in foster care as a salient aspect of their identity—e.g., it was an important or significant aspect of their identity or frequently shaped, or was brought to their attention, across their various life situations (Gecas & Seff, 1990; Morris, 2013; Rosenberg, 1979, Stryker, 1980; Thoits, 2012). This was an important delimitation as those who do not identify as having a foster care identity and do not view their foster care experience as salient to their identity, likely have made different meaning of their experiences that impacted the extent of the development or degree of acceptance, awareness, or

acknowledgement of a foster care identity (Fitch, 2019). Such perspectives are important to understand through future studies however the focus of this study was on CGEFC who considered a foster care identity to be a salient aspect of their personhood.

Assumptions

Assumptions are aspects inherent to the design of the study that I believe to be true but have not yet been verified by prior research (Terrell, 2016). A core assumption of this study was that there is a foster care identity that people with experience in foster care develop through a meaning making process. Supporting this assumption, some research studies have alluded to the presence of a foster care identity, a few studies have specifically studied aspects of a foster care identity in the context of foster care or college (e.g., Kools, 1997, 1999; Okomu, 2013, 2014; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), and one study of the retrospective perspectives of CGEFC found a foster care identity was a component of college success (Fitch, 2019). While these studies individually provided support for the belief that there is a foster care identity that is developed through a meaning making process across the contexts of foster care, college, and after college, there has not previously to date or to my knowledge been a study that has examined the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity across foster care, college, and after college graduation among CGEFC. This study was also conducted with the assumption that participants who identified as having a foster care identity were aware of their meaning making process to the extent that they would be able to respond to interview questions about the topic.

Limitations

In this section, I describe the limitations of the study. Limitations are the constraints that were inherent in the research study that affect the generalizability of the results (Terrell, 2016). It is important to note that the aim of this study was not to generalize as constructivism cautions

“against generalizations stripped of time, place, and research situations” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 210). While the aim of this study was to develop an emerging theoretical perspective on foster care identity development for CGEFC, these findings should not be unequivocally generalized and applied to all people with experience in foster care as people with experience in foster care are not a monolith and intersecting identities, experiences, personal attributes, and contexts may shape the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Rather, the findings of this study can inform a preliminary understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in the context of this study and may be studied further with attention to other contexts. Future studies may expand upon the emerging theoretical perspective constructed in this study by considering its application to youth presently in foster care, people who were formerly in foster care but did not go to college, or people who were formerly in foster care but did not graduate from college with a bachelor’s degree. Studies could also focus more explicitly on the meaning making process at the intersection of other identities with a foster care identity. Further, there may be benefits to studying the perspectives of people such as caseworkers, foster parents, educators, friends, or significant others, who have sustained interactions with those presently or formerly in foster care to learn from their vicarious perspectives of witnessing the development of a foster care identity over time while also centering the voices of those with lived experience in foster care, however, such efforts were outside the scope of this study.

Use of Terms

In this section, I introduce the terms used in this study. Some terms are specific to the context of the foster care system, others are specific to higher education, and still others, such as how to refer to people with experience in foster care, are not widely agreed upon with various terms used in the literature. Specifically, I refer to people with experience in foster care in this

study using person-first language (e.g., person, youth, student, or college graduate with experience in foster care). Although the terms “foster youth,” “foster child,” “former foster youth,” and “foster care alumni” are prevalent in the literature, I use person-first language as it is in alignment with *APA Publication Manual 7th Edition* (2020) guidelines and is based on the recommendations of people with experience in foster care and/or kinship placements (e.g., Bartkowiak, 2014; Hoffman-Cooper, 2021; Johnson, 2021). More specifically, for this study, I use the phrase people with experience in foster care when referring to the larger population of people who were placed in foster care at some point in their lives, and the phrase youth, young adult, college student, or college graduate with experience in foster care when I refer to a specific subpopulation, as outlined in the definitions below. However, when I directly quote from extant literature, I use the terms used by the study author(s) to accurately represent their words.

- College graduate with experience in foster care (CGEFC): A subpopulation of people with experience in foster care, consisting of college graduates who experienced placement in the foster care system at some point during their lives.
- Family privilege: The experience of being a member of a stable family and the benefits that accompany it such as love, belonging, and access to basic resources (Seita, 2001).
- Foster care: A state system governed by some federal legislation with some federal funding allocations that provides living arrangements and care provision for youth who are removed, temporarily or permanently, from their families of origin due to a determination their parent(s) or guardian(s) of origin cannot care for them.
- Foster care identity: An aspect of identity associated with having experience in foster care and being ascribed the label “foster youth,” “foster kid,” “former foster youth,” or

“foster care alumni;” for the selection of participants for this study it refers to those who identified experience in foster care as a salient or significant aspect of their identity.

- Identity development: the process by which people come to understand one or more of their identities, how their identity is co-constructed with others, and how their identities affect their lives (e.g., how they see themselves, interact with others, make decisions, and are treated and viewed by others) (Patton et al., 2016).
- Meaning making process of developing a foster care identity: The process of constructing, interpreting, and understanding a foster care identity with increased complexity across time.
- Youth with experience in foster care (YEFC): A subpopulation of people with experience in foster care, consisting of people who are under the age of 21 and are in the foster care system (may be referred to in the extant literature as “foster youth,” “ward of the state,” or “foster child”).
- People with experience in foster care: The general population of individuals who experienced placement in the foster care system at some point during their lives.
- Students with experience in foster care (SEFC): A subpopulation of people with experience in foster care, consisting of college students who experienced placement in the foster care system at some point during their lives (may be referred to in the extant literature as “former foster youth,” “foster care alumni” or “care leaver”).
- Student development theory: “a collection of theories related to college students that explain how they grow and develop, holistically, with increased complexity, while enrolled in a postsecondary educational environment” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 6).

The aim of providing the above definitions is to provide clarity and consistency for how the above terms will be used in this study.

Summary

In summary, the purpose of this CGT study was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC. The intended outcome of this study was to develop an emerging theoretical perspective on foster care identity development grounded in the experiences of participants. This study addresses the lack of student identity development theory that centers people with experience in foster care to date, supports understanding of their identity development, and actively validates collective voices with lived experience in foster care in support of normalizing and affirming the presence of a foster care identity.

This dissertation includes five chapters. In this chapter I introduced the study, the statement of the problem this research study addresses, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the significance of the study. I also discussed my personal positionality, my approach to the study, and a discussion of the delimitations, assumptions, and limitations of the study. I closed with an introduction of the use of terms. In the next chapter, I introduce the conceptual framework and discuss the literature that both informs this study and serves as the sensitizing concepts that provided the tentative ideas I both pursued, and departed from, in this study (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz 2014). In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology for this study, including: the research design, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, reflexivity, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. In Chapter 4, I report the findings of this study including the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity grounded in the experiences of the participants. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings in

relation to the conceptual framework, existing literature, and the research questions for this study, and describe the implications, limitations, and strengths of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I introduce the conceptual framework for this study and discuss the literature that informed an understanding of how college graduates with experience in foster care (CGEFC) make meaning of a foster care identity. Although there is a growing body of empirical literature on youth with experience in foster care (YEFC), to date the representation of college students with experience in foster care (SEFC) and especially CGEFC remains relatively limited (Fitch, 2019; Johnson, 2021; Salazar et al., 2016b; Sarubbi, 2019; Unrau, et al., 2020; Whitman, 2018). Further, while development of various social and personal identities is largely understood to be an important part of adolescence, college, and adulthood (Patton et al., 2016), relatively few studies have specifically examined a foster care identity.

Yet, the concept of a foster care identity has been referred to in an increasing number of studies, particularly over the last decade. For example, earlier studies have used the term *foster youth identity* (e.g., Camarena-Prieto, 2021; Fitch, 2019; Gamez, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020, 2021; Kinarsky, 2017; Levy, 2014; Salazar & Schelbe et al., 2021; Sarubbi, 2019), *foster care identity* (e.g., Fitch, 2019; Gamez, 2017; Levy et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2020; Rosenberg, 2018; Sarubbi, 2019; Schwartz, 2005; Watt et al., 2013), *foster alumni identity* (Kearney et al., 2019) or *foster care alumni identity* (e.g., Sarubbi et al., 2019) in their publications, affirming the relevance of a foster care identity as a construct in research. While Samuels and Pryce (2008) did not use the term “foster care identity” in the body of their manuscript, they listed it in the keywords of their study further signaling its relevance as a construct in research.

Overall, this chapter is informed by relevant theoretical, conceptual, and empirical research studies. I took care to identify extant literature, including formative pieces and recent

works, as well as manuscripts authored by CGEFC as a means of taking an emancipatory approach to the literature review and valuing the voices of those who are the subjects of this study (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). This chapter is organized into five sections. First, I will introduce the guiding conceptual framework, composed of four concepts and theories, that provide a sensitizing perspective that guided my review of the literature presented in this chapter. Next, I present the review of the literature in four sections that discuss the identity development of people with experience in foster care in the context of: (a) the historical construction of the foster care system, (b) foster care, (c) college, and (d) life after college graduation. The review of the literature places the studied meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC in context, offers consideration of factors that can have influence on the meaning making process, and provides insight into how the meaning making process may develop over time, during foster care, college, and into adulthood. Together, this chapter provides the sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014) that informed this study and the concepts I drew on and departed from as I conducted the study.

Conceptual Framework

In this section, I introduce the conceptual framework that guided this constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC. My experiences of: (a) personally developing a foster care identity, (b) working with people with experience in foster care, (c) conducting coursework in psychology, sociology, and student development, and (d) conducting the literature review for this study, informed the theories I drew from to construct this conceptual framework. The conceptual framework of this CGT study was composed of the following four theories: (a) symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), (b) Cooley's looking glass self (1902), (c)

Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1993), and (d) Kegan's theory of the evolution of consciousness (1982, 1994). I close this section with discussion of how I integrated these four theories to form a cohesive conceptual framework that provided a sensitizing perspective from which to preliminarily view the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Symbolic Interactionism

The major theoretical perspective underlying grounded theory is symbolic interactionism, making it especially appropriate to apply to this CGT study (Charmaz, 2014; Grbich, 2013).

Symbolic interactionism as a theory “assumes society, reality, and self are co-constructed through interaction” in a temporal process (Charmaz, 2014, p. 9). Symbols and language (spoken and unspoken) are believed to have an important role in our interactions (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014; Grbich, 2013; Mead, 1934). As Charon (2010) describes, “in social interaction, we attempt to label others, recognizing their identity through our actions and words. We tell them who we think they are. And they, in turn, attempt to tell us who they think we are” (p. 144). As Charmaz (2014) further explains, the labels associated with recognizing others' identities are not inconsequential, rather “naming constitutes a way of knowing, categorizing, locating, evaluating, and dealing with an individual ... Names are seldom neutral. Instead naming a phenomenon typically evokes or ensures an evaluation of it” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 272). The language, symbols, and cues used not only shape our interpretations and meaning made from those interactions, but also our subsequent actions, reactions, and understanding of self, past, present, and future (Charmaz, 2014). In essence, “we act in response to how we view our situations. In turn, our actions and those of other people affect these situations, and subsequently we may alter our interpretations of what is, was, or will be happening” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 262). In this way, symbolic interactionism supposes there is a process of interaction that occurs over

time whereby “people can and do think about their lives and actions rather than respond mechanically to stimuli” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 9). In summary, symbolic interactionism considers the language and symbols used in interactions to be central to the way we make meaning and engage with the world as an active participant (Charmaz, 2014).

In this study, symbolic interactionism provided a means of explaining how meaning is co-constructed both during the research experience and in the lives of the participants. Both within the study and in participants' lives, interactions, interpretations of those interactions, and subsequent reactions, shaped the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. The focus on language and symbols was important to acknowledge as the foster care system, college environment, and society at large has various terms, symbols, and cues that communicate the value of people with experience in foster care that can shape the development of a foster care identity. Further symbolic interactionism was appropriate for this CGT study as it “inspires theoretically-driven research and leads to fresh theoretical implications” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 262). Symbolic interactionism frames the understanding that the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity occurs over time and through the process of interaction.

Cooley’s Looking Glass Self

An originator of the aforementioned symbolic interactionism, Cooley asserts that self-identity is formed by three steps known as the looking glass self: (a) people imagine how they appear to others, (b) people imagine how others judge them, and (c) people imagine how others feel about them based on those judgements (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Although the concept of the looking glass self was developed in part from observing the interactions of children, the concept can be applied to people of all ages. From Cooley’s perspective, how we develop a self-identity is likened to looking in a mirror, or multiple mirrors,

each reflecting back our interpretations of how we believe others judge us. In essence, our interactions with others and our interpretations of what others think of us serve as a metaphorical mirror telling us what we are worth and who we are. We rely on the language, symbols, and other cues from those interactions to inform our interpretations and we “may experience feelings of pride or shame about the sense we make of their reflections” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 266).

According to Cooley, we are actively involved in interpreting how others view us, our interactions with others hold varying degrees of importance to us, and we attempt to manage how we appear to others. In other words, we may care more about how some view us than others, we may be discerning about which views we incorporate into our self-identity, and we may make decisions about what parts of ourselves we share with others.

Cooley’s (1902) concept of the looking glass self was important to this study as it provided a means of understanding how CGEFC may make meaning of their foster care identity by interpreting how others view them based on their shared interactions. The theory also positions CGEFC as having agency in determining how they present themselves to the world of others who often hold preexisting perspectives about them and the extent to which they incorporate others’ viewpoints into their self-identity. Additionally, the looking glass self provides a perspective on how and why (or why not) a person may present or disclose their foster care identity to others as a tool of identity maintenance and managing how others view them.

Kegan’s Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness

Kegan’s theory of the evolution of consciousness (1982, 1994), describes how our ways of *meaning making* grow increasingly complex over our lifespan with consideration of affective, interpersonal, and cognitive processes. The theory of the evolution of consciousness includes five *forms of the mind* that individuals may progress through to achieve greater degrees of

consciousness that shape the meaning they make of themselves, their environment, and their relationships with others. Kegan (1994) proposed *holding environments* serve as an *evolutionary bridge*, supporting people at their current form of mind while encouraging their continued development to the next form of mind. The five forms of mind, outlined in Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory include: (a) First Order: the impulsive mind of young children; (b) Second Order: the instrumental mind of older children and young adolescents; (c) Third Order: the socialized mind that typically follows adolescence; (d) Fourth Order: the self-authoring mind one may develop early in adulthood; and (e) Fifth Order: the self-transforming mind one may or may not develop in one's lifetime, as it is an especially rare level of meaning making.

Given the focus of this study on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity across time for CGEFC, I will focus discussion on the Second through Fifth Orders. The Second Order: Instrumental Mind is characterized by classifying objects, people, and concepts based on characteristics and seeking rules to provide structure (Kegan, 1994). The Third Order: Socialized Mind is characterized by experiencing other people "as sources of internal validation, orientation, or authority" (Kegan, 1994, p. 5). In this form of mind, "how the individual is perceived by others is of critical importance" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 179). The Fourth Order: Self-Authoring Mind is characterized by individuals having "the capacity to take responsibility and ownership for their internal authority" (Kegan et al, 2001, p. 5). For those who reach this order, rather than relying on others for validation and authority, the individual considers others, while making their own decisions and defining their own worth (Kegan et al, 2001). The final form of mind, the Fifth Order: Self-Transforming Mind, is relatively rare for people to reach prior to the age of 40 (Evans et al., 2010). In this order, "individuals see beyond themselves, others, and systems of which they are a part to form an understanding of how all people and

systems interconnect” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 180). In total, as people develop more complex ways of meaning making, they reconstruct their understanding of themselves in relation to their environment and may experience changes in how they are differentiated from and connected to their environment and others (Kegan, 1982, Patton et al., 2016).

Kegan’s theory of the evolution of consciousness contributed to the framework for this study as it supported consideration of how participants could develop more complex ways of making meaning of foster care identity across their lifespan. Demonstrating the application of the theory, Okumu (2014) used meaning making in a similar research context to understand the transition experiences of SEFC in their first two years of college describing that “meaning making conceptualizes how individuals organize their experience in ... their quest for a consistent self-identity and meaningful engagement with their environments over time. It is the fundamental process by which an individual develops the core of [their] identity” (p. 11). Further, Kegan’s (1982, 1994) description that people navigate desires for both distinctiveness and inclusion across the orders of the mind is particularly applicable to understanding the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity as people with experience in foster care may have been made hyperaware of their differences and experienced fractured connections with their community, adding to complexity of developing a strong sense of self while also finding a sense of belonging. The theory also provides a means of understanding how some contexts in foster care, college, and adulthood may serve as holding environments that support people at their current form of mind, while providing an evolutionary bridge toward more complex ways of understanding themselves and the world. Lastly, Keagan’s (1982) acknowledgement that the evolution of consciousness may be painful is an important consideration when understood in combination with the often-painful physical separations and

developmental transitions that can occur for youth, students, and young adults navigating the foster care system (Gamez, 2017).

Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1993), the fourth and final theory that contributed to the conceptual framework, provided a means for understanding the contexts in which the person and the environment interact with consideration of society, time, and history. According to Brofenbrenner (1979) the understanding of development, "requires examination of multiperson systems of interaction ... and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject" (p. 21). While Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory was created from research on early childhood development, Renn (2003), identified the theory holds value in "conceptualizing the development of individual [college] students within a complex, dynamic, interactive web of environments" (p. 386). Brofenbrenner's theory consists of four components: person, process, context, and time (PPCT), and the interactions among them. The theory contends interactions between the four components promote or inhibit identity development (Evans et al., 2010). Next, I describe the four components of Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory and discuss how they supported the theoretical understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Person

The person component of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory includes the attributes of a person. Renn and Arnold (2003) described the attributes of a person in the college environment to include "the personal experience and characteristics students bring with them to higher education, including the intersection of socially constructed identities (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, abilities and disabilities, etc.), prior academic

performance and academic self-concept, political and social ideologies, and family background” (p. 387). Brofenbrenner (1993) called personal attributes *developmentally instigative characteristics* and identified four types including students’: “(a) propensity to explore surroundings, (b) engage or persist in increasingly complex activities, (c) invite or inhibit particular responses from others, and (d) view their agency in relation to their environments” (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 387). While developmentally instigative characteristics impact the course of development, they “do not *determine* the course of development; rather, they may be thought of as ‘putting a spin’ on a body in motion. The effect of that spin depends on other forces and resources, in the total ecological system” (Brofenbrenner, 1993, p. 14). Considering the unique interactions of a person’s instigative characteristics and the environment was important for engaging the experiences of CGEFC given their many personal attributes could shape their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. The person component provided a tool for considering the differential outcomes in the meaning making process based on personal factors, while also understanding there are many other contextual factors that impact the process such as those considered by the remaining theory components.

Process

The process component of Brofenbrenner’s ecological systems theory describes the interactions, known as *proximal processes*, that take place between the person and environment over time. Brofenbrenner (1993) asserted positive identity development occurs when interactions between the person and environment become increasingly complex, and the individual has the support and resources to navigate the complexity in a manner that supports their development. Patton et al., (2016), and Renn (2003) drew parallels to Sanford’s (1966) widely known challenge and support theory that suggests the forces of challenge and the resources of support

must be balanced for young people to develop positively. Likewise, this aligns with Kegan's (1994) concept of holding environments that support people at their current form of mind and encourage their development to the next form of mind by providing an evolutionary bridge.

Renn (2003) provided examples of the interactions a student and their environment may have in relation to the process component, describing how a student may engage their developmentally instigative characteristics and seek to explore “increasingly complex questions about identity (e.g., What does it mean to be a lesbian? What is my identity as an African American man?)” (p. 387), and in turn their environment may respond in a supportive or unsupportive manner to those identity inquiries. Similarly, CGEFC interact with their environment and may experience positive or negative responses to their instigative characteristics, including their foster care identity. For example, when CGEFC practice identity disclosure and share their foster care identity with others, or participate in a youth advisory board (YAB) or campus support program (CSP), they may receive support for, or experience barriers to, developing a positive foster care identity within different environments.

Context

The context component of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory positions the *person* within the *context* where the interactions of the *process* component occur (Evans et al., 2010). With the person at the center, there are four levels of context surrounding them at greater distances in order from closest to farthest from the person they are: (a) *microsystems*—face-to-face interactions, roles, and activities; (b) *mesosystems*—interaction of two or more microsystems; (c) *exosystems*—settings that do not contain the individual but still influence them; and (d) *macrosystems*—the overarching opportunities, beliefs, and history that comprise the pattern of micro, meso, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Evans et al., 2010;

Renn, 2003). Renn describes, “from each of these four levels, the individual receives messages about identity, developmental forces, and challenges and resources or support for addressing those challenges” (pp. 387-388). Additionally, the levels interact, affect one another and the individual, and provide the individual with “congruent, nonconflicting settings; incongruent, conflict-free settings; or something in between” (Renn, 2003, p. 388). Further, as the micro and mesosystems act on the individual, so too, the individual acts on these contexts (Evans et al., 2010).

Understanding the context of where the process of developing a foster care identity occurs for CGEFC informed the findings of identifying the critical influences on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity with consideration of each of the four levels including: (a) microsystems (e.g., direct interactions with their friends, foster family, biological family, faculty, staff, case worker); (b) mesosystems (e.g., interactions among the their foster caregivers and case worker, family or origin and service providers); (c) exosystems (e.g., interactions between their peers and the parents of their peers); and (d) macrosystems (e.g., societal expectations of having a stable family unit, historical and social construction of who is a “foster youth” and who goes to college, social forces impacting intersecting identities). Additionally, the theory supports examination of “important interactions *between and among* ... the micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems” (Patton et al., 2016, pp. 42-44), and the ways these levels can influence the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. The theory also positions CGEFC as having agency as active participants in their worlds by not only considering the contextual forces that act upon them, but the ways they also act upon the world around them.

Time

The time component of Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory considers how development occurs across "time in individual lives and across the lifespan" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 45) at three levels: (a) *microtime*—person-environment interactions; (b) *mesotime*—duration or frequency of interactions across time; and (c) *macrotime*—"the changing expectations and events in the larger society, both within and across generations, as they affect and are affected by, processes and outcomes of human development over the life course" (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 796). In earlier theorizing, Brofenbrenner (1995) used the word *chronosystem* to describe macro-time including socio-historical-environmental events that "make possible certain kinds of developmentally instigative opportunities ... as well as at an individual level according to the timing of life events in microsystems" (Renn, 2003, p. 390). These conceptualizations of time provide specificity that complement the more general references to a temporal process of development suggested by symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Mead, 1934).

The time component of Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory supported consideration of how the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity can take place over time and across the lifespan through interactions and existence in a changing world. Specifically, the chronosystem supported consideration of how social historical events such as the origin of the child welfare system and how youth in foster care have been viewed across history can shape CGEFC's meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in the present day, and how generational changes in the process can occur as a result of events such as policy changes and implementation of new support programs. Taken together, all four components of the PPCT model of Brofenbrenner's ecology theory provided a tool for understanding the context that the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity

occurs within. As Patton et al. (2016) described, the PPCT model “can provide a snapshot of one moment of a student’s development-in-progress or can serve as a terrain on which to map the locations of development” (p. 45). Using the PPCT model of Bronfenbrenner’s theory to create “snapshots” was useful to this study as it supported consideration of critical influences on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity at key points in time.

Integrating the Theories for the Conceptual Framework

Together, symbolic interactionism, Cooley’s looking glass self, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, and Kegan’s theory of the evolution of consciousness comprised the conceptual framework of this study. I visually represent how I integrated these four concepts to form the conceptual framework for this study in Figure 1. I engaged Bazley’s (2013) recommendation to graphically represent the framework to help me consider and refine how the concepts were interrelated. I drew from Renn and Arnold’s (2003) depiction of the PPCT model as nested circles to inform my representation of Bronfenbrenner’s theory in this framework.

To describe the integration of these theories to form the conceptual framework, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) purports individuals interpret and make meaning of the language and symbols that comprise their interactions with others and they act and react to those interactions through a process (Charmaz, 2014). The other three theories build on and complement symbolic interactionism to further inform how individuals make meaning of their interactions with others, at their particular level of development at the specific time and context during which the interaction occurs. Cooley’s looking glass self (1902) offers a description of how interpretations of interactions with others inform the development of identity while Kegan’s theory of the evolution of consciousness (1982, 1994) provides a framework for understanding the ways individuals develop increasingly complex ways of making meaning of their interactions

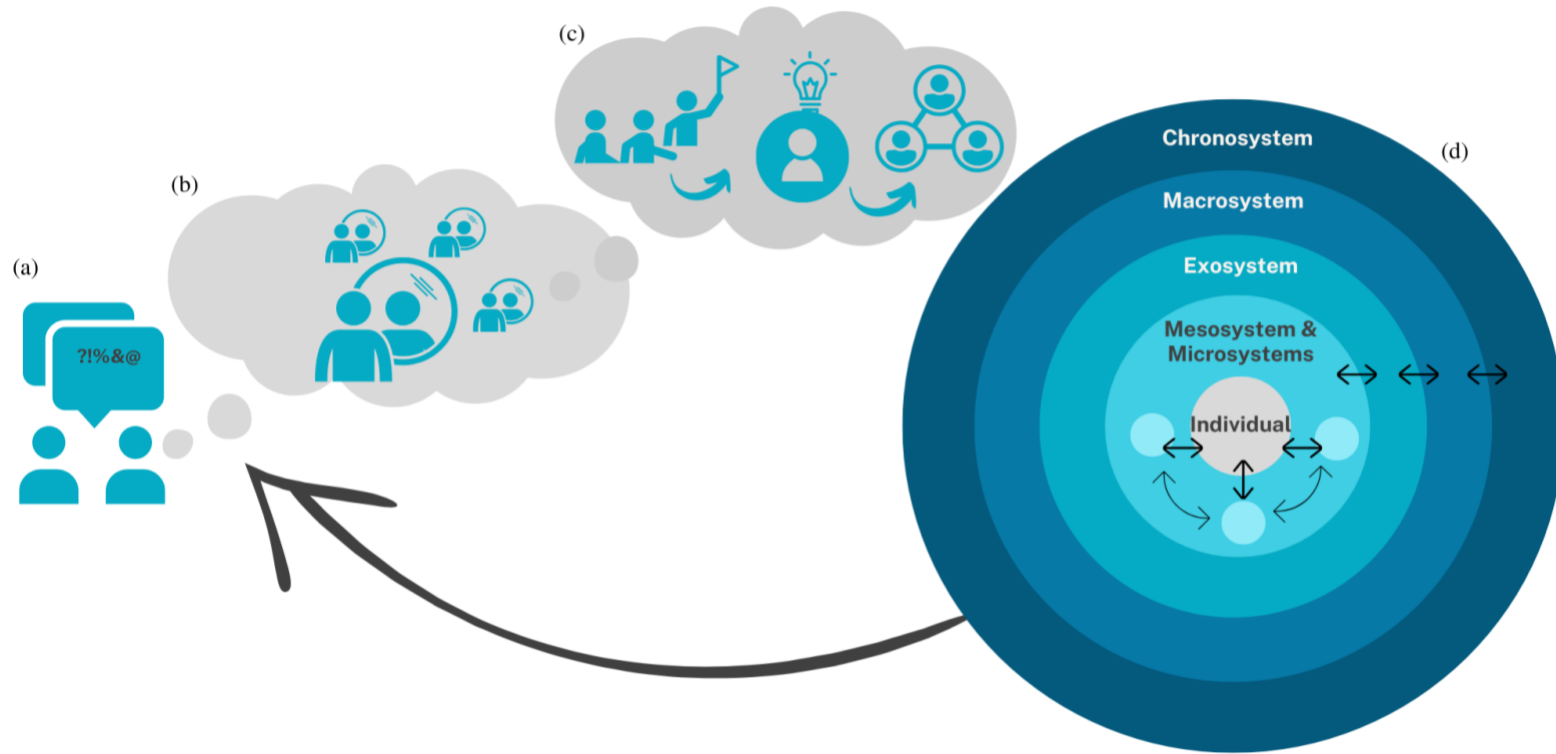


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Guiding This Study on the Meaning Making Process of Developing a Foster Care Identity

Note. This figure demonstrates how I integrated (a) symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969, Mead, 1934), (b) Cooley's (1902) concept of the looking glass self, (c) Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of the evolution of consciousness, and (d) Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1993) to form the conceptual framework for this study that served as sensitizing concepts. Representation of (d) adapted from Renn, K. A., & Arnold, K. D. (2003). Reconceptualizing research on college student peer culture. *Journal of Higher Education*, 74(3).

and understanding their identity across their lifespan. Finally, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1993) describes how the person, process, context, and time interact, and how various forces may support or hinder development.

Each of these theories individually and collectively contributed to the developing understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC. While the theories share some interconnected concepts, they each made unique contributions to this conceptual framework by informing different aspects of the meaning making process. The conceptual framework also provided a sensitizing perspective from which to interpret the literature I discuss in the following sections. Next, I present a review of the literature relevant to development of a foster care identity in the context of: (a) the historical construction of the foster care system, (b) foster care, (c) college, and (d) life after college graduation.

Historical Social Construction of the Foster Care System and Foster Care Identity

To place development of a foster care identity in context as the conceptual framework suggests, it is necessary to first understand the history of the foster care system and how a foster care identity was socially constructed across key historical events. Preceding the development of the foster care system, there were out-of-home placement practices marked by racism, antiblackness, colonization, classism, ableism, and sexism, that separated youth from their families of origin and positioned Black, Indigenous, youth of color and immigrant, disabled, and poor youth as having diminished status in society (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Collins, 2000; Rymph, 2017). These historical origins inform the context from which the foster care system was developed and operates in the present day. In this section, I discuss how the foster care system is informed by the context of: (a) slavery and racialized out-of-home placements that extracted labor from youth and commodified them to varying degrees, (b) boarding schools for

Indigenous youth and related efforts that facilitated genocide and colonization through family separation, and (c) the mutual social construction of foster caregiver and foster youth identities across history.

Slavery and Racialized Out-of-Home Placements

From the 17th to the mid-19th century in North America, African and African American people, including youth, were enslaved, captured, traded, bought and sold as property, denied basic human rights, and horrifically exploited for labor, often for the duration of their lives (Collins, 2000; Diouf, 2022; Rymph, 2017). Slavery forcibly and systematically separated families and dehumanized African and African American people, abhorrently positioning them as property and a commodity, holding value only for their productive labor (Collins, 2000). Over the course of the more than 235 years slavery endured in the United States, “millions of children, taken away from Africa or born in America, [were] forced to live under a barbaric system” (Diouf, 2022, para 1). In the year of 1865 alone, more than one million youth were enslaved in the United States (Diouf, 2022).

During this time, some white children experienced indenture, apprenticeships, and boarding out with some families pursuing these out-of-home placements when they could not care for their children, often due to poverty, work demands, or health ailments (Myers, 2006; Rymph, 2017). Arrangements were made for a particular time frame, in some cases spanning a large duration of a youth’s childhood. In the case of indenture and apprenticeships, contracts were signed between parents and another adult detailing the youth would perform labor in exchange for food and housing (Myers, 2006; Rymph, 2017). In the case of boarding out, families of youth provided payment to another adult to provide care for their youth (Myers, 2006; Rymph, 2017). Unlike slavery, out-of-home placements for white youth were not

dehumanizing based on race, yet they shared commonality in the ways they positioned youth as desirable to non-parental adults to the extent they had monetary value or could produce value through labor.

Which youth mattered across history was highly racialized and shaped by white supremacy, exemplified in part by how the early out-of-home placements that extracted labor from white youth were quick to end because they were deemed socially unacceptable for the ways they too closely resembled the slavery of Black youth that prevailed (Rymph, 2017). Moreover, scholars have reflected how slavery created the conditions for the foster care system yet is erased from the system's history with Billingsley and Giovannoni (1972) specifically calling to attention that in essence, "until 1865 slavery was the major child welfare institution for Black children in this country, since that social institution had under its mantle the largest numbers of Black children" (p. 23). Even after the Civil War, many Black youth were indentured to former slave owners creating the conditions by which "child welfare institutions could develop in this country without concern for the majority of Black children; this factor alone ensured an inherently racist child welfare system" (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972, p. 24). Yet, despite the intergenerational ways the history of slavery and racism deeply impacted society and the development of the foster care system, documented history remains largely cataloged from the white colonizer's lens.

Rymph (2017) calls attention to sources such as the National Foster Parent Association (n.d.) that reports the "first foster child" was Benjamin Eaton, a young boy of European descent whose mother bound him out as an indentured servant for 14 years when she was unable to care for him after the passing of Eaton's father. Historically defining this as the "first" recorded case of "fostering" is concerning as it suggests a modern day foster care system that is comfortable

attributing its start to youth laboring through indentured servitude while also perpetuating the erasure of the African, Indigenous, and other children of color who were enslaved, indentured, or otherwise exploited and coercively or forcibly separated from their families of origin, long before and long after Eaton's out-of-home placement (Rymph, 2017). Representing history in this manner constructs white youth's experiences with family separation and out-of-home placements as more worthy of acknowledgement, downplays the role of racialized systems of labor extraction through out-of-home placements, and ignores the ways slavery and colonization disproportionately separated families of color.

Unequal treatment based on race continued across history as orphanages in the 19th century, and later the foster care system in the first half of the 20th century, were developed and implemented as a "service" for able-bodied whites only. Rymph (2017) characterized how, "private [orphanages] could turn away children who they defined as poorly behaved or who exhibited defects of body or character, it was the children perceived as challenging, different, or less desirable (a group which typically included Black children) who ended up in state institutions" (p. 20). Therein Black and disabled youth were left to facilities associated with poorer conditions and outcomes, including prisons, asylums, and homelessness (Rymph, 2017). When respective child welfare systems were established by states and localities, few agencies served Black families and youth a practice that continued for years, even after child welfare systems were increasingly formalized and the Social Security Act of 1935 began to direct the first federal grants to states to partially fund child welfare services (Fox, 2012; Rymph, 2017).

During the civil rights movement "advocates identified a *lack* of foster care services for Black children as a problem of discrimination in need of remedy" (Rymph, 2017, p. 125). The agility of racism and antiblackness to retool systems toward oppressive ends (la paperson, 2017)

is evident as the demographics of youth in foster care quickly shifted as the foster care system began to serve Black youth and families, with minority youth going from being unserved to disproportionately overrepresented. By 1964, “children of color were 29% of all children in the public foster care” (Rymph, 2017, p. 130) despite comprising only 15% of the United States population at the time (Passel & Cohn, 2008). In essence child protection and foster care was weaponized against communities of color as a tool of whiteness that disproportionately separated youth of color from their families.

Moreover, when Black youth were placed in foster care, they experienced unequal and inequitable treatment. Foster parents of Black youth received a lower stipend, and the standards for foster home licensing were administered irregularly (Rymph, 2017). Standards were based on middle-class white homes resulting in the exclusion of Black and Indigenous families interested in fostering, yet different and lower standards were also applied to the homes where youth of color and youth with disabilities were placed (Rymph, 2017). Many Black and Indigenous youth experienced transracial placements which the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) (1972) argued has detrimental effects on youth’s racial-ethnic identity development. When the NABSW (1972) released a position statement opposing transracial adoption and outlining the harm Black youth and communities endured as a result, the statement was wielded as justification for why large percentages of Black youth linger in foster care, claiming an inability to race match permanent placements (Hermann, 1993; Rymph, 2017). Later, the Multiethnic Placement Act (MPEA) of 1994 “prohibited child welfare agencies from delaying or denying adoptive placements on the basis of race. Yet, ... allowed race as a factor in placement decisions” (Myers, 2006, p. 101). Two years later, the 1996 amendment to MEPA asserted a youth’s race must “be considered irrelevant in determining the best placement” (p. 101). As

scholars acknowledge, this is a complex issue (Butler-Sweet, 2011a, 2011b; Courtney, 1997; Hawkins-Leon, 2001; McRoy, 2016; Samuels, 2009), but at its core is to “understand the role of foster care in preserving families (some families more than others), valuing children (some children more than others), and investing in services (for some children but not all)” (Rymph, 2017, p. 37). Next, I examine how out-of-home placements differentially impacted other racially marginalized populations as they facilitated colonization and white interests.

Out-of-Home Placements that Facilitated Genocide and Colonization

The United States troubling yet often-erased history of enacting colonization through out-of-home placements with implications for identity development of youth is further exemplified by the forceful separation of Indigenous youth from their families “as part of government efforts to assimilate Native people into Euro-American ways” (Rymph, 2017, p. 36). From the early 19th to the mid-20th century, Indigenous youth were placed in boarding schools where they experienced physical and cultural separation from their families and way of life as they were forbidden to speak their Native language or engage in traditional practices (Colmant et al., 2004; Hoerig, 2002; Reyhner, 2018). In 1925 alone, there were over 350 boarding schools with over 60,000 Indigenous youth detained in the United States (Chakraborty, 2019; Wolfe, 2006).

The out-of-home placement of Indigenous children in boarding schools was part of systematic acts of genocide and colonization. It was during this same time white colonizers stole land from Indigenous peoples with two-thirds of land taken by 1930 (Chakraborty, 2019; Wolfe, 2006). In 1928, the Institute for Government Research published *The Problem of Indian Administration* that named family separation and the forced removal of Indigenous youth as an atrocious assimilation tactic, an act of genocide, and a means of violent colonization (Meriam, 1928; Wolfe, 2006). The report detailed how youth were poorly cared for, had inadequate

nutrition and health care, and were forced to labor (Meriam, 1928). Deplorably, despite the report, Indigenous youth continued to experience separation, erasure, and harm for 20 more years as it was not until “the 1950s that institutional placements [boarding schools] fell out of favor for Native children” (Rymph, 2017, p. 36). The painstakingly slow pace of eliminating the boarding schools is further indication of how deeply rooted out-of-home placements were as a tool of oppression and colonization.

What is more, the child welfare system was quickly retooled to perpetuate whiteness and colonization as the Indian Adoption Project picked up where boarding schools left off, separating Indigenous youth from their families from 1958 to 1967 (Jacobs, 2014; Rymph, 2017). The project deployed the false narrative that Indigenous youth were “unwanted and their families and communities [were] hopelessly impoverished and deviant ... [creating] a desire among liberal white Americans to ‘rescue’ these children as a way to address the ‘plight’ of the Indian” (Rymph, 2017, p. 127). While the American Indian and Alaskan Native Social Workers denounced the Indian Adoption Project and their activism led to the development of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978 that included Tribal Nations in child welfare decisions (Myers, 2006; Rymph, 2017), the impacts of these acts of colonization have reverberated across time.

Despite the established guidelines of the ICWA that aim to maintain American Indian children in their families of origin or should they need to be removed, prioritizing placing them with another Native family, there have been legal challenges to ICWA as recently as 2018 and though ICWA was reaffirmed in a 2019 court ruling, Native youth are disproportionately represented in foster care with maltreatment reports of Native youth being twice as likely to trigger a child protective services investigation, twice as likely to be substantiated as

maltreatment, and four times as likely to be placed in foster care than white youth (NICWA, 2017). A systemic review by Francis et al. (2023) summarized the positive progress of ICWA but also the enduring challenges to implementing ICWA as a sizeable proportion of the cases involving Native youth still do not adhere to the ICWA guidelines (Limb et al., 2004), attributed to issues with state caseworkers having limited knowledge of ICWA and not following the procedures to ask youth or families about their culture or notifying Tribes of the involvement of Native youth and families (Moore, 2020; Waddell, 2002). Additionally, limitations of funding, training, tracking systems, and organizational and personnel capacity in both the state and Tribal child welfare systems were noted barriers to fully actualizing ICWA (Francis et al., 2013).

Across several populations foster care and adoption has served and continues “to transfer children who are economically disadvantaged (and often non-white) to middle-class homes, both within North America and internationally” (Rymph, 2017, p. 12). Other initiatives including a wave of international adoption programs following the Korean War, Operation Pedro Pan that placed 14,000 Cuban youth in United States foster care, and Operation Babylift that brought 2,000 infants to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War (Rymph, 2017) are all examples of the transfer of youth of color to white families. Much like Brace’s orphan trains previously emphasized moral Christian superiority, these foster care and adoption practices drew on the rhetoric of “Christian-Americanism—a unique blend of American patriotism and Christianity emphasizing family” (McKee, 2021, p.) that Christian child welfare agencies in particular employ to justify coercive domestic and international family separation practices (Littlefield & Vasquez, 2018). As an example of how such practices persist to the present day, McKee (2021), critiqued how Bethany Christian Services benefited from their recent role in coordinating foster care placements in 2018 for children separated from their families at the southern border, naming how

the agency's foster care services "laid the groundwork to turn these children into adoptable objects-transformed into disciplined bodies acceptable to white America" (p. 97) and how "'saving' children seems rarely to mean supporting family reunification or family preservation" (p. 100). These practices and the discourses that accompanied them facilitate white interests, colonization, and socially constructed the identity of youth in foster care, particularly Black, Indigenous, and international youth, as pitied for being presented as unwanted by their families of origin (Rymph, 2017). Consequentially, through these various practices, the identities of birth families are simultaneously constructed as deviant and foster care or adoptive caregivers are positioned in dominant discourse as white saviors (Rymph, 2017).

Social Construction of the Identities of Care Providers and Youth

The identities of youth in out-of-home placements and their caregivers have been socially constructed and positioned in mutually reinforcing ways across history with arguably negative implications for youth (Rymph, 2017). Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children's Aid Society, unabashedly perpetuated a hero-victim dichotomy between caregivers and placed out youth in the rhetoric he used to describe the orphan train program he launched in 1853 (Rymph, 2017). "An ambitious and controversial social experiment that is now recognized as the beginning of the foster care system in the United States" (Children's Aid Society, n.d., para 1), orphan trains were an out-of-home placement program that placed youth in homes to labor, but did so subversively, under the premise of finding rural families for homeless immigrant youth (Birk, 2015; Rymph, 2017; Zelizer, 1994). Over the course of 75 years, until the last orphan trains ran in 1929, over 250,000 youth were sent from the East Coast to the Midwest on trains, displayed on platforms and in city venues, and claimed by white families under the guise of

saving them from urbanism and providing them with rural Christian upbringings (Cook, 1995; Encyclopedia of Arkansas, n.d.; Greenspan, 1998; Myers, 2006; Rymph, 2017).

Brace's justification for the orphan trains socially constructed troubling identities for youth that were marked by classist, anti-immigrant, white Christian supremacy (Hacsi, 1996; Rymph, 2017):

The effort to reform and improve these outcasts [is] mission-work. Their labor, it is true, is needed. But many a time a bountiful and Christian home is opened to the miserable little stranger, his habits patiently corrected, fault without number borne with, time and money expended on him ... from the highest religious motive of noble self-sacrifice for an unfortunate fellow-creature. (Brace, n.d. as cited in Myers, 2006, p. 26)

Brace was documented in literature as having low regard for immigrants and poor families and his efforts often targeted them, positioning “‘cruelty to children’ as something that ‘they’—the immigrant—did, never ‘us’—the respectable classes” (Rymph, 2017, p. 27). Like other forms of family separation, youth placed on the trains were typically not orphans, rather they were separated from their parents through coercive practices and oppressive systemic conditions (Brown, 2011; Just in Time for Foster Youth, 2023; Rymph, 2017). In particular, “Brace sought out children whose families appeared too impoverished or culturally problematic. His agency applied intense pressure to parents to give up their children” (Rymph, 2017, p. 21). Orphan trains became a means of maintaining whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) with white landowning families, mostly men, having rights to the production power of immigrant youth in a manner that was legitimized by the law, forced cultural assimilation, and maintained segregation as Black youth were excluded from the trains and rendered to even poorer conditions (Rymph, 2017).

Brace rhetorically positioned white Christian families who took in youth from the trains as superior, moral, and generous while socially constructing a deviant identity for the youth he placed on the trains. Brace's early messaging has echoed over the years and has been reiterated

in the child-rescue and home-finding campaigns that encouraged foster parenting as an act of heroism or charity and presented youth in a deficient manner that evoked societal outrage toward their parents and families of origin (Berebitsky, 2000; Myers, 2006; Rymph, 2017). The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the first child protection agency, notably founded after the American Society for the Protection of Animals and by some of the same leaders, found their most successful fundraising campaign was to show before and after photos of abused and neglected youth, who after being placed in foster care, were presented as well groomed (Myers, 2006). These approaches tokenized youth, celebrated the adults and systems that held power over them and their families of origin, and set the tone for how youth in foster care would be viewed in the present day, nearly 100 years later.

While foster caregivers have largely been positioned as superior relative to youth in foster care, foster families have simultaneously been benchmarked against normative and legally permanent families in a manner that devalues both foster parents and youth in foster care. The rhetoric has historically differentiated “adoption (which created ‘real’ families)” (Rymph, 2017, p. 27) from foster care, with “foster children, their biological parents, and their foster parents viewed with suspicion by much of the public and even by the agencies that served them” (p. 7). Some youth were in essence commodified through adoption, yet overtime, youth in foster care were constructed as not possessing “the same value that children available for adoption (especially white infants) had, due to their age, backgrounds, described behavioral problems, and status as ‘welfare’ or ‘government children’” (Rymph, 2017, p. 12). Likewise, foster parents were viewed as being “drawn from a different and inferior pool than those pursuing adoption” (Rymph, 2017, p. 96). Class, gender, religion and race, created a foster care-adoption hierarchy

that communicated which families were (il)legitimate and which youth were (de)valued (Rymph, 2017).

Growing beliefs that youth in foster care may have emotional or developmental delays (Linsey, 2004) fueled stigma and socially constructed youth in foster care as “hard to place,” notions of which were disproportionately applied to youth of color (Myers, 2006; Rymph, 2017). In addition, the expansion of social welfare policy perpetuated beliefs that government assistance was both easy to access and provided sufficient resources for families, bolstering the perception that youth were no longer being removed from their families of origin due to being poor, rather they were being removed because they were “problem youth” from dysfunctional, unstable, pathological families (Rymph, 2017). Describing families and youth as pathological rather than poor, conveniently positioned individual families as the problem, absolving society of responsibility for addressing the oppressive systemic conditions that created poverty and allowing for many of the conditions that resulted in foster care placement (Rymph, 2017). One of many repercussions of “these ubiquitous references to pathology and damage was to stigmatize all foster children simply because they were in foster care” (Rymph, 2017, p. 120). Stigmatizing ideologies of those with experience in foster care dominated sociohistorical perspectives with implications through to the present day.

Further, the persistent view across history that caregiving work, including the provision of foster care was primarily the work of women and should not be compensated, has contributed to numerous repercussions for how youth in foster care are consequently (de)valued (Rymph, 2017). When some of the first agencies began providing payments to foster families for the youth in their care, the suspicions about women who would accept payment for the care of youth were addressed by keeping “board payments lower than the actual costs of caring for a child” (Rymph,

2017, p. 24). Foster care became seen as “a disparaged form of ‘welfare’ that would stigmatize the women who provided it, the children who received it, and their families [of origin]” (Rymph, 2017, p. 8). Youth’s value and the degree of trouble they were to care for was reflected on a numeric scale in the form of an assigned daily monetary rate the system deemed appropriate to provide foster parents as remuneration for their care provision. Notably, the gap in payment to care for youth in foster care “has persisted to the present. Acknowledging it is to acknowledge the hidden role of women’s unpaid care work in sustaining American welfare provision” (Rymph, 2017, p. 24). Therein the (de)valuation of people with experience in foster care is systematically connected to the de(valuation) of women and their caregiving labor through linked systemic oppression.

Although the persisting belief was the monetary resources provided to foster parents should not be substantial enough that one could make an income off caregiving, some communities weaponized the modest payments provided to foster parents to discriminate against foster families and foster youth by barring foster homes from particular neighborhoods. Some communities defined the payments to caregivers as a fee for a service, thereby making foster parenting a job and subjecting foster homes to zoning restrictions (Rymph, 2017). In other instances, housing units had bans on illegitimate children, the definition of which was applied to youth in foster care. In the late 1960s, foster parents in Los Angeles advocated to address discrimination by changing a local ordinance that prohibited foster homes in areas zoned for single families. As foster parents sought to overturn the restriction “they encountered negative stereotypes about foster children and foster parents and opposition from realtors, property owners, and members of city council with arguments such as ‘allowing people to take in foster children ruins the sanctity of the single-family dwelling’” (Rymph, 2017, p. 146). Taking place

just over 50 years ago, the assertion that foster homes and thereby foster youth defile the “sanctity” of neighborhoods and are an illegitimate form of family informs the context of the foster care system today. With this understanding of the historical construction of the foster care system and a foster care identity, I transition to a review of the literature on identity development in foster care in the present day.

Identity Development of Youth in Foster Care

Foster care is intended to be a temporary living arrangement provided as a service by state agencies for youth who are removed, temporarily or permanently, from their families of origin due to a determination their parent(s) or guardian(s) cannot care for them (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.; Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.b). Notably:

Foster care was never and still is not a ‘national system.’ Although there are some federal laws that govern it and some federal funding to support it authorized through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, foster care developed at the state and local level. (Rymph, 2017, p. 4)

While some state and local differences may allow agencies to serve families and youth with attention to their unique sociopolitical and environmental contexts, the lack of national coordination can result in disconnected systems that are difficult for YEFC to navigate and scholars to study (Courtney et al., 2013; Courtney & Chapin Hall, 2015; Rymph, 2017). Further, as evidenced by reported outcomes on Child and Family Services Reviews, differences from state to state can result in disparities among YEFC of how they are served by their respective foster care agency and state system (Ahn et al., 2022; Bruskas, 2008; Courtney, et al., 2003). The localized context of foster care underscores the importance of acknowledging the experience of each YEFC is unique and YEFC are not monolithic, rather they have differing identities, pathways to and through foster care, and differing outcomes based on several factors, individual and systemic (Day, 2022). With this preliminary understanding of the foster care system, in the

sections that follow, I discuss how: (a) experience in foster care is marked by trauma, loss, and disruption; (b) the foster care system manifests systemic power and oppression interrelations; and (c) counterspaces may support positive identity development.

Experience in Foster Care Marked by Trauma, Loss, and Disruption

Youth enter foster care for a variety of reasons. The most frequently documented reasons youth are placed in foster care include: (a) neglect (62%), (b) drug abuse by a parent (33%), (c) caretaker inability to cope (13%), and (d) physical abuse (13%) (DHHS, 2023). Remaining smaller percentages make up additional reasons youth may enter foster care, such as a death of a parent. Notably, some of these documented reasons for removal do not accurately attend to the underlying cause of removal. Although the leading cause of removal is neglect, some scholars and advocates have brought to attention how this named “cause” misplaces fault on youth’s family of origin rather than racialized and systemic socioeconomic class issues such as poverty, unemployment and underemployment, and a lack of affordable and adequate housing (Charlow, 2001; Hill, 2004; Rodriguez & Shinn, 2016).

Moreover, scholars have additionally explored the way the child welfare system is adjacent to policing and can result in the disproportionate surveilling of racially marginalized populations (Burrell, 2019; Edwards, 2019; Raz, 2020). Further, as a large majority of child welfare case workers are white, a lack of intercultural awareness coupled with systemic racism can manifest in individual perspectives and systemwide policies and procedures that can lead to racialized perspectives of what constitutes neglect therein resulting in the disproportionate separation of families of color (Charlow, 2001; Cooper, 2013; Hill, 2004; Mixon-Mitchell & Hanna, 2017). With this context in mind, presently 43% of youth in foster care are white and 56% are youth of color (DHHS, 2023), with Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native youth

specifically overrepresented in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.a). Further, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities are disproportionately placed in foster care which can adversely affect overall health, and with attention to the intersection of identities, Black youth and young women with intellectual and developmental disabilities are more likely to be placed in foster care, a risk that also increases with their age (Shea et al., 2024).

Experiences youth may have before and during foster care are often characterized by *complex trauma*—that is trauma that is recurring and may involve youth’s caregivers or occur within their home environment (Greeson et al., 2011). The nature of complex trauma has the propensity to have “wide-ranging, long-term effects” (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2023, para. 1). Relatedly, studies have reported YEFC have high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health challenges that may shape their identity development and well-being long after the traumatic event is over (Keller et al., 2010; McMillen et al., 2005; Salazar, 2013). Demonstrating the pervasiveness of trauma experienced among YEFC, Pecora et al. (2005) reported 1 in 4 YEFC encountered PTSD in the past 12 months, a rate two times higher than U.S. war veterans (Pecora et al., 2005). Further, Courtney et al., (2011) reported approximately 60% of YEFC in a large regional study had been exposed to at least one traumatic event in the past 12 months and experienced at least one negative cognitive, emotional, or physical symptom of PTSD when reminded of the event.

In addition to trauma prior to foster care, many youth experience disruptions to nearly all aspects of life while in foster care, including separation from biological parents and often siblings, transitions in their living environment, school changes, and barriers to participating in normative youth development activities (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010; Harden, 2004; Hegar

& Rosenthal, 2011; McCormick, 2010; Perry, 2006; Wojcak et al., 2018; Whitman, 2021). Moreover, as a few studies have reported the majority of foster caregivers are white, and youth of color are disproportionately placed in transracial foster and adoptive homes (Leathers et al., 2019; Vandivere et al., 2009) and many YEFC also experience separation from their culture and heritage (Jessup, 2022; Whitman, 2021). Hyde and Kammerer (2009) call disruptions such as these, *complex and cumulative instabilities*. These disruptions notably occur between the ages of 0 and 18 years old when youth are simultaneously undergoing various aspects of development (e.g., physical, cognitive, psychological, social, emotional, cultural, and identity) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Erikson, 1968; Greeson et al., 2011; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011; Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994) and have ramifications for youth's well-being long after they exit foster care (Berzin et al., 2014; Harden, 2004; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Racusin et al., 2005).

Even when placement in foster care removes youth from harmful situations to in theory place them in a safer living environment, the process of entering foster care is still experienced by many youth as a traumatic event (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Perry, 2006). Some scholars (Lee & Whiting, 2008; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010, Samuels 2008, 2009) have described placement in foster care and the separation from one's family from the perspective of *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1999, 2006). Ambiguous loss occurs when loss is felt deeply and pervasively across many dimensions of life, the duration it will be endured is unknown, it is an atypical loss, and it is marked by an absence of outlets for processing the grief (Boss, 1999; Lee & Whiting, 2008; Samuels, 2008, 2009). Ambiguous loss becomes chronic when it happens repeatedly, such as when youth move foster care placements or cycle in and out of the foster care system (Samuels, 2009). Recent reports indicate more than a third of youth have two or more placements each year

(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022), while Pecora et al. (2005) previously reported 70% of youth experienced four or more placements. As time in foster care increases so does the likelihood of placement changes, creating a continued cycle of disruption particularly for teens during a time that is arguably critical to identity development (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010; Leathers, 2006; Perry, 2006; Webster et al., 2000; Wertheimer, 2002; Wulczyn et al., 2003).

A qualitative study by Unrau et al. (2008, 2010) explored how 22 adults perceived prior placement changes. Participants described the physical and psychological shifts associated with placement changes and reported even placements with people who were familiar to them such as relatives or reunification with their family of origin had cumulative impact on their lives (Unrau, 2010). Likewise, Rest and Waston (1984) examined the long-term impact of foster care and placement changes on 13 adults and reported experience in foster care put them “at risk of an impaired self-image from the deeply felt stigma of foster care, a difficulty establishing emotional intimacy, and an unresolved sense of loss” (p. 291). Offering hope, Perry (2006) purported negative impacts of transitions might be mitigated when youth are granted placement stability and are able to develop strong (re)structured biological, foster family, and peer networks.

As of 2022, the largest percentage of youth were in a foster family home with a non-relative care provider (44%), 34% were in a foster family home with a relative, also commonly referred to as kinship care, and the remainder were in other placement types, including nearly 10% in group homes or institutions (DHHS, 2023). While placements in foster family homes are generally associated with better outcomes than group homes or institutions, they are still marked by major changes and disruptions as youth are faced with adapting to a new living environment with strangers (Metzger, 2008; Mitchell, 2018; Ozmun-Wells, 2015; Perry, 2006; Unrau et al., 2008, 2010). Kinship placements are typically associated with better outcomes than other foster

care placement types as they maintain a connection between youth and their family of origin by placing them with an adult caregiver with whom they likely have an existing relationship (Ehrle & Green, 2002; Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009; Metzger, 2008; Perry, 2006; Pittman & Boswell, 2007; Rosenfeld et al., 1997; Winokur et al., 2014). Some studies reported youth placed in kinship care had a more positive self-concept than youth placed in a foster family home with a non-relative (Metzger, 2008; Mosek & Adler, 2001).

Despite the known benefits of foster home and kinship placement types compared to group homes, teens ages 13 to 17 were most likely to experience group homes, with 36% of teens ages 13 to 15 experiencing group homes as their first placement, and 53% experiencing a group home at some point while in foster care (Wulczyn et al., 2015). Youth of color, and especially Black youth, are disproportionately placed in group homes, are placed in group homes at a younger age, and have longer stays in group homes (Wulczyn et al., 2015). Group homes and institutional placements tend to be more restrictive and are associated with poorer well-being outcomes (Fathallah & Sullivan, 2021; Perry, 2006; Simmons-Horton, 2017). Reports indicate group homes and institutions are often staffed by shift workers, who surveil youth, are undertrained, have high turnover rates, enforce overly restrictive policies, offer youth limited agency and privacy, and do not tend to the personal, social, emotional, or cultural developmental needs of youth (Fathallah & Sullivan, 2021; James, 2011; Lardner, 2015; Samuels, 2009).

Amidst placement changes, many YEFC face school changes that are further disruptive to their lives and development (Calvin et al., 2000; Clemens et al., 2018; Ersing et al., 2009; Levy et al., 2014; Silver et al., 1999; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004), leaving some YEFC additionally managing loss and separation from their friends and teachers (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens et al., 2017; Unrau et al., 2008). A Midwest study of 17-year-olds in foster care in Illinois, Iowa,

and Wisconsin reported over one-third of the youth experienced five or more school changes (Courtney et al., 2004). When foster care placement and school moves occur together, Clemens et al., (2018) found academic growth was significantly reduced, resulting in a “foster care achievement gap” with YEFC starting at a lower achievement level on average, growing at a lower rate while in foster care, and falling behind each year. To achieve the “catch up growth” to meet grade-level standards, YEFC “need to make up more than a year’s progress in a year’s time” (Clemens et al., 2018, p. 92), a feat that is often unattainable without proper support and amidst the continued challenges that accompany experience in foster care.

Many YEFC also experience disruptions in accessing normative developmental activities (Simmons-Horton, 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015). While the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 included provisions that legislated normalcy for YEFC (i.e. requiring states to ensure youth have opportunities to participate in developmental activities), historically, youth have reported barriers to participating in activities such as team sports, employment, college visits, and life skill activities like making decisions for themselves, obtaining a driver's license, or opening a co-signed bank account (Bussiere, 2006; Olson et al., 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015; Pryce et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). The more recent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on group activities (Amechi, 2020; Lopez et al., 2022) can make it difficult to ascertain if the legislation has achieved its marked goals. Barriers to participation in normative youth activities have ramifications for youth’s preparation for adulthood and various aspects of their development (Bussiere, 2006; Berardi & Morton, 2017; Olson et al., 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015; Pryce et al., 2017). A study of over 200 youth and young adults who were preparing to age out of foster care or had aged out of foster care, found 73% of participants did not have a driver’s license and 53% did not know how to open a bank

account (Thompson et al., 2018). Limited access to normative activities can create *exposure gaps*, wherein by no fault of their own, YEFC have not been exposed to activities that support critical aspects of development (Bennett & Hoffman, 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015). Recently, J. Bennett, M. Day, and M. Raap, (personal communication, August 8, 2022; publication forthcoming) reimagined this as *nurture privilege*, considering how foster care may (or may not) facilitate stable relationships with caring adults who provide exposure to developmental activities that support positive outcomes for YEFC.

With an understanding of the importance of stable relationships for youth development, federal legislation has sought to encourage permanent placements for youth, varying from promoting family reunification, kinship placements, adoption, or simultaneously planning for family reunification while considering other permanent placements. As Myers (2006) described, the “intervention pendulum thus swings back and forth” (p. 102) and the legislation in effect when a youth experiences foster care, has significant impact on how their case is managed and the corresponding case plan and permanency goals established. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012) described permanence as “an idea, a value, and a status” (para. 2), with legal permanence occurring when the law affirms the relationship between the caregiver and youth, while relational permanence describing the meaningful long-term relationships that are accompanied by love and belonging. Youth exit foster care in a number of different ways that offer varying levels of legal and relational permanence including reunification with their family of origin (52%), adoption (28%), emancipation, otherwise known as aging out (5%), guardianship (4%), or permanent placement with a relative (4%) (DHHS, 2023). Of note, legal permanence is not always synonymous with relational permanence, as some youth have described adoption as “legally belonging to someone” while not guaranteeing “familial belonging” (Samuels, 2009, p. 1234). In

addition, while some youth maintain connection with their family of origin while in foster care or seek to reconnect after exiting foster care (Chapman, et al., 2004; Jones & Kruk, 2005), studies have reported some youth find their relationships with their family of origin to be characterized by challenge and instability (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Samuels, 2009).

Despite a legislative focus on permanency, each year, nearly 20,000 teens exit foster care when they reach the age of discharge in their state foster care system (Berzin et al., 2014; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; DHHS, 2021; Hedenstrom, 2021). Moreover, the previously discussed racial disproportionality among those in foster care persists with Black and Indigenous youth exiting foster care at a greater rate without permanency (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). The absence of permanence can leave youth with feelings of abandonment, rejection, and diminished sense of belonging (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Samuels, 2009; Unrau et al., 2008). Exemplifying the absence of relational permanence in the lives of many youth who age out of foster care, one study by Courtney et al. (2011) reported that over one third of YEFC said they had “too few” or “no one” to count on across four categories of social-emotional-material support. Likewise, Samuels (2008) reported emotional support was most frequently noted by YEFC as the support they needed but was absent from their life. Despite barriers to permanence, Samuels (2009) found many YEFC retained hope of (re)establishing an idealized family in adulthood, suggesting (re)establishing family and a sense of permanent relationships could be a critical developmental task for some YEFC as they transition into adulthood.

Presenting challenges for YEFC establishing the type of futures they desire, when many youth age out of the foster care system they have little to no support with housing, finances, physical and mental health care, or caring adult connections (Courtney et al., 2001; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008). Experience in foster care and aging out of foster care is associated with an array of

negative outcomes, including experiencing higher rates of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, early and unintended pregnancies, unmet health and mental health needs, substance abuse, sex trafficking, and incarceration, and lower rates of educational attainment (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2018; Pecora et al., 2005; Racusin et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019; Rosenfeld, et al., 1997; Scannapieco et al., 2016; Unrau & Grinnell, 2005; Watt et al., 2018). Although the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 offered states federal funding to extend foster care support services up to the age of 21 to ease youth's transition to adulthood and lessening some of the risks associated with aging out of foster care, persisting disparities in well-being outcomes between YEFC and their peers who were not in foster care remain (Courtney et al., 2018; Courtney et al 2021; Courtney & Hook, 2017; Courtney & Okpych, 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Lee et al., 2014; Okpych & Courtney, 2020; Peters et al., 2009; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019). Next, I discuss how systemic power and oppression interrelations in the foster care system can produce poor well-being outcomes among YEFC and how these conditions together have corresponding implications for the identity development of people with experience in foster care.

Systemic Power and Oppression Interrelations in the Foster Care System

When youth enter the foster care system, many find an institutionalized space of power and oppression relations that constrains their voice and minimizes their right to self-determination with consequences for their identity development (Bruskas, 2008; Just in Time for Foster Youth, 2023; Kools, 1997; Merkel-Holguin et al, 2022; Nybell, 2013; Snow, 2009). In this section, I discuss the impacts of (a) power distribution in the foster care system, (b) language and labels applied to youth and their families, (c) consequences of the devaluation of foster youth

on identity development, and (d) experiences of forced independence and societal assumptions of normative family privilege.

Power Distribution in the Foster Care System

Many youth placed in foster care find they have little say over where they are placed, aspects of their daily life, or their foster care case plan (Fruendlich et al., 2006, 2007; Johnson & Menna, 2017; Miller et al., 2017; Samuels 2009; Unrau, 2006; Unrau, et al., 2008, 2010). Dumbrill (2003) identified that the child welfare system uses a “power over” rather than a “power with” (p. 113) approach for engaging youth and their families of origin. Likewise, Bains et al. (2003) described “agencies use their social positions to control the power dynamics of relationships” (para. 5). Bruskas (2008) applied the “Five Faces of Oppression” (Pharr, 1990) to explain the ways youth in foster care are positioned in society and within the foster care system. According to Pharr (1994) oppression and domination are present when a group of people experience one or more of the five faces of oppression. Bruskas (2008) asserted youth in foster care experience all five faces in the foster care system: (a) exploitation by being placed into a system that benefits others, (b) marginalization by being excluded from full participation in society as a result of the poor well-being outcomes the system creates, (c) powerlessness as they have little agency over many aspects of their current and future lives, (d) cultural imperialism as they are hidden and positioned as abnormal in comparison to normative families, and (e) violence by being subjected regularly to social injustices in the foster care system that are ignored by society.

Similarly, Yang and Ortega (2016) used vignettes to examine how power and privilege is manifested in the “differing expectations of appropriate care between biological parents and the foster care system” (p. 1). They critiqued how the state determines biological parents to be unfit,

yet the acts of the state as the alternative caregiver, may be just as egregious, and sometimes more so. One study reported 31% of YEFC reported being “mistreated” at least some of the time while they were in foster care (Courtney et al., 2001). Further, outcomes from Child and Family Services Reviews indicated many states are not achieving their designated well-being requirements and many are declining in performance rather than improving (Ahn et al., 2022; Bruskas, 2008). Caseworkers in Geenen and Powers’ (2007) study reported the foster care system may incentivize caregivers for emphasizing and maintaining youth’s deficits and disincentivize skill development by providing higher payments for youth who have more/special needs. Yang and Ortega (2016) identified such “bureaucratic neglect is allowed to occur because of the population primarily served by the child welfare system [are] the poor and families of color” (p. 1), underscoring the intersections between race, class, and foster care.

Diminished Status Conveyed Language and Labels

Power and oppression interrelations are also deployed through the language and labels used by actors within the foster care system. When youth enter foster care, they can experience dehumanization as they often lose their personal identity when their family of origin is rendered as a “case” (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2022), and they are ascribed a primary stigmatized status and label of “foster youth” by the child welfare system. The stigmatized status has implications for how youth view themselves, particularly in instances when their foster care status is made public and they’re subjected to societal views (Bruskas, 2008; Kools, 1997, 1999). Youth in foster care often find their new identity of “foster youth” has a diminished level of power and agency and is accompanied by biased perceptions and negative stereotypes that are communicated by others through lowered expectations and statements of marginalization (Bruskas, 2008; Just in Time For Foster Youth, 2023; Kools, 1997, 1999; Nybell, 2013; Pryce et al., 2017; Rogers, 2017;

Rymph, 2017). A participant in one study spoke of their experience in foster care, sharing, “It (being a “foster child”) makes you feel like you’re about this big (presses thumb and forefinger together). Everybody is always putting you down cause you’re a foster child” (Kools, 1997, p. 267). Likewise, Morton (2015) reported the 11 participants in their phenomenological study “conveyed stories about being disempowered, marginalized and silenced. Many participants shared stories of desperation. They felt they had no voice or advocate, and that they were at the mercy of the system and of their placement” (p. 488). Youth’s awareness of the stigmatizing views held by others and experiences with having their voice silenced or minimized has repercussions for identity development.

In addition, having an awareness of the negative outcomes facing youth with experience in foster care also can shape views of oneself. Rymph (2017) noted “the professional and scholarly writing on foster care, too, is marked by deep pessimism” (p. 2). While understanding the negative outcomes the foster care system produces for YEFC are important to grow societal awareness of the issues that may eventually prompt system reform, sharing the statistical outcomes decoupled from a discussion of the strengths and resilience of YEFC can position them in a deficit manner and ignore their agency, assets, and successes (Benard, 1997; Fitch, 2019; Hoffman-Cooper, 2021; Sarubbi, 2019). Bruskas (2008) described how persistent deficit messaging can be internalized by youth and contribute to a negative self-identity, stating “over the years, society will tell them that this is not normal (a child in foster care); eventually they will not be able to resist the adoption of an identity defined by others, which intensifies the notion of oppression” (p. 74). Next, I will further explore the consequences of such devaluation on the identity development of people with experience in foster care.

Consequences of Devaluation in Foster Care for Identity Development

Kools (1997) was one of the first and remains one of the few scholars who specifically identified the effects of experience in foster care on identity development. Conducting a grounded theory study of 17 YEFC ages 15 to 19 years old, Kools explored youth's perceptions on long term foster care and found it had a negative impact on adolescent identity development. Specifically, Kools identified the *process of devaluation of self by others* was facilitated by *depersonalization* with impersonal treatment in the foster care system and *stigmatization* with an identity defined by others through biased assumptions, stereotypes, negative expectations, and marginalizing treatment. Considering the findings in relation to Erickson's (1968) theory on psychosocial development, Kools proposed YEFC may experience *identity foreclosure* (Erickson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) as they may prematurely commit to a stigmatized identity, "with the goals and expectations determined by others or defined by their group membership" (Kools, 1997, p. 269). Kools contrasted the experience of YEFC to that of their peers with normative family structures who may have what Erickson (1968) and Marica (1980) called a *moratorium period* during which they are encouraged to explore their identity through developmental activities with the support of a stable and resourced family (Kools, 1997).

In a later manuscript, Kools (1999) described how the dynamics of the foster care system resulted in the *process of self-protection* characterized by YEFC hiding or guarding their foster care identity, having a defensive posture about their foster care identity, maintaining distance from others, and keeping relationships superficial. Kools identified a consequence of the process of self-protection was YEFC projecting a *veneer of self-reliance*, "which gave the appearance of self-confidence, competence, and independence" (Kools, 1999, p. 148), though underneath was a stigmatized self-identity that led YEFC to avoid attachment to protect themselves from "further

loss and stigmatization” (p. 149). Kools described the behaviors resulting from the veneer of self-reliance as *pseudoindependence*. In a recent study on help seeking, Bennett (2020) defined pseudoindependence, as young people presenting themselves as “independent, competent, and capable but missing the knowledge or skills necessary to navigate the challenges during their transition to adulthood” (p. 19). Such findings suggest YEFC’s awareness of the views others hold about their status as a person in foster care has ramifications for how YEFC view their own identity and present themselves to others with implications for various aspects of their well-being.

Building on Kools (1997, 1999) findings, a few more recent studies have explored identity development among YEFC. In an interpretative study, Samuels and Pryce (2008) explored the experiences of 44 youth as they aged out of foster care and confirmed self-reliance was a component of a foster care identity as both a strength and a risk. Samuels and Pryce (2008) called the phenomenon *survivalist self-reliance* for the ways in which youth conveyed a sense of *survivor pride* for their ability to make it through various challenges on their own. Further, youth described a *disavowal of dependence*, as they considered dependence on others to be a form of failure they sought to avoid. Although youth constructed positive self-identities out of the challenges they faced and the internal resources they relied on to get through, their disavowal of dependence had ramifications for identity development as it often deterred help seeking behavior and led them to internalize hardships and attribute fault to themselves (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Forced Independence at Odds with Societal Assumptions of Family Privilege

Mulkerns and Owen (2008) also found the experiences of YEFC aging out of foster care impacted the development of youth’s sense of self and led youth to construct an identity founded on self-sufficiency and help-avoidance. Several other studies have also confirmed youth’s

experiences with stigmatization, feelings of difference, and a corresponding hesitancy to disclose their foster care identity or seek help (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Courtney et al., 2001; Finkelstein et al., 2002; Hines et al., 2005; Johnson & Menna, 2017; Mohapatra et al., 2010; Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Pryce et al., 2017; Stanley, 2007; Villagrana, 2018). Many studies attribute these findings to the foster care system forcing an expectation of independence, one that is often internalized by YEFC and is notably different from the degree of *interdependence* afforded to many of their peers who were not in foster care (e.g., Berzin, 2014; Mulkerns & Owens, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Blome (1997) critiqued how the expectation of independence for YEFC is blatantly inequitable, when juxtaposed to the normative expectations of their peers:

It is a curious reality that [some of] society's most vulnerable youth, those who have suffered abuse or neglect and [may] have never known consistent, permanent, nurturing adult relationships, are asked to be self-sufficient at a time when other youth are still receiving parental support in college or are experimenting with their first jobs from within the safe confines of a family. (p. 42)

In this way, society largely maintains a systematic assumption that youth and adults have the support of a stable family environment that will provide care and resources to assist in development and life transitions (Berzin et al., 2014; Blome, 1997; Goode, 2009; Samuels, 2009; Seita, 2001). Normative expectations of family privilege are even represented by the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), that describes how many youth receive social emotional and financial support from their family as they gradually shift to adulthood (Berzin et al., 2014).

John Seita (2001), a social worker with lived experience in foster care drew from McIntosh's (1997) concept of white privilege and used the term *family privilege* to describe the often-unnoticed benefits that accompany being the member of a stable family unit, including the "assets and pathways that provide us with a sense of belonging, unconditional love, and spiritual values" (p. 131). Likewise, Ozmun-Wells (2015) asserted, "family origin, history and

community come with automatic benefits” (para. 4), the privileges of which she provides numerous examples of in her writing detailing the effects on the daily life of YEFC who may not have consistent access to such support. Rather, YEFC may experience varying degrees of family privilege, depending on their circumstances and the extent to which they have access to a stable and supportive family network (Seita, 2001). While prior trauma in their family of origin and instability experienced while in foster care may preclude some YEFC from establishing an advantageous degree of family privilege, it is important to acknowledge some YEFC are able to establish a greater degree of family privilege as a result of foster care than they had previously, particularly if they are able to establish permanency with a foster, adoptive, or kinship family or be successfully reunified with their family of origin (Bennett, 2020). However, for many YEFC, the foster care system constructs artificial relationships with adults (e.g., caseworkers, foster parents) that are temporary and end when youth exit foster care (Bennett, 2020; Knight et al., 2006).

Ozmun-Wells (2015), an advocate who experienced multiple adoptions, and multiple step- and foster homes, created a questionnaire that demonstrates the ubiquity of family privilege and the undeniable ways it impacts youth who do not experience the support of a stable family unit and particularly YEFC. The questionnaire poses a series of statements from the perspective of someone with a normative degree of family privilege, asking, for example, if their family structure is represented positively and equitably in the media and if they can be confident someone won’t make negative assumptions about them because of the type of family they are in (Ozmun-Wells, 2015). The items on the questionnaire represent how experience in foster care is socially constructed as a deviant variation from widely held views of acceptable family structures and provides examples of how such views can be systematically perpetuated (Ozmun-

Wells, 2015). Relatedly, some scholars have affirmed YEFC report stigma associated with not having a normative family structure (Dansey et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2013).

Horn (2020) discussed the work of Goode (2009) and asserted “structural stigma in foster care stems from the social condition that, in colonizing societies, children are raised in families that provide for their needs” (p. 106). Our society is structured with the assumption that “*family* is the major vehicle for preparing [children] for the world of adulthood ... The values, skills, challenges, and opportunities that shape and define adulthood are woven into the very fabric of their everyday family lives” (Frey et al., 2005, p. 2). Further, Letiecq (2019) identified family privilege is entangled with other systems of oppression and upholds White heteronormativity, imploring scholars to “rigorously interrogate the intersections of White privilege, family privilege, [Standard North American Family] supremacy, marriage fundamentalism, and the mechanisms of advantage maintenance within ... and across social systems in the United States” (p. 408). With consideration of the history from which the foster care system was founded and the identity-based disproportionality that persists in the foster care system today, it is evident that family privilege can interlock with other systems of oppression and disparately impact YEFC.

Counterspaces and Turning Points That Support the Identity Development

Amidst the experiences of trauma, loss, disruption, and systemic power and oppression interrelations in the foster care system, some scholars have identified *counterspaces* (Solórzano et al., 2000) that may support the identity development of YEFC. Solórzano et al. (2000) originally conceptualized counterspaces as sites where “deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate could be established and maintained” (p. 70). The construct of counterspaces has since been applied to other marginalized identities (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Lee & Harris, 2000) and contexts beyond the collegiate environment

(Margherio et al., 2020; Terry et al., 2014), making its application to the foster care system appropriate given the persistent racial disproportionality and the fractured or absent pathways from foster care to college that impacts the postsecondary enrollment and graduation of many YEFC. Youth advisory boards (YABs) and K-12 schools are two counterspaces scholars suggest may support the positive identity development of YEFC.

In the United States each state and Washington D.C. has a state YAB and additionally many counties or regions offer YABs (e.g., 27 sites in Michigan alone) that provide spaces for YEFC to engage in leadership and advocacy (Day et al., 2012; Forenza & Happonen, 2016; Havlicek & Samuels, 2018). The first YAB in the United States was started in California in 1988 (Havlicek & Samuels, 2018). However, given the limited research available on YABs, Havlicek and Samuels (2018) conducted a CGT study to understand what YEFC learned from participation in a YAB. Like the study conducted by Kools (1997, 1999), identity development was determined to be central to participants' experiences. From semi-structured interviews with 33 YEFC who were current and former officers of an Illinois state YAB, Havlicek and Samuels (2018) found YABs "created a platform for participants to challenge and reinterpret their experiences in ways that normalized, protected, and enhanced positive aspects of their identities" by "affiliating with peers, accessing generative adults, and trying on new roles" (p. 259). Havlicek and Samuels (2018) asserted YABs are counterspaces "where foster youth can share experiences ... that may otherwise be hidden, ignored, or silenced, and receive support" (p. 249), with positive consequences for identity development.

Likewise, a qualitative study of participants of a YAB in New Jersey presented triangulated interview and survey data of YEFC and coordinators of the YAB (Forenza, 2016a, 2016b). Forenza (2016a, 2016b) reported participants found the YAB created family-like

connections that were otherwise absent from their lives. One youth described how the staff coordinator of the YAB was the adult they had known the longest, they considered him to fill the role of a “dad,” in their life, and he was the only adult to attend their high school graduation for them (Forenza, 2016a). Other youth described how their peers on the YAB were like family, creating “relational solidarity that [produced] feelings of empowerment” (Forenza, 2016a, p. 914). Forenza (2016b; 2018) also reported the YAB had a role in psychological, behavioral, relational, and interpersonal-emotional empowerment and supported youth’s critical consciousness while supporting their pursuit of social change. One example of youth’s efforts towards social change was their action to secure the donation of duffle bags so when other YEFC were placed in foster care or had placement changes their belongings would no longer be moved in trash bags (a common practice across the nation that arguably sends explicit and implicit messages to YEFC about their value) (Forenza, 2016b). While youth’s efforts were commendable and needed, the project also underscores the dehumanization that can occur in the foster care system and how much further change is needed. In essence, the power and oppression interrelations present in the foster care system may set a low threshold for what constitutes a counterspace. YABs may facilitate the system’s constrained engagement with youth voice and celebrate minimal improvements rather than placing the voices of YEFC at the center of a larger reimagining of the foster care system to create more humanizing spaces (Nybell, 2013).

Lastly, while not specifically referred to as counterspaces some scholars have also suggested K-12 school environments can also challenge the deficit perspectives YEFC face and support their positive identity development (Dansey et al., 2019; Hass et al., 2014; Schroeter et al., 2015). From interviews with 19 SEFC who had experienced foster care, Hass et al. (2014) reported some experiences in the K-12 system were “turning points” for the participants and

supported their subsequent enrollment or completion of a college degree. For some participants, schools were “safe havens” with “turnaround people” (Benard, 2004; Werner & Smith, 2001), that facilitated emotional comfort and were spaces where they could exercise their competence and talents, develop a sense of autonomy, and receive support. Likewise, Hines et al. (2005) reported all 14 of the SEFC in their study “saw school as a positive alternative” (p. 389) to their challenging life circumstances and “throughout childhood and continuing into adolescence, school was often the only stable and supportive place where they were able to find escape and refuge” (p. 389). As identified previously, not all youth in foster care have positive experiences in the K-12 system. Hass et al. (2014) and Hines et al. (2005) had specifically studied SEFC who were enrolled in college, which may suggest youth’s positive experiences in the K-12 system shaped their subsequent access to, and success in, postsecondary education. The findings could alternatively be explained by the unique characteristics among the participants in their study that facilitated their positive experiences in their K-12 education and their enrollment in college. With an understanding of the way various experiences in foster care may impact identity development, next, I discuss the identity development of SEFC in the context of college.

Identity Development During College for Students with Foster Care Experience

As Johnson (2021) noted in their review of the literature on SEFC, the number of studies of people with experience in foster care in the context of college is relatively small, albeit growing, particularly in the past 10 to 15 years. Although many of the studies that exist on SEFC have not been completed from a higher education perspective or with explicit attention to identity development, their findings still contribute to understanding foster care identity development and the factors that may influence the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity during college. In this section, I discuss the relevant literature on SEFC

including: (a) experiences of marginalization in college, (b) the role of campus support programs in identity development, and (c) college as a time and space to (re)construct identity.

Experiences of Marginalization in College

During the same time the foster care system was being formed, so too were higher education institutions (Wilder, 2013). As Gonzales (2018) synthesized, “higher education privileges white patriarchal and middle class cultures” (p. 505), and has a history founded on the exclusion of people of color, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities. With consideration of SEFC specifically, Hallett and Westland (2018) described how “despite institutions seeking to serve diverse student populations, higher education is still built around a middle class environment” (p. 17). Moreover, higher education institutions maintain assumptions of family privilege despite the circumstance that “varying levels of family privilege can be found among [college] students” (Oberts, 2013, p. 76). Arguably, higher education was not developed with the possibility of enrolling and serving students with experience in foster care in mind.

With consideration of Ozmun-Wells’ (2015) family privilege questionnaire described previously, colleagues with lived experience in foster care and I described how family privilege is perpetuated in the context of the college environment and developed considerations for building awareness of family privilege in the context of higher education. The questionnaire included privileges such as, “I don’t have to think about who my emergency contact will be,” “I have someone to visit me during college for parents’ day or family weekend,” and “I have someone to help me move on campus,” that exemplify how college environments assume students have a degree of family privilege (Hoffman, et al., 2019). Whitman (2018) also reflected, “privileges such as an advocate, fallback housing, somewhere to go for the holidays, someone to borrow money from, someone to send them care packages, and an emotional

confidant do not exist for the majority of foster youth students” (p. 87). As experience in foster care is a hidden identity, higher education institutions and faculty, staff, and students are largely able to ignore or dismiss the presence of SEFC on campus and minimize the presence of SEFC proportionally among the student body (Davis, 2006; Whitman, 2018). SEFC can face marginalizing experiences that have implications for identity development in the college environment, such as experiencing barriers to meeting basic needs that jeopardize postsecondary success, having to self-identify to receive support and resources, and navigating a campus environments that may not affirm or acknowledge their presence (Westland & Trotten, 2018).

Prior studies have indicated it is common for SEFC to have difficulty meeting or receiving support for their basic needs during college (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Whitman, 2021). Such challenges can further feelings of difference and reinforce that college campuses are not intended for SEFC (Westland & Trotten, 2018). A participatory action study conducted by Miller et al. (2017), explored how 51 SEFC conceptualized what campus programs could provide to support their postsecondary success. The students had an array of suggestions and in essence reimaged what a campus designed for SEFC might look like, noting several areas of support needed. Notably, students identified challenges with meeting basic needs and requested support with tuition, emergency funds, affordable housing, access to food, medical care, job placement, and life skills.

While a growing number of colleges and universities have campus support programs (CSPs) that provide support and resources, CSPs may not provide all the backing YEFC need to navigate the complexity of campus environments and a society at large that assumes individuals have the support of a stable family structure. Among students involved in one CSP, 31% identified at least one unmet need for services or supports (Dworksy, 2010) and other studies

have noted SEFC involved in CSPs still face challenges to meeting basic needs such as housing and access to physical and mental health care (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017; Opsal & Eman, 2018; Salazar et al., 2013, 2016b). Even among institutions that have CSPs, some SEFC may not be involved in them due to not having information about the CSP, being deterred by having to self-disclose their identity to participate in the CSP, or the CSP having capacity limits, restrictive qualifications, or stringent requirements to participate (Hallett et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2020; Opsal & Eman, 2018; Salazar et al., 2016b).

Experiences with stigma, stereotypes, and developing an internalized self-reliant identity that deters identity disclosure or help-seeking can persist for some SEFC from foster care to college (Bennet, 2020; Hallett et al., 2018; Kinarsky, 2017, Watt et al., 2013). Having to self-disclose a foster care identity to either receive support to meet basic needs or for faculty, staff, or peers to understand their life circumstances can perpetuate feelings of “otherness” for SEFC (Hallett et al., 2018). A fragmented campus environment that puts students in the position of needing to disclose their identity repeatedly to receive support from different entities can also reinforce feelings of difference (Hallett et al., 2018). Miller et al. (2017) specifically urged CSPs to not, “require foster youth and alumni to ‘out’ themselves to be eligible for services” (p. 61), because such disclosure episodes can be immensely challenging for SEFC.

Of concern, some SEFC have marginalizing experiences in college that may further silence their disclosure and help-seeking behavior. One study surveyed SEFC and found 61% reported they had heard or read insensitive comments about YEFC on campus and 44% reported feeling pressure to keep their foster care experience private on campus (Kinarsky, 2017). Only 33% of participants reported they felt comfortable sharing their foster care identity on campus (Kinarsky, 2017). A SEFC in a study by Westlund and Trotten (2018) shared, “Here it comes

that feeling, like I'm dumb, worthless. I questioned if I would be able to make it another year. Success is not for people like me, you know those of us in foster care" (p. 94). Such reflections from SEFC in earlier studies underscore the feelings of invalidation SEFC can face that may span from their experience in foster care through to college.

The feelings among SEFC of loneliness, invisibility, and not being as valued on campus as their peers with normative families is reflected in several studies (Hallett et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2018, 2020; Jones & Dean, 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Opsal & Eman, 2018). Participants in one study shared suggestions for how interactions with faculty and staff could be more affirming of their foster care identity and the need for creating supportive processes that facilitate disclosure of a foster care identity (Miller et al., 2017). Some studies have reported SEFC have negative experiences in the classroom related to their foster care identity. SEFC have described being impacted by discussions on "family topics" in the classroom, felt their faculty were not understanding, were unsure their faculty cared about them, and did not know if faculty would be able to connect them with support resources related to their identity or experiences (Hallett et al., 2018; Skobba, 2018; Westland & Trotten, 2018). Summarizing their experiences with faculty on campus, a student in one study described how "the majority of professors don't really understand, in particular, foster students" (Miller, 2020, p. 3). Other studies have documented SEFC may have similar experiences with campus staff. In a study of 12 SEFC, Tobolowsky et al. (2017) reported participants had experiences with staff not providing support because they were unfamiliar with the needs of SEFC or the resources that could help them.

Beyond simply being familiar with the lived experiences of SEFC, some scholars have suggested faculty and staff relaying affirming views of those with experience in foster care may have an important role in SEFC developing a positive self-concept (Phillips et al., 2015; Salazar

et al., 2016b; Unrau et al., 2020; Watt et al., 2013; Westland & Trotten, 2018). Unfortunately, SEFC may not encounter affirming viewpoints, in some cases even among CSP staff that are familiar with SEFC. One study of 12 CSPs reported some comments from staff that revealed deficit-based perspectives of SEFC. In the study, rather than critiquing systemic barriers, some staff identified the personal challenges of SEFC as a barrier to increasing college retention, stating “they don’t know how to problem solve well,” “they sabotage themselves,” “drugs and alcohol are the largest issue,” and SEFC view themselves as “*terminally unique*” (Hernandez and Naccarato, 2010, pp. 763-764). While personal challenges may be a factor among many others that influence persistence and graduation of SEFC, these statements are harmful generalizations that largely position SEFC in a deficit manner decontextualized of the systemic influences that shape the educational experiences and outcomes of this population.

Although the notion of SEFC being “terminally unique” with the implication they largely create their own barriers is fallacious, it is important to acknowledge the ways experience in foster care may uniquely shape the lives of SEFC. Participants in Miller et al.’s (2017) study identified it is important for campuses to recognize “the needs of foster youth are different from other ‘groups’ on campus” (p. 61). While SEFC and the larger population of students determined by the FAFSA to be under the age of 24 and have independent status (e.g., due to homelessness, death of both parents) may hold some similarities as they often share the experience of not having the support of a stable family during college (Opsal & Eman, 2018), studies have documented differences to other peer groups such as low income first-generation college students (Day et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2013; Whitman, 2018; Unrau et al., 2017). Scholars have described how experiencing foster care may intersect in some ways with the experiences of other marginalized groups on college campuses, while constituting a unique

experience in and of itself (Day et al., 2021; Day et al., 2011; Day et al., 2013; Whitman, 2018; Unrau et al., 2017). When institutions do not attend to the unique experiences of SEFC and instead lump them in with other student groups they're perceived to share similarities with such as low income or first-generation college students, it can render SEFC invisible and fail to acknowledge how a foster care identity, in conjunction with their other identities, may uniquely affect their college experience (Johnson, 2021; Whitman, 2018; Unrau et al., 2020).

Campus Support Programs and Other Sources of Support During College

Acknowledging SEFC aspire to attend college, are present on many college campuses, and have unique needs during college that are otherwise unaddressed in the campus setting, some colleges and universities have established CSPs to provide resources to improve college access, retention, degree attainment, and overall well-being for SEFC (Emerson & Bassett, 2010; Davis, 2006; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Geiger et al., 2018; Keating, 2022b; Lopez, 2018; Miller al., 2017; Okpych, 2012; Randolph & Thompson, 2017; Salazar et al., 2016b; Schelbe, 2018; Whitman, 2023). The first CSP for SEFC began in 1998 at California State University, Fullerton (CSU-Fullerton, 2019; Day et al., 2017; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010). Today, there are nearly 100 CSPs listed on a national resource map maintained by Fostering Success Michigan (n.d.), while Okpych et al. (2020) identified there are over 100 CSPs in the state of California alone. A study of 401 California young adults who experienced foster care and enrolled in college reported 52% of participants were involved in a CSP. Although less than half persisted through their first two semesters of college, those who were involved in a CSP were significantly more likely to persist (Okpych et al., 2020). Such findings suggest, as the number of CSPs across the nation have grown over the past 20 years (Geiger et al., 2018), it is likely those involved with CSPs make up

a sizable percentage of SEFC who persist to college graduation, making it important to consider how CSPs may contribute to the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

While CSPs vary widely in their structure, eligibility requirements, and type of support offered (e.g., scholarships, coaching services, pre-college outreach, mentoring, peer activities, year-round housing, mental health supports) (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009, 2010; Geiger et al., 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010), there are a few frameworks that provide recommendations for implementing CSPs and what resources they might offer (Emerson & Bassett, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Salazar et al., 2016a). From a task force that took a youth-centered approach, Casey Family Programs (2001) identified the *It's My Life*, Seven Life Domains as a framework for understanding the interconnection of several facets of life that are important in the transition to adulthood. The Seven Life Domains include: education, cultural and personal identity, supportive relationships and community connections, physical and mental health, life skills, finances and employment, and housing (Casey Family Programs, 2001). Further, Emerson and Basset (2010), took a case study approach to examining existing CSPs and created Casey Family Programs' *Supporting Success: A Framework for Program Enhancements*, outlining 12 core elements of effective CSPs (e.g., designated leadership and staffing; year-round housing, financial aid; planned transitions to, during, and following college). Day et al. (2017) described how one CSP used the Seven Life Domains and Supporting Success Frameworks to guide how the CSP supported SEFC, with attention to the interconnected nature of the seven life domains. A SEFC in a study by Collins et al. (2023) reported how a CSP that used the Seven Life Domains framework for program implementation "allows a student, including myself, to understand yourself, who you are as a person" (p. 13). It is particularly notable that the Seven Life Domains Framework suggests CSPs should provide support for the personal and cultural

identity development of SEFC and acknowledges the interconnections among the domains with consideration of personal and cultural identity during college and into adulthood (Casey Family Programs, 2001; Day et al., 2017).

Correspondingly, in an effort to support positive identity development for SEFC, some CSPs have had documented success with using strengths perspectives, trauma informed approaches, youth voice and/or self-determination strategies (Bennett et al., 2020, 2023; Geiger et al., 2016; Hass et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2015; Piel et al., 2020; Sensiper & Barragan, 2017, Watt et al., 2013). Demonstrating how CSPs may have a critical role in supporting positive views of self and building self-efficacy, students in one study rated a CSP highest on the measure of “helping them believe in themselves; specifically that they could enter and be successful in college” (Phillips et al., 2015, p. 56). A student in another study, spoke of how they were both motivated by and felt a sense of accountability to their CSP, explaining, “I felt like they really believed in me...how could I let them down after putting so much into me?” (Westland & Trotten, 2018, p. 96). While more widespread evaluations of CSPs are needed (Collins et al., 2023; Schelbe, 2019), studies have reported SEFC connected with CSPs had higher GPAs, persistence, and/or graduation rates compared to SEFC who were not connected with CSPs (Huang et al., 2018; Kinarsky 2017; Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Okpych et al, 2020; Unrau et al., 2017; Watt et al., 2013). Further 77% of participants in one study reported their CSP was essential to their ability to graduate (Unrau et al., 2017).

In addition to supporting positive self-views that may support academic achievement and persistence to graduation, CSPs have also helped students feel a sense of belonging, provided a safety net, and created a family environment with other students who had similar life experiences (Cantú, 2014; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Gillum et al, 2018; Horn, 2020; Huang et al., 2020;

Kinarsky, 2017; Opsal & Eman, 2018; Watt et al., 2013). A participant in one study stated the CSP they were involved with “provided a nurturing environment on campus, I felt emotionally safe and that someone cared” (Dworksy and Pérez 2010, p. 262). Moreover, Bennett (2020), and Bennett et al., (2023) detailed a humanistic coaching approach used by many CSPs which develops a transformational interdependent relationship between SEFC and a CSP staff member who provides support, promotes skill development, and encourages the help seeking behavior that may otherwise be diminished as a result of experiences in foster care that more often promote survivalist self-reliance. Students in a few studies identified their CSP as the place they can go for support no matter what, or the place they can go when there’s no one else they can turn to (Dworksy & Pérez, 2010; Horn, 2019; Huang et al., 2020; Opsal & Eman, 2018). In essence, CSPs may have a role in cultivating a degree of virtual family privilege (Bennett, 2020), which Seita (2001, 2014) contends communities have a responsibility for cultivating when such relationships may be absent or diminished for a person with foster care experience. In a survey of several students engaged with CSPs, 71% indicated the program helped them with their most significant challenges such as adjusting to college, balancing school and work, finding stable housing, or overcoming feelings of being profoundly alone (Dworksy & Pérez, 2010).

Of particular interest, 75% of students involved in one CSP reported it was a safe space to share their foster care identity (Kinarsky, 2017). While relatively positive, the findings of Kinsarky’s study are also concerning as they indicate 25% of participants did not perceive even a program specifically established to serve SEFC was a safe space to share their foster care identity. Relatedly, some CSPs are noted as having a role supporting SEFC with reframing the term “foster youth” as a means of reducing internalized stigma (Hallett et al., 2018; Watt et al., 2013) and “managing barriers and stigma, and strategic disclosure of life history, identities, and

labels” (Phillips et al., 2015, p. 53). A SEFC in a study by Watt et al., (2013) recalled their awareness of the statistics of how many YEFC earn a bachelor’s degree, stating, “It’s all negative. All the information for foster kids is negative. Everything that is in the news is negative. There’s nothing positive that you can see or hear regarding foster care. It [the CSP] is counteracting. You are putting us out there in a positive light” (p. 1412). Similar comments from students in a few studies suggest CSPs may have a role in supporting SEFC with (re)claiming and (re)defining their foster care identity (Gillum et al., 2018; Horn, 2019; Piel et al., 2020; Watt et al., 2013).

Students in several studies have also expressed the value of the peer support they received through involvement in CSPs and described the motivation they experienced through connecting with others who share the experience of being in foster care as a youth (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Gillum et al., 2018; Horn, 2020; Huang et al., 2019, 2020; Jones & Dean, 2020; Opsal & Eman, 2018; Watt et al., 2013). Demonstrating how connections with peers in CSPs can help SEFC make meaning of their experiences one participant in the study by Watt et al. (2013) shared:

What really blew my mind was that I could come in with a group of people just like me, who had similar experiences, and that we could come together and talk in a non-threatening way and explore our pasts ... to do it with other people who have lived what I have lived, that is very powerful. And to do it from the other side of the fence, to say yeah, we went through all of that but look where we are now? Now let’s laugh about that. That’s something that’s been able to let me reach back into the past and let some of those things go so that I can propel myself even further on my personal path. (p. 1414)

Other students involved in this CSP shared how their experiences with the program made them want to connect with other YEFC to be a support and help them redefine their foster care experience in a positive way (Watt et al., 2013). Consequently, amidst navigating feelings of

difference in college, these findings signal CSPs may be instrumental to the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for SEFC who are involved with them.

College as a Space to Construct Identity for Students with Experience in Foster Care

Beyond CSPs, the campus environment in general, consisting of an array of supports and barriers, is a social-environmental context in which identity is developed and (re)constructed (Patton et al., 2016). As demonstrated by various student development theories, college provides a time and context during which students' identities develop both in a general sense and with attention to specific facets of their identities or intersections of their identities (Patton et al., 2016). Although there is not a student development theory that describes how students with a foster care identity come to understand their identity during college or develop and (re)construct a foster care identity during this unique time in their life, scholars have provided indication that college uniquely shapes the identities of many SEFC (Okumu, 2013, 2014).

Hernandez and Naccarato (2010) acknowledged that the transition to college for some SEFC “may pose questions of identity, class mobility, self-efficacy, self-actualization, and the right to goal attainment” (p. 764). Yet, scholars have documented SEFC have a strong desire to defy the statistics and dominant narratives telling them of their likelihood of success (Keating, 2022a; Lovitt & Emerson, 2008; Smith, 2017; Tobolowsky et al., 2017; Unrau et al., 2012). A student in one study demonstrated how they were reframing deficit views others held about SEFC stating, “others have us believe that we are inadequate because of our experience but it’s quite the opposite. We are stronger individuals because of what we’ve endured in our lives” (Salazar et al., 2016b, p. 269). Examining how 23 SEFC experienced simultaneous vulnerabilities yet were also resilient, Rios and Rocco (2014) identified participants in their study embodied several strengths including: perseverance, responsibility, resourcefulness, diligence,

motivation, goal orientation, and self-efficacy (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Likewise, a study by Unrau et al. (2017) suggested SEFC may be the epitome of the engaged student population colleges seek to enroll as participants were more academically motivated, had a more positive attitude toward college, and a stronger desire to finish college than the national first-year student population (Unrau et al., 2017). Results from studies like these acknowledge the many strengths of SEFC and the ways they may (re)make meaning of a foster care identity in the context of college.

Okumu (2013, 2014) conducted one of the only studies to date and to my knowledge to consider the meaning making process of SEFC in the college environment that considered identity development along with other aspects of the college transition. Okumu conducted a dissertation study (2013) that was later published as an article (2014), in which CGT was used to explore how eight first- and second-year college students at “select four-year universities and two-year community colleges made meaning of their personal identity, feelings, thoughts, interpersonal relationships, experiences, and needs” (Okumu, 2014, p. 11) in their transition to college. Like the findings of other studies, Okumu (2014) identified participants “expressed feelings of isolation and estrangement in the transition to college but these perceptions were balanced by increased self-esteem, feelings of self-sufficiency, and optimism in the face of a new beginning” (p. 14). More specifically, Okumu (2013, 2014) found the college environment contributed to feelings of empowerment and supported participants’ development, despite participants also reporting experiences of marginalization during college.

Ultimately, despite challenges in the college environment, the transition to college was a time in which “students began to interpret their life experiences relative to foster care in a different light and felt empowered to define themselves in new, more positive ways” (Okumu,

2014, p. 22). The findings of Okumu's (2013, 2014) CGT study were *grounded conceptualizations*, providing the opportunity for future studies to engage in theory development at greater levels of abstraction to propose a grounded theory on how SEFC make meaning of their personal identity. Moreover, Okumu's (2013, 2014) study focused on the meaning making process of the transition to college with consideration of identity development for SEFC in one region of the United States, supporting the need for further research more specifically on the meaning making process of a foster care identity, beyond the transition to college, with consideration of a wider range of participant experiences. Okumu's (2014) study was "the first research of its kind to explore meaning-making dynamics of emancipated foster youth transitioning into higher education" (p. 24). Although Okumu (2013, 2014) suggested further research be conducted, in 10 years, no studies to date and to my knowledge have explicitly explored the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in relation to the college environment, additionally underscoring the need for the present study. Next, I will discuss the relevant literature on the identity development of CGEFC.

Identity Development of College Graduates with Foster Care Experience

While the literature on SEFC, particularly those involved with CSPs has grown in recent years, there largely remains "limited knowledge about what life is like for young adults with experience in foster after graduating with a baccalaureate degree" (Unrau et al., 2020, p. 1). As Gillum et al., (2016) examined in a literature review it was largely not until 2005 that studies on the general outcomes of CGEFC were published and Fitch (2019) identified such studies have been predominantly problem focused and report primarily college credential or material outcomes. However, some CGEFC have affirmed the importance of acknowledging the presence of a foster care identity after college graduation (Daniels, 2015, Fitch, 2019; The Foster Scholars,

2020, Whitman, 2016). In a submission to *The Imprint*, Whitman (2016) specifically described how engagement with CGEFC is imperative, critiquing how presenting only the experiences of youth currently in foster care conveniently puts a timestamp on how long a person's lived experience in foster care is valid and facilitates the co-opting of youth's narratives in a manner that can be manipulated, and deployed to fit "into the agenda of the nonprofit industrial complex" (Whitman, 2016, para. 7). As a doctoral student at the time, Whitman (2016) reflected, "There is no expiration date on my foster care experience ... [it] is not milk—something to use or discard by a certain date. I am still here ... Therefore, my foster care experience is still very much relevant" (Whitman, 2016, para. 12). While prior research is limited, I discuss the available literature on the following topics: (a) college graduation as a second emancipation, (b) the well-being outcomes of CGEFC, and (c) the retrospective perceptions of CGEFC on their college experience.

Graduating College as a Second Emancipation

Gamez (2017) described how life after college graduation is a unique transition and context during which aspects of the foster care experience and a foster care identity may continue to impact people with experience in foster care into adulthood. In a dissertation study of 22 participants who were preparing to graduate or had recently graduated with a bachelor's degree, Gamez (2017) discussed how students experienced moving into, moving through, and moving out of the college environment from the perspective of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg 1991, 1984). In a national presentation of the findings, Gamez (2018) summarized participants' experiences transitioning to life after college graduation as a second emancipation as participants described the transition in parallel to their original emancipation from foster care. Participants described transitions following foster care with a similar vividness and emotionality

and relayed how in both cases they lacked family support, had limited access to resources, and experienced a degree of risk and uncertainty for their future. Likewise, in a submission to *The Imprint*, Daniels (2015) described how she had achieved various definitions of success as a college graduate, yet described the ways she still struggled, writing, “the very thing that caused my entry into foster care remains a constant in my life ... I’ve struggled to get to this point. I’m *still* struggling to keep myself from cracking that I’ve been motherless for 25 years” (Daniels, 2015, para. 11). The experiences of CGEFC that have been documented by scholars with lived experience in foster care underscores the impact of the foster care experience continues into adulthood and after college graduation.

Understanding experience in foster care continues to impact people with experience in foster care after graduation with a bachelor’s degree, one CSP specifically piloted a program for CGEFC to provide continued mentorship and navigational support after college graduation (Sensiper & Barragán, 2017). Other scholars have also discussed how experience in foster care impacts various life transitions in adulthood. For example, a participant in Fitch’s (2019) study who enlisted in the military after exiting foster care and later enrolled in college as a veteran, also described the transition as parallel to their emancipation from foster care for the ways their exit from the military was abrupt, accompanied by great uncertainty, and left them without housing or provision of basic needs. Such findings suggest the impact of the foster care experience is not bound to time spent in foster care and rather it affects individuals’ perceptions of other life transitions into adulthood. Further, the vividness and emotion with which participants in the study conducted by Gamez (2017) described transitions they faced as parallel to their emancipation from foster care, suggests the impact of the foster care experience may not

wane linearly over time, rather it may be piqued across one's lifespan by circumstances that mirror prior experiences in foster care.

Outcomes After College Graduation

The concerns participants in Gamez (2017) study shared about having limited support resources and experiencing great uncertainty during their transition from college to life after graduation have also been documented by a few studies that examined the life outcomes of CGEFC. While some studies have indicated a bachelor's degree narrows or eliminates the gap in employment rates and individual income between CGEFC and the general population of college graduates (Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Salazar 2013), having a bachelor's degree does not inherently guarantee positive outcomes across all life domains and does not ensure the development of a positive identity. Rather, studies have documented an array of well-being outcomes for CGEFC, reporting positive outcomes on some measures while also identifying areas CGEFC experience challenges that may impact identity development (Salazar et al., 2013, Unrau et al, 2020).

Identifying some of the challenges this population faces following college graduation, Salazar (2013) reported there were differences on outcome measures between 250 CGEFC with a bachelor's degree who had been recipients of a national scholarship program, and a general population group matched for age and degree. The general population had higher levels of self-reported job security, household yearly earnings, health, mental health, financial satisfaction, home ownership, and happiness, and had lower levels of public assistance usage than CGEFC. Relatedly, Schelbe and Jackson (2020) reported many participants in their study faced financial challenges, felt isolated, and some had challenges meeting basic needs and felt unprepared to live on their own one year after graduating from college, despite having been involved with a CSP in

college. On the other hand, Kelly et al. (2021) examined the impact of social and emotional supports during college on post-graduation outcomes of 241 CGEFC with a bachelor's degree or higher and found higher levels of social support in college was associated with higher levels of happiness after college and more frequent socialization with other students while in college was associated with a lower likelihood of receiving public assistance after college. Considering these findings together, amidst the challenges CGEFC may face after graduation, there may be mediating factors that support positive identity development and outcomes.

Other studies specifically examined outcomes after college graduation with consideration of the Seven Life Domains Framework (Casey Family Programs, 2001). While the model includes the personal and cultural identity domain, focus on the identity domain in research has been limited. Unrau et al. (2020) examined the outcomes of 41 CGEFC who obtained a bachelor's degree from 2010 to 2017 who had participated in one CSP during their time in college. A web survey asked participants quantitative and qualitative questions about their well-being in the following life domains: employment, housing, finances, health, relationships, and life skills. Although the CSP provided support in the personal and cultural identity domain (Unrau et al., 2017, 2020) and nearly all the other life domains were addressed by the survey, the authors did not report on the status of participants' outcomes related to the personal and cultural identity domain, however, some of the participants' responses to the survey relayed identity outcomes. Out of the options provided on the survey, participants indicated they perceived the CSP was most helpful in strengthening their self-awareness, and the life skill they were most prepared for after graduation was self-advocacy. In addition, qualitative responses coded for the open-ended question of "what has been your greatest achievement since graduation from college" resulted in 6% of responses being coded as "understanding themselves better" (Unrau et

al., 2020, p. 6). It is possible that if participants had been presented with self-understanding as one of many pre-determined response options, an even greater proportion of participants may have indicated self-understanding was their greatest accomplishment since graduation. In all, this finding suggests for at least some CGEFC, CSPs may support their continued meaning making and self-understanding as they continue their lives after college graduation.

Correspondingly, Salazar and Schelbe (2021) also analyzed results from a survey of college graduates with an associate degree or higher and reported that out of the seven life domains addressed during college, responses indicated three domains, (a) supportive relationships and community connections, (b) life skills, and (c) physical and mental health had an association with the post-college outcomes they measured. The post-college outcomes measured included employment status, home ownership, satisfaction with their financial situation, job satisfaction, and mental health. Salazar and Shelbe (2021) did not find the cultural and personal identity domain to have an association with post-graduation outcomes, however, the domain was only measured by two indicators. One indicator was based on a composite score related to cultural supports received during college (e.g., did participants receive cultural supports they needed and if so, were they satisfied with them) and the other indicator was a composite score based on perceived foster care stigma during college (e.g., did participants feel people knowing about their foster care experience would be helpful, harmful, or neither). These measures do not represent the full complexity of well-being under the personal and cultural identity domain during or after college but do suggest comfort with disclosure may be a component of developing a positive foster care identity.

Further, while the overall domain of personal and cultural identity was not associated with post-college outcomes, one of the indicators of the domain, stigmatization, was associated

with financial satisfaction. Participants who had lower feelings of stigmatization in college had higher financial satisfaction after graduation. Although the studies conducted by Salazar and Schelbe (2021) and Unrau et al., (2020) had limited focus on identity development, the findings provide an understanding of some of the well-being outcomes that may coincide with continued development of a foster care identity after college graduation.

Expanding understanding of the outcomes of college graduates with foster care experience from a race conscious approach, Unrau et al.'s, (2020) study compared the self-reported outcomes of both racial minority CGEFC (i.e., Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, or multi-racial) to those of white CGEFC. The survey results indicated participants in the racial minority grouping had a poorer perspective of their life after graduation, had fewer categories of people they were in a supportive relationship with, and felt less prepared overall for life after graduation than their white peers. The association between race and the life outcomes of CGEFC was also replicated in Salazar and Schelbe's (2021) study that found Black participants reported poorer outcomes than white participants on each of the post-graduation outcomes measured in the study, including employment status, home ownership, satisfaction with their financial situation, job satisfaction, and mental health. Unrau et al. (2020) discussed how racial minority CGEFC, and particularly Black CGEFC, may experience the effects of systemic racism as they transition to adulthood with impact on their outlooks on life and well-being outcomes. These studies reinforce it is necessary to acknowledge and engage racial identity at the intersections of a foster care identity in research studies. An intersectional awareness that considers a foster care identity and other social and personal identities is necessary to adequately understand and represent the experiences of CGEFC.

College Graduates Retroactive Perceptions of Their Identity During College

A series of recent studies have explored the retrospective perceptions CGEFC have of their college experience, including factors that served as strengths, supported their success, or presented challenges in college (Fitch, 2019; Hass et al., 2014; Horn, 2020; Medelin & Jaeger, 2021; Salazar et al., 2016b; Sarubbi, 2019). Although these recent studies did not focus exclusively on identity development, the participants often retrospectively described aspects of a foster care identity as playing a considerable role in their college experience whether as a strength, support, and/or challenge. These studies not only suggest a foster care identity may shape the experiences of SEFC during college, but also affirm experiences with identity during college may remain the subject of continued meaning making after college graduation as demonstrated by the retrospective reflections of CGEFC.

Salazar et al., (2016b) led one of the first exploratory studies to examine the retrospective perspectives of CGEFC on the strengths, challenges and supports they experienced while in college that affected their success. Conducting qualitative content analysis of survey data collected in 2010 from 248 CGEFC who had obtained an associate degree or higher and had been a part of a national scholarship program for SEFC, Salazar et al., (2016b) considered how resilience can be facilitated by opportunities to develop self-authorship, a concept that draws from Kegan's (1982, 1994) concept of meaning making used in the conceptual framework of this dissertation study. Salazar et al. (2016) identified seven global themes that have an impact on the college success of CGEFC and two of the themes, *positive self* and *overcoming*, are particularly relevant to meaning making and identity development. Both positive self and overcoming were strengths that participants retrospectively reflected had supported their success in college yet were also marked by corresponding challenges.

The theme of positive self in the study conducted by Salazar et al. (2016b), encompassed participants' perceptions that their success in college was facilitated by them engaging their strengths, including self-determination, open-mindedness, and finding opportunity amidst adversity. However, participants also reflected on negative attitudes that challenged their success in college such as low self-confidence, low self-esteem, feelings of being abandoned, lonely, afraid, fearful of failing without a safety net, and being worried about leaving their family behind. Overcoming as a strength encompassed a range of participants' experiences, including a desire to prove others wrong, feel normal, achieve what others around them had not, and a general feeling of persisting despite their past circumstances. Salazar et al., (2016b) identified that participants engaged their characteristics like stubbornness, fear of failure, and perfectionism as strategies to help them overcome, relating to earlier findings of survivalist self-reliance and pseudoindependence as a component of a foster care identity (Kools, 1999; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Demonstrating how being a CGEFC was symbolic of overcoming, one participant stated, "I went through 14 years of abuse ... 4 years of college was a sign that I made it!" (Salazar et al., 2016b, p. 270). This participant's reflection may suggest having a college degree is an important part of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC. Amidst strengths and supports, participants simultaneously described discouragement resulting from the daily pressures of college life, facing the high expectations of self and others, and having a lack of clarity for their future plans as being barriers to their college success.

Relatedly, a study by Medlin and Jaeger (2021) identified clarity of future career plans may be an important factor that supports the success and well-being of CGEFC. Medlin and Jaeger (2021) conducted a narrative study with an anti-deficit framework to understand the personal strengths seven participants who were college graduates or were nearing college

graduation with a bachelor's degree had utilized to overcome obstacles and succeed in college. From the participant narratives the authors identified five strengths they designated as *foster kids capital*, including: fortitude, self-reliance, compassion, optimism, and motivation. They suggested that "identifying this capital could have positive implications by providing a counternarrative to the prevailing stigma surrounding foster care alumni and could be utilized in university efforts to support their success" (Medlin & Jaeger, 2021, p. 158). While Medlin and Jaeger (2021) did not reference the work of Yosso (2005) who conceptualized community cultural wealth, there are parallels in their respective approaches to shift power and rhetoric in and of communities. Yosso (2005) conceptualized community culture wealth to acknowledge the "various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth," therein shifting from a "deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups (p. 69). Similarly, Medlin and Jaeger's (2021) conceptualization of foster kids capital offers a new way of thinking about the strengths of people with experience in foster care as forms of capital they may develop through their lived experiences.

A unique contribution of Medlin and Jaeger's (2021) study was their identification of *compassion* as a form of capital that facilitated success for CGEFC. Compassion as capital was identified from participants' narratives, as they made meaning from the trauma and hardships they experienced, used it to inform their empathy for other marginalized populations, and many used it to inspire their studies and future career plans to serve others and engage in social change. Similarly, Hail (2019) conducted a retrospective study with nine CGEFC from five public institutions in Oklahoma on the factors that supported their persistence in, or completion of college with a bachelor's degree and one key finding was that participants' success was

connected to their strong desire to help others. The participants pursued areas of undergraduate study that would prepare them for a career path where they could support others in circumstances like what they experienced in life. Aligning with this perspective of compassion capital, Unrau et al. (2021), identified most of the CGEFC in their study were volunteering in their communities or giving resources to foster care related efforts while Forenza (2016b) reported YEFC affiliated with a YAB connected their career plans with a desire to help others. These recurring findings support the consideration that identity-aligned career pathways and community engagement efforts may be a component of the continued meaning making process of developing a foster care identity into adulthood for CGEFC.

Similar to Medlin and Jaeger's (2021) anti-deficit approach that yielded the finding of foster kids capital, Sarubbi (2019), engaged Funds of Knowledge (Vélez Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005) as an assets-based approach for a participatory action dissertation research study that identified the strengths five CGEFC utilized to achieve success in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree or higher credentials. Three of the five participants were in a graduate degree program at the time of the study which supported their reflection of the assets they utilized to achieve success in their undergraduate and graduate education, further suggesting the experience of foster care has impacts on CGEFC that can extend beyond their graduation with a bachelor's degree.

Two of the *funds of knowledge as resiliency strategies* reported in Sarubbi's (2019) study that are especially relevant to understanding the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity are *combatting stereotypes* and *compartmentalization*. Like Salazar et al.'s (2016b) theme of overcoming, Sarubbi (2019) described how the strategy of combating stereotypes was experienced by participants as both a barrier and a source of motivation. Sarubbi (2019)

expressed how “participants were each confronted with stereotypes of being juvenile delinquents, criminals, mentally unstable, and almost always considered ‘at-risk’ youth. They shared these stigmas and stereotypes manifested in all realms of their everyday life and relationships” (p. 180). Likewise, participants described being pervasively aware of the statistics indicating their probability of failure in college and risk in life overall. Sarubbi (2019) recognized how participants navigated stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1998), being careful to not confirm stereotypes by avoiding misbehavior or actions that would jeopardize their pathway to success and engaged in persistent overachieving in the college environment as a means of internally and externally reinforcing their legitimacy. Sarubbi (2019) identified “foster care alumni must balance the duality of internalizing stereotypes and simultaneously overcoming them [...] the personal impacts of time in care can be incredibly powerful and enduring” (p. 184), underscoring the ongoing cognitive labor of identity maintenance that can extend across the lifespan of CGEFC.

Sarubbi (2019) also identified how participants used compartmentalization as an asset to achieve success. Participants kept parts of their experiences and identity separate “as strategic tools in concealing their identity as a foster care alumni or suppressing their enduring struggle” (p. 185). While participants described keeping many of their challenges to themselves and some explicitly shared their fear of disclosure, Sarubbi (2019) reported how over time many participants had practiced disclosure of their experiences and foster care identity in humanizing spaces and they received support or found it easier to share their experiences and identities in future disclosure instances. The findings of Sarubbi’s (2019) study suggest identity disclosure may be an important part of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Also related to identity disclosure among adults with experience in foster care, Horn (2020) conducted a qualitative study of nine CGEFC who had a bachelor's degree on their retrospective perceptions of the internal and external resources they used and what supported and deterred their help seeking behavior during college. Sensitizing frameworks for the study included resilience, campus ecology, and stigma. In alignment with the frameworks used, during analysis, Horn (2020) developed eco-maps to create a "view of each participant's social environment and how participants felt engaging these supports" (p. 108). Similar to the prior studies conducted by Salazar et al. (2016b) and Sarubbi (2019), Horn (2020) reported participants fear of the future and the possibility of succumbing to the negative outcomes they knew were prevalent among YEFC served as their motivation and made them want to pursue "college education as the 'golden ticket' which could help them find security they might otherwise not have access to" (p. 110). This further affirms a college degree may be significant to the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Participants described their awareness of the stigma others held about people with experience in foster care, and like the participants in Sarubbi's (2019) study, they described trying to avoid any behavior that would confirm stereotypes others held about people with experience in foster care. Several participants avoided seeking help and connecting with others for fear of confirming negative perceptions or being reminded of their differences from their peers (Horn, 2020). Of particular interest, and a way of counteracting the impact of stigma and stereotypes, participants in Horn's (2020) study described how campus programs that provided support and connection around a particular aspect of their identity such as their socioeconomic status, race, or foster care identity supported their connections to peers. These findings affirm peer support and engagement may have a role in addressing stigma, stereotypes, and supporting positive identity development for CGEFC.

With findings more closely related to a foster care identity, Fitch (2019) conducted a CGT dissertation study that used appreciative inquiry to retrospectively explore the experiences of postsecondary educational success among 11 CGEFC who had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. From the findings of a semi-structured interview and a photo-artifact elicitation exercise, Fitch (2019) identified four themes and developed a corresponding model of foster youth college success. Notably, one of the themes and components of the model of postsecondary educational success was *foster care identity* as participants, “expressed that accepting their foster youth identity was critical to their success and to finding community and belonging” (Fitch, 2019, p. iv). The participants' acceptance of their foster care identity was on a continuum from acceptance to rejection, with most participants describing acceptance of their foster care identity and one participant describing rejection of their identity. One participant described the duality of acceptance and rejection of a foster care identity, stating people with experience in foster care,

Either go two ways when you come out of care, you either never talk about the system, and you say, “I’m gonna put that experience behind me and I’m gonna move forward and never think about that again.” That doesn’t work very well. Or you can really embrace it and own it and work through it and then move forward. (Fitch, 2019, p. 92)

Another participant described their rejection of their foster care identity, equating normalcy with not being associated with foster care as they stated,

Yeah, I just want to be normal mainly. I don’t want to be a foster kid. I don’t want people to feel sorry for me. ... I tried to be normal. Normal as possible. ... I just don’t want people to see me differently, treat me differently. (Fitch, 2019, p. 92)

These participant quotes from Fitch’s (2019) study demonstrate the complexity many people with experience in foster care navigate of whether to claim a foster care identity with awareness that there are repercussions for how others will view and treat them.

Under the foster youth identity theme, Fitch (2019) identified three subthemes that described participants’ experiences with a foster care identity: (a) isolation and difference, (b)

strengths and intersectionality, and (c) belonging and community. Participants “conveyed experiencing feelings of isolation, a keen awareness of their differences from other students, their search for belonging and community, and ultimately found their strengths to be successful” (Fitch, 2019, p. 91). Several participants expressed how their foster care identity intersected with other aspects of their identity and influenced their college experience in unique ways. Participants identified how college was a time to redefine themselves and establish their identity after experiencing instability in foster care that constrained aspects of their choice and expression. As many participants came to accept their foster care identity and became more involved in aspects of campus life, they identified connecting with peers who shared a foster care identity as meaningful, and some participants discussed the sense of belonging they felt and connections they made in familial terms. While Fitch’s (2019) study was focused on retrospective reflections of CGEFC on their postsecondary educational success, “participants explored themes of identity extensively in their interviews ... and findings [were constructed] that could influence future research [on] the identity development process for foster youth college students and graduates” (p. 103), therein affirming the relevance and need for this study.

Summary

While there is a growing body of research on YEFC and more recently, SEFC, there remains relatively limited research on CGEFC. Many studies on people with experience in foster care have taken a problem focused approach and report academic credential or material outcomes using quantitative approaches. Studies that have used qualitative approaches to engage the voices of people with experience in foster care have largely focused on understanding their experiences in a single context (e.g., foster care, college, CSPs). Studies on CGEFC have often focused on material outcomes after college graduation or their retrospective perspectives on

factors that supported or challenged their success in college. Most studies have been conducted from the perspective of social work with a relative absence of research conducted from the perspective of higher education and student affairs practitioners, despite the growing number of SEFC enrolling in and graduating from college and the need to engage YEFC in even greater numbers in higher education. Consequently, the absence of research from the higher education context perpetuates the experiences of SEFC and CGEFC within college environments as hidden and unknown and positions higher education institutions as exempt from holding responsibility for supporting the positive identity development of SEFC.

Although few studies have focused on identity development, many studies have reported findings that indicate there is a foster care identity present among many people with experience in foster care and that such an identity may develop over time in the contexts of foster care, college, and into adulthood after college graduation. Indicative of the paucity of research on the identity development of people with experience in foster care, studies that have examined aspects of a foster care identity have used grounded theory, CGT, or extended case methods to generate a preliminary understanding of this unexplored area (Fitch, 2019; Havlicek and Samuels, 2018; Kools, 1997, 1999; Okumu, 2013, 2014; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). While a few studies have examined aspects of a foster care identity among YEFC or SEFC, no studies to date and to my knowledge have explicitly set out to focus on understanding a foster care identity among CGEFC. To address the need to understand the experiences CGEFC have with the development of a foster care identity, the aim of this CGT study was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC. The intended outcome of this study was to develop an emerging theoretical perspective on foster care identity development, grounded in the experiences of participants. My aspiration was that the findings would provide insight to

child welfare professionals, higher education practitioners, legislators, people with experience in foster care, and others engaged with this population, so the foster care identities of those with lived experience in foster care could be affirmed and the identity development of people with experience in foster care could be better supported across the lifespan.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe the research methodology I employed in this constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study. The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. The intended outcome of this study was to develop an emerging theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity grounded in the experiences of participants. One primary research question and one sub-question guided this study:

1. What is the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates formerly in foster care?
 - a. What are the critical influences in the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity?

In the sections that follow, I describe the methodology and more specifically describe the constructivist research paradigm and the corresponding axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology of this CGT study (Crotty, 2015; Lincoln et al., 2011). Next, I detail the corresponding methods carried out in this study, including a description of participant recruitment; data collection through a series of semi-structured interviews; and data analysis through coding, ongoing theoretical sampling, and memo-writing that guided theory construction. I also discuss how I practiced reflexivity, ensured trustworthiness, and addressed ethical considerations in the study.

Constructivism Paradigm

In this section, I describe the research paradigm that guided this study and its components including the: (a) ontology, (b) epistemology, (c) axiology, (d) methodology using a qualitative

approach, and (e) more specifically the research design of this CGT study. A research paradigm is a coherent social scientific worldview that includes the nature of the reality of the world we live in (ontology), guidance on how that reality can be known and understood (epistemology), why it is important to know that reality (axiology), and appropriate approaches for acquiring knowledge (methodology) (Bazley, 2013; Crotty, 2015; Kuhn, 1962; Lincoln et al., 2011). The research paradigm of this study was constructivism which presupposes that knowledge and identity are socially co-constructed through interactions and through existence within a particular social cultural context (Charmaz, 2014; Crotty, 2015; Grbich, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2011). As further described by Charmaz (2014):

Constructivism brings subjectivity into view and assumes that people, including researchers, construct the realities in which they participate. Constructivist inquiry starts with the experience and asks how members construct it. To the best of their ability, constructivists enter the phenomenon, gain multiple views of it, and locate it in its web of connections and constraints. Constructivists acknowledge that their interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction. (p. 342)

More specifically, “co-construction occurs as we interpret our participants’ meaning and actions and they interpret ours” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 231), accentuating how the act of conducting research is a practice of shared meaning making.

The constructivism paradigm was appropriate as the aim of this study was to understand how participants co-constructed the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, I co-constructed the meaning making process with the participants and sought to engage multiple participant views of the process to identify the complexities. My resulting interpretation of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is itself a social construction developed through the interactions the participants and I shared. Through the research process the participants and I co-constructed meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and in doing so, we actively

continued the process of making meaning and co-constructing a foster care identity together over the course of the study. My interpretation of the semi-structured interviews is presented in the findings of this study in the form of an emerging theoretical perspective that serves as a (re)presentation of the reality the participants and I co-constructed. In the sections that follow I further describe the ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology of the study.

Ontology

Ontology is the belief about the nature of reality (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln et al., 2011). In the constructivism paradigm, the nature of knowledge is “local and specific constructed and co-constructed realities” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 98), and is “co-created through the process of interaction” (p. 107). In alignment with the constructivism paradigm, in this study, knowledge and identity were co-constructed both in the context of participants’ prior experiences and dynamically in the context of the time, virtual space, and dialogue we shared in the participant interviews. As Lincoln et al. (2011) summarized, “as researchers, we must participate in the research process with our subjects to ensure we are producing knowledge that is reflective of their reality” (p. 103). I actively participated throughout the research process to ground the experience in the reality shared with participants by co-constructing the semi-structured interviews with them, carefully attending to the information they shared, seeking clarification when needed, conducting member checking, engaging in an appropriate degree of self-disclosure to support rapport building, and memoing my personal reflections (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also analyzed the data as it was collected, allowing my initial analysis and emerging theory to inform subsequent participant interviews to ensure the knowledge remained grounded in participants’ experiences and our co-constructed reality.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the belief about how researchers come to know a phenomenon and the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon being researched (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln et al., 2011). In alignment with the constructivist paradigm, I engaged each participant as a “co-constructor of knowledge, understanding, and interpretation of the meaning of lived experiences” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 196). Moreover, I was a “passionate participant as a facilitator in this multivoice reconstruction” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 196) of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, while taking care to center the experiences of participants. As a person with prior experience in foster care and a corresponding foster care identity, I was in many ways, “studying [myself] studying [myself] and others” (Preissle, 2006, p. 691). I documented my personal reflections and reflexivity practices in memos throughout the study as further described in this chapter.

Axiology

Axiology is the belief about what is valuable in research (Lincoln et al., 2011). In alignment with the constructivist paradigm, I believe that “knowing is fundamentally valuable as a means to social emancipation which is an end in itself and is intrinsically valuable” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 198). Related to these emancipatory aims, the intended outcome of this study was to better understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and to develop an emerging theoretical perspective of it. As hooks (1994) asserted, “theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (p. 61). In like manner, I sought for this study to hold value for the ways it could have a role in validating those with a foster care identity by

centering their experiences as a phenomenon worth knowing and encourage those who engage with the study's findings to reflect and act to better support people with experience in foster care.

Qualitative Approach to Methodology

Methodology is the appropriate process of seeking knowledge within a paradigm (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln et al., 2011). In the constructivism paradigm, qualitative approaches are used to support robust dialogue between the researcher and participant and to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality (Angen, 2000). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted “the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning making and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 15). Similarly, I used qualitative approaches to engage in-depth dialogue with participants with the aim of understanding participants’ meaning making process of developing a foster care identity through the rich description co-constructed through interviews (Bazley, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Engaging in dialogue with people with experience in foster care was an important aspect of grounding the research in the participants’ experiences, and amplifying their voices, particularly as their voices may not have been centered before, during and/or after foster care (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). Nybell (2013) suggested scholars should amplify the voices of those with experience in foster care and listen to both what is spoken and unsayable as we “create new contexts where young people might speak through the cracks” and “listen long and wide especially when what young people are saying has the potential to unsettle our certainties and transform our world” (p. 1234). Understanding that sustained engagement is necessary to “listen long and wide” in the way that Nybell (2013) suggested, I co-constructed a series of three semi-

structured interviews with participants. This qualitative approach also holds value for the way in which it situated me, the researcher, as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher as a research instrument approach, allowed me to both value and question the ways my foster care identity shaped the meaning I co-constructed with the participants and how I (re)presented our experiences with the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology

I specifically employed CGT methodology to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. CGT is appropriate for this study as it is especially suited for understanding social processes such as identity development, addressing “how” and “what” research questions, and developing a grounded theory of a delimited problem in a specific context (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) defined a process as “unfolding temporal sequences that may have identifiable markers with clear beginnings and endings and benchmarks in between. The temporal sequences are linked in a process and lead to change. Thus, single events become linked as part of a larger whole” (p. 17). Likewise, the intended outcome of this study was to use CGT to consider the links between temporal sequences to co-construct a theoretical perspective on developing a foster care identity.

CGT is an expansion upon the original foundations of classic grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) that includes: (a) focusing on analyzing actions and processes rather than themes, (b) simultaneously collecting data and conducting analysis, (c) constructing analytic codes and categories from the data, (d) using the constant comparison method, (e) advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis, (f) engaging in memo-writing to support theory development, (g) employing theoretical sampling,

and (h) advocating delaying the literature review after data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Engaging constructivist approaches, CGT includes these original conceptualizations of classic grounded theory while avoiding mechanical applications of the grounded theory approach by resisting “notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert” (Charmaz, 2014; p. 13), instead, CGT emphasizes how research is constructed between the researcher and participants, rather than discovered by the researcher (Bazley, 2013; Charmaz, 2014). While classic grounded theory suggests theory will emerge or be discovered as though “there was an objective underpinning truth lying somewhere in the mountain of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 238), CGT asserts the data and analysis are co-constructed by the researcher and participants during the research process.

CGT positions the “researcher and participant in an interpretive exchange where neither enters the research space without the influence of the world, their individual histories, beliefs, assumptions, informing the meanings, they make of each other, their experiences outside and within the research space” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 105). In this way, data and analysis are co-constructed by the researcher with a degree of influence from prior studies and other relevant theories and concepts rather than purporting that the researcher will not be influenced by extant knowledge. Charmaz (2014) suggested drawing from Blumer’s (1969) notion of sensitizing concepts, understanding it is not always possible in research projects, such as a dissertation study, to delay the literature review as suggested by classic grounded theory, nor do researchers ever enter a study as a blank slate even when they do delay the literature review. Rather, “sensitizing concepts give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and questions to raise about their topics. Grounded theorists use sensitizing concepts as tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30). Moreover, it is

key to use sensitizing concepts from the literature review and conceptual framework as a place to start the inquiry, inform the development of the interview guide, and a place from which to depart as ideas further develop with the aim of constructing a theory that is grounded in the participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). In this way, applying CGT methodology guided me to co-construct an abstract theoretical understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity with the participants through data collection, coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling, all while taking into account how data was located in time, place, and situation, and was co-constructed through the research relationship, situation, and social identity locations (Bazley, 2013; Charmaz, 2014; Grbich, 2013).

Employing CGT methodology allowed me to apply grounded theory methods in a systematic yet flexible way to co-construct qualitative data with participants and develop a theoretical perspective grounded in the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2014). CGT was also an appropriate approach for this study given the absence to date and to my knowledge of an existing theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014) to describe the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates with experience in foster care (CGEFC). Additionally, CGT methodology supported my meaningful engagement with my experiences with a foster care identity as I co-constructed the data with participants, attended to what I noticed in the data collection and analysis, pursued hunches through theoretical sampling, and documented my thoughts in memos.

Participants

In this section, I describe how participants were selected for this study, their demographics, and how the proposed sample size was shaped by the concept of theoretical sufficiency. CGT calls for the selection of participants who have first-hand experience with the

research topic to support the in-depth exploration necessary to inform theory development (Charmaz, 2014). To identify and select participants who met the criteria of the study and were likely to be able to provide rich description of their experiences, I used non-probability convenience and purposive sampling (Bazley 2013; Crotty, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria to participate in the study included all the following: (a) be an adult age 18 or older, (b) have experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday, (c) have graduated with a bachelor's degree, and (d) identify as having a foster care identity (see Chapter 1 delimitations section for explanation for why these criteria were selected). As a reminder, foster care identity in this study means experience in foster care is a salient aspect of identity—salient meaning an important aspect of identity or an aspect of identity that frequently shapes or is brought to attention across various life situations (Gecas & Seff, 1990; Morris, 2013; Rosenberg, 1979, Stryker, 1980; Thoits, 2012). Participants in the study received a \$50 Visa gift card incentive for their participation as a small token of my sincere appreciation for sharing their time and perspectives with me (Seidman, 2006).

Using convenience and purposive sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I reached out to individuals and organizations that serve people with experience in foster care. The list of contacts I reached out to is detailed in the Research Participant Recruitment Strategy (see Appendix A). I updated and modified a list developed by Sarubbi (2019) of national agencies and organizations and national peer groups serving people with experience in foster care. I emailed/messaged the research participant recruitment email (see Appendix B) and research participant recruitment flier (see Appendix C) to contacts at organizations listed on the recruitment strategy. While I was prepared to use snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as data collection progressed to fill remaining participant spots by obtaining recommendations

from existing participants of individuals they knew who met the study criteria, I did not need to use this sampling technique as the number of IRB approved participant spots were filled in under seven days.

Demographics

All the participants in this study identified as women, though the study did not have a gender criterion for participation. Participants were accepted into the study based on the order of their interest once I confirmed they met all three of the eligibility criteria for the study including that they: (a) experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday, (b) graduated with a bachelor's degree, (c) identified as having a foster care identity. While participants were encouraged to select a pseudonym to protect their anonymity, several opted to decline the use of a pseudonym which in the context of the interview was tied to the meaning and importance placed on ownership of one's voice and story, particularly given many participants had past experiences where their voice and story were disrespected and co-opted by others, particularly those in positions of power. I discuss the ethical considerations for providing participants the option to decline a pseudonym in the next section. A summary of participant demographics is provided in Table 1, followed by a descriptive summary.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Name	Types of Placements Experienced	Age at Time of Study	Highest Degree Obtained or In Progress	Race/Ethnicity
Ashley (she/her)	Adoptive placement Non-relative foster home	20s	Master's	Black
B (she/her)	Group homes Kinship placement Non-relative foster home Residential center Shelter	30s	Master's	White/Muslim
Clare (she/her)	Kinship placements	40s	Doctorate	White
Danisha (she/her)	Kinship placement Non-relative foster home	30s	Doctorate	White
Elyse (she/they)	Kinship placement Non-relative foster home Residential center	20s	Master's	White
Kim (she/her)	Adoptive placement Non-relative foster home	30s	Post-Baccalaureate Certificate	Black
Simone (she/her)	Residential group home Temporary emergency shelter	30s	Master's	Black and Hungarian
SL (she/her)	Non-relative foster homes	20s	Bachelor's	Native American
Veratta (she/her)	Group home Family/Kinship placement	30s	Master's	Black

Participants were between mid-20s and mid-40s ($M = 33.88$, $SD = 5.26$, $Mdn = 24$), all of whom were women. Among the participants four were white (44.44%), three were Black (33.33%), one was Native American (11.11%), and one was Biracial—Black and Hungarian (11.11%). The participants entered foster care between the ages of 1 and 16 years old ($M = 10.33$, $SD = 4.81$, $Mdn = 12$) due to reasons ranging from abuse, neglect, caretaker inability to cope, and drug abuse by parent(s). Across the participants, they had a range of placement experiences including non-relative foster home (66.67%), kinship placement (55.55%), group homes (44.44%), adoptive placement (22.22%), and shelters (22.22%), with all participants experiencing more than one placement change and almost all experiencing more than one placement type. None of the participants were permanently reunited with their original caregivers of origin and only one established legal permanency through guardianship with their kinship care providers while all others aged out of foster care.

The participants all had earned a bachelor's degree with three first obtaining an associate degree before a bachelor's degree (33.33%), five had obtained a master's degree and two were pursuing a master's degree at the time of the study (77.78%), and two had obtained doctorate degrees (22.22%). At the time of the study, four of the participants were engaged or married (44.44%), two were divorced and presently unmarried (22.22%), and three were single and had never been married (33.33%). Four of the participants were parents (44.44%). Not every participant shared their spiritual or religious beliefs, but among those who did, the views represented included spiritual, Catholic, Christian, and Muslim. The majority of participants shared they had physical, emotional, or developmental diagnoses and/or (dis)ability including anxiety (66.67%), ADHD (33.33%); depression (33.33%), panic attacks (22.22%), physical chronic illness (22.22%), and developmental delays (22.22%) and all relayed experiencing

continued effects of the trauma they had experienced before, during, and/or after foster care. At the time of the study, the participants were all in helping careers and/or the public service sector working in fields including teaching, therapy, higher education, consulting, non-profit leadership, or government, and all were presently or had been previously involved in efforts to spread awareness and/or advocate for people with experience in foster care as part of their professional roles or in uncompensated volunteer leadership capacities.

Sample Size and Theoretical Sufficiency

Next, I describe how the sample size was shaped by the concept of theoretical sufficiency. The sample size of a research study depends on “the questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in progress, and the resources you have to support the study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 101). Some grounded theorists suggest “you keep sampling until your categories are saturated and that this logic supersedes sample size—which may be very small” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 214). Theoretical saturation, or the point at which “no new properties of the theoretical category are [identified]” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 20) is achieved through theoretical sampling which can be done by selecting new participants (with implications for sample size) or can be accomplished by either returning to existing participants with additional questions or adding sources of data beyond interviews (Charmaz, 2014).

A pragmatic approach to sample size maintains theoretical saturation as an aim, while also acknowledging the subjective nature of saturation as a construct (Charmaz, 2014; Wiener, 2007). Bowen (2008) suggested researchers focus “less on sample *size* and more on sampling *adequacy*” (p. 140). In like manner, Dey (1999) argued “theoretical sufficiency” (p. 257) may better align with the co-constructed nature of CGT methods in which categories are not saturated by data but rather *suggested* by data as they are co-constructed by the researcher and the

participants. Charmaz (2014) further discussed the complexity of sample size noting “grounded theory is efficient, but that does not mean a handful of interviews produces a respectable study. Conversely, having a substantial amount of data does not guarantee making an original contribution” (p. 107). Charmaz (2014) suggested, theoretical sufficiency can be achieved with smaller sample sizes when the researcher has met criteria such as: (a) shared language with participants, (b) identified a clearly defined sample in which participants’ have key shared experiences, (c) collected quality data, and (d) set a specific area of inquiry. This study meets the criteria for theoretical sufficiency, as I had shared language with the participants by nature of also having experienced foster care, had clearly defined the sample by carefully setting the participation criteria, and I collected rich data through a series of semi-structured interviews about the specific area of inquiry defined as the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. With the research purpose and research design in mind, I sought to enroll six to eight participants who met the study criteria who would be interviewed three times (for a total of 18-24 interviews). Eight participants were recruited to the study initially, however, one individual completed the first interview and was unable to continue with the second or third interview due to other demands on their time, so one additional participant was recruited to participate in all three interviews. In total nine participants were recruited to the study, with nine participants completing the first interview and eight completing the second and third interview (totaling 25 interviews and over 30 hours of data collection). The number of participants, number of interviews, and the duration of data collection allowed me to gather sufficient data (Dey, 1999), and I was able to engage theoretical sampling through the series of interviews with the participants that guided the development of a theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Data Collection

In this section, I describe how data was collected for this study. Charmaz (2014) asserted, “data collection methods should flow *from* the research question and where we go with it” (p. 27). In this CGT study, in alignment with the research questions, I collected data through a series of three semi-structured interviews I co-constructed with the participants. As emphasized in CGT methodology, data collection took place simultaneously with data analysis to support theoretical sampling and theory development. In the sections that follow, I describe the semi-structured interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are a common method used in CGT studies as they provide the opportunity for “both interviewer and the participant to construct and reconstruct meanings” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 82). Interviews were an appropriate approach for this study focused on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity as interviews themselves can be a “site of exploration, emergent understandings, legitimation of identity, and validation of experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 91). Interviews are a site of a “construction—or reconstruction—of a reality” and a space in which identity is legitimized and further created as “both the interviewer and participant’s performances make and negotiate identity claims” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 79). Interviews provided me with a virtual space to connect in real time with participants about their identity, engage in appropriate mutuality, ask participants open-ended questions that were responsive to our emergent co-constructed dialogue, and center the participants as they shared their experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Crotty, 2015; Dilley, 2000; Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004).

In alignment with CGT and the purpose of this study, I developed the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix D), with an emphasis on understanding the meaning making

process of developing a foster care identity by “learning about participants’ views, experienced events, and actions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 65). I also considered sensitizing concepts from the conceptual framework and literature review as I developed the interview guide while being careful to not restrict the content of interviews too narrowly so that the study remained co-constructed and grounded in the participants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2014). As some of the interview questions asked about social identities in relation to a foster care identity, I prepared a social identity wheel (see Appendix E) to provide participants with a visual to guide their reflections on their social identities.

I pilot tested the semi-structured interview questions with a colleague who had experienced foster care after their 13th birthday, held advanced graduate degrees in social work and higher education, identified as having a foster care identity, and had worked with college students with experience in foster care (SEFC) previously. I asked this individual if they would be willing to pilot the interview questions with me because they held similarities to those who would be invited to participate in this study and the focus of their advanced degrees and their professional experience working with SEFC could support additional insights as I finalized the interview guide. Based on the pilot test of the interview guide I adjusted the tentative order of some interview questions, adjusted my expectations of how many questions I may or may not get to within the interview timeframe, and became aware of questions I may need to be prepared to rephrase or move past if they did not resonate with a participant. I eliminated a few questions based on the pilot study that were described by my colleague as “too abstract.” It was also affirming that my colleague affirmed the interview guide largely reflected the topics they wished to address regarding the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and were open-ended to allow them to address the experiences most important and relevant to them.

Through the semi-structured interviews in this study, I sought to co-construct rich data characterized by thick description that was “detailed, focused, and full” and revealed “participants’ views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 23). Throughout the interviews I “attend[ed] to the situation and construction of the interview, the construction of the research participant’s story and silences, and the interviewer-participant relationship as well as the explicit content of the interview” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 91). My aim was to affirm participants as the experts on their experiences by encouraging them to share with me what they believed was relevant to their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and to share at a level and pace that felt comfortable to them (Charmaz, 2014). To support our co-constructed dialogue and center the participants’ experiences, I “use[ed]—and explore[d]—the interview participant’s terms,” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 87) whenever possible, and let participants know that I “wish[ed] to understand their experience in their words without imposing [my own] on it and thus may ask for more details on what they mean[t] from time to time” (p. 71). Charmaz (2014) also emphasizes it is important the “interviewer listens, observes with sensitivity, and encourages the [participant] to talk” (p. 58). Given this, I attended to the “participant’s language, meanings and actions, emotions and [if their camera was on, their] body language” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 58) throughout the interviews, while listening and encouraging dialogue.

As CGT methodology is characterized by simultaneous data collection and data analysis to support theory development, I conducted a series of three semi-structured interviews, 60-90 minutes each. I listened to the participants’ stories “in their fullness” during each interview, conducted preliminary data analysis, memoing, and reflection after each interview, and followed up in subsequent interviews on “the analytic properties and implications of major processes”

(Charmaz, 2014, p. 86). For example, early in interviews aspects of carrying significant responsibilities and achieving yet not feeling like one had accomplished enough were discussed by participants. Through preliminary analysis, coding, and memoing I was able to identify these constructs and was able to make decisions about how I would engage participants about these constructs in future interviews. To not force constructs on the data, sometimes I patiently waited to see if a construct would naturally come up in the interviews with the other participants and if it did I was prepared to co-construct the dialogue to ask more questions about their experience with the construct and give examples of how it came up for other participants to further construct the properties of the construct. Other times, I planned new interview questions in advance that would allow me to further co-construct with the participants the properties of the construct and various ways it showed up in the meaning making process.

Interviews took place online by Zoom and interviews were recorded with participants' permission. I encouraged the participants to join the Zoom from a location where they would have privacy and let participants know they were welcome to have their cameras off, using only audio, if they preferred. During the first interview, we built rapport and largely discussed what it means to be a person with experience in foster care and the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in a general sense. During the second interview, we continued our conversation from the first interview, informed by my subsequent data analysis and with a greater focus on experiences in college. During the third interview, we continued our conversation from the earlier interviews, informed by my continued data analysis and with a greater focus on experiences in adulthood after college graduation. Throughout the subsequent interviews, I shared with participants my preliminary interpretation of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity based on the data collection and data analysis

completed to date. I invited the participants to react to my preliminary and emerging theory construction and share anything they would like to add, or change, based on their experiences which served as a form of member checking and supported theory generation.

Charmaz offered to researchers, “you may rethink what you seek in an interview, which questions you ask, and when and how you ask them. Your interview guide evolves with your study” (p. 90). Just as Charmaz suggested, the interviews in this study changed focus over time, from semi-structured and participant-centered “to a mutual conversation about theoretical categories as [I sought] to further data to develop categories” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 19). I initially engaged broad coverage of the categories I identified in the data during the interviews and then moved to deep and more complex coverage of the categories in the interviews to strengthen “both the precision and theoretical plausibility of [my] analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p. 89). To support the evolution of the interview structure over time, the interview guide was developed as a non-ordinal list rather than numbered list to indicate questions would not be asked in a prescriptive order so I could be responsive to the direction of the co-constructed interviews. The list of possible questions and topics provided me a balanced level of structure while allowing me the flexibility to follow unanticipated and emergent areas of inquiry that arose during participant interviews. Through preliminary analysis, coding, and memoing I was able to identify these constructs and was able to make decisions about how I would (re)engage participants about these constructs in future interviews. To not force constructs on the data, sometimes I patiently waited to see if a construct would naturally come up in the interviews with the other participants, and if it did, I was prepared to co-construct the dialogue to ask more questions about their experience with the construct and give examples of how it came up for other participants to further co-construct the properties of the construct through discussion of the ways their experiences were

similar or different from others. Other times, I planned new interview questions in advance that would allow me to further co-construct with the participants the properties of the construct and various ways it showed up in their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Throughout the interviews, I followed up on points of discussion with prompts like “That’s interesting, can you tell me more about it?”, “Would you tell me how you define it?”, or “Can you provide an example?” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 69), to help the participants be explicit about their meaning, affirm their understanding of their experiences, and seek guidance on how to interpret their experiences. As appropriate, I also affirmed what participants shared, engaged in a thoughtful degree of mutuality and reciprocity with my own experiences and reflections, and as a form of member checking and theoretical sampling I occasionally shared unidentifiable examples from data analyzed from the earlier participant interviews that affirmed or nuanced our co-constructed discussions. Sharing examples served to validate participants’ experiences individually and as a community, and supported grounding the emerging theory in the complexity and range of experiences represented across the participants. See Appendix F for an excerpt from one of the last first-round interviews that demonstrates examples of how I attended to the participant’s experiences while offering my own reflections and how I engaged in theoretical sampling and member checking by sharing examples and concepts co-constructed in earlier interviews with other participants in a manner that supported further co-construction of the concepts that supported theory generation.

Data Analysis

In this section, I describe my data analysis process, including how I analyzed the semi-structured interviews and how I used memo-writing to shape the theoretical direction. I also describe how I used these components together to construct an emerging theoretical perspective

on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. As noted previously, foundational to CGT, I simultaneously collected data and conducted analysis to maintain a focus on analyzing actions and processes in the data co-constructed with participants in the interviews (Charmaz, 2014). I used constant comparison as a method to guide data analysis and theory development, meaning “emerging codes, categories, properties, and dimensions as well as different parts of the data, [were] constantly compared with all other parts of the data to explore variations, similarities, and differences in the data” (Hallberg, 2006, p. 143). Fundamentally, I approached the data with the question “What is happening here?” (Glaser, 1978, p. 57), and considered what are the basic social or social psychological processes. Further, I considered, how do participants construct the various components of the meaning making process:

Who exerts control over these processes? Under what conditions? What meanings do different participants attribute to the process? How do they talk about it? What do they emphasize? What do they leave out? How and when do their meanings and actions concerning the process change? (Charmaz, 2014, p. 34)

While engaging these considerations, I used the sensitizing concepts as a point “of departure for developing, rather than limiting [my] ideas” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 31) and was careful to not impose “packaged images and automatic answers from extant theories” (p. 244). In this way, I maintained awareness of the sensitizing concepts from the conceptual framework and literature review to inform analysis while maintaining a focus on grounding analysis in the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Analysis of the Semi-Structured Interviews

After each interview concluded, I had the interview transcribed verbatim, noting all utterances the participant and I exchanged, including pauses, false starts, and filler words (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Mclellan et al., 2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I did this with the understanding that the transcription is an important initial form of analysis and that it

could provide early leads on areas I might need to follow in subsequent data collection and analysis and could also bring to light the ways I as the researcher needed to adjust my presence and approach in the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 2008). Before beginning coding in the Dedoose coding software (Dedoose, 2024), I reviewed the memos I wrote that included my notes during the interview and any reflections I made immediately after. I also listened to the audio recording and read through each interview, and I wrote additional memos on what stood out to me from reengaging the interview content a second time. This helped me ground myself in each participant's perspective as I began coding for each interview. I used open coding to assign a word or phrase to the data with the aim of coding "to analyze not summarize" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 159). Initially, I focused on coding for the "possibilities suggested by the data" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 120) and I took care to be "short, simple, spontaneous, and analytic" (p. 161). Moreover, understanding that "speed and spontaneity help in initial coding" (p. 118) I moved quickly across the data.

At the recommendation of my dissertation committee, when I pilot tested the interview guide I also pilot tested my data analysis methods, specifically trying both line-by-line coding and coding segments of a few or more lines together to identify what would best suit the data and support me with moving the data analysis to theory generation. I found a hybrid approach in which I applied codes to varying lengths of data, sometimes a single line, and other times a few lines chunked together, best served my analysis of the data and supported the balance of speed and nuance recommended by Charmaz (2009). More specifically, I used line-by-line coding when events, actions, and emotions were complex to support the analysis process of pulling event sequences apart, analyzing them, and reconstructing them (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). When segments of data were focused on one topic as was often the case when participants

reflected with thick description on experiences that were particularly meaningful to them, I used segment coding to preserve the wholeness of the meaning to the participant.

My initial codes were largely “provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 117), and I revised them when needed as I continued to analyze the data and document my reflections through memo-writing (Bazley, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Grbich, 2013). Much of my open coding naturally employed process coding and in-vivo coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016) in alignment with the study’s focus of grounding the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in the participants’ experiences. As my analysis progressed, I more explicitly conducted rounds of coding in which I analyzed the data specifically using process coding (Saldaña, 2016), during which I reviewed the data for opportunities to apply gerunds (i.e., words ending in ‘ing’) to foster “theoretical sensitivity because these words nudge us out of static topics and into enacted processes as they prompt thinking about actions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 245). An example of a process code included “dehumanizing treatment” that conveyed the process of being faced with the perceptions of others as conveyed through their actions that made participants feel less than human. I also conducted a round of coding to review the data more explicitly for opportunities to apply in-vivo codes and draw directly from the participants’ words to continue to ground the codes, subsequent categories, and emerging theory in the participants’ views and actions (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). An example of an in-vivo code included “with us not part of us” a short phrase which a participant used to describe being physically with a family but not being treated as though they were fully a belonging member of the family. Some codes were both process and in-vivo codes such as “reclaiming my inner child” which was used explicitly by a few participants to describe their process of healing and finding oneself in light of the experiences that disrupted their

childhood while in foster care. The practice of using in-vivo codes was an important part of carrying my interaction with the participants forward into the analysis and keeping the analysis grounded in participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

As I used in-vivo coding to draw from participants' words, I specifically tended to participants' language that included: (a) commonplace words with more significant meanings (e.g., the word "tired" referred to the long-lasting impacts of the physical, mental, and emotional fatigue of carrying adult-like responsibilities as a result of foster care); (b) innovative terms with significant meanings (e.g., using the existing word "foster care," a noun, instead as an adjective to describe the experience of feeling/being or not feeling/being foster care); (c) shorthand terms reflecting significant insider perspectives (e.g., participants naming other people with experience in foster, with the expectation I would have a shared understanding of who they were and their significance/relevance to our conversation) and; (d) statements of actions or concerns (e.g., "I stopped playing" whereby a participant was implying the literal and figurative action of stopping childhood play as a result of experiencing foster care) (Charmaz, 2014).

I also paid attention to what participants said and returned to quotes that touched my heart and mind (Charmaz, 2014). An example of a quote I returned to for deeper understanding was Simone's reflection, "Who am I outside of my foster care identity? It's such a big identity, it's so big it's my entire world." Additionally, I attended to what participants did not say and their silences, for "what participants do not say can be as telling as what they do say" (Charmaz, 2014; p. 91). Often, I would share with participants what I was noticing in our co-constructed dialogue and shared virtual space. On one occasion SL generously relayed their appreciation of me affirming their thoughts and experiences and shared, "that's a very brilliant, if I'm being honest. Even to articulate that to me, that means a lot that you're aware of that piece." I found

attending to participants words, body language, sayable and unsayable, and being open with them about my reflections was an important part of affirming their experiences, building reciprocity and mutuality, and ensuring the analysis was grounded in their experiences.

As my analysis progressed I used the following coding methods that aligned both with CGT and my aim to develop a theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity: (a) versus coding to identify processes in conflict (e.g., balancing the “good v. the bad” facets of the foster care experience; to be and feel “bio v. foster” in a placement); (b) structural coding to note concepts specifically related to the research questions (e.g., “meaning making over time”); and (c) elaborative coding to elaborate on sensitizing concepts from existing theory (e.g., “looking glass self”) (Saldaña, 2016). I found it was important to maintain an openness to the coding methods I used and to select them based on the content of the data. This practice aligned with Charmaz’s (2014) observation that it is essential to tolerate ambiguity in the process and “grounded theory coding is part work but it is also part play” (p. 137). Engaging in this “theoretical playfulness” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 137) helped ensure I was not forcing preconceived ideas and theories on the data and allowed my analysis and the subsequent emerging theoretical perspective to be co-constructed with the participants and grounded in their experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

Next, to guide theory generation, I developed codes into categories. I engaged in focused coding to review codes and consider how they were related to develop categories from the data (Charmaz, 2014, Saldaña, 2016). Some categories included codes that were raised to categories verbatim (e.g., “all the healing I have to do” was raised to a category that included codes such as “reclaiming my inner child” and “making peace”) and other categories were new concepts I discerned from the data through my synthesis and constant comparison of initial codes (e.g.,

“finding meaning in the hardship” that included codes such as “giving back” and “foster care focused career” (Charmaz, 2014). I defined categories in memos, by identifying and explaining their properties, characteristics, assumptions, and their relationship to the other categories (Charmaz, 2014; Grbich, 2013). As needed, I returned to initial codes for further analysis and to address new theoretical directions (Charmaz, 2014) (see Appendix G for examples of some preliminary codes mapped into categories).

Memo-Writing

In this section, I describe how I used memo-writing to shape the theoretical direction of the study (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) described how the “iterative process of grounded theory leads the [researcher] to focus, write, reflect, and focus again” (p. 108). In this way, memo-writing served as a “bridge” between the data collection and data analysis processes and is both a tool of data analysis and a form of data I produced over the course of the study that I could code and analyze for further insights (Charmaz, 2014). Given the essential role of memo-writing in CGT methods, I wrote memos: (a) after each interview to note my initial reflections, (b) throughout the data analysis process, and (c) anytime I had a realization about the study (Charmaz, 2014). I used memos to document (a) operational decisions related to the research process, (b) coding and category descriptions, (c) analytical properties and connections among categories that moved conceptualizations to a theoretical level, and (d) reflexivity reflections on how my personal experiences and identities shaped how I conceptualized the data and engaged with the participants (Birks et al., 2008; Charmaz, 2014). Understanding “analytic connections can happen any time during the research process” and “grounded theorists stop and write whenever ideas occur to them” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17), I kept a secured electronic memo book and a physical notebook so I could reflect in the moment and could select the medium to best

articulate my ideas at the time (e.g., quickly typing thoughts out or drawing out relationships with pen and paper).

I used memo-writing throughout the research process to analyze, compare, and refine codes and categories from the data, and in alignment with theoretical sampling, I used memos to identify the categories I needed to further refine with participants during future interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Grbich, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). As Charmaz (2014) describes memo-writing “creates an interactive space for conversing with yourself about your data, codes, ideas, and hunches. Questions arise. New ideas occur to you during the act of writing. Your standpoints and assumptions can become visible” (p. 162). To support authentic reflection, I wrote my memos quickly and without editing them to foster “developing and preserving [my] natural voice” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 181). I accepted what came to my mind and allowed my reflections and the connections I made to flow from one topic to another (Charmaz, 2014), and many I crafted in a non-ordinal list format or included hand drawn mind maps and diagrams. Initially, my memos included my interpretations of what was happening in the data the participants and I co-constructed, analytic discussions of the data in relation to codes, and personal reflections on the data and analysis. These memos informed future theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). As analysis progressed, my memos continued to document my personal reflections while moving toward theoretical abstraction as I documented the categories I constructed and the developing theory (see Appendix H for brief excerpts from select memos). Understanding that the passing of time would continue to shape the analysis and support me taking “[the] ideas to a more abstract analytical level” (Charmaz 2014, p. 191), I revisited memos periodically to support my further reflection and analysis.

Data Visualization

I periodically used data visualization tools to support my constant comparison of the data. I reviewed the frequency of which codes were applied to the data and the co-occurrence of codes in the data to inform categories and the relationships between them, while being careful not to assume such markers meant a code needed to be raised to a category or was inherently meaningful to theory development. I also used code mapping (e.g., drawing out relationships among codes and categories), clustering (e.g., creating clusters of codes), and code landscaping (e.g., word clouds) to visually represent codes and draw out the connections among them (Charmaz, 2014; Rico, 1983; Saldaña, 2016). I sorted and diagramed codes into categories by placing them physically on notecards so I could tangibly compare them, create clusters of codes and categories, consider their connections, magnitude of influence and sequences among them (Bazley, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). These electronic and physical visualization tools helped me with “creating and refining theoretical links” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 216) and led me to “integrate ideas and establish the logic of their order” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 20). I wrote memos throughout this process as my comparison of codes and categories generated new theoretical ideas (Charmaz, 2014). I also shared my preliminary diagrams with the participants and provided opportunities to react to my visual representation of their experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

Theory Construction

In this section I further describe how the components of this study allowed me to construct a theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. A hallmark of CGT is to use simultaneous data collection, data analysis, and memo-writing to build on levels of abstraction directly from the data and use theoretical sampling to

check and refine emerging analytic categories, with the aim of developing a theory grounded in the participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). As such, the aim of this study was for data collection and data analysis to culminate in an emerging theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity grounded in the experiences of participants.

Simultaneous data collection and data analysis allowed me to be responsive to the data and engage theoretical sampling as I moved from initial analysis toward theory construction. I moved quickly across the data and in an iterative manner to identify and define codes, create and develop categories, and establish the relation of categories in a manner that constructed theory. Coding served as the "pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain the data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). Throughout data collection and data analysis I moved from writing about initial reflections, ideas, and codes, to writing about theoretical categories, revisiting memos periodically, and making modifications to advance theoretical development. To move analysis forward I used theoretical sampling to follow up with participants on directions and questions that came up in my interpretation of the data (Bazley, 2013; Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used theoretical sampling to identify and saturate properties of categories, identify and differentiate the relationships between categories, and identify variations that informed my theoretical construction of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling allowed me to: (a) address the gaps I identified through constant comparison analysis and employ abductive reasoning, (b) consider possible interpretations of findings, and (c) check my inferences with participants through further data collection and analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Grbich, 2013). Theoretical sampling informed the questions I returned and asked of participants during the series of semi-structured interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I continued this iterative

process of data collection, data analysis, theoretical sampling, and memo-writing throughout data collection and analysis. I also found that sharing preliminary aspects of the theory constructions with participants and presenting preliminary findings at a national research conference while the study was underway helped me further develop and refine the emerging theory.

Throughout my analysis, I maintained a focus on actions and processes as doing so is “a key strategy in constructing theory and moving beyond categorizing types of individuals” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 245). Focusing on actions and processes supported my identification of the connections and sequences that comprised the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. In addition, I reviewed my categories to check if they were merely a grounded description of the data or if I was synthesizing codes and identifying categories with enough abstraction to move toward theory generation (Charmaz, 2014). The intention of CGT is not explanation or prediction; it is an abstract understanding of the experience (Charmaz, 2014). In other words, the aim of the constructed theory resulting from this study is to make greater sense of what previously were “murky musings and knotty problems,” clarify “phenomena and relationships between them that were only sensed beforehand” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 233), and expand perspectives about the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

As CGT offers “a set of general principles, guidelines, strategies and heuristic devices rather than formulaic prescriptions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3), there is not one objective way by which to develop a theory grounded in the data or to identify what components the theory will contain in advance of completing the study. Rather, I had to be responsive to the co-constructed research situation throughout the study to collect data and conduct analysis of the data in a manner that allowed me to interpret theoretical patterns in the data and develop a theoretical perspective that was precise and grounded in the participants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2014). As

Charmaz (2014) suggested, I engaged the data with an exuberant curiosity, understanding that “constructing theory is not a mechanical process. Theoretical playfulness enters in. Whimsy and wonder can lead [me] to see the novel in the mundane. Openness to the unexpected expands [my] view of studied life and subsequently of theoretical possibilities” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 245). In alignment with this guidance for CGT, I took my responsibility for conducting this study seriously, while not demanding my process of theory construction follow a prescribed path so linearly that it closed me off to possible interpretations or departed from being grounded in the participants' experiences.

Reflexivity

In this section, I briefly outline the reflexivity practices I employed throughout the study. According to Charmaz (2014) reflexivity is “the researcher’s scrutiny of the research experience, decisions, and interpretations ... how the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influence inquiry [and] how the researcher conducts research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports” (p. 344). From a CGT perspective, researchers are “obligated to be reflexive about what we bring to the scene, what we see, and how we see it” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 27), as the research experience is a co-construction and requires reflexivity of actions and decisions. An ongoing systematic practice of reflexivity was imperative to maintaining awareness of power interrelations in the research process particularly given the way power interrelations often shape the experiences of youth during their time in foster care (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). Pillow (2003) described how the practice of reflexivity is more than a positionality statement or naming of insider-outsider status and can be better grappled with as an “uncomfortable reflexivity” through which researchers consistently interrogate power interrelations with participants, practice accountability with participants, and struggle for

“ongoing self-awareness during the research process” (p. 178). With this commitment to self-awareness, I engaged an uncomfortable reflexivity as an ongoing practice throughout the study.

Prior to conducting the study, I used the reflexive guide I created for researchers to engage people with experience in foster care in an emancipatory manner through the research process (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). Engaging this reflexive guide helped me enter the study with a reflexive stance and commitment to not reproducing harmful “ideologies, conventions, discourses, and power relationships” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 241). I asked myself the questions from the guide and reflected on how I would engage reflexivity, how the research would benefit people with experience in foster care, contribute to discourse, be co-constructed with participants, be trauma-informed, and how the findings would be shared and used to influence praxis.

My reflexivity practice continued during the study as I engaged reflexivity during interviews with the participants and through my ongoing reflection documented in memos. During the interviews, I practiced reflexivity by attending to my body language, gaze, internal dialogue, and microverbalizations (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, I was conscious of not forcing my agenda through the interviews and considered what priorities the participants might have and what information they may wish to share about their experiences (Charmaz, 2014). I encouraged participants to speak at their own pace, about experiences most important to them, and I sought to affirm their understanding of their experiences. As Charmaz (2014) described “how your research participants identify you influences what they will tell you. Their identifications of you draw on their readings of subtle observations as well as explicit categorizations” (p. 29). While writing memos, I practiced ongoing reflexivity and considered the changing nature of my insider-outsider status and power interrelations based on the context of each interview and the

dynamics with each participant (Charmaz, 2014). I acknowledged I am simultaneously an insider sharing a foster care identity, and yet, also an outsider based on differences in lived experiences, contexts, and unique intersections of personal and social identities that influence the co-construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2014; Chavez, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Grbich, (2013) asserted reflexivity requires “a heightened awareness of self in the process of knowledge creation and clarification of how one’s beliefs have been socially constructed and how ... age, gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, education are impacting on interaction, data collection, and interpretation” (Grbich, 2013, p. 113). I reflected on the active role I held throughout the research process, how my various experiences and identities shaped each phase, and how my own “past influences the way [I] see the world and [the] data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 117). In turn, I was aware of how my positionality and perspectives informed the study while being careful to not force my preconceived notions about the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity onto the participants or the data, ensuring the analysis was grounded in the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2014).

Trustworthiness

In this section, I describe how I ensured trustworthiness of the research through initial sampling strategies, reflexivity practices, data collection, data analysis methods, theoretical sampling, and member checking. Within the constructivism paradigm, trustworthiness is a measure of goodness or quality of the research conducted (Lincoln et al., 2011). From a CGT perspective, Charmaz (2014) suggested “the quality of your study starts with the data, as does its credibility. The depth and scope of the data make a difference. A study based upon rich, substantial, and relevant data stand out” (p. 32). In this study, I sought to ensure trustworthiness of the data by carefully planning the study, ensuring alignment across the research questions,

paradigm, and methods, and engaging specific practices in data collection and data analysis to support quality data. In addition, a strength of CGT is that it fosters a collaborative and egalitarian environment that can facilitate hearing participants stories “in fullness” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 86), that supports the co-construction of robust data that informs theory development.

Using purposive and theoretical sampling of participants and employing a series of three semi-structured interviews allowed me to collect quality data by engaging the participants in sustained co-constructed dialogue with thick description (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Collecting data over time through the series of semi-structured interviews also allowed me to crystallize the data (Richardson, 2000). Crystallization of the data is offered as an alternative to triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A critique of triangulation is that it assumes a fixed or objective point that can be triangulated as confirmation of the data while crystallization acknowledges “there are far more than ‘three sides’ from which to approach the world” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934). Richardson (2000) asserted crystals with their varying shapes, compositions, and responsiveness to both their environment and their viewer may better explain how, “what we see depends on our angle of repose” (p. 934). I used the series of semi-structured interviews to identify the complexities in the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. I also considered alternate interpretations of the data and considered other theories that may offer explanations (Bazley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The previously described reflexivity practices I employed promoted trustworthy analysis of the data by not dismissing my own ideas, while also seeing “them as representing one view among many” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 132). While it was important I did not force my personal experience on the data, my firsthand experience with the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity informed how I approached the study. As described by Charmaz (2014), as

a researcher “you are part of your analytic work. You bring your analytic skills and perspectives to bear on the analysis throughout the research process and that can be a gift” (p. 140). My engagement with the reflexivity practices helped me be explicit about the ways my decisions and reflections shaped this study.

I also used several data analysis practices that ensured trustworthiness. My use of detailed coding for data analysis supported trustworthiness as it “reduce[d] the likelihood of inputting [my] motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues [onto the] collected data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 94). Conducting data analysis simultaneously with data collection also served a function in ensuring trustworthiness of the data as it allowed me to evaluate the quality of the data on an ongoing basis and use theoretical sampling to collect additional data directed toward theory generation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). As I sought theoretical sufficiency, I pursued quality data to build out the components, dimensions, and relationships of categories to support the development of a theoretical perspective (Charmaz, 2014; Dey, 1999).

As my analysis of the data progressed, I engaged in member checking at subsequent interviews with the participants. As part of member checking, I shared with the participants the emerging theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and engaged the participants in dialogue to identify if my interpretation of their experiences was ringing true or if modifications were needed to “better [reflect] their perspectives” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). With awareness of researcher-participant power dynamics when I conducted member checking, I first engaged participants’ reflections on various aspects of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity to not create a conformity bias. I summarized back to participants my understanding of their specific perspective and asked questions of them to clarify what the meaning making process of

developing a foster care identity was to them. I then shared with the participants the status of my data analysis and the ways the categories and theory were taking shape. I also shared unidentifiable examples from across the participant interviews I had completed and analyzed to date that supported the categories and theory for discussion. In the later interviews, I presented participants with a visual of the categories and emerging theory to discuss. These acts supported continued co-constructed dialogue, both organic and prompted, between the participants and I about what aspects of the emerging theory the participants resonated with and what parts they perceived or experienced differently. Additionally, after this manuscript was complete, I reached out to the participants and provided an opportunity for them to review the descriptions and quotes referring to them in the study and confirm the accuracy of the reported findings or request changes. Through these various practices I supported the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

In this section, I discuss the ethical considerations of this study. As people with experience in foster care may have encountered complex institutionalized power and oppression interrelations in the foster care system and even after emancipation from foster care, it was important to be aware of the ways in which these interrelations of power could be manifested in research processes (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). I strove to conduct this study in an emancipatory manner that actively affirmed the humanity and perspectives of people with experience in foster care. I facilitated the study in an emancipatory manner by maintaining a reflexive stance and committing to centering the experiences of people with experience in foster care by: (a) ensuring the research would support a better understanding of people with experience in foster care, (b) using strengths- and assets-based discourse while taking care to accurately describe the gravity

of the challenges faced, (c) applying trauma-aware practices, (d) affirming the intersectional identities of the population, (e) advocating for systemic change, and (f) committing to finding opportunities to share the research findings and recommendations for praxis in an accessible manner with a broader audience who can act upon the information to initiate change to positively impact people with experience in foster care. Next, I further describe specific practices I implemented in this study to maintain an ethical approach.

Prior to beginning the study, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University. Once the study was approved, before starting each interview, I gained informed consent (see Appendix I) from the participants. To support privacy and de-identify the data, I encouraged participants to select a pseudonym name I could use to protect their anonymity in the results of the study. I also understood participants may wish to use a given or preferred name instead of a pseudonym as owners of their experiences and perspectives, and in such cases I respected their decision to decline a pseudonym so as to not “impose a paternalistic stance” (Capous-Desyallas & Mountz, 2019, p. 274) on participants and as an act of centering participants’ agency and self-determination (Allen & Wiles, 2015; Galvez & Muñoz, 2020). I ensured participants who wished to use their name understood the risks of declining a pseudonym and were fully aware their name would be linked to the data and corresponding results that would be publicly published and presented. I also reached out to the participants after the manuscript was complete and provided an opportunity for them to review the descriptions and quotes referring to them. With a full understanding of how the findings were presented, I encouraged the participants to let me know if they instead wanted to adjust their informed consent form and select a pseudonym before the study was published.

With attention to trauma-aware research practices, I prepared participants during the informed consent that some interview questions may result in the recollection of challenging experiences (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). I had a priority to do no harm and seek to minimize discomfort and I affirmed for participants that the study was voluntary, they may choose to refrain from answering any question or end participation at any time, and I would have counseling resources available to share should a participant be impacted by our discussion. I also structured the guide for each interview to end on a question that was positive in nature to provide a level of closure and ensure participants did not leave the interview in distress (Charmaz, 2014). When I reached out to the participants when the manuscript was complete with an opportunity to review their participant descriptions and quotes, I affirmed that revisiting parts of our co-constructed dialogue may evoke thoughts and emotions, and again offered the participants access to support resources should they be impacted while reviewing their earlier reflections.

Throughout the interviews I attended to the researcher-participant relationship (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) using the previously described reflexivity practices. As Tracy (2013) described “a relational ethic means being aware of one’s own role and impact on relationships and treating participants as a whole people rather than as just subjects from which to wrench a good story” (p. 245). Throughout the interviews with participants, I attended to power differentials and was mindful to not take an authoritarian stance in the interview. I maintained awareness of how “differences in gender, age, status, and experience may result in interactional power differences” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 73). I also strove to “ensure that reciprocity exists and that participants are given credit [by pseudonym or name based on the participants’ selection] for the knowledge they [were] choosing to share” (Galvez & Muñoz, 2020). What is more, I do not take lightly what a privilege it is “to share someone’s private views and personal

experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 71) and I aspire to honor the “assets, voice, and lived experiences” (Galvez & Muñoz, p. 793) of the participants, without whom this study would not have been possible.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. The intended outcome of this study was to develop an emerging theoretical perspective on foster care identity development grounded in the experiences of participants. In this chapter, I described the methodology of this study, the alignment of the paradigm and methods, and justification for my choices. I detailed the methods of this study including my procedures for participant recruitment and selection, data collection, data analysis, and theory construction. I also discussed how I practiced reflexivity, ensured trustworthiness, and addressed ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I reiterate the purpose of this study, introduce the participants, describe the dynamic nature of the emerging theory, and I give an overview of the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Next, I describe in detail each component of the emerging theory, each described and characterized by three dimensions, presenting how each was developed from my analysis of the co-constructed interviews during which participants shared their experiences of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Using thick description from my analysis of the interviews and direct quotes from the participants, I present examples of the range of experiences reflected in each component of the emerging theory. Lastly, I detail the three contextual factors that critically influence the meaning making process. While some examples of the contextual factors are embedded within the described components and dimensions, I present some additional examples that specifically demonstrate the specific critical influence these contextual factors have on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

The findings presented in this chapter aim to address the purpose of this constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study, which was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. One primary research question and one sub-question guided this study:

1. What is the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates formerly in foster care?
 - a. What are the critical influences in the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity?

The findings are the result of my analysis of the data collected from a series of three semi-structured interviews with nine participants who took part in the first interview and eight participants who took part in the second and third interview. All participants had experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday, graduated with a bachelor's degree, and identified as having a foster care identity. First round open coding of the interviews resulted in more than 600 codes. Notably, in the last three interviews very few new codes were added, so although theoretical sufficiency was the original attainable aim, a higher level of theoretical saturation may have also been reached (Charmaz, 2014; Dey, 1999). Through the analysis process described in Chapter 3, I moved the codes to 32 categories. Through continued theoretical sampling and the analysis of the relationship between categories, I constructed the five components of the theory with three dimensions each. Additionally, I constructed the three contextual factors including: (a) micro-macro level perceptions with four contexts where micro-macro level perceptions were encountered; b) family privilege with two levels, connections and phantoms; and (c) the experience of time with three levels, being and feeling foster care, past colliding with the present, and foster care identity fading into the background. Together these components and their dimensions, and the contextual factors and their levels comprise the emerging theory. Next, I will introduce the individuals who participated in the study.

Participant Descriptions

In this section, I provide brief biographical descriptions of the participants based on the information and identities they shared with me, drawing from the participant's language and terms when possible. I invited participants to review the biographical descriptions for accuracy and encouraged participants to provide edits to ensure the descriptions both represented them and were presented with a level of detail they were comfortable with.

Ashley

Ashley was a Black woman in her 20s who experienced foster care in the Mid-Atlantic region. She entered foster care as a young child due to the death of her parent. She experienced two non-relative foster home placements, the first of which did not progress to adoption as planned, and she remained in foster care until she aged out. Ashley experienced separation from her siblings due to separate placements and her siblings later running away from their placements. While in foster care, Ashley participated in a foster care youth advisory board (YAB) and was engaged in foster youth advocacy activities. She experienced a difficult, and at times dangerous, agency coordinated transitional living placement as she was aging out of foster care. She went to a university after graduating high school, earned a bachelor's degree, and was pursuing a master's degree at the time of the study. She had worked professionally in child welfare, non-profit, and government settings and was engaged in foster care legislative advocacy. She aspired to obtain a doctorate degree in the future.

B

B was a white Muslim woman in her 30s who experienced foster care in the Western region. She entered foster care as a teenager due to experiencing abuse by her parent. B experienced placements in group homes, shelters, foster homes, a kinship placement, and a residential facility. While in foster care, she started a YAB to bring youth in foster care together for community and advocacy. B remained in foster care through her teen years until she aged out. After high school, B attended a community college, obtained an associate degree, and went on to obtain a bachelor's degree from a university. In adulthood, she was married to her husband and later divorced, became a parent, and converted to Islam. She was involved in service at her Mosque and was pursuing a master's degree. B had worked professionally in

corporate, child welfare, and non-profit settings and served as a consultant on foster care awareness and trauma-informed practices. B participated in only the first interview and consented to that engagement being represented in the findings.

Clare

Clare was a white woman in her 40s who experienced foster care in the Midwest. She entered foster care as a teenager due to experiencing homelessness and neglect related to her parents' experiencing drug addiction. She experienced two kinship placements and remained in foster care throughout her teen years until she aged out. She was separated from her siblings who were placed in a non-relative foster home where they were later adopted. After graduating high school, Clare enrolled in a university, stopped out, and navigated early adulthood with limited support from her kinship placement. She later reenrolled at a community college as a non-traditional student, completed an associate degree, and continued at universities where she completed her bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. Clare was married to her husband and was a stepparent. She had worked professionally with students with experience in foster care in higher education and non-profit settings and she served others with experience in foster care through these roles and through her involvement with national foster care awareness and advocacy networks.

Danisha

Danisha was a white woman in her 30s who experienced foster care in the Pacific region. She entered foster care as a teenager due to experiencing abuse by her parent. She experienced a non-relative foster home placement followed by a kinship placement with her older sibling classified as voluntary, resulting in an absence of financial resources or services. Danisha remained in foster care throughout her teen years until she aged out, a time during which she

experienced housing insecurity and financial instability. A few years after graduating high school, Danisha attended a community college and later transferred to obtain her bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degree at universities. In her twenties, Danisha was granted guardianship of her five younger siblings, an arrangement again classified by the system as voluntary, resulting in an absence of financial resources or services. In adulthood, Danisha continued to support her siblings, was married to her husband, and was a parent. She worked in higher education and engaged in foster care awareness and advocacy as a consultant and speaker.

Elyse

Elyse was a white queer woman in her 20s who experienced foster care in the Midwest. She entered foster care as a teenager due to experiencing homelessness and neglect related to her parents struggles with mental illness. She experienced placement in a shelter, a residential center, a non-relative foster home, and then permanently in a kinship placement. Elyse remained in the kinship placement through her teen years that transitioned to a guardianship and remains connected to her kinship caregivers as familial and parental figures. After graduating from high school, Elyse attended a university and obtained a bachelor's and then a master's degree. In undergrad, Elyse participated in a campus-support program (CSP) for students with experience in foster care and engaged in foster care advocacy activities. In adulthood, she was diagnosed with a chronic illness and managed related fatigue and pain. At the time of the study, she was engaged to be married to her soon-to-be husband and worked professionally as a therapist. She planned to continue her education with an advanced graduate degree or certificate.

Kim

Kim was a Black woman in her 30s who experienced foster care in the Pacific region. She entered foster care as a young child related to her parent's struggles with drug addiction.

Kim and her younger sibling were in a kinship care placement, non-relative foster home, and an adoptive placement that resulted in a failed adoption. Kim's younger sibling was returned to her former foster home placement while Kim was placed in a second adoptive placement. Kim remained in foster care throughout her childhood until she aged out. After graduating high school, Kim went to a community college and obtained an associate degree. She went on to earn her bachelor's degree and later a post-baccalaureate certificate from a university. In adulthood, she converted to Catholicism, was married, became a parent, and was divorced. She also navigated the death of her sibling who was placed separately when they were in foster care, passing away in his 30s while detained at a mental health facility. Kim worked professionally with non-profit organizations supporting youth with experience in foster care and adoption and was engaged in awareness and advocacy activities through speaking engagements.

Simone

Simone was a Biracial—Black and Hungarian woman in her 30s who experienced foster care in the Pacific region. She entered foster care as a teenager due to her parent passing away and experienced temporary placement in an emergency shelter, followed by permanent placement in a residential group home with her siblings. Simone remained in the residential group home and attended high school on the residential group home campus through her teen years until she aged out. She attended a university directly after graduating high school and became involved in a Summer Bridge Program and a multicultural sorority. Simone obtained a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree. In adulthood, she married her husband who she had met when they were both placed at the residential group home. Simone has worked professionally with students with experience in foster care in higher education and non-profit settings. In her professional roles and in her personal life she centered foster care advocacy.

SL

SL was a Native American woman in her 20s who experienced foster care in the Western region. She and her older siblings entered foster care when she was an infant, and she remembers one foster care placement though she is aware there were others. SL and her siblings were placed in a foster home with a Native American family who were members of a Tribe different from her own heritage. She remained with the family until she aged out of foster care and remains connected to them as the only family she remembers growing up. Directly after high school, SL attended a Tribal college and obtained a bachelor's degree. In adulthood she prioritized reconnecting with Native culture, practices, and ways of knowing. She worked professionally in K-12 education and was engaged in foster care and Native advocacy through various programs she was selected to participate in with national organizations. SL aspired to pursue multiple advanced graduate degrees in the future.

Veratta

Veratta was a Black woman in her 30s who experienced foster care in the Pacific Northwest region. She entered foster care as a teenager related to her parent's struggles with drug addiction. Veratta experienced three kinship placements and a few group homes and was placed separately from her younger siblings during part of her time in foster care. Veratta remained in foster care until she aged out. After high school, Veratta, attended a university, became involved in student affairs leadership roles, and obtained a bachelor's and master's degree. She had considered a career in child welfare but instead made her career working professionally in higher education settings. In her work, Veratta engaged in foster care, mental health, and social justice awareness and advocacy. She had plans to pursue a doctorate degree in the future.

Participant Summary

As outlined in the preceding participant descriptions, while all the participants identified as women, they experienced a foster care identity at the intersection of a unique combination of social and personal identities that comprised their overall identity. Further, everyone had varying pathways to and through foster care and experiences before, during, and after foster care. The various intersections of identities and experiences among the participants supported a deep and nuanced understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, as I will further exemplify as I present their experiences that informed the emerging theory.

Overview of Emerging Theory

Through the data I co-constructed with participants in the interviews and my analysis that took place through coding the data, theoretical sampling, data visualization, memo-writing, and consideration of the sensitizing concepts drawn from the literature review and conceptual framework, I constructed an emerging theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity grounded in the experiences of the participants (illustrated in Figure 2). First, I will discuss the emerging and dynamic nature of the theory, followed by a brief description of the components of the emerging theory. I will discuss each component in greater detail with examples grounded in the participants' experiences in the proceeding sections.

The Dynamic and Tentative Nature of the Emerging Theory

The emerging theory is intended to be dynamic in that it is best engaged with an understanding of the following nuances: (a) each individual's experience is different and the components and dimensions of the theory may be experienced in different ways; (b) individuals may not experience all of the components or dimensions, such that an individual may see their perspectives and experiences represented in some but not all of the emerging theory while others

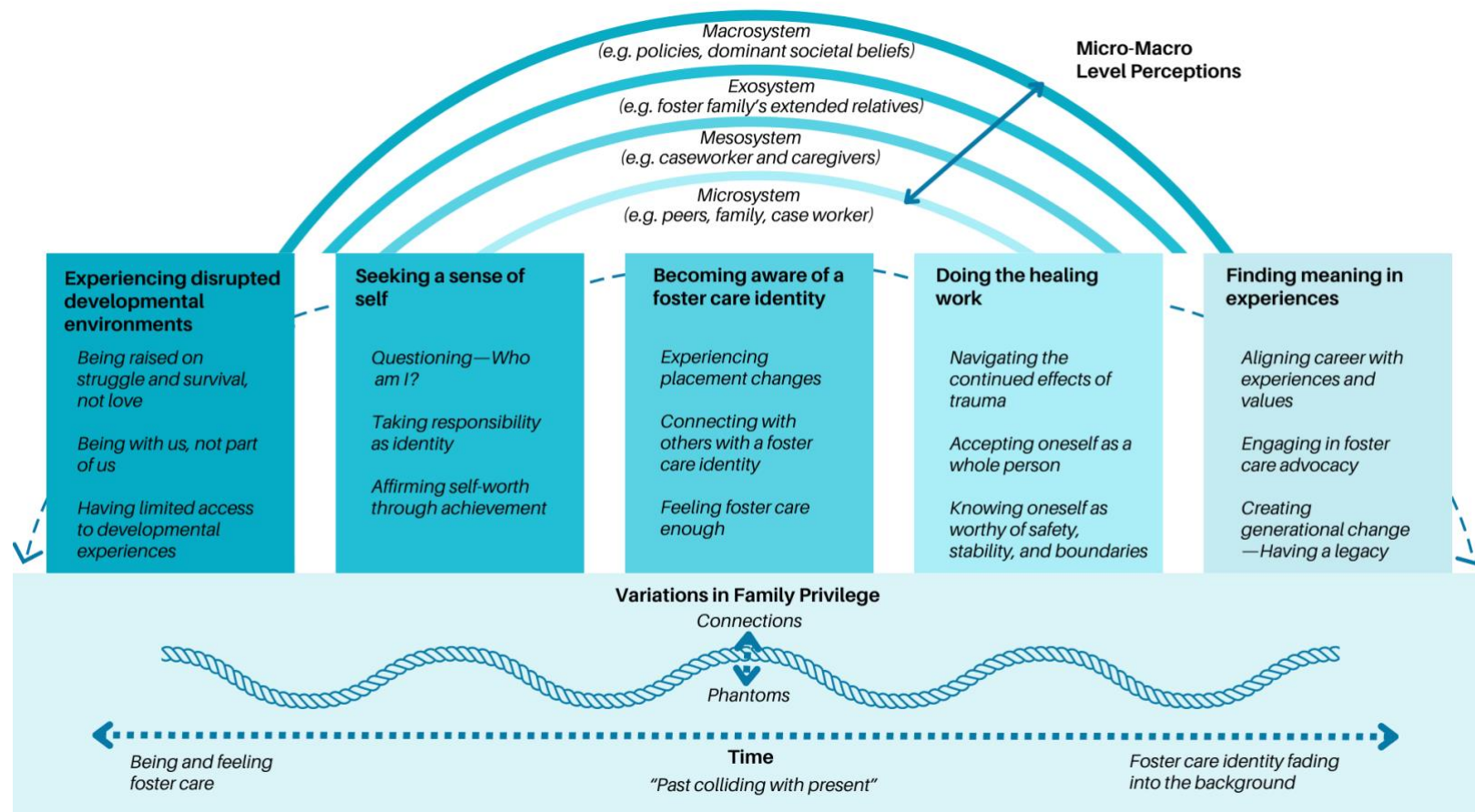


Figure 2

Emerging Theory of the Meaning Making Process of Developing a Foster Care Identity

Note. This figure demonstrates the five components of the theory, each with three dimensions, and the three contextual factors that critically influence the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

may find it more wholly representative of their experience; (c) while the components are presented in the order the participants most frequently experienced them in, the visual is not intended to present a finite stage-based linear order and an individual may experience the components in a different order; (d) an individual may experience a component or dimension more than once, having multiple experiences with a component or dimension in a particular context or time period, or repeatedly over time; (e) experiences with one component or dimension may impact experiences and meaning making of a foster care identity in other components and dimensions; (f) the components and dimensions include a range of experiences, both negative and positive—the representation and interpretation of which must be taken with care so as to not perpetuate overtly negative perspectives that bolster deficit views, while also not dismissing the gravity and complexity of the challenges participants faced; and (g) the theory is *emerging* and is comprised of *tentative* components and dimensions that were co-constructed within the context and methods of this particular study and should not be overgeneralized.

To underscore, it is imperative to engage this emerging theory with an understanding of the nuances above, as many participants emphasized the care with which the theory must be engaged with. Next, I would like to highlight some of specific cautions the participants offered to those who engage with the theory. Clare described how it is important to acknowledge some experiences related to foster care may be negative, but it is imperative to not position a foster care identity as inherently negative:

Like many of our identities over time it can come forward, it can leave a lasting identity. But it's not pathological. It's not negative. Or problematic. It's just a thing, though it's often seen as deficit or negative. While the experience of it can be negative, it doesn't mean the identity that you hold and how you move through life is inherently negative.¹

¹ To support readability and presentation of the findings, when quoting excerpts from the co-constructed interviews with the participants I: (a) made small, unmarked, edits to remove filler words such as “like,” “you know,” “right?,” and “so,” if they were not essential to interpreting the statement, and (b) marked with ellipses parts of statements that were redacted to shorten the length of the statement or demonstrate the applicable parts to the analysis.

In addition, B cautioned, “One thing about identity, is that it’s very tailored to the individual. People choose how they identify and how or whether others’ perceptions shape how they identify.” Also describing the importance of engaging the nuance of foster care experience and a foster care identity, SL reflected on the parallels she identified to the *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians* (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2024):

Just like an essential understanding is to not generalize Native people, if there were essential understandings of foster youth, I would say do not generalize the experiences of people that have lived experience in foster care. I don’t think there is a one size fits all foster identity. The foster care identity is going to be up to that individual.

With the participants’ cautions in mind, it is essential that the components and dimensions of the emerging theory are not overgeneralized as people with experience in foster care are not a monolith, and the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is not a monolithic experience. The aim of presenting this emerging theory is not to proclaim a singular definition of a foster care identity or singular description of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Rather, the emerging theory is intended to honor the voices of the participants in this study and the components of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity that were constructed from my analysis of their individual and collective perspectives in the context of this study. With this understanding, I will transition to providing a brief description of the components of the emerging theory.

Components of the Emerging Theory

The theory includes five components that can be understood as sub-processes of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity including: (a) experiencing disrupted developmental environments, (b) seeking a sense of self, (c) becoming aware of a foster care identity, (d) doing the healing work, and (e) finding meaning in experiences. Each of these components are explained by three dimensions that further describe and characterize these

components of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. For example, the component *Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments* is further described and characterized by three dimensions including: (a) being raised on struggle and survival, not love; (b) being with us, not part of us; and (c) having limited access to normative developmental experiences (see Appendix J for a summary of the five components, each of their three dimensions, and their properties). The components and dimensions are each critically influenced by three contextual factors: (a) micro-macro level perceptions, (b) family privilege, and (c) time. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I discuss each of the components and their dimensions and the contextual factors in greater detail with examples grounded in the participants' experiences.

Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments

The first component I'll discuss that comprises the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is *Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments*. All the participants described the ways in which they experienced disrupted developmental environments before foster care, during foster care, and/or in the process of aging out of foster care and navigating adulthood. Through the data I co-constructed with participants during the interviews and my corresponding analysis, I identified three dimensions that further describe and characterize experiencing disrupted developmental environments including: (a) being raised on struggle and survival, not love; (b) being with us, not part of us; and (c) having limited access to normative developmental experiences. These dimensions had impacts on identity development in general and specifically on the construction of a foster care identity. In many ways experiencing disrupted developmental environments impacted participants' experiences with the next component, *Seeking a Sense of Self*. Each participant, shared how they had experienced a struggle to survive and had inadequate nurturing from their caretakers, felt different from and not

fully a part of one or more of their foster care placements and/or family of origin, and had limited access to normative developmental activities at points in their life. In the following sections, I further describe these three dimensions and provide examples grounded in the experiences of the participants to illustrate the properties of the dimensions and the variations possible within the dimensions.

Being Raised on Struggle and Survival, Not Love

Each participant detailed having to struggle “to survive” in the absence of consistent “protection,” “love,” “comforting,” and “nurturing” from caregivers at some point in their childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood. Some participants associated the struggle to survive and the absence of love with the profound loss of parts of their childhood because of struggles, dysfunction, or harm they experienced. The timing, frequency, duration, and context of these struggles varied but were consistently described by participants as having impact on their developing sense of self with implications for their developing foster care identity. In the subsections that follow, I describe participants’ experiences being raised on struggle and survival, not love before and during foster care, how the conditions of struggle and survival led to the development of a “parentified child identity,” and how the effects of being raised on struggle and survival, not love continued into adulthood.

Struggle and Survival Before and During Foster Care

Some participants described the environments they were raised in prior to foster care that were characterized by struggle and survival. Kim shared, “I think about my life before I went into foster care. It was very chaotic. My mother was in the throes of addiction.” Likewise, Clare described how she and her siblings navigated their parents’ addiction and a range of unmet basic needs as children and adolescents:

I was trying to survive. It was awful conditions growing up and taking care of my siblings. Moving through the first 15 years of my life in a pretty rough situation where I didn't feel my parents loved me. I felt very isolated and fearful, and at risk of very real physical and psychological danger. We were homeless and were in really significant poverty. We were witnessing domestic violence, severe addiction, we didn't have food. I didn't have clean clothes.

While Clare and some other participants shared how their foster care placements offered a degree of safety, security, and provision of basic needs, others reflected how they experienced further struggle and harm in foster care with agency-assigned caregivers who “failed” them in varying ways including experiencing abuse and neglect at the hands of their assigned foster caregivers. Describing how the foster care system can focus on minimal provision of basic needs and not attend to the social emotional developmental needs of youth in foster care, Elyse expressed, “the foster care system treats us like, I'm giving you everything you need. You have a roof over your head. I don't have to love you.” Participants’ descriptions of their various environments before and during foster care, illustrate how it can be difficult to engage higher order needs related to identity development when there is not only an absence of consistent support for developing a positive sense of self but also inadequate provision of basic needs including physiological (e.g., food and clothes), safety (e.g., physical and psychological), and love and belonging (e.g., tenderness, connection, and support from family).

Development of a Parentified Child Identity

Amidst struggles meeting basic developmental needs, many participants discussed how aspects of their identity developed, particularly in relation to the struggle and survival they experienced. Veratta referred to the experience of surviving and having adult responsibilities as a child using the term *parentified child*. Explaining what being a parentified child meant to her, Veratta explained:

I had adult problems when I was a kid, and I didn't get to be a kid. It took me a long time to understand how much joy was robbed from me. I think when you have trauma, when you're a kid, particularly trauma like this, going into foster care, being split up from your siblings, being taken from your parents, being taken from what you know. I was acting and operating as an adult before my time because of that.

Likewise, Kim highlighted how the adults in her life positioned her as a responsible adult rather than a child sharing, "People were asking me to work with them versus them responding to me as a child and comforting me." For some participants, their experiences constructed an adult/parent identity at a young age that was characterized by being responsible for their own and others survival. The premature conferral of an adult/parent identity usurped a protected child identity, an identity most participants could not recall the luxury of ever having due to the struggles they faced from a young age. As participants reflected and made meaning of a parentified child identity into adulthood, some described the profound sense of loss they felt for the childhood they did not get to have.

Many participants described how the struggle to survive and being a "parentified child" was deeply connected to not being "loved," "nurtured," or "protected," either in their family of origin or in their foster care placements. Veratta shared, "I was raised on struggle and survival, not on love. The way I was raised, I was not nurtured." Veratta's description of being "raised on struggle and survival, not love" was elevated through my analysis and became the name of this dimension for the ways it encompassed many participants' experiences with this aspect of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Elyse also described how not having consistent trusting and caring relationships as a child impacted her developmental environment as she explained:

The people that we are supposed to trust to care about us and have our best interests in mind no matter what, are the people who hurt us, intentionally or unintentionally. That sort of betrayal of my parents who are supposed to love and protect me didn't, isn't conducive to fostering trust and vulnerability ... Trying to grow and learn and develop,

we cannot make meaning in the houses that broke us. It's like trying to build a house on a cracked foundation.

The feeling Elyse described of being betrayed by caregivers was echoed by many participants.

Several reflected with pain and at times anger how they were affected by adult caregivers in their lives who fundamentally did not fulfill their obligation to protect and nurture them as children.

Impacts of Being Raised on Struggle and Survival Not Love on Adulthood

Experiences of struggling to survive without support was present for some into adulthood. While Clare had largely described her time in her kinship placement as a reprieve from the struggles she faced with her family of origin, Clare reflected how her relationship with her relative caregivers became tumultuous after she had aged out and she was alone without support or resources at the age of 18:

I left with basically my clothes. I was financially on my own from that point forward. My aging out experience is one where I was really alone. If not for my chosen family, which at the time was a solid group of friends, I wouldn't have had places to live or food to eat. They helped pay my way for a couple years until I was stable. There was no support from my family.

Likewise, Danisha reflected how a continued struggle for survival followed her into adulthood when she was granted guardianship of her five younger siblings:

I had already had to start my life at 19, living in my car on a credit card because I had no way to get money for gas or food. And then when I got my siblings it was like, okay, there's really no room for error. I stopped playing. I stopped going out. I stopped hanging out with people. I stopped watching TV. I stopped having hobbies. I'm still dealing with the financial burden because the case was unknowingly listed as voluntary by the agency, giving me no support.

Even after foster care, situations of pervasive struggle and survival accompanied by an absence of love and support from a stable family unit had continued impacts on participants' well-being and identity development.

For many participants, experiences with struggle and survival, not love developed deep rooted mental frameworks that both challenged participants yet were assets that could be drawn on as resilience strategies and coping mechanisms in difficult times. Participants used terms like “survival instinct” and “struggle mindset” to describe the ways such challenges shaped their perspectives. Describing how a survival mindset showed up when she experienced struggle and an absence of nurturing relationship in adulthood, Elyse reflected:

In grad school when I was alone again and in that really horrible place, I noticed a return to that survivalist instinct ... I was pushing through with blinders on. It was reminiscent of surviving the situation with my parents as a kid. I was relying on old coping mechanisms.

Danisha also explained how the mindset from experiencing past struggles impacted her into adulthood as she shared, “I still feel like I’m having to fight for things. It is long lasting from having to fight to survive for so long.” It was common for participants to describe difficult challenges in adulthood that required them to activate their resilient capacities in times of continued struggle.

Summary—Being Raised on Struggle and Survival, Not Love

In summary, participants had a range of experiences with struggle and survival, and many experienced an absence of consistent loving and nurturing relationships, ranging from childhood to college and into adulthood that created disrupted developmental environments with impacts on identity development. Being faced with a struggle to survive without support prematurely led to the construction of a “parentified child” identity, in which participants became solely responsible for their own and often other’s survival. This premature conferral of an adult-like status destructed or made it an impossibility to ever have a child, adolescent, or young adult identity in which one was protected and safe to navigate challenges with love. Participants described how the premature conferral of adult-like status impacted them in adulthood as it shaped their

understanding of self, others, and the mental models through which they navigated and made meaning of the situations they faced. Next, I introduce the second dimension of *Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments*, being with us, not part of us.

Being with Us, Not Part of Us

Nearly every participant had experiences being othered within their foster care placements. For some experiences of being othered occurred within their biological family as well. Participants described experiences of being treated differently on a biological vs. foster dichotomy. In foster care placements, some were treated differently based on being “foster” compared to biological children or grandchildren in the home. Others even experienced the biological vs. foster dichotomy in kinship placements and in experiences reconnecting with extended family of origin in adulthood. In other words, even among biological family some participants were treated differently based on being “foster” compared to their relatives who were not in foster care. Understanding that the family ecosystem is often a core context in which individuals receive messages about their unconditional positive value as humans and their deservingness to belong, the experience of being othered within family environments had consequences for identity development as it positioned the experience of foster care and correspondingly a foster care identity as a lower status. In each of the subsections that follow, I describe how participants experienced being with us, not part of us in non-relative foster care and kinship foster care placements, the impacts of not having established legal permanency with a family, and experiences being with us, not part of us among family of origin.

Experiences Being with Us, Not Part of Us in Non-Relative Foster Care Placements

Many participants reflected on feeling othered in one or more foster care placements. B reflected on her experience in one foster home in which she was welcomed in a general sense but also was excluded and made to feel different:

Their family made me feel very welcome to a point. It was like you're here with us, but you're not really part of us. I still have to go to another respite foster home when they would go do certain things. And I remember my foster mom not wanting me to be alone with my foster dad. I was asking him for a hair tie one day and I walked in their room. And she was like, 'What are y'all doing?' I remember her getting real mad about that and it made me feel like being here isn't right. That wouldn't be the reaction if I was a bio daughter.

B's description of feeling as though "you're here with us, but you're not really part of us," was elevated through my analysis from a code to the name of this dimension, as it reflected the sentiment many participants shared that being physically with a family did not ensure a positive sense of belonging in that family.

Like B's suspicion that she would have been treated differently if she were a biological daughter and not a foster daughter, other participants reflected on what it meant to be biological vs. foster with experiences being treated differently compared to the biological or adopted children or grandchildren in the home. Ashley used the phrase "feeling second rate" to describe the experience in one of her foster care placements among adopted foster siblings while SL described an instance in which her foster mother treated her differently compared to the biological grandchildren around the home. SL shared her foster mother said to her, "'You know, these are my grandkids, and I am going to believe them' ... that was the only thing she ever said like that, but that one really hurt. It was the first time I felt like I was different." Although SL qualified the situation only happened one time, the statement implied that to be biological was to be right, true, and believable simply by virtue of being a blood relation, and to be a "foster

youth” was to be perceived as less trustworthy or wrong. In these ways, within their foster care placements, participants had a range of experiences with being treated differently and positioned as an outsider compared to “real” biological or adoptive family members based on their status as a youth in foster care.

Experiences Being with Us, Not Part of Us in Kinship Foster Care Placements

Some participants also shared experiences being othered in kinship care with biological relatives. Some were treated disparately compared to the birth children in the home and others witnessed their caregivers having to justify or qualify their relationship as “oh that’s our foster daughter” rather than using a more permanent relational label. While Clare described how being placed within her family with relatives was one of the “things that worked about her experience in foster care,” she also shared how she’s come to understand she was “treated different and not taken care of in the same way.” While Clare paid for her own haircuts, her cousin of a similar age had far more frequent haircuts that were paid for by the family, the clothes provided to Clare were limited to the amount covered by the quarterly stipend the agency provided her caregivers, while her cousin had ample shopping trips provided by the family, and gifts and other forms of support conveyed stark differences in who was valued in the home. Further explaining how differential treatment through actions, words, and monetary support positioned her as a youth in foster care as lesser status, even among family, Clare reflected:

There was a lot of things that didn’t feel great. I wasn’t treated as their biological kid compared to my cousin who I lived with. He was taken care of a bit more. I was expected to fend for myself financially. Looking back, it’s realizing all the things. Why did I have to pay for that, when my cousin who is a similar age, didn’t have to pay. Why did I only get these things, and he would get more. It was a direct comparison in my face all the time, saying, you’re less, you’re less, you’re less ... And then as we grew up even, my cousin was mid-20s still living at home, had a car five times the cost of mine, and I had to pay them back for mine. And they were constantly talking about what a shithead I was when I was younger, even though I was out there fending for myself at that point. It was

such a hurtful way of labeling me.

Actions and words that communicated deficit views in comparison to near-peer biological children were deeply impactful and conveyed the sentiment of “being with us, not part of us.” Such experiences in relative placements illustrated how for some participants being placed with biological family did not ensure a consistent sense of belonging or equitable treatment.

Impacts of an Absence of Legal Permanency with a Family

Notably, nearly all the participants did not have legal permanency (e.g., were not reunited with their biological parents or adopted or in a legal guardianship with their caregivers), leading them to age out of foster care with a degree of uncertainty regarding their continued connection to their foster care placement. Some participants who had been in long-term non-relative placements reflected on the mixed messages and conflicting feelings associated with having degree of relational permanency with a family yet not having the benefits or sense of assurance that legal permanency such as adoption can provide. For some, this was another way in which the message of “you’re with us, not part of us” was communicated. Kim described the duality of her relationship with her last foster family as she shared, “You learn to one foot in and one foot out...My foster family. I consider them my family, socially, psychologically. But they’re not my family. I’m not entitled to the legal entitlements that one gets from their birth family.” Others also described how navigating relational permanency in the absence of legal permanence contributed to feelings of difference. Reflecting on how she and her siblings were never adopted by the only family she has known since she was an infant, SL shared:

My foster mom did plan to adopt us, but after she passed away, no one really picked up that conversation again and even asked if we wanted to be adopted. And then I did ask why we weren’t adopted, and it’s like well, “Why didn’t you ask?” They’re my family. I feel like that shouldn’t be something that I should ask, you should just want that too.

SL further explained how not being adopted had effects on her identity development as she also experienced differential treatment and exclusion by a biological child in the family:

I guess identity is how you view yourself and part of my identity was questioning why I was treated differently by her specifically. I never understood why. She's a part of my foster care experience. I was still a kid when some of this happened, and it really hurt. Because of how she treated me I was very insecure about myself. I sometimes still fall into this need for validation.

Being othered within family environments in which participants had become relationally attached had impacts on how participants viewed themselves and how they made meaning of themselves as a person with experience in foster care in relation to others.

Experiences Being with Us, Not Part of Us with Family of Origin

Some participants remained connected to their extended biological family or reconnected with their family of origin in adulthood. For a few participants these were additional contexts where the dichotomy of being biological vs. foster was experienced as some were positioned as different by their extended biological family for having experienced foster care. Describing how she was othered around her extended family, particularly when she would acknowledge experience in foster care, Kim shared:

You're the scapegoat in your family. If you say or do something related to foster care, it's like you're the reminder of the family's failing. I was gaslighted into minimizing the foster care piece of my story. My family would minimize its impact and treat it like this passing event versus it having been my life. They used euphemistic language "Oh we didn't mean to leave you in foster care so you could get adopted out." No, that's exactly what happened. I'm no longer going along with a false narrative to belong. When I was younger, and I didn't have the confidence, I would go along.

Similarly, Danisha reflected on the challenges she experienced with her extended family after foster care, "No one said, 'Can you tell me your story?' ... Instead, they just excluded me from everything." In these ways some participants found disclosing aspects of their foster care experience, acknowledging a foster care identity, or simply existing as a person with experience

in foster care in proximity to their family of origin, led to experiences being minimized or excluded. As Kim had previously described the notion of having “one foot in and one foot out with her foster family,” so too the analogy applied to participants’ experiences with biological family as some had to in essence straddle two worlds and two families, one biological and one foster, with the possibility of being positioned detrimentally as “foster” in one or both spaces. In this way, “being with us, not part of us” was experienced even among biological family of origin for some participants.

Summary—Being with Us, Not Part of Us

In summary, participants shared a range of ways they experienced being with but not part of families, both in foster care placements and among biological family. As family environments are a key context in which a sense of self and identity development occurs, experiences of “being with us, not part of us,” constituted a disrupted developmental environment. The actions of others relayed to participants that they held lower status or did not belong because they had experienced foster care. These messages ultimately had effects on the development of a foster care identity and overall sense of self. The unstable or uncertain nature of family connections within foster care placements and among family of origin further reinforced feelings of uncertainty and lack of belongingness. Next, I introduce the third dimension of *Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments*, having limited access to normative developmental environments.

Having Limited Access to Normative Developmental Experiences

Nearly every participant shared there were times they did not have access to normative developmental experiences before or during foster care that influenced their sense of self and identity development. Various experiences and activities in childhood, adolescence, and early

adulthood are documented as having a role in not only helping young people develop the knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary to successfully navigate adulthood, but are also understood to have a fundamental role in bolstering self-efficacy, self-confidence, and developing a positive self-identity for young people. Participants described how having limited access to normative developmental activities was disruptive to their overall well-being, sense of self, and identity. In each of the subsections that follow, I describe how participants experienced not knowing because of exposure gaps, the developmental loss of not being raised in their family or culture of origin, and the effects of limited access to activities that support positive identity development.

Experiences with Exposure Gaps

Many participants described how they experienced exposure gaps in their lives (Bennett & Hoffman, 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015), otherwise understood as areas of missing knowledge, awareness, or skills that spanned across the Seven Life Domains including: education, cultural and personal identity, supportive relationships and community connections, physical and mental health, life skills, finances and employment, and housing (Casey Family Programs, 2001, Day et al., 2017; Emerson & Baset, 2010). B described how she had exposure gaps in foster care that had impacts on her knowledge in various areas in adulthood as she reflected:

“I’m not sure about that. I grew up in foster care.” I have to say that much more often than I anticipated as an adult. What I’ve learned is you don’t know what you don’t know. Over life I’ve realized there’s a lot of stuff I don’t know because I grew up in foster care and I haven’t had that experience.

Many participants described generalized and specific instances of “not knowing” they attributed to developmental experiences they were unable to have before and during foster care.

Describing some of the missed life experiences that impacted her life, Veratta shared:

I didn't learn to drive until I was in my 20s. I didn't get my driver's license until 29. I was told that the system wouldn't let me take driver's ed. And there were other things I missed out on ... I was in an unhealthy relationship because I didn't know, and I wasn't raised with healthy relationships when I was in foster care.

Several other participants reflected how they did not have guidance on how to develop healthy relationships and described how it impacted how they established their identity in relation to others. Reflecting on not knowing about healthy relationships because of foster care and some of the precursors that she believed led to her marriage and later divorce, Kim shared:

I know for a fact the reason why I chose the person I chose and wanting to get married was wanting to have that experience other women have but not really having the guidance of friends and family. You don't know, what you don't know, and for me it was again, not having that experience or guidance on how you choose a mate.

While Kim described how "her life didn't begin until foster care" and it gave her "a chance to be in the world," she also expressed how foster care limited access to some developmental experiences like having the knowledge and experiences necessary to developing healthy relationships.

Participants described other exposure gaps such as experience with financial well-being impacting their success and well-being into adulthood. Sharing how an absence of knowledge about finances shaped her life, Danisha, explained:

I'm in my early 30s and I'm still learning to manage money from my childhood. Cognitively, I still worry about if I'm going to make my bills. And I'm still dealing with debt I have from when I took my siblings in because I didn't get system support as their caregiver.

Moreover, B explained how caregivers denying youth in foster care access to normative developmental activities, like financial knowledge, is a result of how people perceive youth with experience in foster care (YEFC) as having diminished value:

The more we pass kids around, the more they lose the luxury of adolescence and childhood. We basically stop seeing them as children. We just start to see them as foster kids and they stop caring and taking the time. You don't want to tell them about how to

manage debt. You don't want to tell them about how to prepare for bills. You don't teach them financial literacy and put them on your car insurance. And kids lose out. We stop seeing some the humanity in kids, when we just pass them around like that, when they start to become tangible items that can be moved from place to place, they lose some of their humanity in other people's eyes.

In this way, participants described how their level of access to normative developmental activities, was an indicator of whether they were viewed by the adults in their life as worthy of such experiences and communicated to participants the extent others cared about their development. Further, while a driver's license, healthy relationships, or finances may at first glance seem tangential to the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, they are intrinsically related as participants expressed they are important components of self-efficacy, stability, and success and therein contribute to and have consequences for identity development.

Not Being Raised in Family/Culture of Origin

Participants also described not having access to the normative developmental experience of being raised within their family of origin and expressed the implications for their identity development. Kim described, "how I see the world is impacted by virtue of having missed that experience of living with my family of origin during my formative years." Notably, the experience of not being raised in their family of origin was not unique to those placed in non-relative foster homes. Rather, some participants who were living with extended family members in kinship placements also noted the impact of not being raised in their original family unit. Specifically, some participants reflected on the impact of being separated from their siblings who were placed in other locations, temporarily or permanently. Describing the profound loss of not having the normative experience of growing up alongside her siblings, Clare expressed:

One of the things I'm grieving still, is the relationship with my siblings. I envision if only I had been able to stay with my siblings, rather than the youngest and I spending the majority of our childhood apart from one another. I think about what could have been. I feel sad when I see close sibling groups. That was taken from us at no fault of our own.

We will never know for sure who we could have been otherwise.

Clare's reflection demonstrates how a sibling identity can be an important aspect of one's overall identity and the immense grief that can accompany losing a sibling relationship and not being able to co-construct one's identity in mutual relation to a sibling.

Other participants reflected on the cultural knowledge lost from not being raised in their cultural/Tribal heritage of origin and its impact on their identity development. Describing the uncertainty, she felt not having exposure at the intersection of her racial identity as a Black and Hungarian woman, Simone reflected, "I'm biracial and I still don't know my cultures." Moreover, describing the specific cultural separation from Tribal practices and Native ways of knowing she experienced, SL shared:

The Indian Child Welfare Act is a very sensitive topic. I'm all for keeping our Native kids with Native families. However, sometimes, I feel parts of it are flawed. The intention is to keep kids connected to their culture. Who wouldn't want that? However, there's times kids, like me, are placed with a family of [another Tribe] who knows nothing about the way of life of [my Tribe]. I asked when I was older, why didn't you keep me more connected to my culture? They said, "we figured if you wanted to, you'd ask."

In these ways, participants described how their experience in foster care disrupted their development of a cultural identity, a sense of their roots, and history that is often learned in the context of one's family and is a significant aspect of one's overall identity development.

Not Having Access to Opportunities to Develop a Positive Sense of Self

Participants also described how they had limited access to express themselves or learn about themselves through normative developmental activities. Describing how she had limited access to identify her strengths through extracurricular activities, express herself through clothes, or have someone take genuine concern in her interests, Clare shared,

There was never money for trying out for soccer or doing those things. I didn't know what I was good at. There wasn't a day where someone asked me what do I like? Who do

you want to be? What kind of clothing do you want to wear? Let's go to the store and pick out the clothes that you like. I didn't get those experiences.

Being asked about interests and aspirations, having opportunities to shape personal appearance, and being supported in selecting activities that develop and reflect one's interests are normative developmental activities that some participants did not have access to.

Further, many participants did not feel they were in a stable and safe environment where they could express themselves or learn about themselves by taking developmentally appropriate risks, make decisions for themselves, or make mistakes as part of learning about themselves and the world around them. Some participants described being “fearful” of the adults in their foster care placement, caseworkers, or “afraid of the agency” overall and expressed how that deterred them from engaging in normative developmental decision making. Danisha shared how her caseworker perpetuated fear as she shared, “he told me over and over again, ‘If you mess up, if you f-up, you’re moving. If you get a bad grade, I’m down your throat. I’m going to be in your face all the time.’” Similarly, Kim described how her voice and identity was stifled in foster care as she shared, “Growing up there was always this presumption of don’t rock the boat. Don’t do anything that will draw attention to yourself. Don’t talk back. You always have to answer to someone.” It was common for participants to name they were fearful of speaking up because they did not want to jeopardize their foster care placement. Simone explained how the fear of being separated from her siblings constrained her sense of agency and voice:

I had to be the perfect child to avoid being removed from the placement, or my siblings and I getting separated, or risk losing resources. There was a lot at risk. It felt like do what you’re told so you don’t lose anything else. I had a fear of naming things that were wrong or challenging authority. I really internalized being a good girl, being obedient. Things were driven by fear that if I don’t do it right, if I am not obedient, if I ask questions, if I challenge authority, if I call it out, I might lose my siblings.

Simone further discussed how needing to be a “good girl” to navigate the foster care system limited her ability to exercise agency and develop autonomy with impacts on her identity development:

Isn't it normal for youth who are in their teens and as young people to make errors to make decisions and be able to learn from them? I don't think my system experience was ever about making errors. I don't think I had the opportunity to do that, and I think that really reduced my confidence. If anything, it increased my existence as someone who was hypervigilant. I firmly believe that. I didn't know how to move through the world because choices were already preassigned to me at the residential group home ... Where do we get to exercise and practice making choices, and not have consequences for having an opinion? Some of the Black women that were in foster care with me, they were seen as out of control, and all the isms that come with that, and yet, I was so quiet. I think there was a skill of unapologetic choice and opinion that they were exercising but it wasn't supported.

Simone's reflections exemplify how the perceptions and actions of others including experiences with racism can further limit access to normative developmental activities like having agency to make decisions or have an opinion without experiencing incommensurable consequences. Further, such experiences exemplify that while some participants experienced parentification it was also possible to simultaneously experience treatment that in ways infantilized them by not affording access to age and developmentally appropriate activities.

Summary—Having Limited Access to Normative Developmental Experiences

In summary, participants shared a range of ways they encountered limited access to normative developmental experiences and the ways it shaped their sense of self. For many, the limited access to normative developmental experiences created the conditions of “not knowing” because of foster care and conveyed to participants they were less worthy of such developmental experiences. Participants described the grave effects of not having the normative developmental experiences like being raised in their family of origin, with siblings, or in connection to their cultural/Tribal heritage. Further, having limited opportunities to develop interests and have

autonomy to make choices and state their opinions also impacted participants sense of self at the intersection of identities. Having limited access to normative developmental experiences as an adolescent created the conditions in which participants had to learn about themselves and how to navigate the world on their own, into adulthood, and in less developmentally safe environments. With an understanding of the three dimensions of the component *Experiencing Disruptive Developmental Environments*, next, I introduce the component *Seeking a Sense of Self*.

Seeking a Sense of Self

The second component I'll discuss that comprises the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is *Seeking a Sense of Self*. All the participants described their process of seeking a sense of self during foster care and into adulthood. Through the data I co-constructed with participants during the interviews and my corresponding analysis, I identified three dimensions that characterize the process of seeking a sense of self including: (a) questioning—who am I?, (b) taking responsibility as identity, and (c) affirming self-worth through achievement. Each of the participants, shared at some point in their lives questioning who they were, taking responsibility as a significant aspect of their identity, and building self-worth through achievement. These dimensions were often described by participants as a consequence of the disrupted developmental environments they experienced that created the conditions that led them to question who they were, take on responsibility roles as an identity, and achieve as a means of affirming their self-worth in light of dominant deficit narratives. In the following sections, I further describe the three dimensions of *Seeking a Sense of Self* and provide examples grounded in the experiences of the participants to illustrate the properties of the dimensions and the variations possible within the dimensions.

Questioning—Who Am I?

Each participant reflected on times in the past or present where they were unsure who they were, yet simultaneously had a high degree of self-awareness when it came to their ability to survive, be resilient, and harness their strengths to achieve success. Participants confidently named a myriad of strengths they embodied, including but not limited to being, “determined,” “independent,” “authentic,” “accountable,” “competent,” “confident,” “intellectually smart,” “a survivor” and “resilient.” Amidst an understanding of their many strengths, all the participants described questioning who they were at points during foster care, college, or further into adulthood. In each of the subsections that follow I describe how participants navigated an uncertain self-identity, explored their self-identity particularly in college, and over time considered where their foster care identity fit in their overall sense of self.

Navigating an Uncertain Self-Identity

For many, an effect of experiencing the previously discussed disrupted developmental environments was an uncertain self-identity. It was common for some participants to make comments like, “I didn’t know myself,” and “I just wanted to be normal,” particularly when reflecting retrospectively on their self-perceptions as adolescents or young adults. Providing a detailed description of what it felt like to not know herself and how limited opportunities to develop self-knowledge as a child led to this uncertainty, Clare shared:

I would literally say, I'm not good at anything. I don't know what I'm good at. I never had a chance to do anything. I never did extracurriculars. I changed schools like 100 times, especially in elementary school when it's those formative years of trying things. I didn't know anything about myself, and that really persisted as a teenager of morphing into what I thought I should be for acceptance, because I so deeply wanted to fit in and belong.

Clare further described how in the absence of knowing herself as a teen she would copy others in attempts to be “normal” and have a sense of belonging:

I just wanted to be normal, I wanted to blend in. That is still a thing today, I just want to be mainstream. I don't want anybody to see me as different because I was different for so long, and it felt really awful to be different. To just fit in and be normal is everything that I ever wanted. So, that's what I would try to do. I could go shopping as a teen because I had an afterschool job, and I didn't even know what clothes I liked. Because I didn't know my own likes, dislikes, I would copy what other people were wearing because that's the best thing that I knew how to do. Or I would copy the music that people would listen to. My friends didn't like that. I would get called out a lot for trying to copy people, which was really harmful and hurtful to me. I just didn't know how to be myself or what I liked.

Clare's reflection exemplifies the tension yet intersection many participants navigated between developing a sense of self and developing a sense of belonging. In other words, not being so different you're excluded, and not being so similar you're socially reprimanded for not being individual enough, was a complexity participants described navigating as a person with experience in foster care. Further, for many participants, "being yourself" was not inherent or simple and trying to develop a sense of self without the support of caregivers and environments that facilitated positive self-knowledge led to difficult and at times painful experiences. Danisha further explained how experience in foster care and disrupted developmental environments created the preconditions for being uncertain about one's self-identity:

Part of it is finding out who we are. If we're not being allowed to work through that as a young person, then we have to do that in adulthood. I think that's why there's so many of us who feel like we aren't where we want to be is because we don't even know who we are or where we want to be.

As Danisha described, "finding out who we are" takes "work," and among people with experience in foster care this can be a process navigated alone and later into adulthood compared to peers with earlier access to opportunities and support for developing a strong sense of self.

Exploring Self-Identity in College

Some participants described how college was a time that uncertainties about their identity were further brought to their attention as they had to make decisions on their own, in some cases with it being the first time they were even allowed to make decisions, based on their

understanding of themselves. When it came to choosing a major in college, Ashley shared how she initially selected a major that was common among her peers, “I started out with nursing. I just thought, oh, everyone’s doing nursing. Let’s do nursing. I quickly realized that it was not for me.” Ashley changed her major to one that aligned with her interests, yet described how she continued to look to others’ expectations of her as she navigated an absence of self-knowledge:

I was all over the place in college. I was trying to figure out who I was, who my friend groups were...I was just really trying to find myself, and I think it was a little bit harder for me because I had this identity of being in foster care. It was like who should I be based on what people expect? I don’t know.

While identity development is a common aspect of the college experience for many students, participants described it as being harder for students with experience in foster care (SEFC) who are navigating the continued effects of experiencing foster care. Veratta shared how experiencing disrupted developmental environments in foster care limited opportunities to develop a sense of self resulting in numerous changes in her self-identity in college:

I think the foster care identity is part of that in terms of not really having this ability to be introspective and discern what is right for you, what you like, what you don't like, because you're not really taught to do that when you're in survival mode ... so college can be a time of lot of identity shifts.

In the absence of environments that supported the development of a sense of self while in foster care, college was often a context in which identity exploration occurred.

Describing how identity development was also a significant component of her time in college and was a period during which she questioned who she was, Simone shared:

I would say my college experience was really a time where confidence-building and identity development was more of a priority for me than the classroom. I never skipped a class or anything but in retrospect my focus was who is Simone? And who am I going to be? And what do I want to be when I grow up? I’m not with my siblings and I’m not sure how to navigate without confidence, and there was also this panic of I have to figure out my future after this.

It was common for participants to describe a need to understand themselves with a sense of urgency. They were not merely exploring their identity for fun in college and their pursuits to find themselves weren't purely existential in nature. Rather, exploration was deeply connected to an understanding that their continued well-being and survival as a person who "did not have fallbacks" was dependent upon having interests, priorities, and a sense of self aligned.

Underscoring how such questions of identity continued throughout college, Simone described how, the question "who am I?" resurfaced at the intersection of her foster care and student identity as she neared college graduation:

The transition to college graduation was brutal for me. I was considered a successful foster youth graduating with this degree, but there was the identity crisis of who am I, if not a student? And who am I really going to be? I'm going to lose my scholarships, my housing. There was this other level of emancipation I was feeling at the moment of graduating undergrad. As a foster kid, the plan was to graduate and go to college, and then here I am graduating, and I'm like what am I going to be when I grow up. I'm just a foster youth. It was sheer panic. Compared to emancipating from the system, it was more traumatic graduating from college.

A few participants reflected how the emphasis the foster care system and its actors place on going to college can bolster a college student identity as a primary, albeit temporary identity, to the detriment of supporting a holistic sense of self. As Simone relayed, even when the success of degree completion was achieved, the loss of a student identity through graduation resurfaced the question "Who am I?" in relation to a foster care identity, others' expectations, and one's continued ability to survive and meet basic needs.

Considering Where a Foster Care Identity Fits

As part of questioning who they were, many participants described how they had to interpret messages from others about the value of their foster care identity and identify whether a foster care identity fit in the public identity they shared with others. Some participants avoided claiming and disclosing their foster care identity, particularly in their younger years to minimize

encounters with stigmas and stereotypes. Elyse shared her desire to “not be foster care” as a teen because of her peers’ actions toward youth in foster care:

When I was at the group home, a whole busload of us would go to this high school. The idea of people at the high school treating us like weirdos or others because we were foster kids, it was a dehumanizing thing. I remember spending my 10th grade year, vehemently denying that I was a foster kid. You didn’t want to be the weird one in high school that didn’t have a normal life. I was like no one has to know. I’ll just be as “normal” as possible. “Normal” in air quotes of course.

Likewise, reflecting on the embarrassment and fear associated with a foster care identity and a desire to construct a new “not foster care” identity in young adulthood, Kim shared:

I remember not telling people that I was in foster care. I wanted a new identity. I wanted to shake it because I felt embarrassed about it. I felt like I should let go and forget about it. I ended up kind of muting who I was. Outside advocacy circles I never really mentioned my foster care identity. The idea of being known scared me. I kind of segmented it. But I also needed that developmentally at the age of 21. I needed time to see how it fit. When you go from not knowing how long you’re going to be in care and not anticipating it’s going to shape your whole life. Your whole childhood. Not only with the formal label of being foster youth but then into adulthood.

It was common for participants to note a degree of surprise that aspects of a foster care identity followed them into their college years and adulthood after the formal label of “foster youth” was gone, and some, like Kim, described how they needed time to make meaning of their realization a foster care identity may remain a part of their overall identity into adulthood.

While some participants described “denying” or “segmenting” their foster care identity in public spheres, particularly in foster care and into college, some questioned if a foster care identity comprised too much of their overall identity and described lacking knowledge of their other identities. Questioning if a foster care identity was salient and reinforced through her environment to the detriment of other identities she had not explored yet, Simone reflected:

I’m at a place of curiosity. What other interests do I have? What other identities do I have? Sometimes I wonder, who am I outside of my foster care identity? My best friend is a former foster youth, we were in care together. My husband is a former foster youth, we were in care together. Like 70% of my colleagues are former foster youth. So, the

curiosity I have is when will my foster identity not be first? And what will it be? Will it be that I'm a woman? Will it be that I'm a sister? Will it be that I'm biracial and I don't know my cultures? ... The foster care identity is there 97% of the time and I'm not sure what the other 3% is even. When I'm in the shower? Dreaming? I'm genuinely curious who I am outside this aspect.

In this way, some described their foster care identity as being “such a big identity” that it left little room to develop other aspects of their identity.

Summary—Questioning—Who Am I?

In summary, participants shared a range of contexts in which they questioned—“Who am I?” because of experiences in foster care and corresponding disrupted developmental environments that limited some aspects of identity development while bolstering others. Amidst the uncertainties participants navigated on their journey to construct a cohesive and holistic sense of self, participants described a high degree of self-awareness and exemplified their many strengths, while asking, “Who am I?” in the contexts of foster care, college, and into adulthood. As many made meaning of how and where their foster care identity fit in their life, they navigated the perceptions of others along with feelings of being different compared to an idealized normalcy they perceived amongst their real and imagined peers. Next, I introduce the second dimension of *Seeking a Sense of Self*, taking responsibility as identity.

Responsibility as Identity

Each participant reflected on the immense responsibility that was placed on them before, during, or after foster care that constructed their self-identity around their responsibilities. Participants described the responsibility they felt using the phrases “it’s a subconscious insidious responsibility,” “a consistent threat,” and an aspect of their identity that “runs really deep.” While participants described the fatigue that accompanied the responsibilities they held, some also reflected on the loss they felt when responsibility-based identity roles ended. Others

described their desire for rest and distance from the responsibilities they took on yet questioned who they would be without their corresponding identity roles. In the subsections that follow, I describe how responsibility-based identity roles were conferred on participants in childhood, often resulting from experiencing disrupted developmental environments before and during foster care, and I discuss the ways in which responsibility-based identity roles continued to impact participants into adulthood.

Conferral of Responsibility-Based Identity Roles in Childhood

Some participants reflected on how the experiences they had prior to or during foster care constructed their identity around responsibility. Elyse reflected, “there’s trauma that can make you mature more slowly, then there’s trauma that can make you mature too early and make you carry responsibility.” Many participants discussed how in childhood they had responsibility for their family and siblings and held roles such as “caretaker” or “sister mom.” The responsibilities many participants held were not developmentally normative obligations and several reflected how the responsibilities placed on them were the result of the disruptive developmental environments they experienced. Participants were self-reflective about the responsibility they held and how it shaped their identity. Ashley disclosed, “I’ve always known responsibility was a big piece of my identity and that played a role, but I’ve never actually talked about it to anyone.” Likewise, some participants shared how they acknowledged the level of responsibility imposed on them as children, adolescents, and young adults was not developmentally appropriate.

Nearly all the participants had adult responsibilities placed on them at a young age. For many, the responsibilities they held included being responsible for their own survival and others. Ashley spoke about how her role in her family had been one of caretaking and responsibility before, during, and after foster care. Reflecting on responsibilities she held before foster care,

Ashley shared “I spent so many years taking care of my mother, taking care of my siblings, doing the cooking, the grocery shopping, the medication pick-up, reminding people to take their medication. I was the caregiver.” It was especially common for participants to have responsibility for caretaking siblings while in foster care as their assigned caregivers and system agents in their lives often provided inadequate care and protection. Kim shared how she felt inherently responsible for taking caring of her sibling while in foster care:

I was made to feel that I had to take care of everyone, and it's not like it was explicitly stated. It was a subconscious responsibility. It was insidious. I would go to visits, and my little sister would be bouncing off the walls. She externalized. People labeled her as hyper and I very much I internalized everything, so it looked as if I was much more mellow and quote unquote, “well behaved.” So, often, I was just expected to be the default spokesperson for my sister and I.

Describing responsibilities as “subconscious” and “insidious” acknowledges while participants may not have been explicitly asked to take on some responsibilities or the responsibilities may not have appeared particularly egregious, the impact of such responsibilities was cumulative over time and had a mounting physical and psychological toll.

Some participants reflected on how they became accustomed to their responsibility roles such as being the caretaker for their siblings and described how sibling separation in foster care disrupted their identity in complex ways. Describing how being separated from her siblings disrupted her responsibility and identity as a “sister-mom” in her family, Veratta shared:

The hardest part of going into foster care was to transition from my identity of sister-mom to just sister. I have these siblings floating out there and we weren't in contact because we were placed separately. I was old enough to understand what was going on but not being able to help my siblings understand why this is happening and why we're separated was hard. Separation from the responsibility for my siblings was a separation from my immediate core.

While participants often had little choice in the responsibility placed on them at a young age, it was simultaneously impactful when participants were stripped by no choice of their own of

responsibilities and associated identity roles. Situations that disrupted responsibilities and identity roles were described by participants as disrupting their sense of self.

Impacts of Responsibility as Identity in Adulthood

Further, many participants shared how the responsibilities and related identity roles they navigated in childhood had impacts into adulthood. Simone shared how navigating responsibilities in the transition from foster care to aging out established mental models of self-reliance that carried far into her adult life:

Responsibility is a top impact for me of my experience in care. I still have it in my mind that the only person that I can rely on most in my life and should be the most prepared is myself. Some of that has to do with the language around emancipation even from when I was 13. I was having to think about how I'm going to be independent at 18 and I have to prepare for taking care of Simone. No one else is going to do it ... And then it showed up in college, financial stability was solely my responsibility. I was the one responsible for figuring out scholarships, keeping up with my case worker, figuring out insurance. During finals week, I got appendicitis and a \$10,000 ambulance bill I was responsible for. It's always been me being responsible and taking care of myself. It's not that I don't have trust in people now, but the idea I think is so ingrained that at the end of the day, it will be me showing up for me. And I don't say this as oh, look at me, I'm so stable. I look at it as it's still me navigating my trauma that I feel so responsible and that I can only rely on myself.

Further, Simone's reflection outlines how the system language of "emancipation" and emphasis that YEFC need to prepare for independence, rather than the interdependence afforded to many of their peers with stable family units, was one of the many ways responsibility was constructed as an identity for participants.

Likewise, several participants reflected how as responsibility became a component of their identity, it was tied to a belief they needed to be responsible for themselves (and often others) and be self-reliant. Similar to Simone describing how she avoided seeking help, Ashley shared:

I'm determined to do whatever it takes to not feel like a burden, but also not feel hopeless. I get scolded a lot by my best friend about not asking for help. I just don't want

to be a burden to anyone and want to be responsible for myself. I will try to find another way if I need help. I realized it's not good in a lot of situations.

For many, the previously discussed component experiencing disrupted developmental environments and more specifically the dimension being raised on struggle and survival, not on love, was a precursor for responsibility being constructed as a core aspect of identity.

Additionally, related to the previously discussed dimension *Questioning—Who Am I?*, some participants specifically questioned who they were outside of the things they were responsible for. Describing how she questioned who she was in relation to and beyond her education and career responsibilities, Simone reflected:

Responsibility runs really deep. I'm in my 30s and I'm still trying to figure out who I am outside of the things I'm responsible for. I don't know who I am outside of work, school, the grind for survival. I was a student, that was my identity, and foster care. That's what I was. So, when I graduated, it was who am I outside of my responsibility to prove myself as a student. Then I was a working professional. Now it's who am I outside of working professional? I haven't really figured that out yet.

For others, caretaking of siblings was a responsibility that spanned into adulthood and generated questions about self-identity. Danisha shared how having guardianship for her siblings as an adult shaped her identity as she shared, "I was focused on my responsibilities of caring for my siblings and getting through school. There was a loss of identity. Who am I? What do I want as a person outside of these responsibilities?" For some, responsibility became such an overarching aspect of identity it overshadowed other parts of a self-identity. After years of being the caretaker of her family and primarily constructing her identity around her responsibilities, Ashley shared how she desired to limit her responsibilities going forward to focus on her own identity, yet simultaneously questioned who she would be without such responsibilities:

It's taken me years to admit, but I've always been the caretaker of my family. In foster care, but even now, trying to handle family situations. It's a lot. I don't want kids because I'm already tired. I've raised children. I've raised my nieces. I'm still raising my siblings. I've done all that. I don't want to do it anymore. And I've done it all before I was in my

mid-20s. I just want to focus on me. But then it's like what do I do now? With the rest of my life, if I'm not responsible for all that.

Further, as Ashley and others conveyed, the responsibilities some participants held for so many years led to intense fatigue that shaped their desires for a future with less demands but also made it difficult for participants to imagine their identities outside their responsibilities.

Summary—Responsibility as Identity

In summary, participants shared a range of contexts in which they held responsibilities as identity roles in the contexts of their life before, during, and after foster care. For many, responsibility-based identity roles were conferred in childhood and were often experienced in relation to experiencing disruptive developmental environments that constructed being solely responsible for oneself and others as an aspect of having a foster care identity. Constructing responsibility as identity at times had impacts into adulthood such as participants feeling disproportionately and singularly responsible for themselves and others, avoiding seeking help from others, and experiencing uncertainty in developing a sense of self beyond their responsibilities. Next, I introduce the final dimension of *Seeking a Sense of Self*, affirming self-worth through achievement.

Affirming Self-Worth Through Achievement

Amidst questioning—who am I? and navigating various identity roles associated with responsibility, many participants described how achieving, particularly in their educational and career pursuits was a significant aspect of surviving, affirming self-worth, and developing an understanding of themselves. Participants often described their achievements as being driven in part by their awareness of the risks, outcomes, and statistics associated with experiencing foster care. At times, participants described how their achievements were accompanied by feelings of imposter syndrome, yet individuals and resources that supported their success coupled with their

strong internal drive to succeed helped them persist in their endeavors. Some participants reflected on how they came to know themselves as successful yet navigated continued internal and external pressures to achieve at persistently high levels into adulthood in ways that effected their well-being. In each subsection that follows, I describe how participants sought to achieve to overcome the foster care statistics they were aware of, faced imposter syndrome, were affirmed through their achievements, and had an achievement orientation that persisted into adulthood.

Achieving to Overcome the Foster Care Statistics

Many participants described achieving as a coping and survival strategy as it was the only pathway presented to them to avoid living out the outcomes they witnessed among their family of origin and peers. For example, Veratta shared how foster care was a “canon moment” for her, an unpredictable event that changed the direction of her life and set the course for achieving to create a life different from what her parents experienced:

I was very focused academically because I knew I couldn’t have the same life as my parents. Foster care, the experience of being othered and being in the state system, switching roles with my parents, all those things intertwined was a canon moment, the impetus for me to know that this is not the life I want. I’m going to have to get an education for the outcomes and things I want. I knew educational achievement was going to be my pathway to get out of this life, that my parents had raised me in and unfortunately put me in without my permission.

Likewise, some participants described how they felt pressure to achieve because of peers who were unable to persist in college. Simone shared,

Seeing someone I knew from foster care have to leave college and knowing she wasn’t coming back. It was increased pressure to perform at school. I was saddened to see my peers set a goal and not make it. Some were in the real struggle of drugs already, system involved. It was very emotional for me.

The outcomes participants witnessed amongst their families of origin and peers generated feelings of fear and empathetic grief for the hardships others faced while simultaneously motivating them to achieve.

It was common for participants to describe how actors of the foster care system created additional pressure to achieve by positioning academic success as the only way to avoid the negative outcomes associated with foster care. Describing how the foster care agency reinforced stereotypes by reiterating the poor outcomes of YEFC, Ashley described, “Whenever we had to go to the agency for some type of meeting, we were told a lot to not be a statistic, like unemployed or not having a high school diploma.” Simone also shared being presented with negative outcomes at the residential group home she was placed in:

They would have alumni come back who emancipated from the residential group home and have them share. I remember one alumnus came back. His name was Ethan [pseudonym], and he experienced just like everything that could go wrong. He was trying to survive health issues, prison, losing custody of his daughter. Every single scenario that you hear of those statistics of youth who are in foster care. Only 3% of us are going to graduate. Only 50% of us are going to get our diplomas. All these negative indicators. You’re going to be homeless. You’re going to be a parent who loses your kids to the system. He was living it out. I remember thinking, I don’t want to be Ethan. I don’t want this life of consequence and struggle to be my reality. All we were seeing was the negative.

The experience of being repeatedly faced with the outcomes, statistics, and stigma associated with foster care constructed a foster care identity around societal expectations of what not to be, rather than helping adolescents and young adults define who they could be and what they could achieve on their own terms.

For many, the awareness of the stigma and statistics generated fear leading to actions of hypervigilance and hyperachievement. Describing the effect the stigma had on her and how it impacted her identity as a person with experience in foster care, Elyse shared:

You start to believe all the stigma. Hearing bad things like foster kids are aren’t going anywhere. I was like I don’t want to be like that. I need to get my degree. I would tell people I got to show up, I have to prove them wrong. There’s a stigma I’m fighting against. I’m trying to succeed out of spite and be as counterhegemonic as possible. It created vigilance in that I feel like I have to be three steps ahead of everybody or I’m going to become a failure, which is not what I want to do, become a statistic.

Elyse further described how her awareness of the statistics informed her past belief that she needed to pursue a doctorate. She reflected, “It was pure spite. I heard the statistic 3% get a bachelor’s degree so, I said, I’m going to get a PhD. It’s not the right reason to do it. It took me a long time to figure that out.” Ashley also reflected how her awareness of the statistics influenced her perspective that despite her various achievements, she still felt like she had “not done enough.” Similarly, despite numerous career and academic achievements, including obtaining a doctorate, Danisha reflected, “I don't know if I'll ever feel I've leveled the field enough. I think I'll always kind of feel like I'm starving to achieve and get forward. That might be because of my trauma response.” Dominant deficit narratives positioned achievement as a priority for participants to overcome statistics and constantly strive to achieve at the highest level to ensure their survival and affirm self-worth that negative messages had at times diminished.

Facing Imposter Syndrome

While participants described an intense motivation to achieve and shared their growing awareness of the many strengths they held, all described some feelings of their achievements and “success as being surprising.” Ashley described her surprise that she was accepted to every college she applied to:

My biggest success was graduating high school because I never thought I would. I ended up applying to seven different colleges and got accepted to all of them. Which was very confusing. I was like who would accept me to go to college.

Veratta shared similar surprise about being accepted to college, “I was shocked I got in. My GPA was good, but when you look at the different pamphlets. They talk about the average GPA, that wasn’t me. When I got in there, I was like what?!” The narrative presented to the participants of who gets into college did not align with the perception they had formed of themselves as a young person with a foster care identity. Being accepted to college was a turning point in self-worth in

which participants' ability to achieve academically was affirmed, though not without navigating feelings of continued self-doubt.

Participants shared how they faced imposter syndrome in college and in their career. Describing how imposter syndrome was experienced at the intersection of her identities, Veratta expressed, "My biggest challenge in college was navigating imposter syndrome and all that entails to ultimately get to graduation while also navigating all this identity development and being foster care, Black, and first gen." Other participants also described how they experienced imposter syndrome at the intersection of marginalized identities. Simone shared how going from achieving high grades and being valedictorian in a multicultural high school environment at the residential group home to experiencing various struggles at a predominantly white university facilitated the conditions that contributed to imposter syndrome at the intersections of her identity as a biracial, low income, first-gen college student who had experienced foster care. Simone described, "I started to question, Am I meant to be here? Am I smart enough? Those stories we tell ourselves." While getting into college was affirming for some participants, it was also a new context in which they had to navigate their self-worth in relation to the implicit and explicit messages they received about their likelihood of success.

Other participants described how experiences with imposter syndrome shaped their perspectives on their career achievements in adulthood. Clare described how she questioned if her career opportunities were the result of having a foster care identity rather than her abilities:

There's an imposter syndrome piece I still manage. The foster care identity piece comes up in the context of my professional trajectory and questioning if it is because I'm good at what I do and qualified, or is it because I have this identity, and it looks good for them to pick me. That little voice in the back of my head asks, did I actually earn this, or was this something you gave me because I was in foster care and you pity me? Do I deserve it or is it all going to crumble down because I'm selected for something that doesn't relate to my ability? Yes, lived experience is a qualifier for getting work in this field and

conceptually and values wise I believe that, but my own voice asks, “What if you fail?” Clare’s reflections describe the mental labor that goes into processing the validity of one’s abilities, contributions, and achievements while having to simultaneously interpret the perceptions and intentions of others at the intersection of a foster care identity. Likewise, SL reflected on facing imposter syndrome upon being selected for a competitive national foster care advocacy experience yet ultimately found her abilities were affirmed in a manner that bolstered feelings of self-worth:

I remember thinking what did I get myself into? What if I fail at this. But my policy advisor thought really highly of me, and it was a huge moment for me when I started to have a lot of confidence. I felt like I was selected nationally from a whole pool, not because I was the only choice but because what I submitted was good enough. And then to have two federally published policy recommendations out there and to be invited to the White House with Native Tribal youth, and literally every person there was Native, and to meet the First Lady. I was like wow. I learned what I had to offer was really great.

As evidenced in this example, when organizations make efforts to affirm the abilities and contributions of people with experience in foster care, particularly with attention to the intersection of their identities, it can help resolve imposter syndrome and affirm self-worth.

Being Affirmed Through Achievements

Relatedly, it was common for participants to share how experiences with achievement in K-12 education and college affirmed their abilities amidst hardships. Nearly every participant described how at least one educator, mentor, or social worker encouraged them to achieve in their educational pursuits and helped affirm their self-worth in relation to their achievements. Veratta reflected, “Educators are the reason I’m still standing in a lot of ways, they affirmed me.” While being in foster care at times made it difficult to achieve, many participants described how foster care made their educational pursuits and achievements more possible. For example, Clare shared how being in a stable foster care placement helped her develop a sense of identity in

relation to achieving as a student and learner, “I learned when I had a safe environment, I was a really good student. I discovered my intellect, and that was an element of starting to understand who I was.” Moreover, reflecting on their college experiences, several participants shared how “it was meaningful when professors recognized my work” or how making the “dean’s list was a big deal for me.” Ashley described how having her achievements affirmed in college was especially meaningful given the ways her identity at a SEFC had otherwise been positioned:

College helped me become more confident. The label of being involved in foster care adds this layer of making you feel a lot less than others, but other students would come to me for help. I was leading tutoring sessions with people. That helped me build my confidence of who I was and understand oh, I’m good at something. I can do something.

Graduating college was also described by many participants as a specific turning point of self-worth with many referencing it as their “biggest success.” With awareness of the outcomes statistics among youth in foster care, Elyse shared the pride she felt when she graduated with her bachelor’s degree and had plans for a stable future:

Graduation means so much to us because we aren’t supposed to be getting there. I just remember feeling so proud of myself. It felt so good to be there. A bunch of my supporters were there in the audience. It was like I do have a family, and fuck you, I did it. I had it figured out. I had gotten into graduate school. I knew what I was doing. I knew what my career was and that felt really good.

For many participants, experiencing various levels of educational success was a complex yet tangible symbol of achievement that represented overcoming the challenges they had faced and evading the negative outcomes that had been presented to them as a YEFC.

Having an Achievement Orientation

Although participants experienced challenges and faced deficit perspectives, many described how they came to understand their ability to be successful and achieve as a core component of their self-concept. Kim shared, “I’m able to look back now and see the full experience. School, work, and those things that I want to accomplish have been a constant in my

life. They have always motivated me, and I was damn good at them.” SL also described how achieving her goals was a stable part of her self-concept for many years:

Something has always been inside that will not let me give up on myself or lay in bed all day, even in high school. Guilt would come over me that I have to keep building a good life for myself. I always had high goals.

While some participants attributed their drive to succeed as core to who they were regardless of their foster care experience, others reflected how their experiences with trauma and foster care created the conditions that made an achievement orientation a core aspect of their identity.

Reflecting how her experiences growing up in disrupted developmental environments cultivated her drive to achieve, Elyse shared:

The resilience, dedication, and drive are like 90% of my personality that I would not have if I didn’t have experience in foster care. It’s directly related to my trauma and time in care that I would think I must do as much as possible at any given time and I would chew through concrete to achieve my goals. I wasn’t in the present. I was 10 years in the future thinking what can I do today to get myself there.

Whether they attributed their achievement orientation to their experience in foster care or inherent to their sense of self, as it was actualized by participants, for many achieving was an enduring and intertwining aspect of their foster care identity.

While participants generally perceived their drive to succeed positively and as one of their strengths, some expressed how their strong achievement orientation had a shadow side as they questioned, who they were if they were not constantly achieving. Elyse reflected how before her chronic illness slowed her pace, she would question who she would be if she were not achieving and if she was worthy of rest, perspectives she attributed to her experiences with disrupted developmental environments:

What if I get there? What if I have nothing left to strive for. Moments where I’m facing doing just one thing, I would wonder can I handle that? Or am I going to freak out like the walls are closing in on me because I have nowhere to grow or nothing new to fill my time with. These are the thoughts you have when you have a messed-up background. You

question, can I handle normal? Do I deserve normal? Am I going to be okay with normal?

Like Elyse, “normal” was a condition many participants felt they were not, as it implied having permission to rest, a deservingness to not constantly be striving to achieve, or struggling to survive. Also positioning “normal” as the opposite of constantly achieving, Danisha reflected,

There’s time where I wish I could just be normal and not want to have more. There’s side of me that wants to do more but at the same time there’s the exhaustion of always sharing and doing...I’ve been done with my PhD...but when I finished, I was like what’s the next big thing. But also, when is enough going to be enough? I’m like girl, when will you breathe? I worked my tail off but looking back at those successes at those wins, I didn’t celebrate them. It’s like I have to get to the end or it’s not happening. You lose yourself a little bit and then it’s what’s the next challenge.

In many ways, an achievement orientation was an asset that helped participants affirm their self-worth amidst deficit perspectives and helped them survive and reach a degree of stability in their life. However, the pressure participants faced to (re)affirm their self-worth through achievement had consequences such as not resting, not celebrating achievements, associating an absence of productivity with lowered self-worth, and being in a constant state of achieving.

Summary—Affirming Self-Worth Through Achievement

In summary, participants experienced pervasive messages that conveyed self-worth was tied to achievement. Witnessing their family of origin and peers struggle while being told “don’t be a statistic” generated fear of failure and conveyed achieving was necessary to prove one’s worth. Navigating imposter syndrome specifically in relation to their foster care identity, led many participants to question if their achievements were legitimate and if they were worthy of the opportunities extended to them. While some participants had experiences that led them to question the validity of their achievements, many described turning points in which their abilities were affirmed. Despite facing imposter syndrome, participants were ultimately confident in their ability to persevere with an awareness of their many strengths, had a long history of overcoming

challenges to achieve success, and reflected how achieving was a core aspect of their sense of self. While achievement at times helped facilitate a positive sense of self in relation to a foster care identity that been positioned by dominant narratives in a deficit manner, building self-worth through achievement generated questions among participants of who they would be if they were not striving to achieve. Others questioned if they were deserving of being “normal,” a term used to describe the state of not hyperachieving to survive and feeling a sense of permission to rest. With an understanding of how participants experienced seeking a sense of self, next, I introduce the third component, *Becoming Aware of Foster Care Identity*.

Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity

The third component I’ll discuss that comprises the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity*. All the participants described becoming aware of the ways in which their experience in foster care was part of their identity. Some participants were aware of their foster care identity upon entry into foster care or during events in foster care that brought the identity to their awareness, while others described growing awareness of the foster care aspect of their identity farther into adulthood as they continued to reflect on their experiences in and related to foster care and how it had shaped their lives. Participants described how experiences with placement changes in foster care, connecting with others with a foster care identity, and coming to understand their foster care experience as valid, all facilitated awareness of a foster care identity in challenging and affirming ways. Through the data I co-constructed with participants during the interviews and my corresponding analysis, I identified three dimensions that characterize the process of *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity* including: (a) experiencing placement changes, (b) connecting with others with a foster care identity, and (c) feeling foster care enough. In the

following sections, I further describe the three dimensions and provide examples grounded in the experiences of the participants to illustrate the properties of the dimensions and the variations possible within the dimensions.

Experiencing Placement Changes

Many participants reflected on how the realization they were in foster care and held a foster care identity was brought to their attention when they experienced changes in their foster care placements. Changes in foster care placements included changes participants experienced moving from one location to another as well as changes in the dynamics they experienced within a foster care placement that shifted how they were treated in relation to their status as a person in foster care. One participant referred to the changes she experienced in one foster care placement as a “turning point” that brought a foster care identity to awareness as a significant aspect of her overall identity. For some participants, turning point experiences through changes in foster care placements took place while they were in foster care and for others changes in how they experienced their foster care placements took place in adulthood, such as during the transition to college. While some of the other dimensions discussed in the following sections brought a foster care identity to awareness in a positive manner, many participants described how experiencing placement changes brought a foster care identity to their awareness in challenging ways as changes in their environments were associated with experiencing disparate treatment that brought a foster care identity to their attention. In the subsections that follow, I describe how participants became aware of a foster care identity based on the type and duration of foster care placements they experienced, changes in how they were treated in foster care placements, and their experiences transitioning placements from foster care to college.

Feeling Foster Care Based on Placement Type and Duration

The number of placement changes, type of placements experienced, and the amount of time in foster care shaped some participants early awareness of a foster care identity as a component of their identity. Describing how multiple placement transitions and a long duration of time in foster care shaped her early awareness of her foster care identity, Veratta explained:

I think particularly when you've been in the foster care system for all your life or have been in for a long time and have been shuttled around to different types of homes or different families it's this larger kind of overarching thing. Through all of that and also having to fight for so long for everything I have at every level, is what has brought the identity forward for me.

In this way, Veratta expressed how she became aware of a foster care identity through the combination of placement changes and the associated experience of struggling to survive. Others discussed how the specific type of foster care placement they experienced upon entry into foster care shaped their early awareness of a foster care identity. Reflecting on how being placed in a shelter made her newly conferred status as a “foster kid” immediately apparent, Elyse shared:

Foster care was jarring. Being placed at the shelter was the most jarring time. It was one of those things where we all have that stereotypical view of foster care and foster kids. But then it was happening to me, and I quickly had to incorporate, I'm part of that stereotype, what does that mean for me? Being a foster kid myself made it personal.

While some participants had experience in foster care that brought a foster care identity to their awareness early on, others described how their awareness of a foster care identity grew over time and with reflection on the placement changes they experienced.

Kim reflected on how she came to understand a foster care identity over time and made meaning of the various relative, adoptive, and non-relative foster care placements she experienced:

The old way of thinking was a new identity through adoption. That it eradicates all past experiences. But that's not true. I was in adoptive placements and the other parts were still there. You can't simply drift a child away from prior experiences before and during

foster care and act like it's not there anymore. It does impact their core. It affirms for me it is part of your identity and I think we are starting to see a shift where people are starting to understand this needs to be seen as part of identity.

For some, becoming aware of a foster care identity took time, in part because they were influenced by dominant narratives that as Kim described suggested she should have “a new identity” rather than acknowledging a foster care identity may still develop and be present despite being adopted, as was the case for Kim who reentered foster care after experiencing a failed adoption. Likewise, B described how her awareness that a foster care identity was present in her life, came with time as her foster care placement changed from being with her relatives to being in a shelter:

When I was with my relatives, I was in foster care, but I really didn't identify with that, and I didn't feel “foster care” because I was with my family. There was a period of two years I didn't even think about being in foster care even though I was. The caseworker would still come by, and I'd be like nobody needs you. I have my family. But then my family got overwhelmed because I had some hard behaviors. They sent me to the emergency shelter because nobody would take me. Then when they forgot about me, it became real. It was very apparent I was in foster care, and I felt very “foster care” after that.

B's description of feeling “foster care” is one of many examples across the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in which participants used the phrase “feeling foster care” or “being foster care” to explain the ways a foster care identity was brought to their attention negatively through experiences being marginalized because of their status as a person with experience in foster care. It was common among participants who had experienced a foster care placement with relatives to describe being or feeling less foster care during their time in a kinship foster care placement, while non-relative foster care placements were described by participants as creating a greater awareness of a foster care identity with a greater degree of impact on and salience to their overall identity.

Feeling Foster Care Based on Changes in Treatment in Foster Homes

Beyond changes in physical foster care placement locations, some participants shared how changes in the dynamics within their foster care placement, made them aware of a foster care identity. Ashley explained how being treated differently within one of her foster care placements was a turning point that brought her foster care identity forward:

Developing a foster care identity, happens through a turning point. Something happens that completely shapes who you used to be, how you think about the world, how you think about yourself, and I think that event may be unique to the individual. My event was the issues that I started having in my second foster home. Being treated differently by the adopted children it really shaped and made me aware of my foster care identity.

Other participants described how changes within their foster care placement resulted in different treatment. SL shared how the passing of her foster mom shifted her experience in the home from generally feeling a sense of love and belonging to at times feeling like a “foster kid”:

When I was growing up it was a very stable home but then my foster mom passed away and from that point after she passed away, that’s when I started to feel more like I was this foster kid in the foster care system. I wasn’t treated like I belonged as much as people that were biologically related in the foster family.

SL described how even in foster care placements where primary caregivers are committed to equitable and humanizing treatment, if not everyone in the home or extended family “is on board,” marginalization can occur. In this way, changes in treatment within even long-term foster care placements made some participants more aware of the foster care aspect of their identity.

Feeling Foster Care in the Shift from Foster Care to College

For some participants, placement changes such as those associated with aging out of foster care and going to college brought their foster care experience to greater awareness as an aspect impacting their identity. Describing how going to college changed the dynamics with her foster care placement and made her aware of the continued effects of foster care, SL explained:

I didn't realize how disconnected I was until I went to college, because like, no one from home ever really checked up on me. It was always me calling and making that effort. Especially in Tribal communities, family is huge and instead I felt very alone. College felt like my loneliest time in my life.

For some participants, the placement transition of moving out of a foster home and moving onto a college campus brought to awareness how experiencing foster care had resulted in different levels of support compared to their peers who had not been in foster care. Also sharing how the transition to college was a time she became more aware of her foster care identity and that it could be perceived negatively by her peers, Veratta shared, “college is where shame was introduced regarding the foster care identity because I didn’t have parents I could just call. I didn’t have anyone to back me up.” Likewise, Simone shared how the social-environmental transition from the residential group home to a college campus both created physical distance from her foster care identity yet brought it further to her awareness at the intersection of her identities as she described, “it was my first time being away from my foster care identity ... but then it was apparent that I was very different from the girls on my floor. They were white and privileged, and had their parents move them in.” While many participants physically left their foster care placement and aged out of foster care when they went to college, experiences of difference they had in the pseudo placement transition to the college environment brought a foster care identity to greater awareness.

Summary—Experiencing Placement Changes

In summary, many participants experienced placement changes that made them increasingly aware of a foster care identity. Placement changes that were abrupt and less family-like were described by participants as “jarring” and made them feel “foster care.” For some participants, changes within their foster care placements, such as changes in who was present in the placement or how they were treated by those in the placement made participants feel like a

“foster kid,” a label that was conferred through actions and words of others that shaped participants awareness that they were perceived by others as “foster care.” Moreover, participants transition aging out of foster care and going to college, was another placement change that while it created a degree of physical distance from their foster care placement, for some, brought a foster care identity to greater awareness through experiences of being different from their college peers who had not been in foster care. Next, I introduce the second dimension of *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity*, connecting with others with a foster care identity.

Connecting with Others with a Foster Care Identity

A core dimension of the component *Become Aware of a Foster Care Identity* is connecting with others with a foster care identity. Connecting with others with a foster care identity facilitated the meaning making of a foster care identity in a positive manner. Many participants expressed how their understanding and eventual acceptance of a foster care identity was shaped by their connection with others with a foster care identity. While participants had varying degrees of access to environments where they could connect with others with lived experience in foster care, many provided a range of examples of how they engaged opportunities to connect with others during foster care, college, and into adulthood. In the subsections that follow, I describe how participants became aware of a foster care identity through their connection with others with a foster care identity during adolescence, adulthood, and even through participation in this study.

Connecting with Others with a Foster Care Identity During Adolescence

Participants described how they found opportunities to connect with others with a foster care identity during adolescence in environments such as through a group home, youth advisory board (YAB), and campus-support program (CSP). While group homes were experienced by some participants as environments that brought their foster care identity to awareness in a less

positive manner, as discussed in relation to experiencing placement changes, one participant described how connecting with others with a foster care identity in the residential group home she was placed in provided her a space to positively make meaning of a foster care identity. Simone reflected how her identity developed as being a “proud former foster youth” because of the pride and connection she felt amongst the youth in her residential group home placement:

When I introduce myself, typically the first thing I say is, “I’m Simone and I identify as a former foster youth.” Depending on the audience, I’ll say, “I’m a proud former foster youth.” My entire foster care experience was collective. I’m proud and feel pride because ... there was a collective group of us who all had this shared experience of foster care, navigating and trying to move through the world without our parents and achieving.

It was common for participants who had positive experiences connecting with others with a foster care identity in adolescence to share how such experiences shaped their meaning making of a foster care identity as a positive and community-based identity that persisted into adulthood.

Another participant described how connecting with peers with a foster care identity by participating in a YAB shaped her awareness of a foster care identity and the support she felt for the foster care aspect of her identity. Reflecting how participation in a YAB provided connection with others and empowered her to use her voice as an adolescent, Ashley shared:

They served as a support system. We have this shared experience of being in foster care. While each of our experiences was slightly different, we could relate to one another, support one another, answer questions and help each other. I had a voice.

Participants reflected on the power they felt when they were in community with others who understood the experience of foster care and a foster care identity.

For those involved with a CSPs, connection with peers or near-peers through the program was instrumental to awareness and acceptance of a foster care identity. Sharing how involvement in a CSP in college was the impetus for reframing her foster care identity positively after encountering largely negative stereotypes while in foster care, Elyse described:

It wasn't until the CSP, my junior year in college where I started to see, oh, I can be a foster kid and not have all this stigma and all these assumptions about what it means to come from a fucked-up background. I can have this identity and talk about my experiences without it making me a bad person. It was something that really connected me to other people as opposed to isolated me and invited judgment like I thought as a teenager.

Further, Elyse described how a workshop put on by the CSP that featured another student with experience in foster care shaped the meaning she made of her foster care identity:

The telling your story workshop was very helpful where a person with lived experience in foster care came in and shared with us. I started to see my experience and identity as something that makes me stronger because I survived and now I'm doing great things. Like I've said, I started seeing my story as my strength and my struggle as resilience.

In this way, prior implicit and explicit messages participants received about what it meant to be a person with experience in foster care shaped early perceptions of a foster care identity, however, positive experiences with peers and near-peers who had a foster care identity helped participants remake meaning of their developing foster care identity as strengths-based with positive attributes.

Experiences Connecting with Others with a Foster Care Identity in Adulthood

While some participants had early experiences connecting with others with a foster care identity through group homes, youth advocacy boards (YABs), and campus support programs (CSPs), others did not have opportunities for connection until they pursued advanced degrees and accompanying work experiences. Veratta shared how graduate school facilitated her connecting with others around various aspects of identity, including a foster care identity:

In my master's program I started to understand salient identities and when I would talk to students and introduce myself, I would share about what salient identities were and talk about mine. I would say well you can visibly see I'm a Black woman, and then I would talk about how I'm an educator, a former foster youth, I struggle with depression and anxiety. I would talk about my identities with others very openly.

For some, having a designated role serving others supported identity acceptance and identity disclosure. Clare reflected how working with a CSP in graduate school and her early career was a “defining moment” that supported her connecting with others with experience in foster care:

I began to recognize students in the CSP see me as someone in me who is inspiring them because I had a shared experience. That was the first time I was ever really around others with experience in foster care. I was never in a group home. I experienced foster care alone in many ways. I wasn’t with my siblings. It was just me. I was in my late 20s when I first started meeting those students. I recognized, Wow! There are a lot of people who had similar experiences to me and now I’m around them in larger numbers for the first time.

Near-peer possibility models and experiencing a foster care identity in community with others helped support positive meaning making of a foster care identity in a mutually affirming manner.

Other participants reflected how experiences with advocacy activities in adulthood affirmed aspects of their foster care experiences and identity. Despite being in a long-term foster care placement with her siblings, SL described how at times she felt she was “the only one in her direct world with foster care experience” and that she did not “hear enough stories about other people with experience in foster care.” Describing how connecting with others with experience in foster care through advocacy initiatives in adulthood made her feel less alone in making meaning of her foster care experience, SL shared:

It was very humbling to see how many people have lived experience in foster care. It really opened my eyes and felt great to connect with people that have been in the foster care system. It kept me inspired. It helped me feel less alone. It helped me get out of victim mode. Hearing everyone share about their experience ... I used to feel like I was the only one who had been through this.

Connecting with others with experience in foster care was described by participants as “normalizing.” Explaining how connecting with other professionals with experience in foster care through career and advocacy activities shaped her awareness of a foster care identity, Clare shared:

I remember going to a conference and being introduced to these other professionals and scholars with experience in foster care ... A few years later we presented at a conference together and it was really the first time being around people who are developmentally in the same space as me and owning that identity. It's been a fairly recent thing for me ... It's relatively new to be in spaces with older people who have been in foster care and have this identity.

Connecting with others with a foster care identity was described by many participants as having positive impact at various points across their lifespan. Opportunities to connect with others with a foster care identity was described as especially transformative in adulthood among those who did not experience such community previously while in foster care. However, even for those who had early experiences connecting with others with a foster care identity, there was still acknowledgement of how continued connection with a community who shared a foster care identity had a role in supporting meaning making well into adulthood.

Describing the importance of connections with others with a foster care identity across the lifespan, Simone shared:

Everybody in my circle is predominantly people who know me related to foster care. Either they work in the field, or they are foster. That is my support system. I really appreciate and love not having to explain why. The grace and the beauty of not having to go there and talk about it all the time. The commitment of we're doing the best that we can figuring it out. That constant affirmation and the space for human error. The simplicity and grace of the shared understanding is huge.

The way some participants spoke of their connection with others with experience in foster care and how it shaped the meaning they made of their foster care identity implied they experienced a difference compared to their interactions with those who had not experienced foster care. While connections with those with experience in foster care were largely described as supportive, affirming, and comprised of shared understanding, the implication was that at times interactions with those who did not have a foster care identity were different because it required carrying the labor of explaining circumstances related to foster care or navigating judgement from others.

Connecting with Others with a Foster Care Identity Through the Study

Lastly, some participants noted how continued meaning making of a foster care identity through relative connection with others with lived experience in foster care occurred during the study. Several participants reflected how the study being conducted by someone with lived experience in foster care, with other participants who had experienced foster care, shaped their decision to participate in the study and had a role in affirming their foster care identity. While some participants entered the study confident that they a foster care identity as a salient aspect of their identity, a couple participants suggested the study further supported their meaning making of a foster care identity. Clare shared how the study affirmed her foster care identity as a person who was initially uncertain if she had a foster care identity:

I hesitated at first because I was thinking I don't know if I have a foster care identity. But I thought surely, I do. And now I really think I do have a foster care identity. It's been a really great process, the evolution and recognizing how it shows up for me today. I feel like I've learned a lot about myself in the process. The surface word is that it's very validating to dig into it and I think it's given me permission to acknowledge in the process the impact that that experience had on me and continues to have on me in ways that I may have written off, blamed myself for.

Other participants reflected how the study validated their foster care identity by facilitating, with anonymity, a degree of connection with others with a foster care identity through the perspectives and examples of other participants I shared during the interviews. Simone described how even though the participants did not meet one another during the study, she felt she benefited from a degree of connection with others because of how preliminary findings and examples grounded in the participants' experiences were shared:

When I was in my master's program there wasn't a foster youth identity theory and I remember thinking, I wonder if we can get that narrow and that specific for our community. And now it's amazing to see in real time, this summary and visual representation of the findings and hearing the weight of some of those truths, the rolling conversations we have with ourselves, it's powerful and affirming. We are sort of able to have the benefit of spending time with fellow lived experts because of how you're

sharing preliminary findings from the conversations with each of us.

As Simone described, connection with others with a foster care identity may be supported through research studies like this and even in the absence of direct connection with others with a foster care identity, meaning making can still be supported by elevating and sharing the experiences and voices of people with a foster care identity through various modalities.

Summary—Connecting with Others with a Foster Care Identity

In summary, connecting with others with a foster care identity was an important dimension of becoming aware of a foster care identity and thereby making meaning of a foster care identity. While most of the contexts in which participants connected with others with a foster care identity were not universally experienced by all participants some of the spaces of connection participants found included a group home, YABs, CSPs, professional career and advocacy spaces, and this research study. Connecting with others with a foster care identity supported meaning making of a foster care identity at various points in time across the lifespan, including during foster care, college, and into adulthood. Opportunities to connect with people who shared a foster care identity was described as affirming and validating and offered a space of shared understanding that facilitated meaning making of a foster care identity. Next, I introduce the third dimension of *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity*, feeling foster care enough.

Feeling Foster Care Enough

A core dimension of the component *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity* is feeling foster care enough. Several participants described how at points in their life they had minimized their foster care experience and positioned it as not substantial or significant enough to accept a foster care identity as an aspect of their identity. Feelings of not being foster care enough were

especially prevalent among participants who considered their foster care experiences to be generally positive which was most often the case among those who were placed with relatives in kinship placements, had a degree of placement stability with few placement changes, and perceived that they experienced less harm before foster care and/or in their foster care placement(s), compared to their perception of their peers. Many participants expressed how with time they had come to acknowledge both the negative and positive aspects of foster care experience were legitimate and didn't make a foster care identity any less possible. As participants navigated feeling foster care enough, many reflected how they came to realize the ways that policies, eligibility criteria for resources, age limits on foster care advocacy activities and other systemic definitions and dominant narratives constructed a hierarchy of who was foster care enough based on age, type of foster care placements experienced, permanency status, and more. In the subsections that follow, I describe how some participants minimized their foster care experience, later came to acknowledge how their experience was an impactful part of their life and identity, and in acknowledging their experience as foster care enough, countered and critiqued systemic definitions and dominant narratives that constructed who is foster care enough.

Minimizing Foster Care Experience

As participants reflected on their contemplation of whether their foster care experience was foster care enough for them to claim a foster care identity, some made comments, “but I was with my family,” “I was only in for eight months,” “I was lucky,” and “I was one of the fortunate ones.” Describing how she had often minimized aspects of her foster care experience because she was in kinship care, Clare shared:

I was in foster care, but because I was in kinship care I've realized I diminished my own experience and the trauma I experienced because I was never in a group home, I was

never placed in out of home care with strangers. It was never the label of you're a foster kid. I never said I'm in foster care. Those just weren't words I used to describe myself even though I knew I was in that category because I was a ward of the court, I had a case manager, I had a lawyer. I would always say, "I was in foster care, *but* I was with my family." That's a sentence that has come out of my mouth a lot. There were a couple messages behind that. One is that kinship foster care is not considered foster care which doesn't get the same resources traditional foster families get. Which is unfair, and I think a policy change is needed to address that. And there was also a message I had told myself of technically you were in foster care, but because you were with family it's different ... I always felt my experience wasn't foster care enough.

Perceptions of one's own experience, policies that delegated resources based on different types of placement settings, and awareness of others' experience in foster care, all had a role in shaping an early understanding of what type of experiences were perceived as foster care enough.

Some participants reflected on how they felt their experience was less foster care than others based on what they perceived their peers' experiences were. For some an awareness of statistics about youth in foster care informed participants' perceptions of how others' experiences in foster care compared to their own and made them feel as though they were "less foster care." Despite experiencing several challenges in foster care including multiple placement changes, a failed adoption, and separation from her siblings, Kim shared, "When you think about the worst things that happen to kids who go into foster care, being trafficked, and killed. If you think about things on a spectrum, I had it good as it could be, I think." Likewise, despite experiencing multiple placement changes and an unsafe transitional living placement while aging out of foster care, Ashley shared:

I think I was one of the fortunate ones. There were definitely times where it was ugly, but I think I was fortunate to be placed in the homes I was in and receive the support I got. And I think my time in foster care was pretty good compared to a lot.

In some cases, participants' comparisons were informed by the experiences their peers had personally shared with them. Expressing how others' experiences were different from some of her own, SL shared, "hearing people share about their experiences. I was like, wow, you've been

through a lot more than I have. You never experienced stability. You've never known what it's like to have a stable family." Likewise, Simone reflected how she at times felt her experience was less significant than what her peers experienced even though she entered foster care as an orphan due to the death of her parent and was placed permanently in a residential group home:

Being considered an orphan and entering the foster care system was very different. I think about my peers who experienced severe abuse or neglect. It's the idea of story comparison. I was aware of my story and my experience of what led to foster care, and it felt like their story was so much more than mine. But with time, it became this unspoken understanding that you're foster, I'm foster, we know we've both been through struggle.

Many participants reflected on their own experiences in relation to the experiences of others in foster care as they sought to make meaning of their developing foster care identity.

Acknowledging Foster Care Experience and Countering Dominant Narratives

Over time, participants described how they came to understand it was important to affirm the range of foster care experiences that comprise a foster care identity. This meant repositioning every individual's story, including their own, as worthy, whether it aligned with dominant narratives about foster care, or not. Clare reflected how she came to understand her foster care experience as being foster care enough and worthy of disclosing:

For me, the process of claiming I do have this identity, and it can be learned from has been a more recent development in my life. For so long I invalidated it. I was like well my experience wasn't that bad, and therefore it wasn't an identity that I could actually possess. It took me a long time to get to that idea, that the process of the development is really like stepping into the truth of it for me, and not what other people want the truth of it to be, that it's some really negative story that tells us all the things we don't want to do. It wasn't until I started working with young advocates who were doing strategic sharing, and they would say, I don't necessarily have anything bad to share. I said, good, share the good things. I realized why don't I start sharing. Just because there isn't a negative doesn't mean there isn't anything to share. How about my story can help you learn the things you do want to do?

Several participants described how they held perceptions or encountered expectations from others that if they were going to share their experience in foster care and claim a foster care identity that it would need to be a deeply negative experience and include traumatic details.

Some even encountered comments from others that a detailed level of traumatic disclosure was expected of them if their foster care experience was going to be viewed as legitimate or foster care enough. Several participants shared how with time they set and maintained boundaries when it came to what they would disclose of their foster care experience regardless of other's expectations and in doing so redefined on their own terms what was foster care enough.

Relatedly, some participants described how resources for people with experience in foster care had a role in constructing who was foster care enough. Questioning the impact of some support resources requiring disclosure of one's foster care experience with pressure to share traumatic details, Veratta shared:

Although when I applied to college, I felt like foster care was just a natural part of my identity to share, it's also concerning that we basically want students to write trauma porn to get into college and get the resources they need.

Likewise, Simone discussed how eligibility criteria, specifically age to access various resources conveys who is foster care enough and puts age limits on how long one's foster care identity is relevant:

Age restrictions are a pitfall that mean you reach an age and you're out of services, out of resources, out of connections. Higher education and nonprofit organizations, we're replicating the pitfall and drop off of emancipation out of foster care. It's ridiculous to say you're connected to us until you're 27 and that's it.

Danisha also discussed how various criteria restricted her access to resources and sent messages about how long and under what conditions foster care is perceived as impacting someone's life to the extent they are deemed worthy of resources:

We're not all qualified for the same resources. Just because we've all been foster youth doesn't mean that a foster youth who's 35 is going to get qualified for the same things as a foster youth at 20 ... When I was going to school there was not support but even now there are so many restrictions on those programs, especially age. Only one could help someone like me go back to school.

Ultimately how long and under what conditions foster care experience was believed to impact individuals' lives was codified in part by the eligibility criteria to access resources.

In addition, several participants reflected how foster care advocacy opportunities had a role in honoring or elevating their foster care identity to a point, but as time passed, they were at times positioned as “dated” or “less relevant.” Danisha described the impact of being phased out of advocacy and speaking engagements with age as she shared, “It feels like, wow, I’m washed up again, and it brings up old feelings of not being enough.” Simone shared how she “vividly remembered” the piece authored by Whitman (2016) that “says there’s no expiration date on the foster care experience.” As someone in her 30s that still found a foster care identity as a salient aspect of her identity, Simone shared her appreciation for Whitman’s assertion that people with experience in foster care and their experiences are worthy regardless of age. Further, Simone expressed how the child welfare system can leverage age limits in advocacy spaces to systematically dismiss peoples’ experiences in foster care:

It’s an interesting thing where our youth are too young to be part of the decision making but then those who are over the age of 18 or 24 are too old to have any opinion because our experiences are considered dated or irrelevant, yet the same consequences I experienced as a youth are still consequences that current youth in foster care are experiencing today. And when I look back at my experience, there’s no way I would have done advocacy any younger than I am now, I don’t think I had the words, or the belief in my story, or the belief that my experience even mattered.

As Simone described, it can take time for people with experience foster care to view their experience as foster care enough to share their story with others, but age restrictions on advocacy opportunities can result in the exclusion of matured perspectives that have engaged such meaning making over time. Also describing how age limits can dismiss the continued effects of foster care experience across the lifespan, Danisha shared:

It’s not just 18 to 25 that foster care experience impacts. Where’s the 25 to 50? That’s missing. How do we engage those voices? Because it’s going to keep impacting us in

different ways, we don't even know yet. But there's a lot of spaces, if you're over the age of 24 in most states, you're not being seen because everyone is emancipated out by the time their 25 and they're just not included anymore.

Considering opportunities are limited for adults over the age of 25 to share the continued impacts of their foster care experience from a lifespan perspective, Danisha and several other participants shared they were drawn to participate in this study because they found it was a relatively rare opportunity to contribute a lived experience perspective as an adult.

Summary—Feeling Foster Care Enough

In summary, feeling foster care enough was an important dimension of becoming aware of a foster care identity and thereby making meaning of a foster care identity. While participants received various messages about whether they were foster care enough from a combination of sources including but not limited to policies, their awareness of others foster care experience, perceptions of others they interacted with, eligibility criteria for resources, and age limitations for foster care advocacy activities, participants described how, with time, they came to understand a range of experiences in foster care are possible and their own foster care experience was no less worthy than others. Moreover, several participants described how they came to understand their foster care experience as foster care enough regardless of how positive or negative their experiences were in foster care. Reframing their experience as foster care enough supported participants with acknowledging the continued impacts their foster care experience had on their life in both positive and challenging ways, and facilitated acceptance of a foster care identity as an aspect of their overall identity. With an understanding of the dimensions of *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity*, next, I will introduce the fourth component *Doing the Healing Work*.

Doing the Healing Work

The fourth component I'll discuss that comprises the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is *Doing the Healing Work*. Each of the participants described doing the "healing work" at some point during their life, often into adulthood, with implications for how they continued to make meaning of their foster care identity. Many participants discussed how doing the healing work was a "a huge task" that was intensive and laborious. Phrases such as "I'm still processing and healing from that," "I'm on a healing journey," "all the healing I have to do," "I have to work through that" and "I'm grieving still," were common among the participants. Doing the healing work was described by some as requiring significant effort amidst managing the other responsibilities they had in their life, such as family and career. Each participant described how they experienced the long-term effects of trauma related to foster care, came to understand themselves in relation to and beyond their foster care identity, and grew in their confidence to lead healthy lives. Through the data I co-constructed with participants during the interviews and my corresponding analysis, I identified three dimensions that characterize the process of doing the healing work including: (a) navigating the continued effects of trauma; (b) accepting oneself as a whole person; and (c) knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries. In the following sections, I further describe these three dimensions and provide examples grounded in the experiences of the participants to illustrate the properties of the dimensions and the variations possible within the dimensions.

Navigating the Continued Effects of Trauma

A core dimension of the component *Doing the Healing Work* is navigating the continued effects of trauma. The trauma many participants experienced in relation to foster care was complex in nature, characterized by multiple traumas before, during, and after foster care that

were often long-lasting in duration with far-reaching effects on a foster care identity. Describing how experiences of trauma and a foster care identity are often related, Clare questioned:

How do I separate how trauma impacts my daily life versus my foster care identity? Because to me they're so intertwined, but I'm not sure I want to conflate those two things, because the identity itself isn't necessarily the trauma but it does feel related.

Elyse also reflected on how she experienced her foster care identity in relation to trauma:

The interplay between trauma and a foster identity, mine are so incredibly linked that I can't really look at it without trauma. The trauma coming, going away, and working on the rubble after the fact. My identity really formed with letting the dust settle and looking around me and seeing what was left was the foster care identity.

Participants described how navigating the continued effects of trauma influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. In the subsections that follow, I describe how some participants additionally experienced trauma at the intersection of their racial and foster care identities and how navigating the continued effects of trauma included acknowledging the effects of trauma, addressing the effects of trauma, feeling fatigued from engaging in trauma and healing work, and being in an ongoing healing process shaped the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Trauma at the Intersections of Racial Identity and Foster Care Identity

Some participants experienced complex trauma related to race that intersected with experiencing foster care and meaning making of a foster care identity. SL discussed how she experienced the repercussions of generational trauma as a Native person from the long history of colonization and genocide facilitated through family separation practices:

I realized generational trauma is a real thing I carry. Many Native people are hurting. I carry the guilt of things I've never done because people I know have done hurtful things because they're hurting, and I carry that pain like I had done it. I carry their guilt, their shame, like it's mine. And some of the generational trauma stems from boarding schools, the lack of culture, not being connected to the culture, the mass graves that have been discovered. The abuse they had to go through and that disconnection from their people to literally die in such a massive number. That's been passed down to our Native people.

And it's not like you chose to hurt. It's so indescribable. I don't have the language. I'm healing amidst it.

Veratta also described how she experienced trauma at the intersection of her foster care identity and racial identity. Reflecting on the various traumas she experienced and their impact on her meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, Veratta shared:

I was an angry person. I used to be mindful about being the angry Black woman and it took me a long time to renounce that and acknowledge, yes, I'm angry because I have a lot to be angry for, a lot of stuff has happened to me that I did not ask for. Look at the world! My body is policed. My hair is policed. Now in my 30s I can reflect I was angry as a teenager for my parent's behavior and for being split up from my parents. I can see now, because I'm a lot more well versed in like attachment wounds, and attachment theory, that I had attachment wounds on top of everything else.

In these ways, for some the continued effects of trauma related to foster care, were layered with the experience of complex trauma related to colonization, systemic racism, and antiblackness.

Acknowledging the Continued Effects of Trauma

For many participants, a part of the meaning making process was first acknowledging that it was possible for trauma to have an impact on their adult lives long after foster care.

Describing the unanticipated ways trauma related to foster care impacted her life as an adult, SL shared:

I had a mentor tell me at 17 or 18 years old that it's common for your trauma to come up, that you can't avoid it, and it's inevitable. At the time when she first told me this, I was like I doubt it, I'm fine, it doesn't affect me, like, look at me. I'm doing great. I didn't realize how it actually comes back to people. And for me, it did come back, and it was very hard to admit how my trauma was affecting me as an adult. I started to have trauma responses from what I experienced, and it just felt unfair. I was like you were never held accountable for the things that were never supposed to happen to me, but now I have to do the hard work. I'm still processing and healing how my trauma came back to me.

While SL had adults in her life that affirmed the effects of trauma may extend into adulthood, Danisha described how others in her life dismissed some of her experiences with trauma, as she shared, "people say, stop talking about it. That was three years ago get over it. I'm like, don't

you realize trauma takes time. Until it happens to that person, they don't understand what it feels like." Navigating the continued effects of trauma after foster care without the support of others, created further challenges to what was already, at times, a difficult healing journey.

Consequently, many participants described how they were very private about how their trauma continued to impact their life. Sharing how she previously concealed her experiences with trauma and the related healing process Veratta expressed, "I didn't want people to know because I felt like people knowing things about me or knowing that part of me led to me being hurt." Relatedly, some participants shared an awareness that their "mental health" or "experiences with trauma" could be "weaponized" or "used against" them. SL described how for this reason others were often unaware of the trauma and anxiety she navigated:

Most people would never know I suffer from bad anxiety because how I carry myself, day by day, and how I've learned to cope and navigate. I had always been okay with talking about aspects of what I've been through, but the trauma that came back to me as adult, for once I wasn't okay talking about it, I was really scared, and I didn't want to go to therapy.

It was common for participants to face many of the continued effects of trauma privately due limited exposure to messaging that facing the continued effects of trauma is a normative experience following the various transitions and challenges that occur before, during, and after foster care.

Addressing the Continued Effects of Trauma

Despite participants describing how they were often private about aspects of the trauma they experienced and were at times hesitant about discussing the continued effects of trauma with others, nearly every participant shared how they had engaged in counseling or therapy at some point in adulthood. Some participants shared how participating in counseling or therapy was "part of their healing" and it helped them acknowledge and better understand the continued

effects of trauma they experienced. Kim shared, “During that time I had a lot of anger. Just a lot of trauma and I was able to get in therapy and work on some of those things. It’s still hard and I don’t know if it gets any easier but I’m more aware of it.” Also describing how therapy was a component of acknowledging the continued effects of trauma in a manner that supported continued meaning making of her experience and foster care identity, Clare shared:

My therapist is really good at helping me dig in and acknowledge some of the truths I’ve not allowed myself to say for 30 years. The most traumatic part of my time in foster care was being separated from my siblings and that remains a really difficult aspect of my experience and my life. I have to be present with that every day and getting to know my siblings because we were separated. We’re all full adults and we still have to work on repairing, restoring, understanding the experience that we were separated and didn’t see each other for years. It’s something I’ve made sense of in therapy.

Participants described how therapy supported their navigation of the ways they continued to experience the effects of trauma related to foster care as an adult.

In addition to going to therapy, many participants named other activities that had a role in helping them navigate the continued effects of trauma, including education, faith, or finding other healing or therapeutic outlets. Danisha shared how through “counseling, education, and faith, I’ve done a lot of work and grown a lot. One of the biggest things was recognizing what happened wasn’t normal but not being stuck there, and those things helped.” Others described other activities supported their healing. Ashley described her advocacy around art therapy and also shared, “my therapeutic outlet is singing once a week with concert choir. It’s like a release where I can let go.” Veratta also described how playful activities helped her “get back to the fun” and had a role in her healing process:

Now there’s this work that I’m doing to reclaim my childhood and healing my inner child. At the apartment complex I live in there’s a swing set at the playground and when the quiet hours hit, and the kids aren’t out there, I go out and swing. I’ll sit there with my earphones on and just swing for 20 minutes. And every time I heal a bit more. The inner child is healed. I’m trying to get back to the fun because I didn’t get to have fun when I was a kid.

While participants described some instances of “letting go” and “having fun,” many of these activities were still framed as a “huge task” of healing from the trauma they had experienced.

Feeling the Fatigue from Trauma and Doing the Healing Work

One of the continued effects of trauma and the labor of “working to heal” was the fatigue some participants described feeling. Danisha shared, “I’m so tired all the time. I’m like man, I want to retire. People are like, you’re in your 30s and I’m like you don’t understand, my body and my soul are like 80 right now.” Even among those who largely described their experience in foster care as creating positive change in their life, there were still feelings of a deep fatigue they felt from the trauma they navigated before, during, or after foster care. Kim shared, “the pain that I have gone through with my family of origin and my adoptive family and going through the system, even if it was a mostly positive experience. I’m just exhausted. I’ve run out of steam.” Also describing her efforts in relation to the metaphor of retiring, SL described the deep self-work and meaning making she had engaged in as significant labor:

I really do feel like I’ve lived a whole life. When it comes to healing, being insightful, understanding ... I see things on a level that my older peers and older people in my life have said is impressive. It’s like we’ve lived so much already. We’re still so young but it’s like we should basically be at the age of retirement for the amount of labor we’ve put in.

As participants navigated both their adolescence and adulthood, they navigated the fatigue from experiencing trauma and engaged in significant labor as they prioritized doing the healing work while managing a variety of other responsibilities in their lives.

Being on the Other Side of Trauma in an Ongoing Healing Process

Several participants described how although it was hard work, they were “really proud” of their efforts to acknowledge, understand, and prioritize healing the ways trauma impacted their life. Each participant referenced in how they were “more healed” or “on the other side of

it,” while simultaneously describing being in a perpetual healing process they weren’t sure would ever fully end. Elyse described how she came to redefine and accept her ongoing experiences with trauma as a neutral part of her life:

There was a lot of shame that I described as a teenager from the trauma and foster care, and then it slowly started to change with time into, this is just a truth. It still affects every sphere of my life. It’s just not all consuming. It’s not negative. It’s not positive. It’s neutral. It’s something that I have to heal from and I’m actively working through every single day. And I can’t just pretend it didn’t happen. I have to go to therapy now.

Also describing how time and healing efforts created distance from the continued effects of trauma, Danisha shared:

I’m not as close to that wound as I used to be. It’s been rather healing to see back and realize I don’t get affected the way I used to because I can recognize the effects through the healing I’ve done and found peace that it wasn’t my fault, I didn’t deserve that, and I didn’t need to feel shame like I was ruining my family by sharing my own experience. There is still tons of healing I have to go through because it’s multi-layered when you go through this type of trauma. But I have hope again. It’s a different way to walk.

Other participants reflected how it was difficult to anticipate the way trauma would have continued effects on their life which informed their perspective of healing as an “ongoing” or repeated process they would navigate throughout their life. Some participants shared how they were “healed” representing a degree of finality in some respects and in other respects described how they were “healing,” implying the ongoing active nature of the process. Like Danisha’s metaphor of a wound, Elyse described, “I think of it as cancer and remission. I’m in remission. I’m healthy, but you know it could always come back.” Veratta also described the unpredictable nature of healing as she shared, “I’ve healed to a certain extent, and I say to a certain extent, because I believe healing is a lifelong process. You’re going to have days where you go forward and days where you backslide.” In these ways, participants came to understand an aspect of their lives and corresponding foster care identity was navigating the continued effects of trauma they experienced across time.

Summary—Navigating the Continued Effects of Trauma

In summary, participants shared the many ways they experienced the continued effects of trauma in relation to a foster care identity. For some, experiences with trauma were additionally layered with trauma at the intersection of race and were the result of colonization, systemic racism, and antiblackness. Part of navigating the continued effects of trauma was acknowledging that the effects of trauma could be present long-after the direct experience of foster care had ended. Although many navigated aspects of their trauma in relative isolation, with time nearly all the participants described how counseling or therapy was a part of their “healing journey” and helped with the process of acknowledging and understanding the effects of their trauma as a pathway forward. In addition to therapy, many participants explained other activities they engaged in that were healing or therapeutic. Participants expressed how they felt were “on the other side” of the trauma, yet there were still effects of trauma they continued to navigate in expected and unanticipated ways. As a result, some participants described how they were in a continual process of healing they were not sure would ever be fully complete, and it had become a normalized aspect of their life accompanied by a sense of pride for the work they had put in and how far they had come in their growth, understanding, and healing. The healing process was described as “work” or “labor” by many, and when they reflected on the trauma they endured and the work they had put in to heal, some shared the deep sense of fatigue they felt and a desire to reach a peaceful state in the future. Next, I introduce the second dimension of *Doing the Healing Work*, accepting oneself as a whole person.

Accepting Oneself as a Whole Person

The second core dimension of the component *Doing the Healing Work* was accepting oneself as a whole person. Accepting oneself was an experience participants described as juxtaposed to the

earlier dimension Questioning—Who am I? Rather than being uncertain about their sense of self participants expressed their clarity around who they were both as a person with a foster care identity, and as a person with various other attributes and intersecting experiences and identities. Many participants described how part of their healing process was coming to understand their foster care identity an aspect of their larger identity. For some this meant doing the “shadow work,” which was part of healing work that meant accepting parts of themselves that others had previously not looked upon favorably and reclaiming a foster care identity in positive terms. Others described how an aspect of accepting oneself as a whole person was acknowledging how a foster care identity was one aspect of their identity rather than constituting their whole identity. Further, several participants described the various other identities they had come to understand were part of their larger self-identity and how their various other identities related to a foster care identity. It was common for participants to describe how a foster care identity was one part of their larger self-identity while discussing how the development of other salient identities was part of the healing process. In the subsections that follow, I describe how participants engaged in doing the shadow work, reclaimed a foster care identity as an aspect of their identity, and explored and developed intersecting identities as part of accepting themselves as a whole person and healing.

Doing the Shadow Work

Participants described how an aspect of accepting oneself as a whole person was accepting one’s weaknesses or less favorable qualities, particularly those related to experiencing foster care, and eliminating feelings of shame about them. Veratta described this as her “shadow work” which she defined as accepting your shadow self or the parts “you hide from other people that aren’t as favorable in other individuals’ perspectives or from a societal lens and that were

partly formed as a result of survival or trauma.” Describing how she had some habits related to attachment wounds that she used to feel shame about, Veratta explained, “I’ve made peace with the fact I do these things and I’m able to talk about it in the public sphere.” Also reflecting on how she’s come to understand her “somatic reactions” related to trauma, Danisha shared, “I used to be ashamed of my anger, now I understand that anger is protection and acknowledgment that you are being mistreated and I need to check-in with it.” SL also reflected on how with time she came to “own everything about myself, I know where I lack things. I know where I’m very strong in things.” Such self-acceptance was important in the context that a few participants described how friends, significant others, family of origin, or foster care placements would ridicule them based on some of the behaviors they developed in response to the trauma they navigated related to foster care. Veratta described how the shadow work she had done to accept herself made her less vulnerable to being marginalized by others:

People will try to make fun of me or clown me for things I’ve done long ago from a place of survival. I’m like dude, I don’t live there anymore. I’ve made peace with that. That’s another part of the shadow work of merging your shadow self with your holistic self, is making peace with those parts of yourself, forgiving yourself, giving yourself grace, and saying, this is fully who I am. I’ve made peace with the things I’ve had to overcome and I’m still overcoming.

In this way, doing the shadow work of accepting the various dimensions of oneself was part of doing the healing work.

Reclaiming a Foster Care Identity as One Aspect of Identity

For some participants accepting and reclaiming a foster care identity, was one of the ways they engaged shadow work, reclaimed their “power and agency,” and dismissed negative messages they had previously received from others. Describing how she used to avoid disclosure of a foster care identity but has since reclaimed the identity in a positive way, Danisha shared,

It used to be a shame thing. Like don't say it. In the past, people were like oh you were in foster care, or you don't have parents, you can no longer be trusted. Oh, you went through abuse, that's why you are that way. But now, it's not a shameful thing for me. It's a whole thing I triumphed.

Likewise, Veratta shared how she has come to view it as an act of power to claim a foster care identity as a salient identity:

There's power that I have. It took me a long time to see I have a lot of power. I call out a foster care identity as one of my salient identities now, because I've made peace with it. I've reconciled because of the healing and shadow work. I've merged all these parts of myself together and because of that merging, what has happened is me saying, you can feel some type of way about my identities. You can be embarrassed. I'm no longer embarrassed. I no longer feel shame.

Also describing reclaiming experience in foster care in a positive way, SL shared, "I have a whole experience in foster care, it's a huge part of who I am, and I have accepted that in a good way." While many participants had experiences where others positioned having experienced foster care negatively, they described how they had accepted and remade meaning of a foster care identity in a strengths- and asset-based manner.

While the participants reclaimed a foster care identity as a positive aspect of their overall self-identity in the present, many described how they had come to see a foster care identity as just one part of their larger identity and emphasized how they were not defined by solely a foster care identity. Clare described her foster care identity as one of many identities and experiences that shaped her perspective:

It doesn't define you. It will impact you and that is normal, just like any other identity. I don't think the experience cannot leave a mark on you with happening during those formative developmental years. For me, foster care resonates as an experience and an identity. And it doesn't feel like a choice of whether or not to have the identity, but it feels like there is a choice in how I present the identity, how much in different areas at different times. It's one of the lenses that I see through, among others that are part of my identity and experiences.

Likewise, while a foster care identity was a part of her public identity, Danisha also reflected how it was not her "whole view," as she explained:

Being an advocate, someone who did research on foster care, and wrote a book on experiences in foster care in education, if you look at my social media, my book, or my research, you'll see I'm connected to foster care. But it's not my life everywhere I go. Yeah, it's part of me. It's not my whole identity anymore. It's part of my story. I went through foster care, but foster care and my trauma does not define me. When I was writing my story I was like, I really want people to understand that this can be part of you. But it doesn't have to be your whole view.

In this way, participants redefined a foster care identity as one aspect among the many identities and experiences that shaped their perspectives and lives.

Other participants shared how simultaneously acknowledging their experience in foster care while having a foster care identity be less salient in their daily lives was an aspect of their healing. For example, Kim shared how foster care experience had once been a large part of her life and releasing it meant “not being stuck in the grief”:

My identity has changed. In my 20s it was an identity and now it's more of an experience. After going through my divorce, I don't even have the words to describe it. I always thought to myself, I would get to 40 and just be done with it. You remember the movie *Forrest Gump*, when he was running, and all those people are following him, and he looked like a mountain man? This is a really poignant point I want to make. He looked like the mountain man, and he was just running and then he stops running and he goes I'm tired. I think I'm going to go home. I don't know what it was, but I just said I'm done. I don't identify with being a foster child anymore. I'm not a child. It's a happy sadness. For so long it was my life. I think the time has come where this is no longer part of my daily life and that feels really good. Now, I think about my foster care experience, but the memory is fading. What is left is me and being able to actually live my life and not be stuck in the grief.

Also describing how creating some distance from a foster care identity while still acknowledging its presence was part of her healing, Elyse shared:

It's part of my healing that I'm further away from it. I was going to do my research related to foster care. Now, I'm inquiring about a whole different line of work, different interests. Foster care will always be something I'm going to be passionate about and it's also my answer for that social media trend of what can you talk for an hour straight about—I'll probably always say foster care. But it's like a scar as opposed to a wound now. It's always there but it doesn't really hurt anymore, and it's part of who I am but I don't want it to consume my life. It consumed my life for too long...I don't identify as much as I used to with it and that's fine.

A point a few participants made was the importance of constructing a sense of self beyond a foster care identity so that they weren't "consumed" by it as a sole identity in the manner it had been such a large part of their life when they were living within the foster care system or immersed in navigating young adulthood after foster care. Expressing why she viewed it was important to develop a larger self-identity beyond foster care, Danisha shared:

My identity is I'm Danisha, I experienced foster care. I'm Danisha, I have a PhD. I'm Danisha I have a family. I don't wrap myself up and be like I *am* foster care because then there's the danger like jobs, titles, or degrees of who are you outside of this thing.

Some participants released a foster care identity or held it as less salient as part of their healing from the foster care experience and centering oneself around the many other identities, experiences, and interests, that comprised their whole self.

Having Permission to Develop Intersecting Identities

As part of accepting their whole self, several participants described how they explored and developed other aspects of their identities beyond and in relation to a foster care identity. Simone had referred to exploring and developing other identities as "having permission to have intersecting identities," an opportunity she did not feel she had in foster care. She described how participation in a Summer Bridge program expanded her identity from foster care, an identity that she largely held in isolation in the context of college, to developing a first-generation college student identity that she was able to experience in community with others:

My identity expanding during college from foster youth to first-gen really allowed me to receive more people in my life and see myself in my peers, be more confident and build support, like I'm not the oddball out. My friends and everyone knew I was in foster care, but people had no idea what it meant. With an identity of first-gen we all knew we come from some degree of struggle and it was unspoken.

Similarly, B shared how religion had become large part of her identity and how beyond a foster care identity she was able to find broader connections around trauma in service to the mosque:

Religion is a huge part of my identity. I became Muslim over 10 years ago. Since then, it's become part of my career and become a prominent part of my identity. A lot of my work with the mosque is disconnected from foster care work but I'm hosting trauma workshops there and bringing my trauma work into the religious environment. I've found trauma is a connector for us as almost everyone has experienced some type of loss or sudden changes, just people who have experienced out of home care have sometimes experienced more of this than others.

Some participants connected around identities and experiences that intersected with foster care, in a manner that expanded an overall self-identity and broadened their connections with others.

While at times participants engaged identities and experiences that related to a foster care identity as part of learning about and accepting their whole self, some described how other identities changed how they related to their foster care identity and made it less salient. B shared, "I took a step back from it in my 20s and became a mom, so that consumed me, and my life kind of veered away from foster care." The notion of being "consumed" by another identity, suggests a perception that there was finite time and space to acknowledge, develop, and engage different aspects of identity and as some aspects of identity became more salient, a foster care identity became less salient. In like manner, reflecting on her experience with other identities and life experiences making a foster care identity less salient, Kim shared:

When I meet people, I don't bring it up because I don't remember to. I talk about other things. I talk about my son. My life's gotten bigger. Taking on the [leadership role] I did, I ended up letting some of that identity go. I was representing a national organization, so it gave me an alternate identity other than "foster kid." And I think being a married woman, being a mom, did that too.

Participants shared an array of other personal and social identity roles they focused on as part of accepting and developing themselves as a whole person. Describing how her foster care identity was central to her identity yet not as salient as her other identities, Clare reflected:

While a foster care identity is a central part of my identity because it shaped my education and career, it's not as forward for me as other identities. I think the older I get the more my gender identity is important, like finding my place with other women and

feminism feels really important to me and is more centered.

Also expressing that other aspects of identity that were more salient to her, SL explained, “I take more identity in being Native than I do being this kid with a foster care experience.” Further explaining how her salient Native identity was impacted by foster care, SL shared how a priority in her life after being separated from the practices of her Tribal heritage in foster care has been connecting with Native culture:

For my circumstance being Native and having foster care experience, it just adds to that experience of trying to understand your identity as a person. Since foster care, I’ve been reconnecting to the Native culture. Every tribe is different, but I’ve been learning the smudging, the sweating, and I do that with our Elders here in town who I’ve gotten close to, and even though it’s not the way of my Tribe, my ancestors are rooted into these traditions. I don’t feel alone anymore because I know my roots. I know where I come from. I will say too being Native, as much as it’s an identity, it’s literally a way of life. It’s who I am. In and out I’m Native American. It’s just me, everything that I am, everything that I came from is Native. I take a lot of pride in being Native.

As many participants described part of accepting oneself as a whole person was developing various aspects of identity, beyond and in addition to a foster care identity, something that many participants shared they had limited opportunities to do as a child and adolescent because of experiencing disrupted developmental environments and navigating, at times, an uncertain sense of self.

Summary—Accepting Oneself as a Whole Person

In summary, accepting oneself as a whole person was part of the healing work participants engaged. Participants navigated the process of accepting oneself as a whole person in various ways. For some this included doing the shadow work of making peace with their weaknesses or challenges and reclaiming a foster care identity in a positive manner, counter to the negative perceptions of others they had been exposed to previously. Others described, how part of their healing process beyond reclaiming a foster care identity, was embracing

opportunities to engage other aspects of their identity. Sometimes accepting and developing other identities, meant developing identities in relation to a foster care identity, and other instances it meant accepting what one participant called “alternate identities” that were beyond a foster care identity. Notably, as discussed in the component *Seeking a Sense of Self* and the dimension *Questioning—Who am I?* many participants described earlier experiences with being uncertain about who they were. However, as expressed in this component and dimension, as participants engaged in healing and identity work into their adulthood, many shared how they were clearer on who they were in relation to and beyond their foster care identity. With this understanding, next, I discuss the third dimension of *Doing the Healing Work*, knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries.

Knowing Oneself as Worthy of Safety, Stability, and Boundaries

The third dimension of the component *Doing the Healing Work* was knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries. While many participants described earlier in their life developing a sense of self related to their responsibilities and building self-worth through achievement, many participants reflected how as an adult part of their healing work was to increasingly come to know themselves as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries. Some participants described this state of knowing themselves as worthy as being the result of a “paradigm shift” in which they prioritized their well-being and felt confident and competent in their ability to live happy and healthy lives. In the subsections that follow, I describe how participants developed healthy relationships, set boundaries in relationships, came to know themselves as worthy of rest, and grew in their confidence in themselves.

Developing Healthy Relationships

Some participants described how having healthy relationships with others was a part of being a “healed,” “successful,” and “healthy adult,” and affirmed that they were worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries. Reflecting on how her spiritual beliefs as a Native person helped her establish and make meaning of the healthy relationships in her life after experiencing strained connections with her foster family, SL shared,

Creator is a huge part of my life, and the chosen people I have in my life, my strong relationships are good, solid, and stable, healthy Native people who are spiritual and have a connection to Creator as well. It seems like Creator puts these people into my life and it’s a blessing.

Other participants described how having positive experiences with mutuality and help-seeking in relationships supported their well-being. Clare shared, “It’s learning, it’s okay to ask for and accept help. You can’t do it alone. You need people in your life...Now, I have a core group of chosen and bio family around me, relationships that I cultivate.” Likewise, Elyse described how she had become more comfortable developing trusting relationships and accepting help:

Through the therapeutic work I’ve done, I’m mostly securely attached now, compared to how I was so avoidantly attached before. Instead of it being just safer to be alone, I’ve reframed, I realized I can’t be alone. I need to trust other people, and I can do that, and it doesn’t mean something bad is going to happen. I’ve found it’s actually nice to have people around and people to count on. I’m a lot less scared of losing people. People have stuck around. My best friends and I have been friends for 10, 13 years and they’re not going anywhere. My parents aren’t going anywhere. I’ve found people that I can trust and sort of unload on or show vulnerability to. I’ve found people who won’t let me carry everything on my shoulders alone. It’s a lot easier asking for help. I’m a lot less hyper-independent.

It was common for participants to describe the healthy relationships they developed in adulthood as counter to the type of relationships they had when they were experiencing disrupted developmental environments earlier in their life. While some participants had prior experiences that pushed them to “avoidantly attach” and be “hyperindependent,” others described how their

experiences raised them to “give affection and provide emotional support for connection” without regard for their well-being or boundaries. Kim shared how through her work with a counselor she was able to redefine healthy relationships:

With my therapist I realized I never really had privacy. Now, I honor my need for connection and that means engaging in relationships where I’m respected and that are viable, healthy, and safe and don’t require me to give up my right to privacy in order to have connection.

In many ways, having healthy relationships in adulthood helped participants reframe some of the less relationships they experienced earlier in their life.

Setting Boundaries in Relationships

While healthy relationships helped affirm participants as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries, some described how they also set boundaries or discontinued relationships that were not healthy and did not affirm their self-worth. Describing having a “paradigm shift” in how she relates to her family of origin and sets boundaries, Kim shared,

My relationship with my family has been a paradigm shift in how I related to them and that comes from putting myself first and allowing myself to truly process my feelings and then make a decision how I want to proceed with them. I didn’t realize how much anger, sadness, and grief I had. We’re hardwired to connect with people who we are genetically connected to but having been victimized. It’s been a shift of my dignity comes first...I don’t want to gossip with you or give you a hug. No, don’t touch me. I don’t want to connect with you. It’s having that ownership over myself physically, psychologically, emotionally.

An aspect of knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries was associated with feeling ownership of oneself, a feeling that for some was the opposite of prior experiences during which they had little to no power to exercise agency over themselves while experiencing disrupted developmental environments before, during, or after foster care. Relatedly, SL described the shift in how she used to seek validation from her foster family and has since developed a deep internal confidence in her worth:

More recently, I feel like I don't have to seek validation from certain family members anymore. I got to a place where I'm okay letting them go. I no longer need their validation. My brain is more developed and secure about who I am where I don't seek that anymore, questioning, if I'm worthy, or if I'm loveable or not. Those insecurities don't weigh in my life as heavy as they used to like when I was younger. I've stopped seeking validation from people that made me feel like I had to prove that I was worthy of love ... I'm proud of who I am and how far I've come. I love myself way more. I'm on the other side of understanding my healing and I'm not afraid to walk away from situations I know are not good for my mental health.

In this way, an aspect of “understanding my healing” was setting boundaries and knowing oneself as inherently worthy of being affirmed and validated in relationships. Moreover, a component of the knowing oneself as worthy was growing cognitively and developmentally in ways that shifted perspectives from seeking validation from others to knowing one's worth regardless of others' perceptions or actions.

Being Worthy of Rest

For some participants knowing oneself as worthy of setting boundaries applied not only to their relationships but to how they approached life. Describing how setting boundaries, and shifting her mindset from not having to be resilient all the time was shaped by her continued healing work and having a chronic illness, Elyse shared:

Having a chronic illness really changes my ability to be resilient. I basically can't anymore and that's fine because resilience is not supposed to be a lifestyle. It's supposed to be a short-term solution ... Because the chronic illness I developed, and suddenly having to navigate chronic fatigue and chronic pain, my productivity tanked and I have to set boundaries around what I can do now. I had to grieve my former self, how much she could do. She was unstoppable. I thought she could do anything. I had to grieve the naivety and idealism, the maladaptive hyperproductivity and hyperindependence. God, I still miss it sometimes because she really thought she was going to change the world. Now, I'm just changing the world in my small sphere of control, and I accept that. I can't do it all like I used to be able to, I can't do it with a broken body from mental and physical health and I kind of own the word broken ... Like that, this is really the first time in my life that I put myself first and don't push myself. I don't focus on ambition anymore and it's great.

Like Elyse, some participants shared how their experience of coming to know themselves as worthy outside of what they were responsible for or what they achieved was a significant shift from previously finding identity through responsibility or building self-worth through achievement. While many ultimately felt at peace with this change, like Elyse, for some participants it was often not without a sense of loss they had to work through for the ways their resilience and adaptive strengths had both helped them succeed, while also at times, had detrimental effects on their health and well-being. Clare also described how she now values being able to set boundaries, rest, and feel a sense of stability at the intersection of a foster care and woman identity and after having “felt jacked up for over 40 years”:

Success to me now means I can rest when I need to, set boundaries to not feel overwhelmed or stressed. I got the highest degree I could, and part of the point was to have a life where I’m not hustling and stressed and worried about not taking care of my basic living needs. Not feeling anxious, overly tired, overwhelmed. Having a sense of calmness and broader wellness ... being fulfilled, finding meaning and happiness, being financially able to take care of myself as a woman ... and having healthy relationships.

While many participants described how they were deeply tired from navigating an earlier state of struggle, survival, responsibility, and achievement, some reflected how their current lifestyle was much more sustainable and aligned with the ways their definition of success had shifted beyond their achievements. Elyse reflected, “success to me is how happy secure and uncomplicated my life is right now. I want 40, 50, 60 more years of this.” Knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries in adulthood helped minimize the continued effects of trauma from earlier experiences with disrupted developmental environments and past experiences navigating an uncertain sense of self in the foster care system that positioned the success of youth in foster care as taking on acts of responsibility and achieving.

Feeling Confident in Oneself

Relatedly, developing confidence in oneself was a component of the healing process that reinforced knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries. SL shared, “I love that I’m confident, it helps me set boundaries. I’ll tell you it took me a long time to form that confidence and feel safe and secure. For me confidence is when you love yourself and believe in yourself.” Also describing setting boundaries as necessary to preserve a strong sense of self, B explained:

I want to be able to stay true to myself and walk away from anything that doesn’t feel comfortable. I’ve intentionally created a life that I don’t ever have to limit my voice. In general, I don’t want to be in spaces where I have to be a watered-down version of myself. I’ve carefully crafted my life to be able to be myself.

Describing how having confidence in her boundaries provided a sense of peace and well-being, Veratta reflected, “the biggest thing is I now have is confidence in my boundaries and I’m a lot more peaceful in that. I’m able to say, ‘Nah, I’m not doing that.’” For many participants, a result of knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries was exercising their power and agency to say “no,” something they explained they were unable to do while experiencing disrupted developmental environments. Some participants described how their early life experiences required them to be overly “flexible” and “adaptable” in a manner that positioned having any boundaries at all as being “stubborn” rather than being normative and an appropriate aspect of youth development. Elyse described how part of being herself was accepting her right to have boundaries and dismantling earlier conceptions that she needed to appease others:

I feel a lot more myself, a lot less unhealed, a lot less anxious. I’m a lot more stubborn as an adult and a lot less flexible and adaptable because honestly, fuck that noise. I feel stubborn but I know I’m just becoming more normal because people who don’t have to be flexible or something bad happens can just do what they want. Now, I set boundaries and realize that nothing bad happens because I did that.

In this way a component of “healing” from the past was feeling confident in setting boundaries and knowing oneself as worthy of having boundaries.

Another way confidence showed up in relation to knowing their worthiness of stability and success was participants’ belief they would “ultimately be okay” and have a “happy life.” Elyse described how amidst navigating the continued effects of trauma she came to believe she could still have a general sense of well-being:

Even if you have to fight with your mental demons every day or you’ve had bad experiences in your background, you can get to the other side of the trauma work and you can be successful and have everything you want. You can struggle with trauma and still have a happy life.

Likewise, Veratta explained how she now feels “security” to truly live in her home, whereas she used to stay packed and ready to go because of the traumas of being evicted with her family of origin and experiencing frequent unanticipated moves in foster care:

I’ve grown in terms of security and recognizing bad things happened in the past and bad things can happen again, but I have always landed okay. Even if it was hard for a period of time, I ultimately was okay. I became more secure in my attachment in myself being okay. I’m comfortable in the unknown whereas before I needed to control everything because I did not get to control a lot of the things that happened to me as a child. I’ve since had to overcome and unlearn and relearn how to trust myself.

Reflecting how experiences with past trauma and the dominant narratives about people with experience in foster care can perpetuate beliefs that one is destined to a “life in despair,” Clare shared how her graduate studies informed her mindset that many people do find healthy relationships, stability, and happiness despite past challenges:

One of my classes covered resiliency and one of the things that stuck with me was even after experiencing trauma, a really high percentage of people *are* okay. Not everyone is going to spiral and live their whole life in despair. Are they going to be great on every well-being measure, or be rich, or not face any stress? Not necessarily. But the majority of people find people they can trust. They have stability. They have happiness. That stuck with me because the narratives that we hear about young people are that you’re going to be pregnant, incarcerated, unemployed, homeless, mentally ill, addicted but there’s a lot that tells us you might have challenge but in general things will be okay.

Clare further described how her identity grew significantly in adulthood as she developed an understanding of herself as someone who is competent and capable of navigating challenges:

I didn't know what my identity was coming out of foster care. The identity that I've developed is really significant since I was in care. My sense of competency is significantly better than when I was in foster care. Knowing I'm good at things. Knowing I can take care of myself. I know I'm a competent person and I'll be okay. Those things I didn't necessarily trust when I was younger.

In this way, having confidence in oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries didn't mean participants did not face challenges, rather it meant participants believed they had the confidence, competency, and connections to manage challenges with a high likelihood of ultimately persevering through hardship and maintaining a sense of well-being.

Summary— Knowing Oneself as Worthy of Safety, Stability, and Boundaries

In summary, participants shared how knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries was both a result of and a contributor to their healing. Participants described how knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries was affirmed through healthy relationships and was actualized by setting boundaries in relationships that did not affirm their worth. While self-worth for some was previously defined by others or in relation to their responsibilities or achievements, participants described how coming to know oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries shaped their overall outlook on life and helped counter previous associations of responsibility as identity, affirming self-worth through achievements, or otherwise defining their value as a human based on others' expectations. With time, participants shared how they developed their confidence in themselves and came to know themselves as competent and capable of continuing to achieve their own definition of success in life. With an understanding of the dimensions comprising the component *Doing the Healing Work*, next, I

introduce the fifth and final component of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, *Finding Meaning in Experiences*.

Finding Meaning in Experiences

The final component I'll discuss that comprises the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is *Finding Meaning in Experiences*. Participants had various ways in which they described their commitment to finding meaning in their experiences with foster care. For some this was described as having "purpose," "a legacy," and being "what drives me."

Describing how she made meaning of her experiences by finding purpose in giving back to others, Clare shared:

Sometimes I think, why did this happen to me, and maybe it's so I can help other people. It is part of my purpose to give back. I have so much meaning and purpose in the things that I do. Sometimes I think if this didn't happen, I might not be in a job that fulfills me.

Some participants reflected how their participation in this study was a way in which they were finding continued meaning and purpose in their experiences. SL shared how she felt purpose in sharing her experiences in the study:

I know Creator has moved my life to continue advocacy work for our kids in foster care. I strongly believe Creator has given me a purpose for this and literally out of all the things in the world and the research that goes on, I was able to find your research. For me it felt like Creator validated that I'm meant to be part of this type of work.

Moreover, all the participants expressed how their experiences related to foster care shaped their educational and career path, their engagement with advocacy or awareness efforts, and their aspirations to create generational change. Through the data I co-constructed with participants during the interviews and my corresponding analysis, I identified three dimensions that further describe and characterize finding meaning in their experiences: (a) aligning career with values, (b) engaging in foster care advocacy, and (c) creating generational change. In the following sections, I further describe these three dimensions and provide examples grounded in the

experiences of the participants to illustrate the properties of the dimensions and the variations possible within the dimensions.

Aligning Career with Experiences and Values

A core dimension of *Finding Meaning in Experiences* is aligning a career with experiences and values. All the participants were engaged in careers in helping roles or in the public service sector and the majority were serving people with experience in foster care in some capacity either directly through their job role or through their additional service and volunteer efforts. Describing what shaped their career trajectory, nearly all the participants shared how their lived experience in foster care informed their aspirations to “support people who have shared experience of being in foster care.” Even those who described a growing distance from the salience of their foster care identity shared how it was still their “why behind doing this work” and expressed how it affects their “perspectives on work.” Others who worked in helping roles that were not directly related to foster care shared how they wanted to continue to find ways for the “foster care community to be part of their career.” It was common for participants to use words like “connected,” “entangled,” and “intertwined” when discussing their foster care identity in relation to their career. In the subsections that follow, I will describe how participants aligned their education with their values, how they perceived and experienced working at child welfare agencies, their experiences in trauma-informed and foster care affirming work environments, and how their purpose- and values-driven work was a significant part of their lives.

Aligning Education with Values

Participants alignment of a career with their values, particularly their interest in serving others in humanizing and socially just ways, for many began in adolescence and was a component of their meaning making of a foster care identity to pursue degrees and a career

pathway where they could support other young people and their communities. While in high school, Veratta shared how she already knew she wanted to be in a role where she could “reach back and pull forward to make sure others succeed.” As a result, Veratta was selected for a public service early career development program. Other participants did internships, assistantships, and service experiences through which they served others while pursuing their education. Describing how her experience in foster care shaped her major choice, Simone shared:

I knew from the time I was 16, I wanted to serve my community. I wanted to be in the helping field. My identity as a foster youth was really salient and so was my student identity. All of my work, education, career has all been connected to foster care. Whether it was when I graduated college and went back to my residential group home every summer as an undergrad, being a grad assistant with the CSP, or now working with a non-profit.

Likewise, all the participants pursued undergraduate majors that aligned with their values of serving, understanding, or communicating with others. Their undergraduate majors were in areas including social work, child development, criminal justice, education, teaching, journalism, communications, and psychology, and many ultimately pursued advanced studies in these areas and had obtained master’s or doctoral degrees.

In describing how they choose their undergraduate major, graduate studies or career path, participants often positioned their choice in relation to child welfare and specifically whether their initial aims were to pursue a job as a social worker. Frequently participants expressed how a career in child welfare and as a social worker felt like the only pathway available to them as a person with a foster care identity who wanted to give back to others in foster care. Sharing her initial aspirations to work in child welfare as a social worker, Clare reflected, “My initial hope was to get my degree and become a caseworker at the child welfare agency. That was the only

future I saw for myself.” Veratta also reflected how child welfare was her original career path as she drew meaning from her experiences in foster care:

Foster care helped me figure out what I wanted to major in for undergrad, social work. I had a very distinct career plan starting at the age of 15. I determined at that time, I was going to go work as a social worker in the African American unit of the child welfare agency so I could help youth, support educational access, and make sure they knew all the things no one told me about like ETV [Education Training Voucher].

On the other hand, some participants shared how they were anchored in their decision to not pursue a career with a child welfare agency or as a social worker based on the misalignment to their values they experienced while in the foster care system. Simone shared, “I knew I did not want to be a social worker. I did not want to be part of that system.” Reflecting on how being a social worker is often one of the only tangible career pathways presented to people in foster care who express they want to align their career with their experience and have a desire to give back, Clare shared:

So many young people in foster care are like I want to give back, and to them the only pathway they see is, “I’m going to become a social worker.” It becomes the only model for helping. I’m an example of that, my interest, my talents, my hopes all lined up into social work and education. But some people might be really good at finances and that doesn’t mean you can’t give back. You don’t have to be a social worker to help but often that’s the only option presented ... There are accountants out there who’ve been in foster care, I can guarantee, but where are they? Are they not disclosing their identity because they’re not in an environment where disclosure is valued?

A repercussion of participants having limited access to possibility models of other people with lived experience in foster successfully engaged in careers and making positive change within their spheres of influence, meant one of the few pathways they saw for engaging their foster care identity was to become a social worker with a child welfare agency.

Perceptions of and Experiences with Working at Child Welfare Agencies

Interestingly, despite several participants having initial thoughts about pursuing a career as a social worker, only a few participants ended up working with a child welfare agency, and by

the time of the study all had pursued other career pathways and work settings. Some participants reflected in hindsight how they were grateful their plans changed after hearing about the experiences of their peers who had pursued a career in child welfare. Reflecting on how she retrospectively feared the child welfare system would not have aligned with her values or supported her well-being based on what she had witnessed among others, Clare shared:

Had I not worked with the CSP, I probably would have perished in the child welfare system as a social worker. I don't think it would have been very healthy for me. Who knows, maybe I would have gotten some promotions at the agency or maybe be a high-level leader there. Or, maybe it would have chewed me up and spit me out, like it does with so many people, and I would have gone back to school and changed my career like so many people who are just retraumatized by the system, especially back then when there was even less understanding of what it meant to be in foster care and then work in the system. I don't think we fully understand that experience now, but there's a little more sensitivity to being trauma informed that was not happening then.

Although her initial aspirations were to pursue a career as a social worker, Veratta also reflected on what she anticipated would have been a misalignment between her values and those embodied in the child welfare system:

I decided I didn't want to go into social work specifically because I knew I would advocate too much and probably get myself fired because I'm a hot head when it comes to things I deeply care about and social justice. I know there's a lot of stuff happening in the system that I would not be okay seeing on a day-to-day basis.

Sadly, other participants who had worked in the child welfare setting affirmed the concerns other participants had shared.

When Ashley authored legislation to protect the rights of people with experience in foster care she found “the agency was totally against it, they were pushing back,” in a manner that diminished her lived experience expertise and sought to discredit her perspective. Also, describing how aspects of her agency, voice, and competency were questioned at times within child welfare settings, Simone shared, “with serving our foster youth community I go back to spaces with people who worked with me when I was young. Sometimes it feels like I will always

be 13-year-old Simone to them who has no sense of the world.” Specifically describing how her experiences working with child welfare agencies did not align with her values, were not trauma informed, and were performative in their engagement of people with lived experience in foster care, B shared:

The state picked me up as one of their “success stories” because I had started college, I had a job, and I had used their resources. So, they were like, why don’t you work for us, you’ll be a superstar. I for sure wanted to do that, because I was going to change the system from the inside out, right? Go work for Child Protective Services, and they’re going to listen to me. I thought I was going to go save the world. The disappointment I felt when the reality I was faced with hit me. The system not only wasn’t built for youth in foster care, but it also wasn’t built for people with lived experience to be professionals within it. As much as they say they value the voices of people with lived experience, a lot of times it feels like a performative slogan. It’s not genuine and it left such a distaste in my mouth. This is so gross. I don’t want to be a part of this. I don’t want my name on this. I don’t have to listen to you be disrespectful to the same people that you’re exploiting their experience.

Unfortunately, this was not B’s only experience with a lack of values alignment in the child welfare setting. When she later worked in another child welfare adjacent organization that “recruits people with lived experience in foster care,” she encountered policies that were not “equitable or trauma informed for people with experience in foster care.” B described how the work environment was not supportive of her circumstances navigating the death of her biological mother or accommodating of the boundaries she needed as a person with prior experience in foster care. Explaining the experience she summarized, “it was some of the most traumatizing stuff I’ve ever dealt with in my life.” It was common for participants to describe how they were passionate about changing the child welfare system from the “inside out” but felt disillusioned by the values misalignment, dehumanization, and marginalization they experienced at the intersection of their professional roles and foster care identities within the child welfare system.

Finding Trauma-Informed and Foster Care Affirming Work Environments

Several participants reflected on the type of work environments they found affirming of their foster care identity. Describing how she wanted to address the values misalignment she experienced previously in child welfare to create trauma-informed workplaces, B shared:

I completely stepped away from it because I was like this is disgusting. I put a lot of energy into thinking about my voice and what's best. Operating in spaces that don't feel good for my morals or values or makes me feel drained, I don't want to do that. As I got a little older, I realized just because I step away doesn't mean the needs goes away, I just needed to find a different way and that's where I do a lot through my consulting. The experience I had working with the child welfare system made me want to develop a training to design workplaces that are equitable for people with lived experience through my company. We need to identify and create environments where people can authentically be themselves.

While some participants described environments that needed to be more trauma informed and foster care aware and their plans to support that effort, others shared how their work environments supported their meaning making of a foster care identity. Describing how her career pathway and job roles had a role in affirming her foster care identity, Clare shared:

At the CSP I was able to explore and develop a sense of identity in the context of people that were really helpful for me to do that. The role I moved into is one in which lived experience was celebrated and valued. Like we are seen as more legit if we have lived experience and we're seen as insiders, versus other careers that it would not matter or matter less. I get to be in spaces where people are reflecting on foster care and hearing other people. There's so much exploration of the topic around me all the time it makes it feel less extreme or severe. It's normalized, like it's just a typical thing, and it's part of my life and not an unspoken taboo thing. If I had done something else, the foster care aspect of my identity might not have been reinforced. It would have still been a part of me that was never going away, but it wouldn't have been as front and center in my day-to-day work. I feel like there's choices that reinforce the consistent development of a foster care identity and what it means. My work allows me to think about how I leverage, share, and make meaning of this identity.

Also, describing how her work environment acknowledged and reinforced the presence of a foster care identity, Simone shared, "My identity is present in 95% of the conversations I'm in. The organization is based on storytelling, so reflection is a big piece of my job and being able to

inspire people based on my lived experience.” As some participants described, their career choice not only provided them with opportunities to channel their experiences with a sense of purpose for serving others, but it also supported the continued development and meaning making of a foster care identity.

Purpose- and Values-Driven Work Without End

Further, some participants described the fulfillment yet fatigue that comes with having a career closely intersecting with their experiences and values. Describing how her foster care identity helped her connect with a career she finds deeply fulfilling, Clare shared:

I feel grateful my career has gone the way it has, and I feel like I’m making an impact. The work I am able to do on a day-to-day basis is soul giving. Without this identity that I have, I probably never would have found it. I feel there's a level that's connected in ways that maybe other people don't experience. It's entangled most of the time but that's in a good way. I really love and care for the people in the work.

While Clare largely described the benefits of experiencing a deep intersection of career, foster care identity, and values, she also described how it created the conditions in which work does not end and is an ever-present aspect of life:

Work never turns off. I can have boundaries around email or talking about work but all the things that come with doing human and equity work. I can't watch TV without seeing the challenges I'm trying to figure out every day. I can't listen to a podcast, music, everything represents the human struggle. It doesn't feel like I can ever separate the work that I do from the life that I live. I don't even know what retirement means because I can't untangle work from this identity.

Likewise, Simone expressed how she felt her job constituted much of her life at the intersection of her foster care identity:

It's just a job, but it's not just a job. It's a fraction of your being not your entire being but my foster care experience has determined everything. It feels like a big identity that it's my entire world. Everything is always for the best interest of others. It's very extreme.

For some finding meaning in experiences through a career that aligned with their values was a way in which the dimension of responsibility as identity was also engaged as there was a great degree of responsibility associated with fulfilling their purpose to give back through their career.

Acknowledging the weight they sometimes felt of engaging the deep intersection of their career, values, and foster care identity, a few participants questioned if they were experiencing burnout and some shared how they at times would imagine possible futures if they had jobs or career pathways that consumed less of their life. Danisha reflected, “What would it look like if I went to a different field where I could have more rest or peace. I don’t know what how that would ever look.” Clare also described how not feeling such a deep connection to work felt like an impossibility as she shared, “I don’t have a desire to switch fields, but sometimes I wonder what if I didn’t work with foster care anymore? That doesn’t even feel available to me. I can’t imagine where work gets left at work.” The combination of the foster care and professional identity supported many participants meaning making of a foster care identity, yet also caused a fatigue of navigating the ever-present nature of the purpose-driven work in their lives.

Summary—Aligning Career with Experiences and Values

In summary, all participants described how their career pathway was initially driven by their experience in foster care and was one of the ways in which they made meaning of their foster care identity. Participants chose undergraduate majors that aligned with their interests in giving back and serving others. Many participants reflected how they had limited exposure to the career options available to them that would allow them to give back to others and several positioned their initial educational and career aspirations in relation to the dominant narrative of helping others through being a social worker at a child welfare agency. Some participants did go into social work with child welfare agencies and others were aware of the experiences of their peers

who worked in child welfare. Largely, participants described child welfare agencies as not aligned with their values as a person with a foster care identity. Participants described how some of their work environments were more trauma-informed or had a role in affirming their foster care identity that supported their continued meaning making. Several participants reflected on the purpose- and values-driven nature of engaging in work aligned with their foster care identity and their overarching values of social justice, equity, and serving others. Some experienced the never-ending and ever-present nature of the work and identified how while it was meaningful work it also created the conditions for experiencing fatigue and burnout. Next, I discuss the second dimension of *Finding Meaning in Experiences*, engaging in foster care advocacy.

Engaging in Foster Care Advocacy

A core dimension of *Finding Meaning in the Foster Care Experience* was engaging in advocacy for and with people with experience in foster care. Many participants described how engaging in advocacy helped them make meaning of their experiences in foster care, both those that were positive and challenging as it informed the ways they aspired to improve the foster care experience for others. Some specifically discussed how having a foster care advocate identity was part of their overall identity and how their engagement in advocacy provided a different way of reclaiming and disclosing their foster care identity that was perceived often positively by participants and others around them. Participants were engaged in advocacy in various ways, spanning from individual to the system level, and through activities including authoring books, releasing a documentary, participating in and leading advocacy groups, drafting legislation, making policy recommendations, speaking out, and serving others with experience in foster care. In the subsections that follow, I describe how participants described the ways they gave their experiences purpose through advocacy, felt personal responsibility to use their voice to create

positive change, developed a foster care advocate identity, and engaged in advocacy efforts in their daily life as aspects of finding meaning in their experiences.

Giving Experiences Purpose Through Advocacy

Many participants described how engaging in advocacy helped them further make meaning of their experiences related to foster care and was a way in which they felt compelled to draw from their own experiences to make a difference for others. Sharing how engaging in advocacy was a component of making meaning of the challenges she and others faced, B explained:

I don't want to have my life been wasted. All these experiences I had as a kid. I had a friend kidnapped and sex trafficked from the shelter. I haven't seen her in over 20 years. I talked to her family, they never found her. These life experiences that we've had that we don't talk about. The stories we don't tell, like when I almost overdosed and died when I was 14. I don't want that to have been for nothing. The abuse I suffered. I don't want that to be for nothing. I don't want my grandparents sacrifice, how they picked up to move with me, to be for nothing.

Others shared how they sought to understand the positive aspects of their foster care experience so they could advocate for others. Describing how she wanted to understand “what worked” in her foster care experience to inform how to support positive outcomes for others, Simone shared:

My advocacy is related to my fundamental curiosity of why did I have relatively positive experiences and have achieved a level of stability for myself? And how can this be the standard or expectation our young people can anticipate in the system. I expect my peers to be able to have the same opportunity and believe as long as lived experience experts are influencing, things will change. I'm optimistic about creating youth-centered practices and outcomes with youth.

Also sharing how she made meaning of her experiences and engaged advocacy and built awareness of both the reality of the challenges she experienced but also possibilities for a pathway forward for system change, Danisha shared:

Sometimes it feels like, is there any hope for this community at all? So, my approach is I don't want to throw more depression out into the world, like you see the outcome numbers, and people every day are like why are we even doing this, if it doesn't matter?

But it does matter. In the documentary, while I share that I've had over 30 different addresses while aging out. I still want to spin this with hope. Not false hope. Real hope. I want to ignite change and for people to leave with the realness but also the hope that it's worth changing.

In these ways, participants gave their experiences purpose by identifying how they could inform change-making efforts to improve outcomes for other youth with experience in foster care.

Responsibility to Use Voice for Positive Change

In addition to the way participants made meaning through their engagement in advocacy, many participants described the deep sense of responsibility they felt to use their voice to advocate for others. Describing the responsibility of being among the first with experience in foster care to access certain child welfare and foster care spaces as a professional, B shared:

We're kind of the first generations of former foster youth getting into spaces, graduating, and in positions where we can really have an impact on how things move forward. I think it's really important to be part of these spaces like some of my buddies who are my age or not that much older that are deep into advocacy. We're like the first generation of alumni that are really in positions where we have the platform to have this voice.

A strong sense of feeling was associated with "being the first to have a voice," and the emotions behind B's words conveyed a sadness for those who historically had less access and were more often silenced, a sense of pride for the community of people with experience in foster care gaining access to previously inaccessible spaces at a growing rate, and a feeling of deep responsibility for creating system change. Others also reflected on their positionality and how being someone who had successfully navigated to and through foster care, higher education, and professional spaces granted them a higher level of access to share their perspectives, led others to perceive them at times as more legitimate, and furthered the responsibility they felt to elevate the larger community of people with experience in foster care through their advocacy.

Further, a few participants shared the responsibility they felt to engage in advocacy was specifically related to their concern that if they didn't use their voice, others would speak for

them and the perspective of people with a foster care identity would be silenced, hidden, and unknown. Simone reflected on the responsibility she felt for advocating that all decisions impacting people with experience in foster care include people with lived experience:

What drove my advocacy is my commitment to asking, how are we bringing the lived expertise of current and former foster youth into the system as partners in decision making for foster care. I'm always asking, "is everyone who needs to be at the table to make a decision included?" The answer is "no." Lived experience is often missing. We are experts of the system. Why wouldn't you want to have the experts in your decision making? I don't want to advocate for. I want to advocate with ... It's almost like if I don't do it. Who's going to do it?

The rhetorical question, "Who's going to advocate, if not me?" was echoed by other participants, underscoring the responsibility they felt while finding meaning through their advocacy. Also describing how she continued to advocate out of concern a lived experience perspective would otherwise be excluded from conversations and even disparaged, B shared:

I could create a life that doesn't acknowledge the foster care part of it or that identity. But I'm supposed to have a voice for more, if I don't, then who will? Somebody's going to step in who don't know nothing about us and come in here and try to speak for us? That's bullshit. That's why I started one of the first youth advocacy groups in my town years ago. I was like for real, get the fuck out of here, stop talking about us like that.

Engaging in advocacy efforts resulted in a foster care identity remaining a salient and public aspect of some participants' lives as they took purpose in driving change for others with experience in foster care.

Developing a Foster Care Advocate Identity

More specifically, a few participants reflected on how their engagement in foster care advocacy facilitated their development of a *foster care advocate identity* and several described how their engagement in advocacy activities had become a positive aspect of their identity. Describing how her foster care identity shifted with the development of a foster care advocate identity, Ashley shared:

For me the process started with acceptance of being a foster kid and the identity that comes with that, and then it moved to this is my life now and it's not perfect, but I want to make it better. So, that leads to advocacy, and then once you're doing advocacy you get opened up to so many intersecting issues in the system and know you need to help make a difference, and you become an advocate for yourself and others.

Also, describing how a foster care advocate identity was a component of her identity, SL shared:

I strongly uphold a foster care advocate identity. I make people aware of it and I'm proud that one of my identities is being an advocate for youth in foster care. My experience is part of my identity in a way where it has driven a lot of my advocacy work, and I see myself as having a foster care advocate identity.

Many participants reflected how engaging in foster care advocacy provided a different means of finding meaning in disclosing, claiming, and relating to their experience in foster care in a way that was generally positioned positively by themselves and others. Sharing how engaging in advocacy and awareness activities brought her foster care identity forward and affirmed it as an aspect of her overall identity, Clare shared:

For the first time, I was on stage, publicly speaking and identifying myself as a person who has foster care experience and was encouraged to share that's my identity. It was like, "I'm your MC today and I'm the youth voice in the room," and it became something to name and talk about which had never been the case before. It's experiences like that where I let the identity come forward.

Others described how being seen as someone who is engaged in advocacy and awareness activities changed their experience with how others perceived them. Danisha shared, "people notice me from the foster care advocacy and awareness work I do now and it's not oh, she's a foster kid. It's oh, she does work in the foster care community." In essence, being designated as someone doing work in the foster care community was perceived differently and more positively by self and others than the label of "foster kid" that had been previously ascribed to them while in foster care.

Reflecting on how engaging in foster care advocacy became a positive aspect of her identity, both from an internal and external perspective, SL shared, "I've done so much as a

young person, I've done almost everything when it comes to advocacy. That's something I'm really proud of, and from the outside, it really impresses a lot of people." Likewise, Simone described how having a foster care advocate identity positioned her foster care identity as a strength and shifted the power dynamics as she shared, "I'm an expert on how the system impacted my entire life and the people around me. That's not a negative consequence. It's expertise, its knowledge, and it can help somebody else. That's been the power shift for me." For some, developing a foster care advocate identity and engaging in foster care advocacy provided a positive and purpose-driven way of acknowledging the foster care aspect of their overall identity in a manner that supported their reclamation of power and agency.

Advocating in Daily Life

For many of the participants engagement in advocacy related to foster care had become a significant part of their life from the daily activities they engaged in, how they navigated the world, and how they took action to create positive change for and with people with experience in foster care. Reflecting on how much of her life was centered around engaging in advocacy, Simone shared, "The last 20 years of my existence have been very much ingrained in contributing, giving back, and empowering my peers impacted by foster care and those who come after us." Others shared how they engaged advocacy in their daily life, in part, by regularly disclosing their foster care identity to increase awareness. For example, Elyse shared, "depending on the circumstance I'll be like, hi, I'm Elyse, former foster youth. One giant introduction. I'm very open about it because I want to increase awareness about it." Others described their commitment to addressing biases, stigmas, and stereotypes they encountered in everyday life as a regular form of advocacy. B shared how she felt strongly about "destigmatizing" people with experience in foster care and the needs they may have as a result of

foster care. Similarly, describing how she was compelled to address the stereotypes about people with experience in foster care presented in the media, Clare shared:

I quit watching *Criminal Minds*, because it started being like every perpetrator, every criminal, was fostered and the behavioral and analysis unit always looking for someone who was adopted or was abused as a kid. I wrote a letter to CBS and said you're perpetrating a really bad stereotype. Do not have all your criminals on your show be foster kids. They never responded so I quit watching the show.

Moreover, engaging in advocacy was such a central component of the meaning participants made of their experiences in foster care, that many described how they saw their participation in the study as a form of advocacy and elevated the topics of which they wanted to increase awareness and understanding. Engaging her foster care advocate identity during the interview, SL shared:

I feel like it's part of my role as a Native person to love my community and love my people, uplift their experiences, especially and specifically our kids in foster care. I've been intentional about doing that in my advocacy, my policy recommendation, when I was an intern ... I know there's probably a lot of things you want to do with the research. But please, if you can, mention the unique experience of Native youth in foster care.

For many of the participants engaging in foster care advocacy or having a foster care advocate identity had become a central part of their adult lives that shaped aspects of their daily lives and for some this advocacy occurred at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Often, participants described how they identified and engaged opportunities to make a difference for others with experience in foster care by increasing awareness, advocating for change, and addressing situations in which bias, stereotypes, and stigma toward people with experience in foster care were perpetuated.

Summary—Engaging in Foster Care Advocacy

In summary, engaging in foster care advocacy was a key component of how participants made meaning of their foster care identity and continued to develop their foster care identity. Several participants described their engagement in advocacy as giving their past experiences,

both those positive and challenging, a purpose by using those experiences to inform the ways they wanted to create positive change for and with others in foster care. Engaging in advocacy for some was a deeply felt responsibility as participants were aware they were statistically among a smaller percentage of people with experience in foster care who had navigated to and through college and into career and advocacy spaces. There was great meaning and a significant sense of duty participants associated with being among the first to have legitimized access to career and advocacy spaces that compelled participants to use their voice to advocate for change. Moreover, participants expressed concern that if they didn't advocate, others without lived experience in foster care may speak for the foster care community. As some participants engaged in various advocacy activities, they developed a foster care advocate identity as a more specific aspect of their foster care identity. For those who referenced having a foster care advocate identity, it was an aspect of identity they were internally proud of and that others around them also generally conveyed positive views about. Some participants described how they felt more salience with a foster care advocate identity than a foster care identity. A foster care advocate identity supported disclosure of some aspects of their foster care experience with a sense of purpose wherein it was a part of their role responsibility as an advocate to acknowledge the foster care experience to create awareness and positive change in the foster care system. For some, foster care advocacy was a natural and ever-present aspect of their daily life in which they regularly took action to spread awareness, address deficit perspectives, and create positive change for people with experience in foster care. Next, I will introduce the final dimension of *Finding Meaning in Experiences*, creating generational change.

Creating Generational Change—Having a Legacy

A core dimension of *Finding Meaning in the Foster Care Experience* was creating generational change—having a legacy. Many participants used the phrase “having a legacy” to describe how they felt personally compelled to create generational change that would persist beyond their lifespan. Participants described the legacy they wanted to have across various contexts ranging from generational change within the foster care system to generational change in the lives of young people or within their families. In the subsections that follow, I describe how participants sought to create generational change within and beyond foster care systems, among people with experience in foster care, and within their families and chosen kin.

Facilitating Generational Change Within and Beyond the Foster Care System

Beyond participants having a career that aligned with their values and engaging in advocacy, several described the type of generational change they wanted to have within and beyond the foster care system. Expressing the belief that system change was possible, even if she may not see it within her lifetime, Clare shared, “I do believe we can make things different. Will it be slow? Yes. Will I see a child welfare system that actually nurtures families while I’m alive. I don’t believe we will.” Clare further described what she saw as her role in setting into motion the type of change that would proceed her as she reflected:

I have maybe 20 years left of work in me before I retire, and I want to leave some sort of legacy to those who come after me of the work that’s ahead. It’s not going to get burnt down and redone in 20 years while I’m working, so what can I contribute through the relationships I have and the changes I can make towards a difference.

Many participants described how change within the foster care system may be slow or inadequate though they remained committed to reimagining the foster care system. Also describing her aspirations to facilitate change in her sphere of influence, Simone shared:

My recognition is how systems move or don't move enough. My belief is that an alternative is going to be created which is community being invested in instead of having CPS knock on your door. I don't believe that will ever work. I believe there will be a new system and part of that is the book we just wrote, five of the authors are former foster youth and the book focuses on the belief that community is the solution to the system and that our youth and families have the ability to be part of their own solution navigating the system.

Like Clare who described the impact toward change she wanted to make within her working years, Simone considered at what point her efforts would transition to the next generation as she reflected:

I'm a hopeful soul and the impact I'm seeing with this book and the mental model that communities are the solutions, I'm at a place where the door is now open at least in the county I lived in that experts of the system have to be at the table. They have to, and so I don't know if I need to be that lived expert anymore. I think I've opened a lot of doors and now it's kind of like a legacy for people who's next. There wasn't really anyone before us doing some of this work. I think this generation really set the tone. And now I'm curious who the next generation is going to be and how they'll serve, support, empower, define, and advocate for the foster youth that come after us.

While participants had their doubts about the speed of change, they were hopeful that change would occur within or beyond the foster care system both within and beyond their lifespan.

Moreover, participants were optimistic about the changes they wanted to help influence during their time and thoughtful about what their legacy would be for the next generation of people with experience in foster care to take up.

Inspiring Generational Change Among Youth in Foster Care

Some participants also described how they desired to create generational change through their connection with young people with experience in foster care. Describing how part of her legacy was identifying how her foster care experience might continue to shape her life and how she would use her experience to advocate for and inspire others, SL shared:

I think my foster care experience is always going to be a part of me. And part of me hates to say that but I think that it's true. I don't think it will always weigh on me, and I can't even say it weighs on me now, because I'm so proud of what I do to uplift my peers. I

think it will always be there and it's part of my legacy. It's part of my story and I'm going to use it to inspire a lot of young people one day.

Others also expressed how foster care was connected to a sense of purpose of making foster care as an experience more normalized and a foster care identity more affirmed for the future generations. Describing how she strove to use her own journey to inspire others with the aim of generational change, Veratta shared:

Foster care has been a primary driver for a lot of things when we're thinking about the legacy I want to have. I still think about what I wrote when I graduated from my master's program, I referenced the quote by Parker Palmer from the book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, where he says, "Many young people today journey in the dark, as young always have, and we elders do them a disservice when we withhold the shadowy parts of our lives." The quote is symbolic of the importance of sharing our dark moments as well as importance of providing mentorship to current and future generations. The reason that quote has always stuck with me over the years is the importance of sharing my own experience with others and normalizing that you can come from whatever background you come from. You're not alone in your identities, experiences, or feelings. It's part of my legacy as an adult to use my story as inspiration and to normalize.

In this way, some participants described how identifying their legacy and using their own story to support others with experience in foster care, lifted some of the "weight" they previously associated with their foster care experiences and created a sense of purpose.

Engaging Generational Change Within Their Families and Kin

Several participants discussed how a significant way they wanted to make generational change was within their families, whether it was in their relationships with their partner, children, or kin-like connections. Sharing how establishing generational change was important in her partnership with her husband who also experienced foster care, Simone expressed:

I'm married to a former foster youth. We grew up in the system together and with our identity of foster youth, I'm thinking about what are our traditions, our holidays. We're figuring that out and creating that change because we don't have generational privilege or wealth or support of resources so we are really setting the bar of what does stability look like in our family when we may have experienced our own challenges. I'm starting to question do I want to be a parent? I think the answer is yes but then I'm thinking about

what that means.

SL also expressed how she had set intentions for the how she wanted to facilitate positive generational change within her family and among her children one day, particularly in relation to her Native identity as she explained:

I want to be a mom and have kids one day and I plan on keeping the Native aspect really strong. I want my family to be traditional and practice our Native way. I want my kids to be healing people, not people that are parts of generational trauma, even though generational trauma can still kind of affect you even when you're not the one abused because it's literally in our DNA. I understand how important it is for me to heal because I don't want to pass down trauma to my kids. I would never intentionally do that, but even unintentionally. I'm so aware of how that could affect a kid ... I think my experience is going to make me a really good mom. I want to raise them to be really good humans.

Other participants also described the ways they were aware of the possible generational effects of the traumas they had experienced and how part of the generational change they wanted to create was to engage in generational healing and restoration.

Some of the participants who had children described the intentional ways they sought to resolve generational trauma and support positive generational change for their children.

Explaining how she pursues her role as a mom in trauma-informed manner to set her kids on a “different trajectory” from her own life, B described:

I gave my children different last names than me and their dad because their dad was also in foster care. I didn't want my kids to be impacted by the shit of my family that came before me. I don't want them to be burdened by my name or their dad's name. They'll have their own names and hopefully it'll be able to start a whole different trajectory for them and they don't have to continue to be tied to this stuff. I learned some of this stuff went back even to my great grandpa abusing and it was this cycle. I'm committed to something different for my kids. I'm probably such a weirdo to my kids because I apologize to them all the time. I ask what they want. I try to be so inclusive of them because I want to break the cycle, and I want them to be free from that generational curse.

Notably, having a legacy by creating generational change within their families was not solely experienced by those who planned to have children or already had children. Participants

described a range of family contexts they were creating generational change whether it was with biological children, stepchildren, nieces and nephews, siblings, partners, or as Veratta described, other kinship bonds. Explaining her expanded view of creating generational change as a Black woman, Veratta detailed:

I've developed an expanded view of children and how to be a parent and how to have a legacy. As an educator, naturally, I have a legacy. I'm not worried about the legacy of biologically being tied to notions of motherhood. I don't want to have children even though society may view that as an expectation and as a Black woman especially, "well what is your usefulness?" I have other people's kids for that, specifically when I think about foster care and the intersection of Blackness. Kinfolk, kinship bonds, that is how I show up for the youth and students in my life, particularly minority students.

As the participants' reflections indicate, their experience and commitment to creating generational change within their families was experienced at the intersection of their racial, foster care, socioeconomic class, and parenting or caregiving identities.

Summary—Creating Generational Change—Having a Legacy

In summary, participants' commitment to creating positive generational change was often positioned as a legacy they hoped would last well beyond their working years and their own lifespan. Participants' commitment to creating generational change was both an outcome of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and a sub-process by which participants made further meaning of their foster care identity. Participants sought to create generational change in many ways, including within and beyond the foster care system, among youth with experience in foster care, and within their families and chosen kin. Now, with an understanding of the five components, each of their three dimensions, and their corresponding properties that together comprised the emerging theory, next, I detail the three contextual factors that influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity: (a) micro-macro level perceptions, (b) variations in family privilege, and (c) time.

Contextual Factors

All the participants described navigating the perceptions of others about their foster care identity, experiencing variations in family privilege across the lifespan, and making meaning across the passing of time. Through the data I co-constructed with participants during the interviews and my corresponding analysis, I identified three contextual factors that critically influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity: (a) micro-macro level perceptions, (b) variations in family privilege, and (c) time. In the subsections that follow, I describe each of the contextual factors in greater detail and share how the contextual factors influenced the components and dimensions of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. While the demonstrated influence of the contextual factors is in many ways embedded in the examples provided in the preceding sections detailing the components and dimensions of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, in the following subsections I will also provide examples grounded in the participants' experiences that specifically demonstrate the influence of these contextual factors on the meaning making process.

Micro-Macro Level Perceptions

In this subsection, I will discuss how micro-macro level perceptions were experienced as a contextual factor that critically influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for the participants. Participants described the views and actions of others they encountered that conveyed positive, neutral, or negative perspectives of their status as someone who experienced foster care and their various other intersecting identities. Often, participants expressed how the perceptions others conveyed of them through their words and actions shaped their experiences and was an aspect they had to navigate as part of the meaning making process

of developing a foster care identity. Participants encountered the perceptions of others in varying contexts that aligned with the environmental system levels outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1993) (i.e. microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems). As the micro-macro level perceptions of others critically influenced how participants experienced each of the components and dimensions, many of the examples are embedded within the previous sections describing those elements of the emerging theory. Therefore, in the remainder of this subsection, I will more specifically describe the micro-macro levels where the perceptions of others were encountered and will provide a few specific examples grounded in the participants' experiences that illustrate the propensity of these perceptions to influence the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

At the microsystem level participants encountered the perceptions of others through their face-to-face interactions with peers, caseworkers, teachers, supervisors, family of origin, caregivers in foster care placements, community members, and others they interacted with in their immediate environments. Describing a situation in which she encountered the perceptions others held of people with experience in foster care at the microsystem level, SL shared, "I think one of the most hurtful things I've ever heard was someone at a church I used to be a member of said, 'Those kids are bad. Those kids are horrible. I can never let them in my home.'" Describing the impact this encounter had on her as a person with experience in foster care, SL expressed,

It hurt me so bad, because I don't know if they knew I was in foster care or not. It hurt how they were generalizing everyone and not recognizing that yes, kids can have behavior issues but there's a reason why and not every child that goes into foster care has that.

B also expressed experiencing marginalizing perspectives, particularly from individual interactions with a caseworker as she shared, "I remember one my caseworkers, she would tell me things like, your real smart, it's a real shame, you're going to end up dead or in jail." Words

conveyed to the participants the perceptions others in their immediate environment held of them and the broader population of people with experience in foster care in a manner that critically influenced how they made meaning of a foster care identity.

In addition to the words participants heard that conveyed the perceptions of others, participants described actions that occurred within the microsystem that relayed the perceptions others within their immediate environment held of them as a person with experience in foster care. Describing how her caseworker and staff at the group home called her by the incorrect name, Elyse shared:

You know, I go by my middle name. It didn't matter how much I said it everyone kept calling me Sybil. That's part of why I really hate to be called it. They just looked at the paperwork and would call me by that name instead of listening to me. The fact that your power is stripped away and you're dependent on them and they're not always the nicest to you. They don't remember your name. I think about if I had a different identity and were trans how even worse psychological that could have been.

Describing how not being referred to by her preferred name conveyed disrespect for her as a person, Elyse further described, "it felt dehumanizing to be treated that way by the group home workers and case managers themselves." While these and many other examples of perceptions at the microsystem levels were marginalizing, participants did express, though with less detail, other instances in which they received affirming messages from individuals in their immediate environment. As demonstrated in some of the prior examples referenced in the discussion of the components and dimensions, caregivers, teachers, caseworkers, peers, and others were described by some participants as conveying positive perceptions of people with experience in foster care.

At the mesosystem level, participants described how they encountered the perceptions of others through interactions they became aware of between individuals around them at the microsystem level. As mesosystem level interactions did not occur directly with participants it was less common the participants were aware of the interactions with a level of detail, but some

participants did describe some specific instances of these interactions. For example, Simone described interactions she became aware of that took place between prospective foster families and staff with the foster care agency that conveyed the perceptions others held of her and her siblings as teens in foster care. She shared, “I remember the message of why people wouldn’t take 4 teenagers was you guys are bad kids. Your mom taught you badly.” Describing the impact that perception had on her, Simone reflected, “I think language has a lot to do with identity. It was very much demeaning language.” A few other participants described how they were aware in a more general sense of the mesosystem level perceptions conveyed through interactions between their siblings or peers in foster care and agency staff or educators, interactions among their foster parents, and interactions between members of their family of origin that conveyed a mixture of positive and negative perceptions of people with experience in foster care, with influence on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

At the exosystem level, participants encountered the perceptions of others in environments they were not directly a part of but they were still influenced by, such as their foster family’s extended relatives or their friend’s parents. For example, SL shared, “extended family would sometimes say, ‘yeah, that’s their foster kid.’ Not directly to me but there was other judgement that hasn’t been said and to me that’s judgement. It’s the exact opposite of acceptance.” Further describing the impact on identity development, SL expressed:

In general, people talk about foster kids, like it’s a charity thing. Forgetting they’re humans and it’s hurtful. The way they word things is hurtful. There’s a tone of good versus bad. It makes foster kids as a group seem less. It feels dehumanizing. At the end of the day, I am a human having this experience. I am not just a foster kid. That doesn’t make me any less human or any less of a family member.

Likewise, Danisha explained how the perceptions of her friends’ parents impacted her:

Their parent would find out my dad was in jail, or my mom had been arrested, or I was in foster care and had been abused. They would say to watch out for me and that they don’t

trust me. Making friends was so hard because their parents would find out I was in foster care and say I was the problem.

Describing the impact of encountering these perceptions, Danisha shared, “It was a really bad thing when people found out, to the point of me being really isolated and alone. I wouldn’t tell my story because it was like the whole world was misunderstanding who we are, mislabeling.”

Participants became aware of the perceptions that others outside their immediate environment held of them and how it critically influenced their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Lastly, participants described how they encountered macrosystem level perceptions through system policies and dominant societal conditions they encountered about people with experience in foster care. Participants relayed various examples of how system policies conveyed perceptions about people with experience in foster care presented in the prior sections that discuss the components and dimensions of the emerging theory (e.g., policies related to the type of support provided for different types of foster care placements conveying who is foster care enough, age limits on access to resources and advocacy opportunities). In addition, Simone reflected how policies and language to emancipation conveyed a perception that others expected her to be self-reliant when she aged out of foster care at 18. Describing how the pressure to be independent impacted her development of a foster care identity, Simone shared:

The language around what emancipated means. That drives a lot of to think do not call. Do not come back. That was me at 13 thinking I’m going to have to be independent as a former foster youth at 18, so I better prepare for taking care of me because no one else is going to do it. It’s those social constructs around expectations and some are formalized in policy.

Elyse also reflected on her awareness of the perceptions others held of people with experience in foster care that were conveyed through general societal expectations as she offered:

I think the statistics about where we come from, what we're doing afterwards, are skewed a lot in the public's perspective. Not everybody's coming from the same thing or going the same place, but the system treats a lot of us the same. The institutional bias of treating us like we come from nothing and are going to be nothing. Or everyone thinks we're a victim and that's not necessarily true ... or it's you deserved it because you're from a poor bad part of town. The complex interplay of discrimination and societal expectations and myths that go unchallenged.

As Elyse referenced the “complex interplay of discrimination and societal expectations,” other participants also discussed how they were aware of how interlocking systems of oppression within and beyond foster care impacted them.

Some participants described more specifically how encounters with racism and antiblackness, impacted them and their peers and conveyed perceptions others held of them at the intersection of race and a foster care identity. Describing how her and her siblings experience was shaped by racial discrimination, Simone shared:

I have siblings that look way more Black in society than myself. The misinterpretation of people that I'm white passing definitely was a different experience between myself, and my sibling. I recognize how in general society moves through interactions with them differently versus myself.

Relatedly, Ashley described how she encountered stereotypes as a Black woman in foster care and reflected how larger societal perceptions filtered down to microsystem and mesosystem interactions she had in the contexts of foster care and education. Ashley explained:

I think race and the perceptions others hold of us based on race is a big piece of developing a foster care identity. There are so many negative stereotypes held in society with being Black and I've had experiences with racism. Personally, I don't believe I ever needed to be labeled disabled and in special education. I've only met people of color who were involved in foster care so that may have shaped how I view things. I think I'm always on edge when I'm out in public. I try to tell myself don't be suspicious.

As participants described, macrolevel perceptions were relayed to them in several ways such as through policies and their experience encountering dominant societal beliefs, including those that created systemic oppression and marginalizing conditions. Some participants described how

perceptions at the macrosystem level influenced their lives at the other system levels down to the perceptions others held of them within their direct environment at the microsystem level. In summary, participants encountered the perceptions others held of people with experience in foster care across the environmental system levels ranging from the microsystem to the macrosystem. The perceptions of others that participants described encountering ranged from positive, neutral, to negative in content and affect and critically influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity across the components and dimensions.

Variations in Family Privilege

In this subsection, I will discuss how variations in family privilege were experienced as a contextual factor that critically influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for the participants. As a reminder, in this study, family privilege was defined as the experience of being a member of a stable family and the benefits that accompany it such as love, belonging, and access to basic resources (Seita, 2001). Across their lifespan, participants described variations in stable family relationships and corresponding benefits of love, belonging, and access to basic resources. A few participants specifically used the word family privilege to describe their experiences and all alluded to family privilege by reference to the features of its definition (i.e., love, belonging, access to basic resources). Variations were experienced in the degree of family privilege participants experienced (a) across the relationships that were central to their lives, (b) within particular relationships (e.g., some relationships were described by participants as more important or impactful to them than others), and (c) among specific aspects of family privilege (e.g., some participants described situations in which they had stable relationships that provided a degree of access to basic resources, yet were not accompanied by feelings of love or experiences of belonging). In other words, variations in family privilege were

experienced in complex ways and for the purpose of illustrating its influence as a contextual factor in the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, it is illustrated in the emerging theory (see Figure 2), by a threaded rope to represent how the aspects of family privilege (love, belonging, and access to basic resources) in some conditions can come together and strengthen the experience of family privilege, but in other conditions can become frayed or fragmented with only one thread of the rope left (e.g., access to basic resources but not love and belonging). The oscillating depiction of the rope represents how overall variations from high to low levels of family privilege can be experienced (e.g., having no or few relationships that provide family privilege versus times where there are several relationships that provide a high degree of family privilege).

When participants described times in their life where they felt a high level of family privilege (i.e., stable relationships, love, belonging, and access to basic resources), they used phrases like “feeling connected,” “having connections,” “having support,” or “having relationships,” which informed the decision to label the peaks on the *Variations of Family Privilege* on the emerging theory as *Connections*. On the other hand, participants described times in their life where they felt a low or absent level of family privilege. A low or absent level of family privilege was not experienced as merely an absence of adequate connections, rather, it was often accompanied by the presence of individuals who did not fulfill their responsibility to provide a degree of family privilege (e.g., family of origin, foster caregivers) and participants described having to mourn and navigate their awareness of the connections and experiences of family privilege that should have been afforded to them, but were not (e.g., not being able to remain connected with their siblings, not being protected, nurtured, and provided for by caregivers). One participant described such experiences using the analogy of a “phantom,” that

will be described further in the examples that follow which informed the decision to label the valleys on the *Variations of Family Privilege* on the emerging theory as *Phantoms*. In the remainder of this subsection, I will provide examples grounded in the participants' experiences of how variations in family privilege, both the experience of *Connections* and *Phantoms*, shaped the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Participants experienced variations in family privilege over the course of their lives in a range of ways that shaped the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. While some participants described the loss of family privilege when they entered foster care because of separation from their family of origin and siblings, some also shared how they experienced a greater degree of family privilege in relatively stable placements with a kinship family, long-term foster family, or a residential home that facilitated stable relationships and a degree of love, belonging, and access to basic resources. In this way, participants' experience of family privilege was complex and could vary with the stability of each relationship in their lives. Describing how she lost her siblings yet established some stable relationships that provided some aspects of family privilege upon entry into foster care, Clare shared:

I found stability when I went into care. My family privilege increased. I felt more safe. I did feel like I was supported. Once I went into care, it was like a light switch in which I had my basic needs met and I did feel my life was much better with my relatives than it was with my parents, even with being separated from my siblings. I was like finally, oh my gosh, I can take a shower. I have a bed to sleep in. I have clean clothes to put on today. I could be a normal kid and go to school and not worry about smelling. The bare minimum felt like such a luxury after years that had been so rough that it actually did feel like privilege.

The shift in family privilege Clare experienced was a factor that influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity as she reflected how it lessened the duration and extent to which she experienced disrupted developmental environments, specifically the dimension of being raised on struggle and survival, not love. Clare's example also exemplifies

how family privilege is multidimensional in that while she experienced some aspects of family privilege in foster care such as having basic needs met, there were some components disrupted as she was separated from her siblings and as demonstrated in the previously presented examples, she described at times not feeling a whole sense of belongingness in the kinship placement among her family. Further, the analogy Clare used to describe the variations in family privilege she experienced as a feeling like a light switch was flipped, reflects the ways changes in family privilege were experienced by participants in unexpected and abrupt ways.

Beyond the entry into foster care being a time where there were often variations in family privilege, such variations continued for some participants who experienced subsequent placement changes in foster care. Simone described how being moved to the residential facility made it possible for her to stay with her siblings and experience stable relationships, belonging, and support there:

When we first went into care we were temporarily placed, and the social worker told us there's like a 95% chance my siblings and I were going to be separated. Her grand plan was I would be adopted because I was the youngest and my brothers would go to a boy's home, and then she just had to find a placement for my older sister. We ended up with a different social worker who was committed to keeping us together and we were placed at the residential group home.

I would say if I had to choose between the idea of a stable two parent household with a loving family, aka being adopted, over being with my siblings, absolutely not. I'd rather stay at a shelter for five years with my siblings. It's an exaggerated idea that we must have stable parents. I was raised by a single mom before, who's to say I need a mommy and daddy. I had all my house parents and staff at the residential group home. I was able to have my relationships intact there. I really experienced a sense of community for at least 9 years if I count when I was a youth and then being able to come back and stay and be connected as an alumni.

In addition to describing how experiences with family privilege can change through subsequent placement changes in foster care, Simone also provided a counternarrative to the common depiction of residential group homes and highlighted that family privilege can be experienced in

environments other than those that society categorically defines as a traditional family unit. What is more, Simone's example outlines how having a sense of intact relationships, community, and belonging at the residential group home impacted her meaning making of a foster care identity.

After foster care, as participants transitioned to early adulthood and college, many experienced additional variations in family privilege as some navigated this time with a great sense of loneliness, while others described how friendships and their redefined sense of family were a significant part of their life through to college graduation. SL explained how her experience with the only family she had known as a child changed in unexpected ways during college and early adulthood:

I never stopped seeing it as my home. Before my foster mom passed, we could walk in, dig in the fridge and it was okay. But after she passed it would make the woman my dad was seeing so mad. It was my home growing up and it was hard to get out of that habit and it just made me feel bad. It still felt like it was my room, but she'd say, "This is our house, you can't just come over." ... I think they saw it as, "She has her own place, she doesn't need to come back here." Just because I can take care of myself doesn't mean I'm not going to want to come back to my family.

While SL described she generally felt a sense of belonging in her long-term foster care placement as a child that she largely attributed to her foster mother, when she aged out of foster care and went to college, she experienced an unexpected shift in the level of access she had to her childhood home, the degree to which she felt a sense of belonging, the amount of support she received, and ultimately the degree of family privilege she experienced. As described in the earlier components, this shift in family privilege led to the experience of disrupted developmental environments in early adulthood with experiences that reinforced being with us, not part of us within her foster family. Also, like SL who experienced the loss of her foster mother and subsequent changes thereafter, several participants described variations in family

privilege they experienced over their lifespan that were associated with the passing of biological parents, kinship care providers, non-relative foster caregivers, and others in their lives.

As participants further navigated their adult lives, some cultivated family privilege through relationships with their significant others, children, or “chosen family.” While these relationships were difficult for some at times, many shared how these relationships positively supported aspects of their identity development in the context of being a person who experienced foster care. Clare shared how connecting with her partner bolstered what had previously been limited access to normative developmental experiences and previous uncertainty about her identity as it provided opportunities to learn about herself and establish an overall sense of self:

Until I met my partner, I didn't know that I like to cook. Nobody ever exposed me to cooking and now I really love to cook ... All these things that my growing up experience didn't afford me. It was being exposed to his family privilege ... that helped me find pieces of my identity that I didn't know even existed.

Beyond building their own families, other participants shared how remaining connected with their caregivers from foster care influenced their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Elyse shared a recent experience in which she had to disclose her foster care identity to explain her connection with her the kinship caregivers she was placed with and she reflected, “Family is still, not fully just a thing. It's a complicated thing.” Others experienced the complicated ways reconnecting with family of origin (e.g., biological parents, siblings, extended family) influenced them in adulthood. Describing her experiences connecting with her biological mother using the analogy of a *phantom*, Kim shared:

She has been of a phantom in some sense. You think of the *Phantom of the Opera*. My mother, I know she's more than her substance, but that's the capacity in which I have known her, is a phantom. My mother started using when I was 1 years old and became this phantom to me on a subconscious level. It impacted her ability to parent me, and therefore be a consistent person in my life. The continued alienation I experienced from her. I don't have any waking memory of my mother before the age of 12. I don't

remember my mother. She is just this phantom. It's a very isolating experience.

Further illustrating how experiences with low levels of family privilege were experienced as phantoms, Kim went on to describe a particularly difficult experience with her biological mother. Reflecting on how she recently experienced the presence and then the absence of her mother in adulthood after she gave birth to her child, Kim explained:

You go through this rite of passage, of having your mother come and stay with you. My mother didn't stay with me. She stayed in the hotel across from my home and abandoned me. I've been looking to this for years that she was going to come stay and help with my first baby. She didn't last 24 hours, she hid in the hotel room and left town without telling me. She's always done this when it's time for her to show up for her children, she doesn't do it.

This situation exemplifies the analogy of a phantom, wherein participants at times experienced the presence of individuals who were responsible for providing stable relationships yet did not fulfill their commitment to do so. During these times, participants were faced with the awareness of what an alternative life might have looked like had they been afforded a normative degree of family privilege that they perceived was common among their peers (e.g., having a mother engaged in providing support postpartum). While other participants did not use the word phantom, others described situations that aligned with the concept of experiencing phantoms. For example, SL described her realization that her foster family had not fulfilled their obligation to provide stable nurturing care to her, as she reflected:

It didn't hurt until I started to have people in my life that did check on me. I have really good friends in my life and people that do care about me now. And that's where I've realized, that's when I started to feel like I was failed is when I had people genuinely care about me. And I was like, wow, my family doesn't treat me like this.

At times, situations where participants did experience connections brought to greater awareness the simultaneous presence of phantoms and highlighted how those who should have provided stability, love, belonging, or nurturing in their lives did not adequately do so.

Lastly, some participants reflected on how the variations in family privilege they experienced at various points in time shaped their overall meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Clare reflected on the variations in family privilege she experienced across time and how those shaped her life, as she offered:

What worked when I was in foster care was, I got to stay with family. Now, I'm still working through some like of the trauma that happened when I was with this family and being separated from my siblings, but I experienced transformational stable relationships while I was in care and that helped me be successful. I had one case manager for years. She was there from start to finish and is still part of my life. While my experience was rocky at times, it helped me have less of a rocky transition to young adulthood ... It's the simple importance that relationships are at the center of everything. Through my lens, I can see, when I had zero safe relationships up until I was [placed in foster care], I know what that feels like, and then when I had people step in and take care of me, I know what that feels like. As an adult with a core group of chosen and bio family around me, relationships that I cultivate with soul mates, best friends, my spouse, my kids. I understand how important that is and to me that gets put into everything I do, the work I do, my approach to life, my beliefs, how I make meaning.

The experience of stable relationships accompanied by love, belonging, and access to basic resources was described by other participants as a significant part of their life with impact before, during, and long after foster care. Many described how variations in family privilege including experiences with high levels of family privilege and having connections, and experiences with low levels of family privilege and navigating phantoms, shaped how they made meaning in their lives both in a general sense and with critical influence on their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Next, I will discuss the last contextual factor, time.

Time

In this subsection, I will discuss how time was a contextual factor that critically influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for the participants. As Simone described, “time impacts development, it impacts a person.” Further describing how a foster care identity was shaped over the continuum of time and how meaning was made and

remade of a foster care identity over time, Elyse explained, “*having a foster care identity is having your past colliding with the present.*” When reflecting on their earlier life, particularly when they were in foster care or transitioning to early adulthood, several participants described aspects of “being” and “feeling foster care,” often related to the components of *Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments* and *Seeking a Sense of Self*. This informed the representation of the left *Time* axis on the illustration of the emerging theory as *being and feeling foster care* (see Figure 2). Over time and experiences related to the component *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity*, several participants shared how they came to understand and accept that their experience in foster care had led to the development of a foster care identity that was an aspect of their overall identity that could remain present even after the experience of foster care had ended. Later into adulthood, it was common for participants to describe as they engaged in *Doing the Healing Work* and *Finding Meaning in Experiences*, their foster care identity was “fading into the background” of their overall identity with other personal and social identities taking greater salience, despite it still being present in many aspects of their life including their career, advocacy activities, and creation of generational change. This informed the decision to label the right *Time* axis on the illustration of the emerging theory *foster care identity fading into the background*. In the remainder of this subsection, I will provide examples grounded in the participants’ experiences of how time was a critical contextual factor that shaped the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

As indication that time was core to the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, throughout the interviews, participants used a variety of temporal words or phrases to describe how their experiences with a foster care identity and meaning making process of developing a foster care identity occurred over time. Participants used qualifiers such as “when I

was younger,” and “as I’ve gotten older,” or statements reflecting, “I used to ..., now I ...,” as discursive indicators implying there was a difference in their meaning making process over the time continuum of “in the past” vs. “now.” For example, Kim shared, “I *used to* shake it off as part of my identity, *but now* I realize it is part of my identity.” Likewise, as Clare retrospectively reflected on her sense of self and identity at the time of the study compared to the past, she shared, “I couldn’t have voiced it *then*, but *now* I can say that’s when I started to discover myself.” Through participants presentation of their experiences in a series of temporal sequences, they conveyed how their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity took place over time.

Specific points in time or “timeframes” were common temporal reference points participants used to position how their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity took place in relation to specific points in time. Frequently, participants would qualify how they had developed or changed during or after significant events such as their entry into foster care, exit from foster care, entry to college, or key markers of their adult life. For example, SL shared, “I’d say *since my time in foster care*, I’ve grown a lot culturally.” Referencing another timeframe that shaped her identity development, SL shared, “*college was a very brutal time*, when it comes to discovering myself and my identity.” Other participants described specific points and times with phrases such as, “it was a defining moment,” or “for the first time” For example, as she described her experience connecting with other students with a foster care identity through the CSP, Elyse shared, “it was the *first time* there were other kids like me.” Likewise, reflecting on her experience working with a CSP for the first time, Clare reflected, “it was knowing at a deeper level this was a *major moment* in my life that was going to impact me significantly.” Thereby, as participants reflected on their experiences, they often positioned

specific points in times that held significance to their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

While aspects of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in some instances was bound to shorter timeframes and specific events, most often participants described the process as taking place over a substantial length of time (e.g., years, decades, possibly never-ending). Participants frequently reflected on their meaning making process using phrases such as, “it evolved over time,” “for the longest time,” “it’s taken me years to admit,” “it took me a long time to understand,” or “it was a struggle for a long time.” Relatedly, as many participants described the duration of the meaning making process, they used temporal cues like “ongoing” or “still” as indication it was a process that remained “in progress.” For example, SL shared, “it did take me a *long time* to get to this place to believe in myself and there’s things I’m *still* working on.” Other participants referenced how their meaning making process continued into the present by using their age as a temporal marker. Veratta shared, “*I’m well into my 30s*, it *still* isn’t easy. I’m *still* navigating these things, the healing, personal, and shadow work to get to the other side.” Likewise, B shared, “I’m *almost 40* and I *still* think about it.” In these ways, participants indicated how they experienced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity across time, as a lengthy and ongoing process.

As participants experienced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity over time, several participants expressed how the passing of time both supported their understanding of a foster care identity, and the passage of time created a degree of distance from their foster care identity. Describing how the passing of time was a necessary for her to more deeply understand and engage the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, Simone shared:

I am in a place where I'm the most reflective and aware of my lived experience in the foster care system. There's the time difference between my 18-year-old self, my 21-year-old self, my 30-year-old self. I think sometimes you need to heal to be reflective and really recognize how you want this experience to impact the rest of your life.

Others also reflected how the passing of time changed how they continued to experience their foster care identity. Elyse explained how with time she was less impacted by disclosing her experience and identity others, "When I tell people sometimes, they're like, "Oh, my god, are you okay?" And I'm like, "Well considering it was over 10 years ago, yes." Further, describing how the passing of time created a degree of distance from her foster care identity and changed how she made meaning of it, Kim explained:

I'm not 5 years old anymore. My foster care identity has changed. It's a dual existence for me, it's an experience and identity and it's fluid depending on how I'm feeling at almost 40 years old ... It's become less emotional through with the passage of time. There's happy sadness that as time goes on it become a memory because for so long that was my life, for better or worse."

Participants reflections of how their foster care identity shifted as time passed affirmed the critical influence of time on the meaning making process.

Lastly, some participants reflected on their overall meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and described the process as events linked in a temporal sequence over time. Further reflecting how a foster care identity rose to her awareness of acceptance and then faded into the background with the passage of time, Elyse used the analogy of a bubble slowing rising, falling, then popping:

It's almost like a bubble, and I think it's kind of burst at this point. It's kind of fading into the background. For me, it was a slow rise to accepting a foster care identity and developing it. And then it's been a slow fade out, but it's still always there and a bubble could always pop up again.

Like Elyse, other participants also described how a foster care identity would "always be there," but would likely "fade" and may not be perceived by themselves or others with the same degree

of salience to their daily life as it once was. Anticipating a foster care identity would begin to fade in relation to how others perceived her and how she viewed herself, Danisha shared, “I think it’s going to start to fade into the background a little bit. It’s not going to be the first thing associated with my name.” Also, reiterating the idea that a foster care identity may fade but “pop up again,” Clare shared, “the identity doesn’t necessarily go away. It may fade back, and it may come forward, like many of our identities over time depending on stage of life that we’re in.” Participants reflections of the slow rise and slow fade of a foster care identity is represented in the illustration of the emerging theory. The curved line that connects each of the components of the theory reflects the rise and fall of a foster care identity over time and the bi-directional arrow on either end acknowledges the possibility of movement back and forth across the components and how the meaning making process is accompanied by shifts in the degree of salience of a foster care identity.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings that I constructed from my analysis of the co-constructed interviews with the nine participants as I sought to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and the critical influences on the process. First in this chapter, I introduced the nine participants and discussed the various identities and experiences they shared with me. Next, I discussed the dynamic nature of the theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity that was constructed from my analysis and framed how I hoped readers would engage the emerging theory based on the insights and requests the participants shared with me as the study moved toward theory generation. Specifically, the emerging theory is not intended to present people with experience in foster care as a monolith or the development of a foster care identity in a monolithic manner as individuals’ experiences with

the components and dimensions of the theory may differ. Moreover, the emerging theory is intended to be engaged with nuance as individuals may not have experiences in all of the components or dimensions, the components may not be experienced linearly in the order they are presented or illustrated, the components and dimensions may be experienced multiple times over the lifespan, and experiences in one component or dimension may impact experiences and meaning making in another. Further, the components and dimensions must be engaged with nuance as they include a range of experiences including positive and negative, both of which are important to understand but are not intended to assign a positive or negative value to a foster care identity. Lastly, it is essential to engage the theory with an understanding that it is *emerging* and is comprised of *tentative* components and dimensions that were co-constructed within the specific context and methods of this study and should not be overgeneralized.

Finally, the focus of the chapter was the in-depth presentation of the findings from the co-constructed interviews and my analysis that included the five components, each of their three dimensions, and the three contextual factors that comprise the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Through numerous examples, I demonstrated how the findings were constructed from my analysis, were grounded in the data from the co-constructed interviews and supported the development of the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. The emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity presented in this chapter (see Figure 2) has five components that can be understood as sub-processes of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity including: (a) experiencing disrupted developmental environments, (b) seeking a sense of self, (c) becoming aware of a foster care identity, (d) doing the healing work, and (e) finding meaning in experiences. Each of these components are further

explained by three dimensions that further describe and characterize them. Lastly, the components and dimensions are critically influenced by three contextual factors: (a) micro-macro level perceptions, (b) variations family privilege, and c) time. With this understanding of the findings and the emerging theory of the meaning making process of constructing a foster care identity, in the next chapter I will discuss the findings in relation to the research questions, conceptual framework, and the extant literature, present recommendations based on the study's findings, reflect on the limitations and strengths of the study, and share my personal reflection.

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CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, I discuss the findings of this study presented as the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in relation to the research questions, conceptual framework, and the extant literature that guided this study. I also present recommendations for higher education, child welfare, and future research contexts based on the findings of this study. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the limitations and strengths of the study and share my personal reflection on the process of conducting the study and my personal experience engaging the findings.

Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study was to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. One primary research question and one sub-question guided this study:

1. What is the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates formerly in foster care?
 - a. What are the critical influences in the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity?

The research questions guided this study that resulted in the emerging theory grounded in the experiences of the participants. In the following subsections I will discuss how the emerging theory addressed each of the research questions.

What is the Meaning Making Process of Developing a Foster Care Identity?

The meaning making process of developing a foster care identity among college graduates with experience in foster care (CGEFC) was the central inquiry of the study. The

college graduates in this study who were formerly in foster care experienced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in unique ways based on the intersections of their identities and experiences. Through the interviews I co-constructed with the participants and through my analysis of the data I was able to identify key sub-processes grounded in the participants' experiences. These key sub-processes are represented in the components and dimensions of the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. The five components of the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity are: (a) experiencing disrupted developmental environments, (b) seeking a sense of self, (c) becoming aware of a foster care identity, (d) doing the healing work, (e) finding meaning in experiences. Each component is comprised of three dimensions that further describe and characterize the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. These components and dimensions of the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity were critically influenced by three contextual factors: (a) micro-macro level perceptions, (b) variations in the family privilege; and (c) time that will be discussed more in relation to the research sub-question. In the remainder of this subsection, I will further discuss the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity based on the findings from the co-constructed interviews and my analysis of the data that resulted in the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity

First, *Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments* encompasses how experiences being raised on struggle and survival, not love; being with but not part of a family; and having limited access to normative developmental environments shape the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Participants described a range of experiences before, during, and after foster care of being faced with the absence or instability of nurturing

relationships with adult caregivers that disrupted a child, adolescent, or young adult identity through the early conferral of an adult-like status, described by some participants as having a parentified child identity. Participants described how they were often expected to navigate struggles alone and be responsible for their own, and often others' survival, without the support of adult caregivers. Moreover, while family is often a central environment where young people receive unconditional love and affirmation of their inherent value as a human, many participants described how such support and a sense of belonging was disrupted as the words and actions of their non-relative foster care placements, kinship placements, or family of origin conveyed they were not fully part of the family due to their status as a person who experienced foster care. Further, participants described how at points in their childhood, adolescence or young adulthood they had absent or inadequate opportunities to engage in a range of normative developmental activities, including those that support young people with developing a positive sense of self in general, as a person with experience in foster care, and at the intersection of identities. Experiencing disrupted developmental environments is a component of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity as the conditions of struggling for survival without nurturing support, being othered even in family contexts, and having limited opportunities to develop a sense of self comprised the developmental and environmental context in which participants experienced foster care and their early engagement with the meaning making process of developing foster care identity.

Second, *Seeking a Sense of Self* encompasses how prior experiences with disrupted developmental environments as a person with experience in foster care created uncertainties about self, such as questioning who am I?, constructing responsibility as identity, and affirming self-worth through achievement. Amidst participants' understanding they had many strengths, all

described times in which they questioned who they were in general and at the intersection of identities because of experience in foster care. Such uncertainty left some participants to navigate a desire to be “normal” among their peers who did not experience foster care, with normal being a quality and status they felt they were not. Although some described being unsure of their sense of self, many simultaneously expressed how their identity was constructed in relation to the various responsibility-based roles they held. Often responsibilities were placed on participants during their childhood and adolescence in a “subconscious and insidious” manner that cultivated responsibility as a deeply held aspect of identity into adulthood. For some participants, the enduring effects of responsibility as identity reinforced perspectives on self-reliance. Achieving, particularly in educational and career pursuits supported participants’ development of a sense of self in relation to their areas of strength in a manner that affirmed their self-worth. However, participants still had to navigate dominant narratives and imposter syndrome that positioned hyperachievement as necessary for survival and perpetuated a belief that they were not worthy of rest. A foster care identity thereby was experienced in relation to being uncertain about one’s overall identity, navigating dominant forces that conferred responsibility-based identity roles, and confronting dominant narratives that one must achieve to survive and be worthy as a person with experience in foster care.

Third, *Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity*, encompasses how participants became aware that foster care experience could be an aspect of their identity which was facilitated through experiencing placement changes, connecting with others with a foster care identity, and feeling foster care enough. Experiencing placement changes refers to the numerous physical changes in the living environments participants experienced in their entry to foster care, moves from one placement to another, aging out of foster care to college, and the interpersonal dynamic

changes experienced within foster care placements over time. Such changes in placements brought to awareness that one was in the foster care system, an experience some participants referred to as a “turning point” in which they were made to “feel foster care.” Most often feeling foster care among the participants was associated with placement changes that were abrupt and less-family like. While feeling foster care because of placement changes did not position a foster care identity positively, becoming aware of a foster care identity by connecting with others who experienced foster care was often affirming. Participants described unique spaces of connection that facilitated their awareness of a foster care identity, including connecting with peers in a group home, youth advisory boards (YAB), campus support programs (CSP), various career and advocacy spaces, and even the context of this research study. As participants became aware of a foster care identity, some described how they came to understand their foster care experiences as “foster care enough” to feel a sense of permission to accept a foster care identity. For some this meant acknowledging how their foster care experience continued to be a part of their lives regardless of policies, eligibility criteria for resources, age limits on activities, or dominant narratives that conveyed a definition of what constituted a foster care experience worthy enough of claiming a foster care identity. Particularly participants who perceived their experiences as relatively positive in foster care compared to their perception of their peers, described how with time they came to remake meaning of their experiences and view the various positive and negative aspects of their own foster care experience as legitimate. Becoming aware of a foster care identity through placement changes, connecting with others with a foster care identity, and feeling foster care enough developed awareness that experience in foster care could manifest as a foster care identity and could be an aspect of one’s overall identity worthy of acknowledgement.

Fourth, *Doing the Healing Work*, illuminates the significant labor of navigating the continued effects of trauma related to foster care, accepting oneself as a whole person with and beyond a foster care identity, and knowing oneself as worthy of safety, stability and boundaries. Participants described how they came to realize and acknowledge the trauma they experienced before, during, or after foster care was complex in nature, long-lasting in duration, and had far-reaching effects on their lives. Some described how trauma and a foster care identity were “incredibly linked.” Others expressed how they experienced trauma at the intersections of their racial identity and foster care identity including generational trauma related to colonization, systemic racism, and antiblackness. Nearly all the participants were engaged in counseling or therapy along with other restorative practices as part of what they self-described as their “healing process.” While participants largely referred to being “on the other side” of the trauma they also expressed how navigating the continued effects of trauma was fatiguing and doing the healing work was an ongoing process that did not have a definitive end. As participants navigated the continued effects of trauma as part of doing the healing work, they discussed how they came to accept themselves as a whole person. This involved accepting parts of themselves they had previously held shame about, reclaiming a foster care identity positively and as just one aspect of their larger identity, and feeling a sense of permission and having access to adequate resources to explore and develop other intersecting identities rather than being defined solely by a foster care identity. As participants became clearer about who they were, they increasingly came to know themselves as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries and they made choices to align with the understanding that they were deserving and capable of healthy relationships, rest, and positive outcomes in their lives. Doing the healing work of acknowledging the continued effects of trauma related to foster care, engaging self-acceptance, and developing self-knowledge and

confidence shifted a foster care identity from being so closely tied to survival, responsibility, and achieving to setting a path toward their own definition of success and well-being.

Lastly, the final component, *Finding Meaning in Experiences*, reflects how a foster care identity was accompanied by a deep sense of purpose that led to the selection of careers aligned with participants' experiences and values, engagement in foster care advocacy, and a commitment to making generational change that further shaped the meaning making process of a foster care identity. Participants detailed how their experience in foster care was a driving factor for their work, advocacy, and approach to life, and some described the ever-present and at times fatiguing nature of engaging "identity as the work." Work environments had a role in affirming and reinforcing the development of a foster care identity for some participants, while others experienced environments that were not trauma-informed or supportive of professionals with lived experience in foster care. Through these experiences, participants reflected on the meaning they made from being among what they perceived to be the first generations of professionals with lived experience in foster care accessing spaces in which they could drive change for others in foster care. Participants expressed the corresponding responsibility they felt to use their voice to create positive change, even if they might not see the full effect of the change needed within their own lifetime. Reflecting on the meaning they made of their foster care identity through their advocacy efforts some explained how they took salience specifically in a foster care advocate identity and felt a sense of purpose in disclosing their foster care identity and experiences as an act of normalizing and inspiring others with experience in foster care. Some participants specifically centered their advocacy efforts at the intersection of identities and hoped to address interlocking systems of colonization and oppression that are all too often experienced in the context of foster care. Beyond career and advocacy activities, many explained how they also

made meaning of their foster care identity at the intersection of their other identities through their aspirations to cultivate generational change in the ways they engaged with their families, raised their children, and nurtured chosen kinship bonds. Finding meaning in experiences shaped the meaning participants made of a foster care identity as they used their experience to inform their sense of purpose in their career, to create positive change through advocacy, and to have a legacy that would last generations beyond them.

What Are the Critical Influences in the Meaning Making Process of Developing a Foster Care Identity?

The critical influences in the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity included the three contextual factors identified in the emerging theory: (a) micro-macro level perceptions, (b) variations in the family privilege; and (c) time. These contextual factors influenced the environment in which the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity took place and impacted how each of the components and dimensions of the meaning making process were experienced. Further, these contextual factors had influence on one another and were at times experienced by participants in combination with increasingly complex effects on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

First, micro-macro level perceptions were the words and actions of others that participants encountered at each of the environmental system levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993) that conveyed positive, neutral, or negative views others held of their status as a person who experienced foster care and their other intersecting identities. The perceptions of others were encountered by participants through direct interactions with individuals in their lives, interactions between the many individuals in their lives, interactions between individuals outside their direct environment, and through interactions with system policies and dominant societal conditions.

Through interactions participants received messages that conveyed others were affirming, indifferent, or disapproving of their foster care identity and other intersecting identities, and participants had to interpret and manage the effects of others' perceptions as part of their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Second, variations in family privilege describes the changes and fluctuations participants experienced in the level of stable nurturing relationships present in their life at various points in time that provided love, belonging, and access to basic resources (Seita, 2001). Variations in family privilege were experienced by all the participants across their lifespan in complex and often unanticipated ways. Participants described times in which they had higher levels of family privilege as *Connections* characterized by belonging and support, and times they had lower levels of family privilege as *Phantoms*. Phantoms was a metaphor to describe the ghost-like presence of adults in participants' lives who did not fulfill their responsibilities to provide stable nurturing relationships. Additionally, an aspect of phantoms was participants experiencing awareness of the support that should have been afforded to them that was not and mourning aspects of their imagined lives that could have been possible had greater family stability and support been available to them. Variations in family privilege and the level of stable nurturing relationships in participants' lives critically influenced how the components and dimensions of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity were experienced by participants. Participants reflected on how they believed they experienced fewer negative effects of foster care when they had greater levels of stable relationships providing family privilege and experienced more negative effects and challenges when they had lower levels of family privilege. Family privilege influenced the extent and duration to which participants experienced disrupted developmental environments, questioned who they were, became aware of a foster care

identity, had to engage in healing work, and their approach to finding meaning in their experiences.

Third, time critically influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity as the process took place over time spanning from foster care to early adulthood and beyond. The meaning participants made of a foster care identity took place at different paces ranging from specific timeframes and contexts through to long durations that spanned many years of their lives. More specifically participants experienced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity as taking place across a time continuum in which the “past collided with the present,” as aspects of the foster care experience continued to have effects on their lives as meaning was made and remade of past experiences within present contexts. Several participants temporally sequenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity as having experiences during or soon after their time in foster care that made them “feel foster care,” followed by becoming aware of a foster care identity, and then engaging and remaking meaning of a foster care identity further through doing the healing work and finding meaning in experiences. Finally, participants described how with the passage of time they experienced their foster care identity “fading into the background,” of their lives. While some participants described a foster care identity becoming less salient than some of their other identities with time, many still referred to how it was an underlying factor that shaped their lives and how they experienced the world. Further, even among those who described a foster care identity as fading, participants reiterated how a foster care identity existed across a time continuum as they anticipated various events in their lives would make a foster care identity more prominent again in the future. Next, I will discuss the emerging theory in relation to the conceptual framework for this study.

Discussion of the Emerging Theory in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

As discussed in detail in Chapter 2, the conceptual framework of this study was composed of the following four theories: (a) symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934); (b) Cooley's looking glass self (1902); (c) Kegan's meaning making of the evolution of consciousness (1982, 1994); and (d) Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1993). These four theories together comprised the conceptual framework that provided sensitizing concepts and the preliminary approach I took to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. In this study, symbolic interactionism, which commonly underlies a constructivist grounded theory approach, supported my attention to the processes of interaction which drove the development of the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. More specifically, symbolic interactionism informed the ways I attended to the language and symbols both present in the past experiences the participants shared with me and that the participants and I mutually used during the interviews as we co-constructed meaning of a foster care identity together over the course of the study. Related to symbolic interactionism, Cooley's looking glass sensitized me to the interpretations and meaning participants made of their various interactions with others as they reflected on how others perceived them, judged them, and felt about them, and in turn made determinations about how they felt about themselves as a person with experience in foster care. This understanding informed my interpretation of the data and informed many of the components and dimensions such as being with us, not part of us, taking responsibility as identity, affirming self-worth through achieving, and being foster care enough.

Moreover, Kegan's theory of the evolution of consciousness supported consideration of how meaning making of a foster care identity grows more complex with the passing of time and

exposure to holding environments that support or hinder meaning making with increasing complexity. As Kegan's theory suggests, participants in the study described both environments that helped their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity (e.g. connecting with others with a foster care identity through a YAB or CSP) and challenged their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity (e.g., disrupted developmental environments in which they were raised being raised on struggle and survival). Moreover, participants expressed how they experienced a "paradigm shift" from looking to others for guidance and validation in their earlier years to making meaning at higher forms of mind farther into adulthood as they redefined themselves with confidence based on their own perspectives and with an awareness of the deep interconnection of their own identities, people, and systems that informed the change they desired to create within and beyond their lifetime.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory supported interpretation of how participants as individuals interacted with different ecological system levels, microsystem through to macrosystems, across time and informed identifying how participants experienced micro-macro level perceptions of others that influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Bronfenbrenner's theory also supported attending to time as a construct during which identity development takes place which facilitated the identification of time as a contextual factor that critically influenced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Together, the four theories that comprised the conceptual framework preliminarily shaped how I co-constructed meaning with the participants, analyzed the data, and began generation of the components, dimensions, and contextual factors that comprise emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, while also providing a

point of departure as I grounded the findings in the participants' experiences. In the next section, I will discuss the emerging theory in relation to the extant literature.

Discussion of the Emerging Theory in Relation to the Literature

In Chapter 2, I discussed the extant literature that served as a starting point for understanding the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, informed the development of the interview guide, and provided a preliminary understanding as I constructed the emerging theory grounded in the participants' experiences. In this section, I discuss how the findings and the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity connects to and departs from the extant literature.

Experiencing Disrupted Developmental Environments

In alignment with the DHHS (2023) statistics that report the most frequent reasons youth are placed in foster care include experiencing neglect and drug abuse by a parent, caretaker inability to cope, and physical abuse by a parent, most of the participants in this study described facing similar challenges that led to disrupted developmental environments before entering foster care. During and after foster care, some participants experienced further disruptions to their developmental environments that aligned with Hyde and Kammerer's (2009) concept of *cumulative instabilities* and shared how they felt profound sense of loss, aligned with Boss' (1999, 2006) definition of ambiguous loss. More specifically, some participants shared the profound loss of their childhood as they experienced how a parentified child identity was conferred on them that disrupted the normative opportunity to develop and engage a child, adolescent, or young adult identity. While a few studies have examined aspects of parentification of children (Borchet et al., 2020; Schorr & Goldner, 2022), very few have discussed parentification specifically in the context of experiencing foster care. The findings of this study

uniquely reflect how being conferred a parentified child identity was experienced by some as an aspect of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Further expanding on an understanding of survivalist self-reliance and pseudoindependence (Kools, 1999; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), participants in this study shared how their development of a “survivalist instinct” and “struggle mindset” was shaped specifically by not experiencing consistent love, nurturing, and protection that was an aspect of the dimension being raised on struggle and survival, not love and had impacts on taking on responsibility as identity and achieving alone to affirm self-worth.

The dimension of being with us, not part of us, describes how participants experienced being othered based on being in foster care in a range of placement types with impacts on identity development. Like other studies have reported (Bruskas, 2008; Kools, 1997, 1999), several participants in this study experienced being othered in non-relative foster home placements. Additionally, some participants described ways in which they were treated differently also in kinship placements with relatives. Yet, many participants underscored their preference remained to be placed in kinship care with relatives rather than a non-relative foster home or group home, and believed they generally had better outcomes as a result. These findings align with those of prior studies that indicate youth placed in kinship care with relatives had a more positive self-concept than youth placed in a foster family home with non-relatives (Metzger, 2008; Mosek & Adler, 2001), though also indicate that youth placed in kinship homes may still have experiences of being othered or not fully belonging that can impact identity development. Further, while scholars have documented how legal permanence does not guarantee relational permanence (Samuels, 2009; Pérez, 2017), some participants who had been in long-term kinship and non-relative placements, reflected on their desire for legal permanency to formalize the sense of relational permanency they felt. Like the findings of earlier studies

(Charles & Nelson, 2000; Samuels, 2009; Unrau, 2008) without legal permanency to accompany relational permanency, some questioned if the attachment they felt to the families they were placed with was illusory, a feeling that was highlighted when they experienced differential treatment by members of their foster family that called to attention that they were with the family yet not formally part of the family. In addition, while some studies have documented challenges of reconnecting with family of origin during and after foster care (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Samuels, 2009), participants in this study uniquely reflected how they felt othered among their family of origin related specifically to their status as a person who experienced foster care and described how their family of origin dismissed or avoided their experiences in foster care, rendering their foster care identity invisible in those contexts.

Lastly, while barriers to participation in normative youth activities among YEFC has been documented by other researchers (Bussiere, 2006; Berardi & Morton, 2017; Olson et al., 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015; Pryce et al., 2017) and some scholars have discussed how this can create exposure gaps that impact various aspects of life into adulthood (Bennett & Hoffman, 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015), this study uniquely documented how limited access to normative developmental activities shapes the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. While some participants described not having generalized access to normative developmental activities like getting a driver's license and managing finances discussed in other studies (e.g., Thompson et al., 2018), participants in this study additionally described having limited opportunities to develop a sense of self. Specifically, participants described how not having the normative opportunity to be raised in their family of origin, alongside siblings, or in their culture disrupted their developmental environment and sense of self. Particularly participants not having the opportunity to be raised in their culture exemplifies how the foster care system continues to

have a role in enacting colonization and perpetuating racialized cultural separation through transracial and transcultural placements that have persisted across history (NABSW, 1972; Leathers et al., 2019; Rymph, 2017; Vandivere et al., 2009), with consequences for identity development. Additionally, participants described how they had limited or absent access to opportunities to get involved in extracurriculars, discuss their goals and aspirations with adults, express their opinions, or make mistakes. As a result of these experiences, participants described a generalized “not knowing” because of foster care which led to them to have to engage in various aspects of learning about self and the world around them into adulthood, often without the support of their caregivers, in less developmentally safe environments.

Seeking a Sense of Self

While a few studies have examined aspects of identity development of people with experience in foster care, this study contributes a perspective on how participants had a high degree of awareness of their many strengths while at times questioned who they were in the context of the previously discussed disrupted developmental environments they experienced and in relation to where a foster care identity fit in their lives. While the findings of Fitch’s (2019) study indicated a foster care identity was a component of college success CGEFC, the findings also reported an aspect of a foster care identity was also experiences of isolation and difference, leading some to reject a foster care identity with the aim of being “normal.” In this study, participants also reflected how they often did not feel “normal” compared to their peers, particularly in adolescence and young adulthood because of their status as a person with experience in foster care, and at times desired to not be “foster care” to fit in and feel a sense of belonging. Amidst these similarities, a unique contribution of the findings of this study was illuminating that a dimension of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity

was “questioning who am I?,” as participants navigated their awareness of both their abundant strengths yet simultaneous uncertainties about themselves as they sought to develop a sense of self. Moreover, similar to Sarubbi’s (2019) description that some participants compartmentalized their experience in foster care and avoided disclosure, some participants in this study expressed how they segmented and muted a foster care identity at times as they made meaning of the identity, while others questioned if a foster care identity comprised too much of their self-identity and minimized their ability to develop other aspects of themselves. Like the findings reported by Okumu (2014) and Gamez (2018), participants in this study retrospectively reflected how college was a time of seeking a sense of self with a sense of urgency as they wanted to have a clear path forward given the ways college paralleled their emancipation from foster care and marked the end of time-limited resources, connections, and stability.

While responsibility was a strength of people with experience in foster care reported by Rios and Rocco (2014), there has previously been limited exploration of how responsibility may be an aspect of a foster care identity. Rather, some studies have discussed how the foster care system enforcing an expectation of independence can be internalized by YEFC (Berzin, 2014; Mulkerns & Owens, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and a few studies have discussed survivalist self-reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) or a veneer of self-reliance (Kools, 1999) associated with a disavowal of dependence that deters help seeking behavior (Bennet, 2020; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In this study, while some participants discussed a self-reliant mindset and avoidance of help seeking most discussed those as properties of experiencing responsibility and achieving as a significant aspect of their lives and identity. Participants reflected how they were specifically ascribed various responsibility-based identity roles by the adults in their lives, often in covert and indirect ways such as being the defacto caretaker of their family or siblings before, during, or

after foster care. Some encountered pervasive messages from actors of the foster care system that they would be solely responsible for themselves after aging out of foster care. For a few, identity continued to be constructed around responsibility-based roles in adulthood. Similar to studies that have found self-reliance may be experienced as a strength (Medlin & Jaeger, 2021; Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and other findings that have exemplified how it presents challenges in the lives of YEFC (Kools, 1999; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), participants experienced responsibility as a component of their identity that at times developed positive identities with a sense of purpose and other times led to self-reliance, avoidance of help seeking, and a loss of a sense of self outside of responsibility-based identity roles.

As was the case for the participants in this study, several scholars have discussed how people with experience in foster care are often aware of the dominant deficit narratives and statistical outcomes of YEFC (Benard, 1997; Fitch, 2019; Hoffman-Cooper, 2021; Sarubbi, 2019; Watt et al., 2013). Bruskas (2008) asserted that dominant deficit narratives can be internalized and contribute to a negative self-identity, while Kools (1997) suggested identity foreclosure (Erickson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) may lead people with experience in foster care to prematurely commit to a stigmatized identity. Contrarily, rather than succumbing to a deficit identity, participants in this study strove to redefine a foster care identity in positive terms by overcoming barriers to achieve success. Like the findings of other prior studies (Benard, 2004; Dansey et al., 2019; Hass et al., 2014; Horn, 2020; Okumu, 2014; Salazar et al., 2016; Schroeter et al., 2015; Werner & Smith, 2001), several participants described how their experiences achieving in K-12 and college environments affirmed their self-worth and described how obtaining their college degree was one of their biggest successes. Although participants did not adopt a stigmatized identity, they frequently did construct their aspirations and parts of their

identity in relation to what they didn't want to be, a statistic. The findings of this study align with those of Sarubbi's (2019) study in which participants experienced stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1998) and strove to not fulfill the deficit views others held of them. In like manner, other studies (Horn, 2020; Salazar, 2016; Sarubbi, 2019) also found that SEFC focused on achieving to combat the stereotypes others held about people with experience in foster care. Moreover, Salazar et al., (2016) identified how characteristics like a fear of failure, perfectionism, and navigating high expectations comprised the theme of overcoming in their study, and likewise in the present study the dimension affirming self-worth through achievement included participants being faced with challenges of navigating hyperachievement, hyperproductivity and an inability to rest. Related to studies that described motivation as an aspect of foster kids' capital (Medlin & Jaeger, 2021) and diligence and goal orientation as a strength among people with experience in foster care (Rios & Rocco, 2014), among the participants of this study an achievement orientation was a significant aspect of self.

Becoming Aware of a Foster Care Identity

In alignment with published stats that more than a third of youth have two or more placements each year (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022) and an earlier study (Pecora et al., 2005) reporting 70% of youth in foster care experienced four or more placements, all of the participants in this study experienced more than one different placement and described how placement changes made them more aware of a foster care identity. Similar to Perry's (2006), suggestion that negative impacts of placement changes might be mitigated by granting youth in foster care placement stability and restructuring biological, foster family, and peer networks to maintain positive connections, participants in this study described how they felt less like they were in foster care when they were in stable placements, placed with relatives in kinship care,

and perceived their overall experience in foster care as relatively positive. On the other hand, participants described how placement transitions, particularly abrupt transitions to shelters or frequent moves to non-relative foster care placements, underscored their position within the institutionalized foster care system, leading others to perceive them more negatively as a “foster youth,” and thereby making them more aware that foster care was an aspect of their identity. While this finding aligns with the study by Unrau et al. (2008, 2010) that reported the long-term effects of placement transitions, this study’s findings offer a new perspective of the impact on placement changes on awareness and development of a foster care identity. Additionally, participants in this study brought forward how even when their foster care placement was largely stable and perceived as generally positive, shifts could still occur within the placement that reminded them they were in foster care and made them aware of a foster care identity, such as the passing of one of their foster caregivers or a change in who physically resided in their foster care placement.

As the findings of some other studies have suggested youth advocacy boards (YABs) and campus support programs (CSPs) may serve as counterspaces (Solórzano et al., 2020) where people with experience in foster care can construct positive self-identities (Day et al., 2012; Fitch, 2019; Forenza & Happonen, 2016; Havlicek & Samuels, 2018; Watt et al., 2013) by experiencing empowerment, opportunities to use their voice, and relational solidarity (Forenza, 2016a), feeling a sense of belonging (Fitch, 2019), and having a safe space to share a foster care identity (Kinarsky, 2017). Likewise, participants in this study shared how connecting with others with a foster care identity facilitated their awareness of a foster care identity and subsequently supported their development and acceptance of a foster care identity. In addition to describing affirming experiences with YABs and CSPs that supported their development of a foster care

identity, participants expressed how other environmental contexts across their lifespan supported their meaning making of a foster care identity. For example, while there are documented challenges often faced in group homes and residential centers as placement settings (Fathallah & Sullivan, 2021; James, 2011; Lardner, 2015; Perry, 2006; Simmons-Horton, 2017), one participant identified how her experience connecting with peers in a residential group home supported her awareness and acceptance of a foster care identity in a positive manner as an adolescent. Moreover, this study contributes a perspective on additional environments CGEFC may engage with in adulthood that support the meaning making process of a foster care identity as participants described professional career and advocacy spaces that supported their awareness of a foster care identity. Further, some participants even expressed how this study had a role in supporting their acceptance and development of a foster care identity by providing a space to reflect on their experiences and identities and gain insights about oneself by engaging with the reflections others had shared about their foster care identity. Understanding contexts like these through which participants engage in meaning making of a foster care identity into adulthood is important as some participants shared that YABs and CSPs were not available in their region or did not exist at the time they were in foster care or went to college. For those who had experienced their foster care placements alone and didn't have youth or student engagement opportunities in their adolescence or young adulthood, their engagement with others with a foster care identity through career and advocacy activities as an adult was their first time being in community with others with lived experience in foster care and had an important role in their development.

Lastly, this study contributed a perspective that feeling foster care enough is a dimension of becoming aware of a foster care identity and making meaning of a developing foster care

identity. An implication of foster care system policies, eligibility criteria for resources, age limits on foster care advocacy activities, and other systemic definitions and dominant narratives was the implicit and explicit construction a hierarchy that positioned who is foster care enough based on age, type of foster care placements, permanency status, and more. Some participants reflected that because they had a relatively positive experience in foster care, they had relative stability in their foster care placement, or they were in a kinship placement, they not only felt less like a youth in foster care compared to their peers with more overtly tumultuous experiences, but they felt they were less worthy than others of sharing their experience in foster care or claiming a foster care identity. However, with time, participants shared how they came to acknowledge their positive experiences could inform needed system-wide reform and many began to identify that amidst the positive experiences they may have had in foster care they still endured some of the ubiquitous challenges and hardships associated with foster care. This aligns with the study by Unrau et al., (2010) that reported even when individuals were placed with people who were familiar to them, the experience of foster care and the corresponding physical and psychological shifts still had a cumulative impact on their lives. One participant reflected on the piece written by Whitman (2016) that asserts that there is not an age or duration limit on how long aspects of the foster care experience can or will impact someone's life. While other participants described how they questioned if they were foster care enough and if their foster care experience was still relevant once they had aged out of certain resources and advocacy opportunities. Related to Whitman's (2016) assertion of the enduring presence of the foster care experience in one's life, many participants indicated how a foster care identity remained an aspect of their identity long after their time in foster care had ended.

Doing the Healing Work

As Fitch (2019) noted there are limited studies on CGEFC and those that do exist have largely focused on reporting outcomes after college graduation. A unique contribution of this study is detailing how the CGEFC who participated in this study experienced doing the healing work as a significant component of their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Greeson et al. (2011) described how complex trauma constitutes many of the experiences individuals face before, during, or after foster care and can have long-lasting effects across various aspects of life after the traumatic event, episode, or conditions have ended. In this study, participants reflected how dominant narratives that cultivated a perception that the experience of foster care ends when one becomes an adult, created the conditions that led some to be surprised by the continued effects of trauma in their adult lives. Further, like Daniels (2015) exemplified in her reflection on the effects of losing her parent, some aspects of the complex trauma associated with foster care are ongoing in nature and must be navigated throughout various aspects of life and across time. Further, participants in this study described how navigating and addressing the continued effects of trauma they experienced before, during, and after foster care was a significant form of labor they endured as an adult that many referred to as “doing the healing work.” Further, participants with racially marginalized identities reflected on the generational and racialized trauma they experienced at the intersection of their foster care and racial identity that they had to heal from. Their experiences affirm the reflection of Unrau et al. (2020) that racial minority CGEFC and especially Black CGEFC may experience the effects of systemic racism with impacts on outlooks on life and well-being outcomes and align with the documentation Rymph (2017) detailed of the foster care system’s history facilitating colonization and perpetuating antiblackness that reverberates to the present.

Some studies such as those conducted by Sarubbi (2019) and Fitch (2019) have described that having positive experiences with disclosing a foster care identity can subsequently support an individual having more positive associations with that aspect of their identity. Likewise, participants in this study described how accepting and at times sharing parts of their foster care identity was a dimension of doing the healing work. Moreover, participants discussed how doing the “shadow work” of accepting parts of themselves that were developed in response to foster care and reframing a foster care identity as a strengths-based aspect of themselves rather than one associated with shame, was part of the way they continued to make meaning of developing a foster care identity. This aligns with the finding Unrau et al. (2020) reported that some participants in their study reported understanding themselves better was one of their greatest achievements since graduating college. Further, as Fitch (2019) reported participants describing intersectionality with a foster care identity in their study, participants in this study expressed how developing intersecting identities was a part of their healing process wherein they were able to make further meaning of a foster care identity in relation to or with greater emphasis on other intersecting identities. Some participants described how developing other intersecting identities supported their development of an overall sense of self and helped them redefine a foster care identity as one aspect of their larger identity in which a foster care identity became an acknowledged though less salient aspect of their identity farther into their adult lives.

Lastly, this study identifies how a dimension of doing the healing work is coming to know oneself as worthy of safety, stability, and boundaries. Participants reflected how previously experiencing disrupted developmental environments and seeking a sense of self were aspects they addressed in adulthood by developing healthy relationships, setting boundaries, coming to know oneself as worthy of rest, and developing confidence in their ability to lead lives in a

general state of positive well-being. Expanding the understanding prior studies contributed that reported YEFC used a veneer of self-reliance to avoid attachment and further loss (Kools, 1999), some participants in this study explained how their perspective shifted from the self-reliance and help seeking avoidance that guided them in adolescence and early adulthood, to developing healthy relationships in which they could practice vulnerability, ask for help, and experience mutuality in adulthood as part of “doing the healing work.” Further, while some recent studies such as the findings reported by Kelly et al. (2021) have affirmed that CGEFC experience various measures of success into adulthood, other studies have reported that when compared to those who did not experience foster care, CGEFC still had lower levels of well-being on some measures such as finances, belonging, happiness, health, and mental health (Salazar, 2013; Schelbe & Jackson, 2020). Relatedly, participants in this study reported feeling confident about their ability to lead safe, stable, and well lives despite dominant narratives and outcome statistics that presented positive outcomes of people with experience in foster care as an impossibility. However, with an understanding of the findings of studies by Salazar (2013) and Shelbe & Jackson (2020) that documented there can be disparities in the outcomes between CGEFC and peers who were not in foster care, it is possible that while participants of this study felt confident about their well-being in life and had experienced positive outcomes in several areas, there may still be noteworthy disparities compared to their peers that were not explored in this study and are worthy of redress. It is also important to underscore that participants’ perceptions of their own lives at the time of the study was that they were in a relatively positive state of well-being, though it remains important to not ignore systemic disparities and opportunities to continue to improve the outcomes for CGEFC.

Finding Meaning in the Experience

While prior to this study relatively little was known about how CGEFC make meaning of their experiences in foster care into adulthood after college graduation, a few studies have indicated that it may be common for individuals to make meaning of their experience in foster care through their education and career paths. For example, Medlin and Jaeger (2021) identified one form of foster kids' capital was compassion wherein participants made meaning of their experiences by pursuing a career where they could serve others and engage in social change. Hail (2019) also found that the success of participants in their study was connected to their pursuit of a career path where they could support others in circumstances like their own. In like manner, participants in this study shared how a dimension of finding meaning in their experiences was aligning their career with their values. A contribution of this study was further detailing the underlying process of finding meaning in experiences through career paths and identifying how that was a component of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Moreover, this study contributed a perspective on how participants perceived or experienced the child welfare agency environment as not aligning with their values and not being designed for people with experience in foster care to work professionally within it. On the other hand, when participants found other environments that were trauma-informed and foster care aware they expressed how their foster care identity was not only affirmed, but the continued development and meaning making of their foster care identity was further reinforced. In addition, an aspect of having a career aligned with lived experiences in foster care and one's values was the effects participants experienced of the intertwined nature of their identity and work, creating the conditions for some to be faced with fatigue or burnout, a phenomenon that would benefit from further exploration.

In addition to aligning their career with their experiences and values, this study contributed a perspective that engaging in foster care advocacy was a part of participants finding meaning in their experiences. Some studies have reported that the participation of YEFC in advocacy activities that empower them to use their voice to create change for others is an important aspect of positive youth identity development (Forenza, 2016a, 2016b; Havlicek & Samuels, 2018). As an extension of these earlier findings, this study suggests engaging in foster care advocacy is an important aspect of CGEFC making meaning of their experiences and positioning a foster care identity in a positive purpose-driven manner well into adulthood. Several participants expressed how they wanted to draw from their experiences to advocate and help others who experience foster care and some specifically described how they wanted to engage in advocacy at the intersection of their identities to create cross-system local and societal change. Similar to scholars who have reflected how engagement in advocacy activities is particularly important considering the ways the foster care system can otherwise constrain youth voice (Morton, 2015; Nybell, 2013), participants expressed how they felt a deep sense of responsibility for advocating for change as they reflected on being among the first generations of people with experience in foster care in larger numbers to graduate college and gain access to professional roles and environments where their voice would be heard. Although participants reflected how they were among a growing community of CGEFC engaged in advocacy efforts, several shared a fear that if they did not speak up, there may not be others to carry the metaphorical mantle, and the perspective of those with lived experience in foster care would remain absent from conversations in the child welfare system. Further, through engagement in foster care advocacy activities some participants shared that they had developed a foster care advocate identity that they took greater salience in than a generalized foster care identity, with

several expressing how advocacy was so central to their daily lives that they near-daily addressed stigma and took action to normalize and redefine a foster care identity positively.

Related to, but distinct from the ways participants found meaning in their experiences through aligning their career with their experiences and engaging in foster care advocacy, participants took a long-range perspective on the type of generational change they sought to create and the ways they aspired to have a legacy of contributing to the lives of others in ways that would persist beyond their own lifespan. More specifically, as an expansion of Medlin and Jaeger's (2021) finding that CGEFC desired to engage in social change, participants in this study shared how they sought to put into motion change they might not see come to fruition within their lifespan that included improvements to the foster care system and imagined possibilities of youth and community caretaking systems that could exist beyond the foster care system. As an aspect of creating generational change and having a legacy, others shared the change they sought to inspire in the next generation of young people with experience in foster care by representing a foster care identity in a normative, positive, and affirming manner and being a possibility model of overcoming barriers, defying the statistics, and establishing an overall sense of well-being. Related to the finding of Samuels (2009) that many YEFC retained hope of establishing family in adulthood, some participants in this study described a significant aspect of finding meaning in their experiences was identifying the type of generational change they sought to create within their families with their partner, children, or chosen kinship bonds. As there is paucity of research on how experience in foster care influences CGEFC across their lifespan, this study contributes a unique understanding that an aspect of making meaning of a foster care identity is a commitment to having a legacy of creating generational change throughout their adulthood.

Perceptions of Others, Variations in Family Privilege, and Influences of Time

Additionally, this study affirmed and expanded on the extant literature that presented how the perceptions of others, variations in family privilege, and passing of time influence the meaning making of the foster care experience and more specifically a foster care identity.

Some scholars (Bruskas, 2008; Kools, 1997, 1999; Nybell, 2013; Pryce et al., 2017; Rogers, 2017; Rymph, 2017) have asserted people with experience in foster care must navigate institutionalized power relations that marginalize YEFC as they encountered biased perceptions and negative stereotypes across various contexts and at the intersection of marginalized identities (Rymph, 2017). Scholars have also highlighted how people with experience in foster care may encounter the positive perceptions others hold of them that support the construction of positive identities in some contexts within or adjacent to foster care, such as the positive views educators and staff hold of people with experience in foster care in some K-12, college, YAB, and CSP environments (e.g., Forenza 2016b, 2018; Havlicek & Samuels, 2018; Hass et al., 2014; Okumu, 2014; Piel et al., 2020; Watt et al., 2013). In this study, participants shared how they encountered the perceptions others held of them at the intersection of their foster care experience and various other identities, particularly racial identities. Participants had awareness of the perceptions others held at various levels spanning from perceptions communicated to them through face-to-face interactions with those in their direct environment through to the overarching dominant societal views conveyed through institutionalized messages and artifacts like policies and the media. Expanding on the earlier assertions and findings of other scholars, this study presents how the perceptions of others that CGEFC encounter at various system levels of their environment have impacts beyond the foster care and college environments farther into adulthood and the perceptions of others critically influence the meaning making process of a foster care identity.

Part of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity over time was participants' experiencing a "paradigm shift" from being more deeply impacted by the perceptions of others to coming to know oneself as worthy regardless of others' perceptions.

While some scholars have discussed how stable family relationships that provide a range of automatic benefits, otherwise known as family privilege (Ozmun-Wells, 2015; Seita, 2001), have effects on experiences before foster care, during foster care and in the process of aging out of foster care (Courtney et al., 2011; Dworksy & Courtney, 2010; Frey et al., 2005; Hoffman et al., 2019; Knight et al., 2006; Oberts, 2013; Perry, 2006; Seita, 2001), this study affirmed that variations in family privilege can continue to have effects farther into adulthood and that family privilege is dynamic in that it is not always an all or nothing experience, rather different aspects of family privilege (e.g., love, belonging, or access to basic needs) may be experienced at different levels and some relationships may matter more than others. This study uniquely conceptualized these variations in family as a rope that intertwined love, belonging and access to basic resources that could become frayed to a single thread when only one aspect of family privilege is present such as access to basic needs. The degree of family privilege participants experienced over time was conceptualized as having the propensity to oscillate up and down with the peaks characterized by "connections" that facilitated the benefits of family privilege, and the valleys characterized by "phantoms" that described the ghost-like presence of adults caregivers that were responsible for providing the benefits of family privilege but did not adequately do so. Moreover, the notion of phantoms, acknowledges the resulting awareness participants had of the missing or diminished level of family privilege present in their lives at various points in time. In addition, as Bennett's (2020) indicated, counter to some of the dominant narratives, family privilege does not always decrease upon entry into foster care as several participants described

how their experiences with stable family relationships that provided a level of love, belonging, and access to basic needs increased in some of their foster care placements compared to their experiences before foster care. Yet, this study also found family privilege remained variable during and after foster care, dependent on factors like the stability of the foster care placement and the dynamics within the placement. Participants described how changes in dynamics in their placement such as interactions with other children and family members in the home, the passing of their caregiver, or aging out and going to college, all influenced the degree of family privilege experienced. Some variations in family privilege continued farther into adulthood as participants navigated the passing of foster parents, kinship caregivers, biological family members, reengaged with siblings and their family of origin, or constructed their own family units through partnerships and marriage, having children, or identifying chosen family and kinships bonds.

Lastly, while the research findings of scholars such as Fitch (2019) and Gamez (2017) suggest that meaning making of a foster care identity is not bound to time spent in foster care and has effects into adulthood including during college and after college graduation, there is a paucity of research that takes a longitudinal lifespan approach to understanding how meaning of a foster care identity is made well beyond college graduation across time. Largely, research has focused on studying the experience and effects of foster care within very specific contexts such as while in foster care, college, or less frequently, after recently graduating from college. However, participants in this study spanned from mid-20s to mid-40s and all had graduated from college, many with a bachelor's degree, several with a master's degree, and a few with a doctoral degree, providing an expanded perspective on how the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity takes place over time. Moreover, like other studies (Fitch, 2019; Gamez; 2017) have reported that life experiences into adulthood may bring memories and implications of

experience in foster care forward into the present, participants in this study described how an aspect of making meaning of a foster care identity was experiencing the ways that their foster care past came forward “colliding with their present.” As the findings presented by Fitch (2019) and Gamez (2017) suggest some impacts of the foster care experience may not wane over time and may be brought forward by certain circumstances, some participants in this study described a foster care fading in salience with the passing of time, yet described situations they expected they would encounter in which they anticipated a foster care identity would again come forward as a salient identity again in the future. Now with this understanding of how the findings presented as the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity connects to and departs from the extant literature, in the next section, I discuss my recommendations based on the findings of this study.

Recommendations

The results of this study have implications for higher education, child welfare, and future research. In the subsequent subsections below, I present recommendations for each of these contexts based on the co-constructed research process that took place between the participants and me, the findings that resulted in the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, and the direct insights the participants offered of how they hoped the findings of the study would be used to inform praxis.

Recommendations for Child Welfare

This study and the resulting emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity offers several insights on the role of child welfare in supporting the positive identity development of YEFC. The findings of this study and the reflections of the participants underscore that the child welfare system and its various actors including

caseworkers, foster and kinship caregivers, and other adults acting on behalf of the system hold responsibility for minimizing or eliminating YEFC's experiences with disrupted developmental environments, helping YEFC to develop a sense of self at the intersection of identities, positioning a foster care identity positively, supporting YEFC with doing the healing work, and encouraging YEFC as they seek meaning in their experiences. As Elyse shared:

I think this study on foster care identity should be required reading for everybody that works at the Department of Health and Human Services ever. It really needs to be part of the first contact and the people who get us through foster care because it's about more than just meeting basic needs, it's supporting us as people.

The child welfare system and its actors must come to see themselves as deeply responsible for attending to the identity development of YEFC and designate resources and support accordingly. Moreover, child welfare needs to embrace their responsibility for cultivating positive identities, including a foster care identity, and various intersecting identities through to adulthood including and beyond the process of exiting foster care.

As many participants described, their time in foster care was often shaped by a focus on their basic physical needs being met with limited to no attention to other core aspects of development including developing a sense of self, making meaning of experiences before and during foster care, attending to and developing their intersecting identities, ensuring stable ongoing relationships, or supporting their positive development of a foster care identity. Several participants also discussed the ways they experienced marginalization and a lack of positive engagement of the intersection of their identities and experiences with racism, classism, and sexism while in foster care with negative implications for their identity development. As scholars (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Collins, 2000; Rymph, 2017) have documented how the foster care system and the out-of-home placement practices that preceded it were marked by racism, antiblackness, colonization, classism, ableism, and sexism and positioned Black, Indigenous,

youth of color and immigrant, disabled, and poor youth as having diminished status in society, the child welfare system must examine and dismantle the ways it continues to perpetuate such harms.

Further, policy changes should be implemented to require well-being measures related to personal and cultural identities are tracked and resources are provided to support the development of YEFC in those areas and with attention to the unique intersection of their identities. Participants reflected how the separation they experienced or the looming threat of separation from their siblings or culture disrupted their developmental environment. To address this policy must continue to sanction the preservation of sibling relationships and continuity of cultural engagement as an important part of youth's development and personhood. As SL underscored the impact of being placed with a Tribe different from her heritage and not being connected to the cultural practices of her Tribe growing up, and earlier literature has analyzed some of the barriers to fully actualizing the Indian Child Welfare Act (Francis et al., 2023), additional amendments to the Indian Child Welfare Act could help ensure the implementation of the Act is better resourced, knowledge of the Act across system partners is improved, and the engagement of the Act's guidelines is monitored for adherence. Such efforts could increase the proportion of Native youth who are able to remain with their Tribe, for example by better resourcing kinship care and foster families affiliated with the Tribe, and should youth need to be placed with a different Tribe, ensuring there are resources and provisions to support youth's continued connection to their specific Tribal culture and practices.

Beyond policy, a shift within the child welfare system is needed that redefines the holistic safety and well-being of YEFC to include aspects of identity development. Moreover, when it comes to evaluating the experiences YEFC have in the foster care system, it is important to

consider that many participants in the study described how their life circumstances ultimately improved after being in foster care and believed their experiences were generally better than the experiences of their real and imagined peers in foster care, despite the reality that many participants still endured harm while in foster care ranging from physical abuse and emotional harm in foster care, multiple placement changes and sibling separation, and nearly all aging out of foster care without legal permanency, and many without relational permanency.

Understanding that some YEFC may take a relatively generous stance on their evaluation of their experiences in the child welfare system because of their awareness of the more atrocious outcomes possible, is important for the child welfare system to consider for two reasons. First, is the understanding that even small incremental changes of improved support for youth's identity development may have a large impact on how youth may perceive their experience in foster care more positively. Second, child welfare may need to evaluate their efforts more carefully to identify if they're truly delivering services at the level youth deserve, as even those with experience in foster care who define their experiences as generally positive may still have experienced egregious harms that need to be addressed and eliminated for future youth.

It is also essential that the child welfare as a system facilitate and properly resource stable developmental environments including before, during, and after foster care where YEFC don't have to struggle to survive and can experience loving and nurturing environments. In some cases, better resourcing youth's developmental environments may avoid their placement into foster care altogether. Efforts to eliminate disrupted developmental environments would support YEFC with developing and maintaining a child and adolescent identity, rather than being thrust into a parentified-child role that creates the conditions of responsibility-based roles becoming a defining aspect of one's identity at a young age. Further, facilitating genuine family privilege in

all its aspects including cultivating a sense of love, belonging, and access to basic resources, having stability in placements and relationships, and being placed with siblings also has a role in supporting positive identity development. Relatedly, for YEFC who (re)engage with their family of origin, child welfare agencies could support the family with making meaning of the separation and subsequent (re)engagement which may minimize people with experience in foster care being positioned as “other” among their family of origin because of their foster care experience. As the findings of this study indicate, it is important that child welfare actors understand that even stable relationships that are associated with positive benefits such as those with long-term foster care placements, kinship placements, and family of origin, may be contexts in which YEFC experience some marginalizing conditions and differential treatment based on experiencing foster care that positions a foster care identity as othered. Enhancing caseworker and foster caregiver trainings to promote approaches that support the positive identity development of YEFC and educating on actions that are marginalizing to YEFC may help reconstruct environments to be more affirming of YEFC.

It is also necessary that policies, practices, and funding models better support YEFC through the process of questioning who they are in general sense, as it is a normative task of adolescence that is all the more important for YEFC who may have experienced disrupted developmental environments prior to and while in foster care. More specifically, it is necessary that scaffolded support and nurturing connections are authentically cultivated with YEFC to support positive identity development. Further, holding awareness that an uncertain self-identity may exist among YEFC because of the experiences they have faced and providing better access to environments and activities that support the development of an overall sense of self, a positive foster care identity, and meaning making of the foster care experience can better support the

identity development of YEFC. The findings of this study suggest YEFC may benefit from the child welfare system supporting greater access to normative developmental activities. This includes opportunities to build self-efficacy through practicing life skills, such as obtaining a driver's license and learning how to manage their finances, and having opportunities to develop a sense of self access through participating in extracurricular activities, having a caring adult genuinely express interest in their aspirations and interests, and having resources and freedom to make decisions about how they present themselves to the world (e.g., choice of clothing, hairstyles, and hobbies). Participants also suggested that opportunities to connect with other YEFC through YABs and other therapeutic or individually defined restorative activities can support positive identity development, including positioning a foster care identity in a strengths-based manner.

Understanding based on the findings of this study that some YEFC may be drawn to consider how they'll continue to make meaning of their foster care identity and experiences, the child welfare system and its actors can offer opportunities for youth to engage in advocacy activities to create change benefiting other youth in foster care, explore a range of career pathway options in which their experience in foster care could inform the perspective and strengths they have to offer, and take active steps towards constructing the legacy they wish to have. Additionally, as many participants shared their perceptions or experiences working professionally at foster care agencies as a person with experience in foster care and reflected how that shaped their decision to not pursue or maintain employment directly in the child welfare settings, I recommend that child welfare agencies interrogate their work environments and commit to practices that will make them more trauma-informed and affirming of those with a foster care identity.

In addition, it is imperative for child welfare and its actors to address and end deficit- and risk-based approaches of engaging YEFC. Various participants expressed how caseworkers, foster parents, and others in their life positioned their foster care identity in relation to negative dominant narratives and poor statistical outcomes of YEFC and described how they found such messages marginalizing and at times dehumanizing. Ultimately, participants encountered the perceptions of others, ranging from positive to negative at varying levels spanning from micro-level interactions with others in their environment up to macro-level awareness of societies overall perceptions of them as a person with experience in foster care. Although participants in this study reframed negative messages as their motivation to achieve to avoid fulfilling such stereotypes, the consequence was a society that positioned the self-worth of YEFC in relation to achieving. A shift to engaging YEFC through positive, humanizing approaches that allows youth to self-define who they want to be outside of the shadow of stigma and stereotypes requires shifts across the micro- to macro-levels environments YEFC experience. This includes how caregivers, caseworkers, peers, neighborhoods, schools, community groups, and society engage with and represent YEFC at the intersections of their foster care and other identities, and particularly racial identities, as conveyed through policies, mass media, and common vernacular.

Lastly, child welfare policies, advocacy activities, and support programs and resources, can also be modified to remove a perceived hierarchy of foster care experiences by adjusting eligibility criteria to include all persons with experience in foster care, rather than positioning some as more “foster care” or “foster care enough” compared to others based on types of placements experienced or length of time in foster care. Moreover, while age restrictions on some programs and resources convey that YEFC should stop being or feeling “foster care” and the effects of foster care and a subsequent foster care identity ends at a particular age such as 18,

21, or 25 depending on the state, the participants in this study described how their meaning making of developing a foster care identity took place over time with the influence of foster care, variations in family privilege, and a foster care identity persisting after aging out of foster care, through college, after college graduation, and farther into adulthood. I recommend child welfare and partner organizations rethink age restrictions and consider expanding their services to a wider range of ages to affirm that for some a foster care identity does not come to awareness until after foster care and the continued effects of foster care can have impacts far into adulthood. Next, I present recommendations for higher education based on the findings of this study.

Recommendations for Higher Education

This study and the resulting emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity also underscores the ways higher education institutions including faculty, staff, and administrators have a responsibility for supporting the identity development of SEFC. Emphasizing this, Veratta shared her recommendation of how the study should be used as urged:

I think for specialized programs like campus support programs for students from foster care, TRIO, and other federally funded programs, directors and deans of student success at colleges and in K-12, it's important for the people overseeing those programs and policy folks to look at this and utilize it related to policy in terms of post-foster care outcomes and use it in these areas to better support people with experience in foster care, during care, during college, and farther into their lives post care.

Further, much like the recommendations for child welfare, higher education institutions also have a role in minimizing or eliminating SEFC's experiences with disrupted developmental environments, helping SEFC develop a sense of self at the intersection of identities, positioning a foster care identity positively, supporting SEFC with doing the healing work, and encouraging SEFC as they seek meaning in their experiences

As participants expressed how they navigated experiences with disrupted developmental environments into adulthood it is important that higher education institutions and faculty, staff, and administrators are aware of the challenges SEFC face during college and take efforts to address such challenges. For example, participants discussed a range of experiences during college such as how it was “their loneliest time,” some experienced homelessness, others managed grief of being separated from younger siblings while away at college, many had little or no support from their foster care, kinship placements, or family of origin, and all expressed how college costs, accumulating student loans, and trying to work during college were significant challenges to their academic pursuits, overall well-being, and identity development. These experiences led participants to feel like they were struggling to survive, brought to their attention they did not have the same family privilege as many of their peers who were not in foster care, and disrupted their ability to engage in normative developmental experiences or fully engage in the luxury of having an emerging adult or student identity in the college environment. Higher education institutions can improve support of SEFC well-being and identity development by providing: a higher degree of support for students’ basic needs, increased financial aid, more options for on-campus jobs that provide compensation and hours that meet their needs, and a better support system that cultivates aspects of what Seita (2001, 2014) called virtual family privilege. While some participants in this study did not have access to programs and resources that exist now at the federal, state, local, and institutional level due to entering college prior to the implementation of such resources, some participants noted that even with the new development of programs and resources, the age restrictions on such services like CSPs and scholarship programs limit access for those SEFC returning to school as a non-traditional student or going to school part-time over several years. Again, as described in the recommendations for child welfare, such limitations on

programmatic support and financial resources can construct a detrimental hierarchy of who is “foster care enough” to receive support in a manner that diminishes the experiences of SEFC that do not fit such narrow definitions. Further, such institutionalized definitions of who is “foster care enough” can lead SEFC to question the presence of their foster care identity and in essence can gaslight the very real ways their foster care experience continues to shape their lives while in college and after college graduation.

Some participants also expressed how some practices of higher education hold promise. Those who did participate in CSPs described how they helped them become aware of, reframe, and accept a foster care identity as an aspect of their overall identity in a positive manner through opportunities to connect with other near peers with a foster care identity. Others described how involvement in TRIO programs, multicultural organizations, and finding community around first-generation or low-income college student identity all had a role in positively shaping their overall identity and foster care identity. This indicates it is important for programs that serve the intersecting identities of SEFC to be aware of the positive impact they may have on this population. Particularly due to the hidden nature of a foster care identity such programs may not be aware of the important role they may have in the college experience of SEFC. Awareness of how such programs support SEFC can support faculty, staff, and administrators with advocating for the continuation or development of such programs on their campuses.

Further, many participants expressed it was affirming when they excelled in their classes, were recognized by their faculty for their knowledge and success, and were invited to serve their peers in leadership roles such as tutoring or being a resident assistant, particularly in the context of the ways many SEFC were exposed to messages while in foster care that they must achieve academically to survive and not fulfill negative outcomes that were presented to them. While

these are positive ways in which the participants were affirmed as a SEFC, it is important for higher education institutions to understand the stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1998) that SEFC face (Sarubbi, 2019) and provide opportunities for SEFC to have their self-worth affirmed and be encouraged to develop a sense of self beyond achieving, defying statistics, and fulfilling obligations to the things for which they are responsible. For example, providing messaging that SEFC are inherently worthy as individuals and affirming SEFC for their qualities and contributions to their community that extend beyond achievements and responsibility roles may support such holistic positive identity development.

Relatedly, it is important for higher education institutions and its actors to understand that SEFC may have had limited access to normative developmental activities while in foster care and may be coming to college questioning who they are while also navigating the continued effects of trauma. While college is a time in which many students regardless of foster care status make meaning of their identities and develop a sense of self, participants in this study discussed this experience with some turmoil and urgency connected to the context of experiencing foster care and the need to have a plan to survive after college with a fear that they did not have other options. Campuses can be sensitive to these experiences of SEFC by providing pathways for SEFC to engage in normative developmental activities and restorative activities during college that support identity development. For example, providing information and resources that support with obtaining a driver's license, offering workshops on various life skills, offering trauma-informed and foster care aware counseling services, and supporting involvement in student organizations and extracurricular activities can help SEFC develop self-efficacy, confidence, navigate continued impacts of trauma, and identify and further develop their talents, interests, and intersecting identities. In like manner, understanding that a finding of this study

was that participants found meaning in their experiences over time during and after college graduation through their career pursuits, engaging in advocacy, and identifying the type of generational change and legacy they wished to have, higher education institutions can support SEFC with such meaning making. For example, higher education institutions can provide SEFC with possibility models of CGEFC who are serving in various career pathways, facilitate SEFC access to advocacy opportunities at the campus, local, state, regional, and national level, and engage SEFC in activities like design thinking approaches that support students with charting their path to achieve their desired outcomes and make generational change.

Lastly, higher education institutions must be aware of the micro- to macro-level interactions SEFC have on campuses that convey the perceptions others hold of people who experienced foster care. While participants at times described the positive perceptions of others they encountered, such as connecting with peers through CSPs, finding community in student organizations, or being affirmed for their academic contributions by their faculty, participants also described a range of experiences in which they encountered the negative perceptions others held of them in the college environment that were marginalizing and at times egregiously dehumanizing. Sometimes the negative perceptions others held were targeted specifically to their foster care identity and status as a person who was in foster care, and other times they were targeted at the intersection of identities including their experience in foster care and their race, specifically being Black on campus, experiencing homelessness, having low income, or having a (dis)ability. Participants encountered negative perceptions through interactions with peers, faculty, staff and experiences navigating campus policies, procedures, and forms that brought to their attention they were a student with experience in foster care navigating the college experience without a normative degree of family privilege and that they were different from

other students or held a lower and othered status on campus as a result. Based on the findings of this study, I recommend higher education institutions evaluate their campus environments to learn more about the experiences SEFC have on their campuses and audit their policies, procedures, and forms to understand how they may be experienced by SEFC and identify if they're perpetuating deficit-narratives and marginalizing SEFC or supporting their development of a positive foster care identity. Next, I share recommendations for future research based on the findings of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study and the resulting emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity offers several insights for future research. First, this study underscores the importance of engaging a foster care identity as a construct worthy of exploration, along with the other components, dimensions, and contextual factors represented in the emerging theory. As participants conveyed in detail how they developed and made meaning of a foster care identity at various points in their life and described an awareness that there is a paucity of research that discusses a foster care identity, it is important for future studies to explore various aspects of a foster care identity, including and beyond the meaning making process of developing the identity. For example, some of the women in this study alluded to their gendered and racialized experience in the foster care system as they shared experiences being sexualized at a young age by the words and actions of those around them, receiving messages about needing to be a "good girl" to avoid consequences, and having a fear of being penalized should they exercise their right to have an opinion. Such identity experiences could be examined from the perspective of how the foster care system maintains the white cis heteropatriarchy by perpetuating the early criminalization of woman for behavior that does not conform to the

narrow bounds of a gendered, racialized, and classist definition of how women should act (Roberts, 2011). Further, Opsal's (2012) finding that formerly incarcerated women developed "replacement selves" that did not subscribe to traditional normative roles or femineity scripts could support consideration of whether and how CGEFC may establish "replacement selves" after foster care that counter dominant narratives.

Second, this study also demonstrates the value of exploring a foster care identity in various contexts and points in time, not only during or in proximity to experience in foster care but also during college, after college graduation, and into adulthood. Given this, I recommend further exploring the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity at additional points in time beyond those represented among the participants in this study, such as those age 50 and older, or in different contexts, such as those who did not graduate with a bachelor's degree or those working in areas other than the public service sector. Moreover, while this study explicitly studied those who identify as having a foster care identity, future studies may benefit from engaging with individuals with experience in foster care who do not identify a foster care identity as salient to them, as it may provide an opportunity to compare similarities and differences in the respective meaning making processes and support identification of alternate pathways for making meaning of experience in foster care over the lifespan.

Third, while this study explored the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews, I recommend future studies explore a foster care identity using various qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches to garner additional insights. For example, artifact elicitation holds promise as a data collection method for future studies as every participant in this study referred to at least one artifact (e.g., books, thought pieces, speeches, and policy recommendations they had authored,

photographs, childhood toys) during interviews that was related to their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Specifically including artifact elicitation as a data collection method in future studies may generate additional substantive findings by providing participants an avenue to communicate aspects of their experience that are difficult to describe with words or that participants prefer not to utter aloud (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). On the other hand, participants offered mixed perspectives on whether they would have participated in a focus group had it been part of the data collection methods. Participants shared concerns that focus groups could risk anonymity for those who wanted to remain anonymous, generate feelings of not being foster care enough compared to the experiences of other participants for those who already struggled with minimizing their experience, and some participants noted they may have had a propensity to speak less and listen more particularly to participants younger than them as a carryover effect from their career-work engaging in youth- and young-adult centered practices. Additionally, some participants questioned if focus groups would have blurred research with intervention as they felt it would be inappropriate to use focus groups if it was being done under the premise and assumption that participants were not connected with others with experience in foster care and focus groups were being conducted as an intervention to try to connect the participants in community. However, some participants shared they would have appreciated the opportunity to share space with the other participants and hear their perspectives as a person with experience in foster care as an act of reciprocity and mutuality. With these reflections in mind, whatever methods researchers select for future studies, I recommend being aware of the possible strengths and pitfalls of each method and how the method of data collection may be uniquely experienced from the varying perspectives of people with lived experience in foster care.

Fourth, my recommendation for future studies is for researchers to take care to not overgeneralize a foster care identity and to be sure to represent the individualized and subjective experience of a foster care identity. In discussing recommendations for future research Elyse reflected, “Our experiences are very subjective. I think when we try to put a blanket solution on a group of very diverse, very complicated individuals, it’s not going to work, so continuing to emphasize the individualized experiences is important.” During the study, the participants and I co-constructed the recommendation that it would be beneficial for future research to further study the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in different contexts and at the intersection of specific identities as such efforts may support, critique, deconstruct, and reconstruct aspects of the emerging theory presented in this study. As I noted in Chapter 1, the aim of this study was not to essentialize a foster care identity or present it as the only salient identity among CGEFC, rather it was to present an emerging and tentative understanding of this aspect of identity that had otherwise been minimally explored, while taking care to present the findings at the intersections of the experiences and identities the participants shared with me during the co-constructed interviews. As such, future studies could advance this tentative and emerging understanding of a foster care identity by taking an intersectional approach or adapting and engaging the emerging theory alongside other existing identity development theories. Moreover, as SL advocated for understanding the “unique situation of Native youth in foster care,” there’s a need for additional studies that explicitly seek to understand the varied experiences of Native youth in foster care, including affirming individual and nuanced Native perspectives on the meaning making process of developing intersecting identities in the context of foster care. In addition, as this study provided insights that some environments such as YABs, CSPs, and career and advocacy spaces supported positive development of a foster care identity,

future research studies could more explicitly explore the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in specific contexts.

Fifth, it is important for future research to engage emancipatory research practices (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021) when partnering with people with experience in foster care in research. Participants shared their engagement in the study was driven in part by my positionality as a researcher with lived experience in foster care and the call for participants that conveyed a level of foster care awareness. Participants reflected how people with experience in foster care are often absent from research studies and described prior experiences with research studies that were disorganized and not trauma-informed or foster care aware. As SL described her recommendations for future research studies and her decision to participate in this study, she shared:

My recommendation would be for researchers and advocates to make friends with someone that has lived experience before you try to work with kids in foster care because I think then knowing people who truly have that experience on a personal level makes you more mindful and not as ignorant when it comes to working with kids in foster care, doing advocacy work, doing research. Again, that's why I was drawn to you and this study is because I've seen people try to do research on this stuff and it's like they didn't have lived experience and there wasn't as much respect for it. When I was reading through what you were doing and your work, I was like, wow, this is really respectful, and I hope I get to be a part of this study.

Therefore, a recommendation for future research studies is to include people with experience in foster care on research teams when possible and to authentically engage in partnership with people with experience in foster care prior to conducting foster care related research.

Additionally, a few participants, as well as a few individuals who did not participate in the study, probed the allowable amounts of monetary incentives for participation in research, noting there was a disparity in the incentive for this study compared to the compensation models for advocacy activities they had participated in that similarly involved sharing aspects of their

foster care experiences over a similar duration of time. Participants indicated they chose to participate in this study even though the incentive was relatively small, understanding that the research incentive was largely funded by me as a doctoral student, their belief the research topic of foster care identity was important, and their view that it was a form of advocacy to be involved in research conducted by and with CGEFC. Although IRB limitations on research incentive amounts are intended to support research ethics and avoid coercion, participant's reflections suggest that future studies should be in conversation with the IRB about amounts of monetary incentives that are commensurable and allowable considering the personal and laborious nature of sharing personal experiences with identity development. With this understanding of the recommendations of how the study's findings can be applied in the context of child welfare, higher education and future research studies, next, I discuss the limitations of the study.

Limitations of the Study

While the aim of this study was to develop an emerging theoretical perspective on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity of CGEFC, the findings of this study are limited to the nine participants and should not be generalized to all people with experience in foster care. While some consider a lack of generalizability as a limitation, it is a tradeoff inherent in the design of a CGT study that provides many including co-constructing data with participants over time and with attention to the nuance of the context. As Charmaz (2014) warns when taking a constructivist approach, it is important to avoid generalizations and maintain awareness of the context in which the data and findings were co-constructed. Moreover, people with experience in foster care, including the participants in this study, are not a monolith and did not all experience the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in the

same way. Rather, their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity was shaped by the unique intersections of their identities, experiences, personal attributes, and contexts.

Additionally, this study is limited to the demographics represented among the participants, some of which were set by the delimitations of this study and others that were unanticipated limitations. Delimitations of this study included that the participants all had experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday, graduated with a bachelor's degree, and identified as having a foster care identity. Unexpectedly, all the participants identified as women and while one participant identified as queer, the study would be more representative of CGEFC if there were more representation among the participants of differing gender identities and sexual orientations. Further, while there was some racial diversity among the participants, there was not representation of a full range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, nor should the findings based on one or a few individuals from a particular racial and ethnic background be generalized to all people of that race or ethnicity. Additionally, unintentionally the participants all had careers in the public service sector that intersected in some way with foster care, whether professionally or through their advocacy efforts. As a few participants noted, it is possible CGEFC working in other areas may make meaning of a foster care identity differently, though this study was unable to explore that given the career pathways represented among the participants. Moreover, while there was not an age minimum or maximum to participate in the study, the participants were all in their mid-20s to mid-40s. As some participants expressed their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity may continue, pause, slow, or stop as they headed into the next phase of their life with experiences like retirement and becoming the elders of their family, it is a limitation of this study that some participants also noted that CGEFC ages 50 and older were not among the participants.

Finally, there are some limitations related to the methods of the study. As the study took a retrospective perspective it provided insights as participants looked back and made meaning over the course of their lives so far, but the meaning making of their experiences in retrospect may be different than those expressed during a longitudinal study that could follow the meaning making of people with experience in foster care in real time over a duration of time as they moved from adolescence to young adulthood, and later into adulthood. Also, while data was collected over a series of three semi-structured interviews resulting in a large volume of data with thick description, data was only collected through interviews whereas collecting data through an additional method may have supported further crystallization (Richardson, 2000) of the data and the findings. Lastly, the study is conducted from my educational and research perspective as a higher education student affairs practitioner and scholar with lived experience in foster care who engages student identity development theory. While my positionality is in many regards a strength of this study that I'll discuss further in the next section, it is also a limitation as the topic of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity could also benefit from being explored by a multi-disciplinary research team. Additional varying perspectives including but not limited to researchers with expertise in topics such as, K-12 education, social work, child welfare policy, child development, racial identity development, and neuroscience, would provide unique and complementary perspectives on the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity that were not possible to engage in this dissertation research study. Next, I share the strengths of the study.

Strengths of the Study

In this section, I'll discuss a few specific strengths of this study including the alignment across the methodology, the quality of the data that was collected, and the focus of the study.

First, I conducted this study in a manner that aligned the research question and sub-question and my positionality as a person with a foster care identity with the constructivism paradigm and the CGT approach to this study. As a CGT approach is not intended to be prescriptive, I followed the guidance of CGT to co-construct the data with the participants and conducted the analysis in a systematic yet flexible manner that supported theory generation and grounded the resulting theory in participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). I took care to ensure trustworthiness in the study through my data collection and data analysis methods, and by practicing reflexivity and member checking to ensure the findings remained grounded in the participants' experiences.

Second, as the quality of a CGT study is directly connected to the quality of the data collected (Charmaz, 2014), I carefully developed the interview questions, set up the virtual research environment, and conducted the interviews in a manner that supported the co-construction of relevant data with thick description. Participants thoughtfully responded to the questions and demonstrated their feelings of empowerment to co-construct the interviews as they engaged in advocacy through the study by addressing the topics that were most important to them and took great ownership over their experiences and story by sharing with me the concepts from the interview guide and preliminary findings they resonated with or felt disconnected from. Further, crystallization (Richardson, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of the data was addressed by collecting data over the span of three semi-structured interviews and engaging each participant retrospectively across their experiences in foster care, college, and in adulthood. While reaching saturation of the data was not an initial aim of the study, it was likely achieved as evidenced by the code book being complete with very few codes added to describe participants' experiences in the final few interviews.

Thirdly, a strength of this study is the voices of the participants—those with lived experience in foster care—and how they were intentionally centered in the study and the emerging theory grounded in their experiences. Further, this study specifically centered participants who were CGEFC, especially meaningful as some studies have not engaged the voices of those with lived experience in foster care and many of the studies that include the perspectives of those with lived experience in foster care have focused on those in or recently exited from foster care, including YEFC and SEFC. As the participants in this study pointed out, while it is important to elevate the voices of those who are close in proximity to experience in foster care, it is also important to include the perspectives of adults who may have made meaning of their experience over a longer period or remain impacted by foster care experience in different ways across their lifespan. Further, while the participants all identified as women, they experienced a foster care identity at the intersection of various other social and personal identities and experiences that supported a deep and nuanced understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. Moreover, this study centered a foster care identity as a construct worthy of study among CGEFC, necessary as a foster care identity has been referred to in an increasing number of studies, and a few prior studies have specifically set out to examine aspects of a foster care identity among YEFC and SEFC, but not CGEFC.

Lastly, many prior studies have been conducted from a perspective of social work and a strength of this study is that it was conducted from the mindset of a higher education and student affairs practitioner. This calls to attention that in addition to child welfare, the field of higher education has a responsibility to support the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity among SEFC and CGEFC. Next, I share my personal reflection on the experience of conducting this study and my personal engagement with the findings.

Personal Reflection

My pursuit of this doctoral degree came at a period of transition in my life. I had accepted an administrator role where my daily duties were no longer focused on direct service to youth or students with experience in foster care. In my younger years, while there were times I desired to “not be foster care,” in hindsight, as an adult, I felt fractured when my foster care experience was no longer relevant to my daily work and fragmented when my foster care identity was no longer in service to a community of people with shared aspects of this experience. I applied for this doctoral program in large part to channel my passion and energy toward continued advocacy through research and with the intention of contributing to the improvement of the outcomes and experiences SEFC have in higher education.

At the time I started this program, I would not have used the label foster care identity to describe this part of myself, but through my learning and exploration in this doctoral program, and the community I developed with the Foster Scholars and others with experience in foster care, I have come to understand my foster care experience as a salient aspect of my identity that holds deep and complex meaning. It is now an identity that along with many of my other identities, provides me meaning, direction, and a sense of purpose, whether it’s through my career or through my broader life’s work to build awareness and support for and with others who have experienced foster care.

This study has engaged me in even deeper reflection of the way my own foster care experience has continued to shape my life, grappling with how to refer to a foster care identity, navigating the complexity of what constitutes a foster care identity, and coming to peace with the ambiguity in it all. Over the course of this program I got married, had a child, learned of the passing of my biological grandfather, mother, and father, met members of my paternal biological

family, and continued to establish my chosen family. To have been in the process of proposing and conducting this study through these personal milestones and challenging events shaped my own meaning making process of developing a foster care identity that was being co-constructed in tandem with this study. Together these experiences underscored for me the importance of taking a lifespan approach to the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

Most of all, this study has been incredibly validating to me and I can only hope it can be validating to others in this community. It was incredibly moving to find within a few days of the study more than enough individuals had shared their interest in participating in the study. If I ever had doubt if there was a foster care identity and if it could possibly hold salience across the lifespan, I received a clear answer that this study mattered to this community and that there were people who wanted to share their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity to improve the experiences of others. That the participants in this study choose to share their experiences and profound reflections with me is incredibly humbling. To be a co-structor in this study, an amplifier of their stories, and a co-conspirator to create positive change for people with experience in foster care is not an opportunity I take lightly. My biggest aspiration for this work was to validate the experiences and reflections the participants shared with me in a manner that will also shape how others think of those with experience in foster care, how people with experience in foster care think of themselves, and how systems serve people with experience in foster care across the lifespan.

At the time of proposing this study, I had suspicions of what I thought might come forward in the findings, and I could not be more pleased that this final work has turned out to be incredibly different from my initial musings. At the time of proposing this study, I naïvely thought it was possible the findings might map into somewhat tidy categories of the experiences

participants had during foster care, during college, and after college and that their identity development might occur in a semi-linear fashion moving from denial to acceptance of a foster care identity through those environments, with the influence of other salient identities, key events, or actors. While the environments of foster care, college, and adulthood were present in the participants' experiences, what was more meaningful was the specific experiences within those spaces, the broader contextual factors that influenced them, and the meaning made of them. I am so glad that I did my best to keep my conjectures in check and that the guidance from my committee, learnings in my coursework, and my engagement with CGT methodology encouraged me embrace ambiguity and ground the findings in the participants' experiences.

Over the course of this study, I strove to truly hear what the participants had to share with me—fully experiencing what was subtlety and bluntly said, understanding the gravity of the meaning and choice of words, probing and checking my understandings, and finding ways to acknowledge those things which were unsayable. Instead of fitting in neat boxes and being presented in a linear fashion, this final work strives to present the complexity, nuance, identity intersections, and multitude of meanings present within the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity that the participants and I co-constructed. Through this process, I have come to understand my own meaning making process of developing a foster care identity was far more complex than I had previously allowed myself to realize. Frequently the participants put to words experiences and reflections I shared but had not been able to express yet. I have been able to reflect on the disrupted developmental environments I experienced that did not end with my exit from foster care, acknowledge how questioning who I am if I'm not responsible for someone or achieving something remains present in my life, express gratitude for the community that helped me become aware of my own foster care identity, celebrate the

healing work I've done and the journey that is yet ahead, and continue to engage with finding meaning in my experiences within and beyond my career, advocacy activities, and creation of my own family. Like the emerging theory presented in this study, my own meaning making journey is emerging, tentative, and in some ways incomplete. I have many questions about what's next and a renewed openness to the possibilities of what may be.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the findings and specifically the emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity in relation to the research questions, conceptual framework, and the extant literature that guided the study. In this chapter I also offered recommendations for child welfare, higher education, and future research based on the findings of the study, I discussed the limitations and strengths of the study, and I shared a personal reflection. The meaning making process of developing a foster care identity among the nine CGEFC who participated in this study was comprised of five components, each described further by three dimensions. The five components included: (a) experiencing disrupted developmental environments, (b) seeking a sense of self, (c) becoming aware of a foster care identity, (d) doing the healing work, and (e) finding the meaning in experiences. Three dimensions describe and characterize each of the components. Additionally, each component and dimension were critically influenced by three factors, micro-macro level perceptions of others, variations in family privilege, and time. The emerging theory is intended to be dynamic with an understanding that each individual's experience with the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity is unique, individuals may not experience all the components or dimensions represented in the theory, and experiences related to one component or dimension may impact experiences and meaning making of the other components or dimensions. Additionally, this is

not a stage-based ordinal model and as such the components may be experienced in an order other than how they're presented in the study and an individual may experience a component or dimension repeatedly over time. Also, as the components and dimensions are characterized by a range of experiences, positive and negative, it is important for readers to take care in interpreting such experiences to acknowledge participants' strength and resilience while not glorifying the challenges they experienced before, during, or after foster care that required them to develop some capacities. It is likewise important to not perpetuate a solely negative perspective of foster care, while not dismissing the gravity and complexity of the challenges participants faced and the ways the child welfare system needs to improve or be reimaged. Lastly, the theory is emerging and is comprised of tentative components and dimensions that were co-constructed in the specific context of this study and would benefit from further study through future research and trialed application in other contexts.

In closing, I co-constructed this study with the participants to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for CGEFC. This study addresses the lack of student identity development theory that centers people with experience in foster care to date, supports the understanding of the identity development of people with experience in foster care, and actively validates individual and collective voices of CGEFC in support of normalizing and affirming the presence of a foster care identity. The CGEFC who participated in this study contributed their deep reflections of meaning making and rich description of their experiences in the co-constructed interviews that led to the development of this emerging theory of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity that is grounded in their experiences. Throughout the study, participants shared their meaning making process of developing a foster care identity and in doing so shaped my reflections on my own meaning making process of

developing a foster care identity. Over the course of the study, the participants and I co-constructed meaning together as we discussed our respective understandings, had new realizations through our conversations, and deepened our collective understanding of the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

I reached out to the following list of National Agencies and Organizations, National Peer Groups, and Campus Support Programs (CSPs) with the Research Participant Recruitment Email (Appendix B) and flier (Appendix C). I updated and added to the following list of national agencies and organizations and national peer groups from the list originally identified by Sarubbi (2019). I obtained the following list of CSPs from the “National Postsecondary Support Map” and corresponding list maintained by Fostering Success Michigan (n.d.).

National Agencies and Organizations

Casey Family Programs
Child Welfare Information Gateway
Foster Care Alumni of America
Foster Care to Success
FosterClub
Fostering Families Today
Foster Kids United
Fostering Success Michigan - An Initiative of Educate Tomorrow
National Court Appointed Special Advocate
National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council
National Foster Youth Institute
National Foster Care Coalition
National Foster Parent Association
National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Hidden Student Populations
Project Foster Power
The Foster Project
The Imprint (formerly The Chronicle of Social Change)

National Peer Groups

Former and Present Foster Kids and Parents
Former Foster Youth of America
Former Foster Children
Former Foster Children United
Former Fosters are Family
Former Fosters Only/Alumni Network

Foster a Fresh Start Project
Foster Care Kids
Foster Care Recovery
Foster Kids Club
Foster Scholars
May is National Foster Care Month
NASPA Sub-Community on Homelessness and Foster Care
The Foster Care Alumni Movement
Revolutionary Former Fosters
SAPros Supporting Foster Youth
XChange by Foster Leaders

Campus Support Programs

Aquinas College - Fostering Success Scholarship Initiatives
Arizona State University Foster Youth Bridging Success
Ball State University - Guardian Scholars
Boise State University - Impact Scholars Program
Buena Vista University - Guardian Scholars
Cabrini University – Building Lives of Purpose Foster Care to College Program
California State Polytechnic, Pomona - Renaissance Scholars
California State University, Bakersfield - Guardian Scholars Program
California State University, Channel Islands - PATH Program
California State University, Chico - Path Scholars / Educational Opportunities Program
California State University, Dominguez Hills - Toro Scholars
California State University, East Bay - Renaissance Scholars
California State University, Fresno - Renaissance Scholars Program
California State University, Fullerton - Guardian Scholars Program
California State University, Los Angeles - EOP Foster Youth Program
California State University, Monterey Bay - Guardian Scholars
California State University, Northridge - Resilient Scholars
California State University, Sacramento - Guardian Scholars Program
California State University, San Bernardino's - EOP Foster Youth Program
California State University, San Marcos - ACE Scholars Services
California State University, Sonoma - Seawolf Scholars
California State University, Stanislaus - Promise Scholars
California, Pepperdine - Guardian Scholars
Central Michigan University
Cleveland State University - Sullivan-Deckard Scholars Opportunity Program
College of St. Joseph - STEPS: Students Taking an Effective Path to Success
Colorado State University - Fostering Success Program

Community College of Philadelphia – Fostering Caring Connections
 Eastern Michigan University - Mentorship Access Guidance in College (MAGIC)
 Ferris State University - Ferris Youth Initiative
 Florida Atlantic University Educate Tomorrow
 Florida International University - Fostering Panther Pride
 Florida State University - Unconquered Scholars Program
 Grand Valley State University - Fostering Laker Success Henry Ford College
 Humboldt State University - ELITE Scholars
 J. C. Smith University - Guardian Scholars
 Kalamazoo Valley Community College - Life Resources
 Kennesaw State University - Campus Awareness, Resource & Empowerment (CARE)
 Center Kutztown University PROFS Program
 Lake Michigan College - Start to Finish
 Lansing Community College- Fostering Stars
 Loyola Marymount - Guardian Scholars
 Manor College – SOAR Program
 Metropolitan State University of Denver - Student Academic Success Center
 Miami Dade College - Educate Tomorrow Single Stop
 Miami University - Regionals – REACH
 Michigan State University - Fostering Academics Mentoring Excellence (FAME) Program
 Middle Tennessee State University - Next Step
 Muskegon Community College
 Northern Arizona University - Blavin Scholar Program
 Northwestern Michigan College - yourNMC Program
 Ohio University - Task Force - REACH
 Penn State University – Fostering Lions Program
 Portland State University - Futures Program
 Rutgers University - Transition for Youth & SHIP
 Saginaw Valley State University-Delta College - (F.A.S.T.) Program
 Sam Houston State University - Forward Program
 San Diego State University - Guardian Scholars
 San Francisco State University - Guardian Scholars Program
 San Jose State University - Guardian Scholars Program
 Seattle University - Fostering Scholars
 Texas State University, San Marcos - FACES: Foster Care Alumni Creating Ed Success
 Texas Tech University (TTU) - Pegasus Program
 Texas Women’s University - The Frontiers Program
 The Wily Network
 University of Alabama - Alabama REACH
 University of Arizona Fostering Success

University of California, Berkeley - Hope Scholars
 University of California, Davis - Guardian Scholars
 University of California, Irvine - Guardian Scholars
 University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) - Guardian Scholars Program
 University of California, Merced - Guardian Scholars
 University of California, Riverside - Guardian Scholars
 University of California, San Diego - Guardian Scholars
 University of California, Santa Barbara - Guardian Scholars
 University of California, Santa Cruz - Smith Renaissance Society
 University of Central Florida - Knight Alliance Network (KAN)
 University of Colorado, Boulder - Guardian Scholars
 University of Houston - Urban Experience Program
 University of Kansas - Fostering Jayhawk Success
 University of Massachusetts, Boston - U-Access
 University of Michigan, Ann Arbor - Blavin Scholars Program
 University of Michigan, Flint: Mpowering My Success
 University of San Diego - Torero Renaissance Scholars
 University of Southern California - Trojan Guardian Scholars
 University of Texas, Austin - Horns Helping Horns
 University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP) - Foster, Homeless and Adopted Resource Program (FHAR)
 University of Texas, San Antonio-ACCESS Center Lab
 University of Washington - Champions Program
 University of Wisconsin - Stout
 Washington State University - Fostering Cougar Champions: Passport to College Scholars Program
 Washtenaw Community College- REACH Program
 Wayne County Community College District - Scholars Motivated to Advocate & Realize their Talents
 Wayne State University - CHAMPS Program
 West Texas A&M University-Buff Connections Horns Helping Horns
 Western Michigan University - Seita Scholars Program
 Wright State University - Independent Scholars

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Email Subject: Call for Research Participants for Study on Foster Care Identity Development of College Graduates

Greetings,

My name is Angela Hoffman-Cooper (she/her), and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership Program at Colorado State University. I am conducting a qualitative research study to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. This study is being completed as my dissertation, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I am writing to share about this study and request your support in identifying potential research participants.

About this Study

This study is motivated by my own experiences as a college graduate and person with a foster care identity, as well as the experiences of others in foster care who I have been fortunate to cross paths with on this journey. The intended outcome of this study is to develop an emergent theoretical perspective on foster care identity development grounded in the experiences of college graduates with experience in foster care.

Participation Criteria

I am seeking 6-8 participants who meet all four of the following criteria:

- Be an adult age 18 or older;
- Experienced foster care on or after their 13th birthday;
- Graduated with a bachelor's degree;

- Identify as having a foster care identity (i.e. experience in foster care is a salient aspect of their identity—salient meaning a significant aspect of their identity that frequently shapes, or is brought to attention across, their various life situations (Morris, 2013).

Participant Involvement

I will conduct this study in the fall of 2023. Selected participants will be asked to participate in three semi-structured individual interviews via online video call or telephone, each lasting 60-90 minutes discussing participants' experiences before, during, and after college related to the process of developing a foster care identity.

Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

Participants will be provided with an explanation of the study and the consent form. Consent will occur before interviews take place. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants will be encouraged to identify a pseudonym name to support their privacy in the data and published results of the study.

Participant Incentive

Participants will receive a \$50 Visa gift card for their engagement through the end of the study.

Invitation to Participate in the Study

If you are personally interested in being considered for this study, please email me at aehoffma@colostate.edu. Additionally, I invite you to kindly share this email and the attached flier with your networks and college graduates with experience in foster care who may be interested in being research participants in this study.

I am thrilled to be able to co-construct this study with participants and grateful you would consider participating or sharing the invitation to participate with your networks. If you have any

questions about this research study, please contact me at aehoffma@colostate.edu or by phone at 906-281-2672.

With gratitude,

Angela E. Hoffman-Cooper (she/her)

Foster Scholar

PhD Candidate

Higher Education Leadership Program

Colorado State University

The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University (protocol # 4764). Dr. Susana Muñoz is my dissertation advisors and the co-primary investigator on this research project. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: csu_irb@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

Call for Research Participants for Study on Foster Care Identity Development of College Graduates

This is a qualitative research study to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care.

Involvement: Participants will be asked to participate in three semi-structured interviews discussing their experiences before, during, and after college related to the process of developing a foster care identity.

Location & Timeline: Interviews will take place via online video or telephone call in fall 2023.

Incentive: Participants will receive a \$50 Visa gift card for their engagement through the end of the study.

Participation Criteria

To participate you must meet all four of the following criteria:

- be an adult age 18 or older
- have experienced foster care on or after 13th birthday
- have graduated with a bachelor's degree
- identify as having a foster care identity*

**Foster care identity in this study means experience in foster care is a significant aspect of one's identity or an aspect that frequently shapes, or is brought to attention across, various life situations.*

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants will be invited to identify a pseudonym name to support privacy in the data and published results of the study.

To enroll in the study or learn more email:

Angela Hoffman-Cooper (she/her) at aehoffma@colostate.edu



COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

IRB #:4764

Date Approved: 08/17/2023



APPENDIX D: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction to Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on the process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. My name is Angela Hoffman-Cooper, and I use the pronouns she and her. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership Program at Colorado State University. This study is being completed for my dissertation, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy. My motivation to complete this study is shaped by my own experience in foster care, aging out of foster care, going to college, and now continuing my education and personal journey into adulthood.

I look forward to learning about your experiences. Before we begin you will need to read and sign the Informed Consent form for this research study. This form explains more about this research study and asks you to sign if you agree to participate in this study. Please review the Informed Consent form and let me know if you have any questions. [I share Appendix I. Participant reads consent form]. Do you have any questions? [I address any questions].

[If the participant does not sign the informed consent]: Thank you for your initial interest and for your time today. Best wishes. [Conclude].

[If participant signs the informed consent]:

I look forward to discussing with you how you have experienced the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity, what have been the critical influences in the process, and how your foster care identity has developed over time—before, during, and after college.

During this first interview we will discuss what it means to be a person with experience in foster care and the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity. During the second interview we will continue our conversation from today. During the third interview we will continue our conversation, and I will also share with you my preliminary interpretation of the process of developing a foster care identity based on the conversations I have with participants, and you will have the opportunity to react and share anything you would like to add or change based on your experiences. I am going to record our conversations so I can review it later, transcribe our conversations, and analyze it. If you prefer, you are welcome to have your camera off and use only audio.

All of the interviews will be semi-structured, meaning I will have some questions prepared to guide our discussion related to the topic of the study, however, we will construct our conversations together. It is my aim during the interviews to affirm you are the expert on your own experiences and to seek to understand your story, views, thoughts, and feelings. I encourage you to share with me what you believe is relevant to your experiences with the process of developing a foster care identity and to share at a level and pace that feels comfortable to you. I wish to understand your experiences in your own words without imposing my own, so I may ask for more details on what words mean to you from time to time. Please let me know if you need me to repeat or reword any questions for clarity. You may also decline to answer any questions you do not wish to address. I am also prepared to share resources of counseling support services should the interview cause any distress.

As a reminder participation in this study is completely voluntary. Do you have any questions? [I address any questions]. Do I have your permission to begin recording? [I will

affirm their response matches with the response supplied on their informed consent form. If yes, I will begin recording; if no, I will arrange to take extensive notes during the interview].

To support de-identifying the data, I invite you to select a pseudonym name for me to use to refer to you in the data collection and study writeup. What would you like me to refer to you as? [Participant shares pseudonym; if participant declines pseudonym, I will affirm their response matches with the response they supplied on their completed informed consent form and they understand their name will be linked to the data and corresponding results that will be published and presented and I will confirm the name they wish to use.].

First Interview Potential Questions or Topics:

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and why you agreed to participate in this study?
- How would you describe your time in foster care?
 - As you look back on your experience in foster care, are there any events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe them?
 - How would you describe the person you were during your time in foster care?
 - What was your biggest success during your time in foster care?
 - What was your biggest challenge during your time in foster care?
- What, if anything, did you know about what it means to be a “foster youth” before being placed in foster care?
- What was your first memory of having the label or title ‘foster youth’ applied to you?
 - How did you feel about other people knowing that you were in foster care?
 - What messages did you receive about what it meant for you to have been a “foster youth?”
- What were your K-12 education experiences like? How, if at all, did experience in foster care impact your experience in K-12 school?
- How would you describe your exit from foster care?
- How would you describe what it means to have a foster care identity?
 - Is it a choice to have a foster care identity? While in foster care? College? Now?
 - When did you first identify with having a foster care identity?
- What people, organizations, places, or events, were critical in shaping the development of your foster care identity? Positively? Negatively?
- Can you tell me about the social identities that inform how you experience the world? [Introduce social identities; Show Appendix E].
 - How do these relate to your foster care identity?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me at this time? [Confirm plans for second interview and share it will cover more about college experiences, follow up on any areas from today for further clarity, and continue the discussion on developing a foster care identity.

Second Interview Potential Questions or Topics:

- [Wrap up any remaining questions from the first interview/ engage in theoretical sampling based on data analyzed to date by asking follow-up questions].
- How would you describe your decision to go to college? How did you choose a college?
- How if at all, did going to college shape your foster care identity?
 - How would you describe the person you were then?
- What experiences do you consider most significant from your time in college?
 - What was your biggest success during your time in college?
 - What was your biggest challenge during your time in college?
- If you participated in a campus support program for students with experience in foster care, how, if at all, did the program shape your foster care identity?
- Are you connected with others with a foster care identity?
 - How, if at all, do they impact you?
- What have been positive or negative experiences you've had with disclosing your foster care identity to others?
 - What circumstances have you had to reveal your foster care identity willingly or unwillingly?
 - How do you decide to tell people about your foster care identity?
 - How have others reacted when you've shared your foster care identity?
 - How has your experience with sharing with others that you were in foster care changed throughout your life?
- How, if at all, does your experience in foster care shape how you see the world?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me at this time? [Confirm plans for third interview and share it will we will continue discussion on the process of developing a foster care identity and my preliminary interpretation of the process based on the co-constructed interviews and my data analysis so far].

Third Interview Potential Questions or Topics:

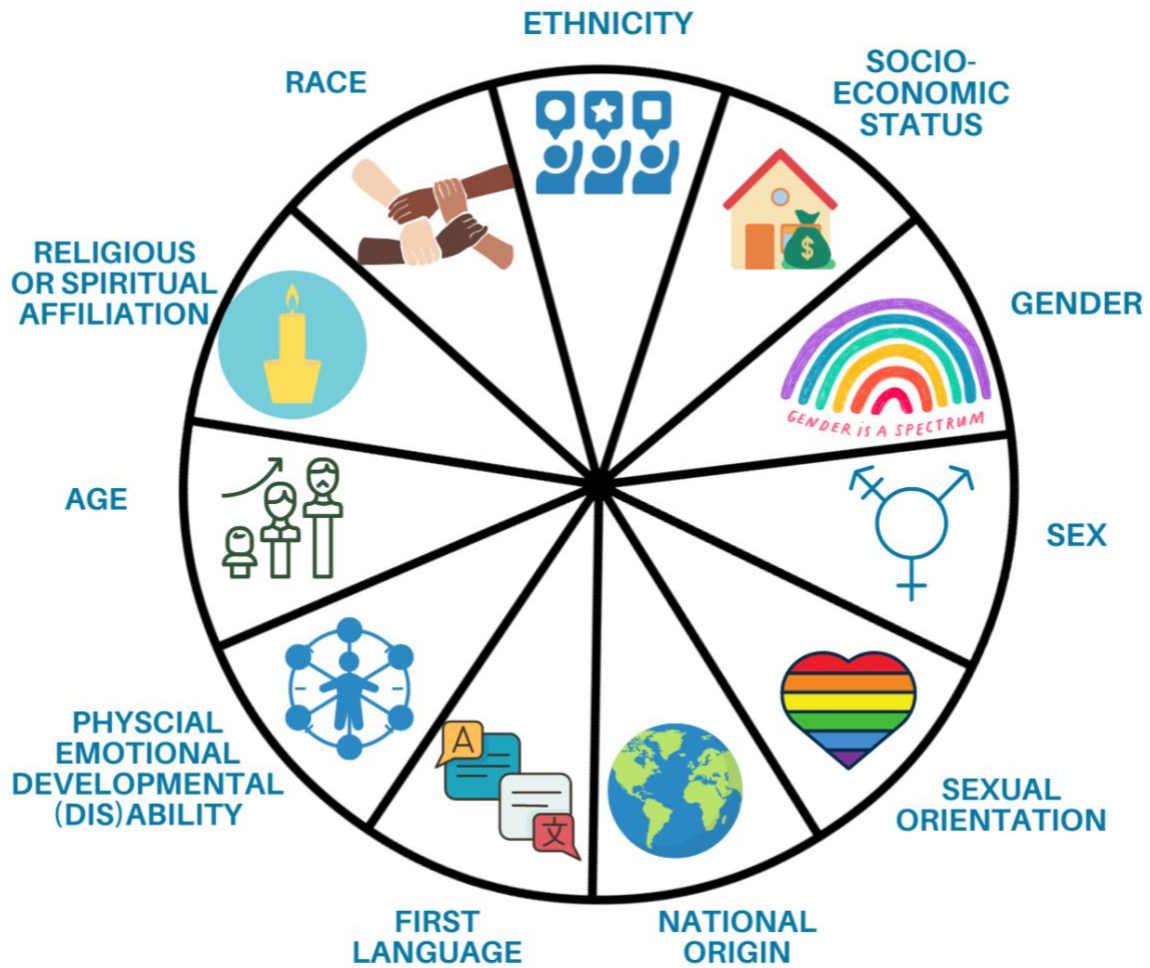
- [Wrap up any remaining questions from the first interview/ engage in theoretical sampling based on data analyzed to date by asking follow-up questions].
- How have you grown as a person since your time in foster care?
 - How would you describe the person you are now? What most contributed to this?
- How, if at all, does having a foster care identity come up or impact your daily life now?
- How do you think your foster care identity will change in the future, if at all?
- What's your definition of success?
- How would you describe the process of developing a foster care identity?
- What has it been like for you to participate in this study?
- What, if anything, have you learned anything about yourself through our conversations?
- [Share preliminary interpretation of findings and discuss participant reactions].
 - Is there anything you would like to add or change about what you've shared?
 - What, if anything, do you think others should know about having a foster care identity?

- What advice would you give to people currently in foster care, going to college, or other college graduates with experience in foster care?
- What do you think should be done with these research findings about the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity?
- Do you know of anyone else who might be interested in participating in this study?
 - Would you be willing to contact them and ask permission to give me their first name and telephone number or email so that I may contact them and give them more information about this study?
 - Would you be willing to pass my contact information on to others so that those who are interested can contact me?

Thank you so much for your time. As a thank you for your time, I will send you information about the gift card to the email address you shared on the participant recruitment survey. This concludes our scheduled interviews. Do you have any questions for me? [I address any questions].

If you have any questions in the future about the study, please email me. I will continue data analysis and present the emergent theoretical perspective on the process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates in my dissertation that I hope to complete by fall 2024. I will share the completed document with you by email once it is published to the web.

APPENDIX E: SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL



APPENDIX F: EXCERPT FROM CO-CONSTRUCTED INTERVIEW

Interviewer: [...] I have some questions, sort of initially set out with the intention that this first interview addresses maybe focuses on experience in foster care, and little bit around exiting, and starting to discuss some aspects of identities. And then some of the future interviews may focus a little more on college and career. But I understand we don't live our lives that way. Looking back, it may not be this linear path. It's been very common amongst the interviews that folks are talking about how something maybe in foster care impacted their life today and that's okay to jump around. Because that's what we're talking about is meaning and how did you make meaning of that time in foster care both then and now. And so, our conversation might move around. And that's okay.

You're welcome to not answer any questions, move at a pace, and share at a pace that feels comfortable for you. And, I've invited folks to please like, call me out if you're like, "You didn't ask me about this and this was a really important piece of my experience. I'm surprised it's didn't come up." Or as I'm a couple interviews in, I'm sharing some of the things I'm noticing across participants, and folks are more than welcome and encouraged to please be like, "Oh, my gosh, that's so true for me." Or, "nope, Angela, that's not it. You have that part wrong, or at least for me, that's not true for me. Here's my take on it." And those are the types of really awesome conversations that we've been having so far through this process.

[...]

Well, my first question to kind of kick us off is if you could tell me a little bit more about yourself and why you agreed to participate in the study?

Participant: Okay, a little bit about myself and why I chose to be part of this study. Well, my name is Simone. Ironically, what attracted me to the study was you had an eligibility criterion that said that foster care is a salient identity to you. And it is for me. When I introduce myself typically the first thing I say is “I'm Simone and I identify as a former foster youth.” Depending on the audience, I'll say, “I'm a proud former foster youth.” Because I think that I have generally a very positive sometimes, I guess, even the term privilege comes to mind for me of how I navigated and move through foster care. I'm in my 30s, so, a little bit more removed. It'll be 20 years that I entered foster care, but really, all of my work education career has all been connected to the foster community. So, whether it was I graduated college and went back to my group home every summer as an undergrad. During my master's, I worked as an assistant university with The Guardian Scholars Program was a program coordinator and grad assistant for five years and now nonprofit. I work in a nonprofit serving transition age foster youth. I'm actually launching our alumni community, 27 and 35. But in general, that's just saying my last 20 years of my existence have been very much ingrained in contributing, giving back and empowering my peers and those who come after us. [...] I was doing direct service initially. And now I'm in more of an advocacy leadership role in the organization and my whole commitment is how are we bringing the lived expertise of current and former foster youth into the system and as partners in decision making for foster care and now juvenile probation. So, I guess that's a little bit about me.

Interviewer: It was great to learn more about you. And I'm curious if you can share a little bit more about what you mean by proud and privileged in terms of experience?

Participant: Yeah. So, my experience in foster care was more congregate care. So, I was in an emergency shelter for 90 days. And then I was placed in a residential academy for foster teens. And so my entire foster experience was collective it was a group of us trying to move through the world and so through that experience, I'm proud, pride became a thing because, one, is it connected our identity as foster youth to a school, we were the dragons and there was a lot of pride, but I don't think it was really being a dragon wearing royal blue and black, I think it was more so that there is a collective group of us who all had this shared experience of foster care, navigating the world without our parents. And many of us achieved that. Well, and many of us did not. But I feel like any sporting event or any like, experience where someone outside came into our space, there was like a pride and a responsibility to like, keep each other safe, but also protect each other, which is different when the system is protecting you versus you peer to peer trying to look out for each other. So, my experience was, I entered the system at 13. So, on that campus, I was in eighth grade. So, I was considered one of the youngest on campus. And so, for me what felt like I had three biological, older siblings with me, I then had 150 older siblings. And so, for me, that's, that's where I think my pride came from. Privilege, I think I have to recognize that. So, I'm biracial, I'm African American, white, and Hungarian. And I have siblings that look way more as a Black man in society, as a Black woman in society, than myself. And so, I think the ability, or the misinterpretation of people that I am white passing, definitely was a very different experience between myself and my brother. So, I recognize how people move through interactions with him versus myself and my other siblings. I only experienced two placements. One for 90 days and one for five years. And as a teenager, and a sibling set of four, I consider that privilege, or maybe lucky. And then you already know you can imagine when you have placement, stability, the ability to be able to succeed academically, to think about college,

to have goals, to have consistent loving adults in your life, I experienced. My other thing is level of privilege is the amount of caring adults I experienced. But also, the amount of peer support that my identity as foster care didn't harm me socially with my peers, but it did when I left foster care. So, I hope that's helpful in terms of pride and privilege. They'll probably be some other ones that come up along the way. But I do recognize and have to recognize that. My last thing about that is that's what led me into my work. And my advocacy is really the fundamental curiosity of why me? Why did I have such a positive experience? And how can this not be the standard or expectation that our young people can anticipate stepping into the system? This is as a possibility to do good. Let's do it all the time for all of our young people. So, I think that curiosity and that fire of like I was able to have a relatively more positive experience in the system and have achieved a level of stability for myself. I expect my peers to have the same opportunity, what can I do to influence that?

Interviewer: The notion of sort of being lucky or folks acknowledging like, "I think I had it better than others," has come up a ton in the earlier interviews. And I know I've heard it amongst, you know, conversations with other folks long before this study and just personal stuff of sort of the various ways in which that story takes shape of folks questioning, "Is my story enough while I was in kinship care?" or "I was with one family since I was one year old, so I don't know if my experience is the one you're looking for?" or just things I've heard in different spaces ... I'm definitely noticing some similarities and you know, unique differences with the things that you're sharing, of course, because you are your own whole human. The idea about an alumni community, I think, is so powerful. So, few opportunities are available. I mean, for a while, it was only sort of through college, and then maybe certain things expanded to like, well we're allowing folks up to the age of 25, I think is the oldest age to date for engagement in many

opportunities. So, it's really neat that you're developing a community that continues beyond that. What sort of spurred the creation of this idea that, "Hey, there should be something for folks in their later phases in life?"

Participant: Yeah, I remember vividly Kenyon Whitman talking about it. He did a presentation on the idea. There's no expiration date on the foster care experience.

Interviewer: Yeah. Oh, my gosh. Pieces of that have come up in the interviews so far because it is part of what spurred this study of this idea that it doesn't end.

Participant: And I share that because I was really grateful for Kenyon to name that as a fact, right? And it grounded my organization, in questioning our commitment to our alumni. And this idea of like, these age restrictions are just again, the pitfall of you know, out of services out of resources out of connections, and our organizations, higher ed nonprofit, like, are we replicating that pitfall or that drop off that emancipation really can feel like and really is for our alum, or former foster youth or transition age foster youth, whatever term you want to use. And so, we look at it as there is no expiration date of the foster care experience, there should be no expiration date on community, because that's what our nonprofit does, we provide community and it's ridiculous to say you're connected to us until you're 27. And then we help you find new connections. So anyways, I have really been grateful for Kenyon's piece. I can't remember if it was a journal article or what. I just remember this whole tagline of that and being affirmed that my experience may be with me forever. I agree with that, as I'm now in my 30s, and that is still a salient identity for me.

Interviewer: Yes, it's something I pulled into the dissertation literature review, again, wanting to be conscious of okay, if there's not that much research out there that I can draw from, sort of arguing why we need to be talking to adults. I think even one of my committee members

... was wondering why you chose this population of college graduates. And then he said, "Once you explain yourself and reason why, oh gosh, it made sense." And that took sort of drawing from various people saying this. And most frequently it was coming from within our own community and from not yet formally published pieces ... And, and so it was through a lot of these blog, opinion, and reflection pieces. Likewise, I think I quoted a piece from Sade Daniels. There was something to the effect of I wake up every day still dealing with the reasons I was removed. Like those things still exist in my life. Like the circumstances that led to all of this and navigating every day without you know, bio mom or things like that. And I remember, Kenyon kind of talks about how sort of younger use stories can be almost like manipulated, and maybe be more palatable is a piece that he kind of gets at, that made me question, Oh, yeah, like, the spaces I was brought into as a young person. I maybe said particular things, that were critiques but I think about the things I would maybe even say now and with greater critiques, but just the way I would show up would be cognitively different. I have continued to develop and some of the power dynamics would be removed because if you're under the age of 25, oftentimes, you're talking still to folks older, higher level and all of that.

Participant: People who have authority over your eligibility for resources. Worst position to be in. You know, in this advocacy work that I'm doing now, I didn't start advocacy work until my late 20s, you know, and it was interesting, because I'm hearing a lot of advocacy movements have an age cap ... And I'm like, I feel I am in a place where I'm the most reflective and aware of my lived experience in the system, and how like, just, there's the time difference, like of my 18 year old self, my 21 year old self to my 30 year old self, I think, sometimes you need time to heal and be reflective, to really recognize like, how you want that experience to impact you the rest of your life. There's no way I would have done advocacy any younger than I am now, there's just no

way. I don't think I had the words or the belief in my story or the belief that my experience even mattered. But that runs up against systems who believe that our experiences are dated, you know that they are irrelevant. But then our youth are too young, they need to be protected. I've been in advocacy meetings where current youth have to have their screens off, their name changed, and they can't say anything. In advocacy meetings in public forums, your attorney is telling you, you are mandated as a human being to not have your camera on. So, it's been an interesting, and I'll pause here, but it's been an interesting thing where our youth are too young to be part of their decision making and experience of the system. But now, those of us who are over the age 18 are too old to have any opinion, because our experiences are considered dated or irrelevant. Well, it's not irrelevant if the same consequences I experienced as a youth are still consequences that my peers are experiencing. So, something's got to change. Right?

Interviewer: It's so true ... The notion of like, just in general age, and time has come up a lot in the interviews. And that shouldn't be, I guess all that surprising really, the system is so governed by these age benchmarks. And just allusions to time, like a notions of present and past colliding, is sort of the way someone specifically described their foster care identity. So, there's things there that I'm sort of grappling with and thinking through with time. One of the things with constructivist grounded theory, which is the type of study this is, is that I'm supposed to be moving not just towards like themes, but really like even broader than that, and then kind of construct a theory that holds some of the maybe the themes and it's not to say it won't be practical at all. But it is supposed to be sort of this like abstract thinking, which is a hard space to move into but also, I'm actually surprised in some spaces where it's almost coming naturally of noticing, for example these benchmarks and time points. Folks questioning that they are doing enough by a particular age ... "Have I proved the stats wrong?" ... Oh, you specifically made a

point of, I love the way that you described in your current work, sort of approaching lived experience or you know, helping to bring folks in with lived experience centering that and then noted specifically like partners in decision making. What history in your life has made that particularly important to you? And what are some ways that you do that?

Participant: I think it's the interesting part in this work of serving our foster youth community, when you are in spaces with people who worked with you when you were young. So, there is this, depending on the person, there's this, like, I will always be 13 to them. I will always be 13-year-old Simone who has like no sense who has no sense of the world who must be saved or protected. And I'll give you an example. So, what sparked my advocacy was the academy was legally defined as a group home and the state of was shutting down all group homes across the country across the state. And so, they targeted this one as one of the first ones. Now, for me, and I won't get into it too much, we can always talk more, but for me, when you have a campus that is dedicated to graduation rates, reunifying siblings and keeping young people in a permanent placement compared to these higher level facilities that are like, you know, the residential care facility to jail pipeline, you know what I mean? I question the integrity of that decision to shut down that group home or that residential academy. So, that sparked my advocacy in terms of I serve on a board ... and so in that seat, I represent myself but I also feel like I represent my community. And so, in leveraging they came to the meeting and said the academy is scheduled to shut down in like six months. It was ridiculous, these kids have been promised a permanent placement and they're like, six months, you have to find somewhere else to live. So I went, I chose to go to the campus and meet with 30 of the youth on campus. And I just asked them, what are your thoughts about this closure, and some youth were like, you know, I'm a little unfazed, because I am going to be reunifying with my biological family and but my

peers who will never reunify with their biological families, I'm scared for them. Or to the youth who said, this is the only place that I felt like a trans or LGBTQ identifying person that I feel safe and accepted. So, I'm hearing all these things from our youth saying, "Please don't close this place," that drove my advocacy. It was as much as I personally have a connection to this academy, it was my peers, the youth that came after me who, if they all would have said, "Simone, this place is garbage. Shut it down." Yeah, I would support that because their current experience is so critical. Right? So, when I say partners in decision making, I went to this board meeting. And I really just said, "Look, I don't know how many of y'all have been to the campus and talk to these youth. Although this academy has a lot of improvements to make, these young people have decided the best placement for them at this time is that campus they are in and the state is making a big decision for these young people without considering them. So, that's what drove my advocacy of is everyone who needs to be at the table to make a critical decision at the table and the answer is always no. It is always no, for our former foster youth because this idea that we are children. I'm in my 30s. I went to the graduation at the academy this year and the same people, several of them who were critical in my developing stability were there. You know, if I'm like I want to invest in that. If I've said I want to invest, I want to create Alumni Scholarship to give to the youth it would be, "Oh Simone we don't we don't need your money. That's okay." Or if I said, "Hey, I want to serve on the campus and I want to be mentor." "Oh no, Simone. It's okay, we got it, don't worry." What is that, that my genuine expertise of this campus isn't yet my actual expertise of navigating this campus for five years. Graduating valedictorian getting the car, graduation, regalia scholarships, going to grad school going to get my bachelor's is irrelevant. So that's where I believe that I, probably in our peers alike, have way more to offer in terms of perspective and empathy, then a lot of other people, and that's not to knock the great

ones that have done great work. But we are experts of the system. So why wouldn't you want to have the experts in your decision making? That's my philosophy.

Interviewer: I appreciate you sharing so much about your experience, even in just challenging my own perception. I was never in a group home. I experienced other placement types. And, you know, with what's in the literature and some other folks who have lived experience and what their experiences are. I think about how much of that literature may not capture the full experience, and how localized the experience is. And I think a point you made from the beginning is the importance of being able to be like, "Hey, this came from our county. There was a representative from our county in this experience." As you were describing your experience, it almost sounded like college to me a little bit in terms of the notion of dynamic campus and going to school together and having this like pride in your school. And almost family ties at that age where folks that go away to college can experience like a residence hall floor. And sort of group homes across the board can sort of be demonized but to your point when, if they're done, maybe right, in the way that you described, it could just be a parallel, like, going to college. And maybe it's a little bit a little bit earlier, and you're having staff guiding you along the way, as opposed to support of a family unit. But there's plenty of other cultures that do operate that way under boarding school mentalities and things like that.

Participant: Yeah. I mean, I've read and heard horrific lived experiences of our peers in group homes, and I'm mortified. You know, I, struggle with this idea of a privileged experience, fortunate, whatever you want to call it, lucky. I can understand why, like, in particular, in the state we had so many youth leaders and advocates at the state level, saying close all the group homes. And I think that that's where the difference of one placement compared to another, but also, it depends who runs it and all these things. But I don't I don't want to stray too far.

Interviewer: Yes, there's so many pieces. There's the perception that well all children need to be raised in families. Well, is an unfit foster family the right solution? Because you know, my experience firsthand the answer is no.

Participant: Is being raised by strangers more appropriate than empowering a family to be healthy enough to take care of their own. Well no, I wasn't looking for new mommy and daddy when I got into foster care. So why are you pushing adoption onto me knowing that that's going to separate me from my current intact biological family and siblings? So, I hope that answers your questions about partners and decision making.

Interviewer: Yeah. These are examples of where, you know, sort of, there was a starting question in mind and direction of this interview but it's all flexible to what comes up in the conversation. You talked about wanting to be a partner to other young people in foster care, where did that originate? And was adoption, something that was sort of pushed on you and in certain parts of your life?

Participant: So, my first interaction with a social worker was me and my three siblings. I don't know if that's common to have like sibling units in meetings together with their social workers. And the social worker is like, sorry, you guys, there's like over 95% chance that you are going to be separated in foster care. And we're like, "Who are you? Who are you serving here?" This system is supposed to serve us, you know. And so, it was weird to see this lady who is legitimately responsible for our fate, say it, like, "It is what it is." When I entered foster care, I was mute, I had stopped talking. So, for my family, our reason for entering the system was that our biological mother had passed away unexpectedly. There was no family plan. We had an older brother that they attempted to like, I use the word pawn us off on. "Will you take your four

siblings?” And he's like, “There are four of them. You know, I have a whole family.” We had a strained relationship, so we weren't connected to him. So, you have a stranger taking on four kids. So, that social worker I shared with you was like, “I'll do everything I can to keep you guys together.” And then like a month in, she comes back and is like, “So, what my grand plan is to get Simone adopted because I was the youngest.” And then my twin brother and my older brother, the plan was to put them in a boy's home. And then my sister was 16. And so, she's like, “I just had to find a placement for you. You'll only be in the system for two years.” So that was the original grand plan for the kids was separation. And I don't know, my two siblings, my older two, were just like nope, get us a new social worker. Nope. And I don't know how. I don't know how they managed that. But we got a new social worker who was committed to keeping us together. And she's the one that found the academy. And she committed to that, she committed to keeping us together. So that was a whirlwind of 90 days. So yeah, I would say, you know, if I had to choose between, like, this idea of like a stable two parent household with a loving family, aka adopted over being with my siblings, absolutely not. I'd rather stayed at some emergency shelter for five years with my siblings. I feel like it's just an exaggerated idea that we must have the stable parents. I was raised by a single mom, who's to say I need a mommy and a daddy. Who's to say that? I had all of my house parents at the group home.

Interviewer: Yeah, the heteropatriarchy runs deep and white. The White cisheteropatriarchy ... Siblings have come up as a huge thing. And then actually, some of the notions of responsibility, whether it was a caseworker, or foster parents or kinship parents, not upholding their responsibility to sort of have the best interest, or young people feeling like responsibility was placed on them, that was unreasonable for that time in their lives. Things like well, questioning into adulthood, “But why didn't you adopt me?” “Well, you should have asked

if that's what you wanted.” Or, “Why didn't you connect me to my culture?” “Well, you should have asked.” Or you know, “Why didn't you tell me?” ... All of these different things and assumptions layered with it.

Participant: I think that notion of responsibility so powerful, I think that runs really deep. For me, I don't know if you're asking me, but for me, it was the idea that I had to be the perfect child to avoid being removed from the placement or being my siblings getting separated. So, I really internalize that as like being the good girl being like obedient. As much as I had a great experience, I think it was driven by fear that if I don't do it, right, if I am not obedient, if I ask questions, if I challenge authority, if I call it out, I might lose my siblings ... I decided head down, like, I'll support my peers but head down, because I didn't want to lose my siblings ... And I wanted every opportunity to not be the statistic that I was seeing my peers live out after they emancipated, I think that was one of the more harsh realities of being in the group setting was seeing people live out the actual statistics that we talked about, was like, super scary, like I was a very scared youth, don't do anything wrong and do everything, right, because maybe you'll have a chance to a stay with your siblings and be get all the resources that you need, because you're not going to have the family stability to take care of you after this. So, emancipation was a huge fear of mine, all through middle school in high school.

APPENDIX G: EXAMPLE OF CODES UNDER CATEGORY

Here are examples of preliminary codes that were further consolidated through constant comparison and through further analysis and theorizing became the dimension *Navigating the*

Continued Effects of Trauma:

- “Still navigating all these things”
- “I don’t want to have my heart shattered”
- “I’m grieving still.”
- “deeper wounds”
- “how much joy was robbed from me”
- “not trying to revise history”
- “still struggling”
- “the pain I’ve gone through”
- The truths I’ve not said
- “what I’m left to deal with”
- Harming others
- Angry teenager
- Attachment wounds
- Bio family in adulthood
- Death of family
- Fear of abandonment
- Foster care experiences in adulthood
- Having triggers
- Hurting from foster care
- Mental health impacts in adulthood
- Others not knowing the trauma
- Reengaging with abuser in adulthood

Here are examples of preliminary codes that were further consolidated through constant comparison and through further analysis and theorizing became the dimension *Being with Us,*

Not Part of Us:

- To be bio vs. foster
- Tension in foster home
- Shared race/ethnicity with foster family not enough
- “Not understanding they’re family to me”
- Not being believed
- Feeling lonely

- Feeling second rate
- Never adopted
- Labeling me as bad kid
- Actions creating feelings of difference
- Father/foster daughter dynamics
- Pity/savior dynamic
- Feeling disconnected

APPENDIX H: EXCERPTS FROM MEMOS

Brief excerpt from a memo reflecting on my positionality and reflexivity after a few first-round interviews:

- Am I talking too much or overexplaining?
- How am I showing up as a white woman in this (and all spaces)? Interesting one participant noted that she only has met POC in foster care.
- Am I too scripted? Asked some follow up questions but really stuck to the interview questions overall - how will this change for future interviews?

Brief excerpt from a memo reflecting on the content of a first-round interview:

- Importance of Native experience.
- Native as forward identity - how to make sure to keep that focal.
- Interconnections of what is trauma v. foster care. Hard to separate.
- Noted this “happened one time” and then gave at least five examples indicating a difference in perception versus reality of the frequency and pervasiveness
- Difference based on status in foster care was communicated through language and actions

Brief excerpt from a memo preliminarily constructing the dimension of seeking self-worth through achievement:

- Self-worth
- Worth tied to accomplishing/achieving
- Participant feeling like they’re not doing enough but they’re in grad school and actually “doing the ‘most’”
- Uncertainty about self-worth tied to point of life, into adulthood?
- Self-worth, achieving, not doing enough, compared to who? statistics? the ‘normative’ ‘other’? Who is doing the comparing self or others?
- ARE PERCEPTIONS OF NORMATIVE OTHER AND COMPARISON TO OTHERS SOMETHING TO EXPLORE IN A FUTURE INTERVIEW?

Brief excerpt from a memo preliminarily constructing aspects of component becoming aware of a foster care identity and dimension being with us not part of us:

- Turning point was a hardship that brought to attention foster care identity
- being treated differently
- bio v. foster treatment in family as example of ‘feeling foster care’
- Does this come up in other interviews - turning point or family treatment as impetus to becoming aware of a foster care identity?

Brief excerpt from a memo preliminarily constructing reflections of how multiple aspects of the theory might fit together:

- Turning point made aware of foster care identity – in a harmful way. Is it possible for this to be in a positive way?
- Something was taken (peace) or not provided (protection)
- Being left with something else instead – trauma, self-reliance
- Dealing with it alone – family privilege.

Brief excerpt from a series of memos focused on overall preliminary theorizing:

- Disrupted identity development – being raised on struggle and survival, not love is channeled through achieving and responsibility and legacy. Acceptance of identity happens through a turning point. Continued meaning making over time with healing, finding self, channeling into advocacy or legacy acknowledging and grappling with the good with the bad of the experience. Dehumanization occurring in different contexts.
- Disrupted sense of self – leading to achievement and responsibility
- Questioning, achieving, pity are experienced as aspects that shape identity. Achieving and responsibility as core to identity? Defined by successes.
- Advocacy and healing are key aspects.
- Healing is work – doing the healing work.
- Dehumanizing treatment, environments, stigma – shaped by the context of being other in society
- Trauma before, during, after care- shaped by ubiquity of trauma
- Intersecting identities- race, age, chronic illness, class, unseen identity perceptions about who is foster care
- Have to realize one is foster care enough to claim/accept a foster care identity
- Variation experienced based on placement, career, time/life stage?
- Characterized or underscored by time and family privilege. Shifts in family privilege before, during, and/or after foster care
- Should research question have been what are the meaning making processes of developing a foster care identity – plural.
- Are there multiple microprocesses within macroprocesses?
- A process is a series of actions/steps taken to achieve an end. Time – action – experiences- has effects, results, outcomes, consequences.
- Process of the foster care system is not achieving desired effects
- Ripple effects of the experience into adulthood.
- Big question is Who am I?
- Career entangled, future legacy, self-assured in strengths and values yet not knowing self
- Ability to rest
- Phantoms and imagined pasts and imagined futures
- Finding meaning in the hardship – legacy

- Knowing self as legitimate, enough in adulthood
- Not a monolith
- Shaped by the ubiquity of trauma
- Meaning made over time
- The micro experiences – interactions; macro – the system across time

APPENDIX I: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Colorado State University

Consent to Participate in Research

Foster Care Identity Development of College Graduates Study

Introduction and Purpose

My name is Angela Hoffman-Cooper. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University in the School of Education in the College of Health and Human Services, working with my faculty advisor, Dr. Susana Muñoz. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which seeks to understand the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates who were formerly in foster care. You are being invited to participate in this study because you meet all eligibility criteria for the study which include:

- be an adult age 18 or older;
- experienced foster care on or after your 13th birthday;
- graduated with a bachelor's degree; and
- identify as having a foster care identity (i.e. experience in foster care is a salient aspect of your identity—salient meaning a significant aspect of your identity that frequently shapes, or is brought to attention across, your various life situations (Morris, 2013).

Procedures

If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct a series of three interviews with you:

- a. The first interview will involve questions about what it means to be a person with experience in foster care and the meaning making process of developing a foster care identity.

- b. The second interview will continue our conversation from the first interview, informed by my subsequent data analysis.
- c. The third interview will continue our conversation from the earlier interviews, informed by my continued data analysis.
- d. During the interviews I will share with you my preliminary interpretation of the process of developing a foster care identity based on the data collection and analysis to date, and you will have the opportunity to react to my preliminary interpretation and share anything you would like to add or would suggest I change based on your experiences.

Each interview will last 60-90 minutes each, for a total of 3-4.5 hours for the study. Interviews will be scheduled at times of your choice via online video or telephone call.

With your permission, I will record and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately reflect the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be recorded, I will take notes instead. If you agree to be recorded but feel uncomfortable or change your mind for any reason during the interview, I can stop the recording at your request. Or if you do not wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

Do you consent for your interview to be audiotaped?

☐ Yes

☐ No

To support de-identifying the data and protect your confidentiality, I invite you to select a pseudonym name for me to use to refer to you in the data collection and study writeup. If you decline a pseudonym your name will be linked to the data and corresponding results and will be included in all final reports, publications, and/or presentations resulting from this research.

Do you decline a pseudonym, understanding that doing so means your name will be linked to the data, corresponding results and will be included in all final reports, publications and/or presentations from this research?

___Yes

___No

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will provide an understanding of the process of developing a foster care identity for college graduates so caseworkers, educators, practitioners, caregivers, and people with experience in foster care may use the emergent theory from this study in their work, practice, and lives.

Risks/Discomforts

It is possible some of the research questions may ask you to recall and discuss challenging situations related to your foster care identity. You are free to decline to answer questions or to stop the interview at any time.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, I am taking precautions to minimize this risk.

Confidentiality

Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If you select a pseudonym, when the study is published or presented, individual names will not be used and only your pseudonym will be used to refer to you. If you decline to select a pseudonym, your identity will not be confidential, and I will ask you to let me know how you would like your name listed in the results of this study that will be published or presented.

The information you provide, including the recordings of interviews will be stored on a secure online system that is only accessible by the researcher/principal investigator.

I will transcribe the recordings as soon as possible after the interview, and then destroy the recordings. When the research is completed, I will save the transcriptions and other study data for possible use in future research and will use the same precautions described above to protect confidentiality. I may be asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes. Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

Compensation

To thank you for participating in this study, you will receive a \$50 Visa gift card upon completion of the third interview. If you complete some but not all of the interviews, you will receive a gift card in an amount proportional to the number of interviews you have completed.

Rights

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you choose to answer any questions or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at 906-281-2672 or aehoffma@colostate.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisors, Dr. Susana Muñoz at susana.munoz@colostate.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at: 970-491-1381, or e-mail csu_irb@mail.colostate.edu.

CONSENT

Participant Consent:

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and voluntarily wish to participate in this research. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing the previous four pages.

Signature of participant

Date

Name of participant

APPENDIX J: SUMMARY OF THEORY COMPONENTS, DIMENSIONS, AND PROPERTIES

<i>Components</i>	Experiencing disrupted developmental environments	Seeking a sense of self	Becoming aware of a foster care identity	Doing the healing work	Finding meaning in experiences
<i>Dimension 1 & Properties</i>	<i>Being raised on struggle and survival, not love</i> ◊ Struggle and survival before and during foster care ◊ Development of a parentified child identity ◊ Impacts of being raised on struggle and survival, not love on adulthood	<i>Questioning—Who am I?</i> ◊ Navigating an uncertain self-identity ◊ Exploring self-identity in college ◊ Considering where a foster care identity fits	<i>Experiencing placement changes</i> ◊ Feeling foster care based on placement type and duration ◊ Feeling foster care based on changes in treatment in foster homes ◊ Feeling foster care in the shift from foster care to college	<i>Navigating the continued effects of trauma</i> ◊ Trauma at the intersections of racial identity and foster care identity ◊ Acknowledging the continued effects of trauma ◊ Addressing the continued effects of trauma ◊ Feeling the fatigue from trauma and doing the healing work ◊ Being on the other side of trauma in an ongoing healing process	<i>Aligning career with experiences and values</i> ◊ Aligning education with values ◊ Perceptions of and experiences with working at child welfare agencies ◊ Finding trauma-informed and foster care affirming work environments ◊ Purpose-and values-driven work without end

<i>Dimension 2 & Properties</i>	<i>Being with us, not part of us</i> ◇ Experiences being with us, not part of us in non-relative foster care placements ◇ Experiences being with us not, part of us in kinship foster care placements ◇ Impacts of an absence of legal permanency with a family ◇ Experiences being with us, not part of us with family of origin	<i>Taking responsibility as identity</i> ◇ Conferral of responsibility-based identity roles in childhood ◇ Impacts of responsibility as identity in adulthood	<i>Connecting with others with a foster care identity</i> ◇ Connecting with others with a foster care identity during adolescence ◇ Experiences connecting with others with a foster care identity in adulthood ◇ Connecting with others with a foster care identity in the study	<i>Accepting oneself as a whole person</i> ◇ Doing the shadow work ◇ Reclaiming a foster care identity as one aspect of identity ◇ Having permission to develop intersecting identities	<i>Engaging in foster care advocacy</i> ◇ Giving experiences purpose through advocacy ◇ Responsibility to use voice for positive change ◇ Developing a foster care advocate identity ◇ Advocating in daily life
<i>Dimension 3 & Properties</i>	<i>Having limited access to developmental experiences</i> ◇ Experiences with exposure gaps ◇ Not being raised in family/culture of origin ◇ Not having access to	<i>Affirming self-worth through achievement</i> ◇ Achieving to overcome the foster care statistics ◇ Facing imposter syndrome	<i>Feeling foster care enough</i> ◇ Minimizing foster care experience ◇ Acknowledging foster care experience and countering dominant narratives	<i>Knowing oneself as worthy of safety stability and boundaries</i> ◇ Developing healthy relationships ◇ Setting boundaries in relationships	<i>Creating generational change—Having a legacy</i> ◇ Facilitating generational change within and beyond the foster care system ◇ Inspiring generational

	opportunities to develop a positive sense of self	◇ Being affirmed through achievements ◇ Having an achievement orientation		◇ Being worthy of rest ◇ Feeling confident in oneself	- change among youth in foster care ◇ Engaging in generational change within their families and kin
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