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A Phenomenological Study of African American Youth Aging Out of the Foster Care System

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Wandra C. Blocker

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

A Phenomenological Study of African American Youth Aging Out of the Foster Care

System

by

Wandra C. Blocker

MA, Adelphi University, 2000

BS, College of New Rochelle, 1992

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Ph.D. in Psychology

Walden University

March 2021

Abstract

In the United States, approximately 30,000 youth “age out” of the foster care system and enter independent living each year. Statistics indicate poverty, homelessness, unmet needs, and mental illness occur at higher rates for these youth than their non-foster care peers, and little research has been conducted regarding their experience. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system and factors they attribute to their transitional outcomes. The attribution and emerging adulthood theories guided this study. Data were collected via interview from a sample size of 12 African American youth aged 21- through 25-years-old who have aged out of the foster care system. The data were analyzed using Moustaka’s steps of analysis and coded to identify categories and themes. Themes emerging from the data included 7 areas of challenge in skills and preparation for independent living. The findings of this study suggested that ongoing preparation before and after emancipation, adult support, and supportive services, are some of the essential components that may ensure positive transitional outcomes. Recommendations include further research of the ongoing dilemma of this vulnerable population with focus on giving foster youth a voice in generating greater understanding of the difficulties, and improvement of policies and support services to reduce societal costs and generate positive outcomes resulting in social change.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my loving father Henry Boyd Platt, my dear sister Marylin Platt-Jackson, and my darling niece Traci-Jo Jackson. Thank you for your inspiration, your faith in me, your encouragement, and your love. I miss you all so very much.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Research revealed that the conditions, outcomes, and challenges of far too many youth who have aged out of the foster care system are the result of being forced into adulthood without the necessary preparation or support for independent living (Ahrens, 2011; Arnett, 2007; Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative [JCYOI], 2015). African American youth are a significant part of the foster care system. Upon aging out of foster care, many of these youth encountered violent attacks and are at a greater risk for homelessness, unemployment, welfare dependency, sexual abuse, and mental illness, than their foster and non-foster care peers (Courtney, 2010; Fowler et al, 2017; Graham, 2015; Howard, 2011). Aged-out African American youth are no longer the responsibility of the state and are not entitled to the much-needed services that the state provides (Courtney, 2017; Zlotnick, 2012). Without prior training or knowledge, African American youth must find and secure their own job, housing, education, and medical insurance (McGee, 2015). The outcomes for these youth not only affect the foster youth, but society as a whole (Cusick, 2010; Fowler et al., 2017).

Literature provides general information concerning foster youth. However, there is limited information concerning the transitional process and outcomes of African American foster youth. In this study, I explored the lived experience, needs, and disparities in outcomes of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system. My goal for this study was to bring awareness of the experiences, needs, and concerns of this vulnerable population. I sought to provide information that may inform

sensitive practices and give foster parents, educators, social workers, and other professionals in the system insight into how to improve the transitional process, resulting in positive outcomes and thus affecting social change.

The subsequent sections of this chapter include background information concerning the dilemma of African American foster youth and their transitional outcomes. This chapter includes information concerning available literature connected to this study's scope, the research problem of this study, the purpose of the study, and the need for public awareness of the lived experience of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system. This Chapter also includes discussion of the central research questions, the theoretical framework used, the nature of the study, definitions of terms, assumptions, delimitations, the significance of the study, and a summary of the Chapter.

Background

The literature indicated that each year thousands of youth in the United States enter the foster care system due to reasons beyond their control. Leathers (2019) indicated that some youth have experienced the loss of one or both parents or guardian and are considered wards of the state. Many enter the foster care system because of neglect, physical, and/or sexual abuse. Still others are placed in the foster care system because of their insolent behavior and constant running away (Denby, 2011; Leathers et al., 2019).

Extant literature indicates that the experiences of some 500,000 youth in the United States foster care system varies greatly (Neal, 2017; U.S. Department of Health &

Human Services [USDHHS], 2013). When a child is in an unsafe environment, where he or she is a victim of abuse or neglect, Child Welfare, or other agencies depending on the state, and even the court, will step in and make the decision to remove the child from the dangerous environment. It is at this point that the child welfare system takes on the role of temporary guardianship and provides for the well-being of the youth (Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2014; Leather, 2019). The system must provide quality care such as shelter, food, clothing, and other needed services for as long as the youth remains in the foster care system. The child welfare system is also responsible for preparing older youth for adulthood so that they will be able to live on their own after aging out of the foster care system (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Yaroni, 2010).

Studies indicated that research conducted between 1970 and 1980 revealed the existence of poor transitional outcomes among youth who have aged out of the system, and as the poor outcomes of aging-out youth became more and more apparent, policies and funding were implemented in an effort to address the needs of youth during the aging-out process (Courtney, 2010; Fowler, 2018). The Federal Independent Living Initiative of 1986 (ILIP), Title IV-E, Adoption Assistance and Foster Care Programs (AAFCEPs), and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (CFCIA) are examples of implemented programs. The Chafee Act made significant improvements in the Independent Living Program. It provided states with available funds for additional support in education, job training, substance abuse, and preventive health care for foster youth leaving the system. The law increased the funds to \$140 million dollars to states to support foster youth through age 21 (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL],

2016). The unsuccessful outcome of foster youth in transition affects both youth and the states in which they reside. These poor outcomes are estimated to cost the United States approximately 5.7 billion dollars in lost revenues which include, but are not limited to, education, criminal justice system expenditures, and expenses allocated for unplanned pregnancy in the areas of health programs and cash assistance from the government (AECF, 2013). A study conducted by the JCYOI (2013) showed that poor outcomes on average costs the community and taxpayers approximately \$300,000 dollars for each foster youth who aged out of the foster care system, in public assistance, incarceration, and community wages over the life of the individual youth. That is a yearly cost to the state of approximately 8 billion dollars (JCYOI, 2013).

A number of studies have been conducted on the disparate experiences of African Americans, but in comparison, little attention has been given to the outcomes of African American foster youths' transitional outcomes and their needs (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Research shows that relative to Caucasian youth, African American youth experience longer stays in foster care, more restrictive foster care placement, are less likely to be reunited with their families, and are less likely to find a permanent family. They are more likely to move through care, experience group care, and lack access to important services. African American youth are more likely to have poor social and behavioral outcomes and are less prepared to survive in life (Gtphen et al., 2017).

Literature indicates that African American foster youth lose needed services at the point of aging out of the system and others experience a decrease in services. Such services include physical health which went from 88.6% to 41.7%, mental health services

from 87.4% to 47.7%, and establishing relationships with a relative or interested adult from 72.4% to 9.8% (Harris, 2010).

Many African American youth are aging out of the foster care system unsuccessfully; therefore, a greater and continuing focus is needed on the transitional process. Little information exists concerning the plight of African American foster youth (Farrow, 2011; Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018). There is a gap in knowledge concerning African American youth and how they perceive their lived experience, aging-out process, unmet needs, and transitional outcomes (Leathers, 2019; Smith, 2011). Knowledge of how African American youth perceive their transitioning process from the foster care system to independent living is vital for the implementation of new programs and or the improvement of programs that are needed for the positive transitional outcomes of this population (Courtney, 2010; Fowler, 2018).

This study was needed to bring about a new awareness of the experiences, challenges, and unmet needs of African American youth who have aged out of care. I sought to inspire a move to action to review and improve existing programs, and adjust policies and procedures to meet the needs of African American youth, thus improving their well-being. African American youth cannot be helped if these needs are not known, understood, and continue to go unmet. This study was needed in order to ascertain and understand more about what these youth need and require in becoming productive members in society. . I sought to provide important information that would inform professionals within the foster care system of how better to assist African American youth transition successfully into society.

Problem Statement

African American youth are aging out of the foster care system unsuccessfully and with unmet needs in spite of a number of interventions to assist in the transition process. In the United States, there is an estimated 128,000 African American youth in the foster care system (USDHHS, 2010, 2016). The literature indicates that approximately 30,000 foster youth leave the system because they have reached the age for aging out of the foster care system without the support of a family (Courtney, 2011; USDHHS, 2015).

Research indicates that many of these youth are faced with the challenge of having to deal with the difficulties of life resulting in poorer outcomes than their peers (Gypen et al., 2017; JCYOI, 2015). Research also indicates that these youth are less prepared than others in their age group to manage independent living. They are more likely to become homeless, unemployed, and unable to obtain health care, compared to their foster and non-foster care peers (Miller, 2017). Thus, many African American youth in foster care find themselves suddenly forced out of a secure environment into an unstable setting without the necessary resources (Courtney, 2017; McGee, 2015; Zlotnick, 2012). The problem is that there are African American youth aging out of foster care unprepared, lacking the skills to live independently, with unmet needs and encountering negative outcomes (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Nesmith, 2014). This unpreparedness means these youth entering the transitional process are doing so at a greater disadvantage compared to some of their foster care peers and youth in the general population. Their disadvantage appears to stem from negative encounters such as

experiences of disparities and disproportionality, neglect, abuse, instability, and constant separations, before, while, and even after aging out of the system (AECF, 2018; Jackson, 2012; Knott, 2010). Research indicates that African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system are more likely to fall victim to drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, mental illness, unemployment, and homelessness than their peers (Ahrens, 2014; Fowler, 2018; Smith, 2011).

The gap I sought to fill with this study was the knowledge concerning the lived experience, needs, and perspective of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system. I sought to explore the lived experience, outcomes, supportive needs, and the perception of this vulnerable population. I also sought to explore factors that would have contributed to a successful or unsuccessful outcome in spite of the many laws, funds, and existing programs in place to help these youth transition to independent living. I sought to bring to light the issues and factors that contributed to the success or unsuccessful outcomes as viewed and shared by African American youth. This research was vital in that it is necessary to become more aware, understand, and learn more about this vulnerable population in order to effectively help them and improve their transitional outcome (Courtney, 2011; Gypen et al., 2017). Literature was found to be limited concerning the lived experience, supportive needs, outcomes, and perspective of African American youth. In the present study, I sought to contribute to the knowledge base of professionals within the foster care system which improved strategies, and skills used in order to help eliminate transitioning with unmet needs, and closing the gap between positive and negative outcomes of this vulnerable population. Previous literature

revealed a need for further research of this populace and revealed a gap in understanding and knowledge concerning factors that have contributed to the transition from foster care to independent living (Fowler, 2018; Graham, 2015). This study was a much needed step towards closing the gap between the successful and unsuccessful outcomes in the transitioning process making it possible for effective social change.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences, outcomes, and perceptions of African American youth within the New York Metropolitan area who have aged out of the foster care system. My goal for this qualitative research was to describe and interpret the lived experience of this phenomenon. I sought to gain an in-depth knowledge of the needs and issues that were particular to African American youth and explore issues that contributed to their successful or unsuccessful aging out process from their perspectives. The interpretive paradigm approach depends heavily on interviews, observations, and analysis which are naturalistic methods (Samar, 2017; Tracy, 2013). I used phenomenological interviews for this study and used them to understand and explore emergent themes as I focused on the views of the participants (Seidman, 2013; Tuffour, 2017). Thus, the qualitative phenomenological design and approach was the appropriate design for this research.

This research study was qualitative in nature and focused on answering the following questions.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to independent living?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): To what do African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system attribute their transitional outcome?

Framework

I used two theories as the basis for this study's framework: the attribution theory (Heider 1958; Weiner, 1974), focusing on the locus of control components (Rotter, 1966) and the emerging adulthood theory. The attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events that occurred in their lives and how they relate to their thinking, motivation, and behavior (Heider, 1958). I used the attribution theory to answer the research questions and understand how African American youth attribute cause to the events surrounding their successful or unsuccessful transitional outcomes. The attribution theory is a social psychology concept that focuses on the causes of events and the reasons individuals, experiencing these events, gives for the resulting outcomes (Cokely, 2003; Scherer, 2018). There are three dimensions to the attribution theory: locus of control, stability, and controllability (Perdue, 2009; Malle, 2011; Scherer, 2018). The locus of control refers to an individual's perception about the underlying causes of events in his or her life. In this study, I used the attribution theory to understand the disparities in outcomes and factors that contributed to the successful or unsuccessful transitional outcomes of African American youth participants as was perceived by them. I also used this theory to explore the impact of the foster care system on this vulnerable population and provide insight into their reaction to their transitional outcomes.

Emerging Adulthood

African American youth who have reached the age of majority are aging out of the foster care system unsuccessfully. The literature revealed that these youth are aging out of care unprepared and with unmet needs (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; USDHHS, 2011). Upon exiting foster care, the responsibilities of the system and the supportive services ceases thus leaving African American youth responsible for providing for themselves (Courtney, 2017; McGee, 2015).

The second theory guiding this study was the emerging adulthood theory (Murray, 2019). Emerging adulthood is a very distinct developmental period which occurs gradually. It is a period in life, extending from ages 18 to 29, when important changes occur in the areas of an individual's thinking, worldviews, employment, financial stability, love, and relationships. These milestones include, but are not limited to, self-sufficiency, sense of responsibility, and personal identity (Murray, 2019). Research conducted by Murra (2019) revealed that during the emerging adulthood period these important milestones may not have been achieved. The emerging adulthood consists of five components: the age of identity, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities that are discussed in Chapter 2. Emerging adulthood provides the baseline for this study as it focused on the development of foster youth, their well-being, experiences, needs, and transition to adulthood.

Creswell, 2013 indicated that phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focus on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. Through the phenomenological approach, I looked at the lived experiences of a number

of individuals encountering the same phenomenon and communicated the meaning of each individual's lived experience of the phenomenon as viewed through the eyes of said individuals. I used phenomenology to explore and identify what African American youth participants experienced and how they experienced it in terms of context .

In this study, I gathered information related to the perspectives of the research participants concerning the phenomenon of African American youth transitioning unsuccessfully from the foster care system to adulthood and independent living. Some African American youth transition from the foster care system to independent living with positive outcomes. They shoulder the responsibility of self-support successfully as they emerge from total dependency on the system to self-sufficient adulthood. It is not clear why some African Americans transition successfully and others transition unsuccessfully. Exploring the lived experiences of these youth who have transitioned into adulthood fits neatly into the selected framework. The focus was on the reasons African American foster youth participants attributed to the occurred events outcomes.

I sought to examine the lived experiences of African American youth who have transitioned to adulthood in an effort to comprehend the phenomenon. Credibility is very important to establish in a qualitative research (Byrne, 2010; Tuffour, 2017). Therefore, I collected and analyzed narrative materials using methods that ensured the credibility of both the data and results. I used questionnaires and interviews to examine what youth believed contributed to their transitioning process. I looked for any patterns or themes that were revealed and reviewed what all the participants had or may not have had in common.

There is an absence of studies examining the needs and outcomes of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system. In this study, I explored and acquired significant insight into the lived experience of African American foster youth encounters as they emerge to adulthood. The use of the phenomenological approach, emerging adulthood theory, and attribution theory, as an extension to the process brought about valuable knowledge and a meaningful understanding of the outcomes or results revealed from this study (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; Van Manen, 1990).

I used a qualitative method with a phenomenological design for this study. I posed general questions, collected data through one-on-one interviews, and conducted data analysis to discover themes and patterns. I developed the research questions to answer the question of what factors African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system attribute to their unsuccessful or successful transitional outcomes. This phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because it is used to collect and interpret data received from participants in order to understand a phenomenon. The views, thoughts, and feelings of the research participants were heard and summarized (Creswell et al., 2018)

Nature of the Study

This was a qualitative phenomenological study. A phenomenological study is used to depict the meaning participants create regarding their lived experience of a phenomenon or an observable occurrence (Tuffour, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the disparity in outcomes in African

American youth to gain insight into their needs. I also sought to explore the lived experiences of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system and factors that contributed to the successful or unsuccessful outcomes. The attention on African American youth, their perceptions, challenges they face, and the transition process resulted in a thorough depiction and analysis of their lived experience. The participants of this research study included 12 African American youth who transitioned from the foster care system to adulthood. Each participant completed a preinterview questionnaire, and engaged in a 65-minute one-on-one interview regarding their lived experience in foster care, their needs, the process of aging out of the foster care system to adulthood, and their outcomes.

I asked the participants a series of open-ended questions, two central questions, two secondary questions, and eight subquestions for each central and secondary question (Creswell et al., 2018). I asked the participants questions to obtain information that led to a textural and structural description of the experiences encountered (Neubauer, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). I transcribed, organized, and analyzed the data gathered from interviewing the participants. Information concerning the research procedures such as the research design and approach, the role of the researcher, the sampling process, data collection method, data analysis, data storing method, the interviewing process, research findings, and more, are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Definition of Terms

The following are functional terms used in this study.

Aging Out: Refers to the termination of court authority over and responsibility for foster care youth. Youth leave the system at the age of accountability set by the state, usually age 18 years old and older. Youth no longer qualify for funds or needed services and are forced to support themselves. The age of “aging out” varies from state to state (USDHHS, 2012).

Attribution Theory: A social psychology concept that has a focus on the cause of events and the reasons individuals attribute to the result of those events. There are three characteristics of the attribution theory, locus of control, stability, and controllability (Scherer, 2018).

Black or African American: American citizens of African descent, the offspring of African slaves, an ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB], 2018).

Disparity: A great difference. In this study, the unequal treatment of one group compared to another in the context of child welfare (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

Disproportionality: A complex phenomenon embedded in the fabric of our system and takes place in every state, in many systems in America. There is a strong presence of disproportionality in the child welfare system as well as education and the criminal justice system. It can refer to a situation in which a particular racial or ethnic group of youth is represented in foster care at a higher or lower percentage than other racial/ethnic groups (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

Emerging Adulthood: A period of time in life extending from age 18 to 29 in which changes and exploration of life take place (Arnett, 2000; Murray, 2019).

Foster Care: A temporary safe and stable living environment arrangement for youth who have been abused, neglected, or cannot be adequately cared for by their parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012).

Locus of Control: An important aspect of personality. Refers to an individual's perception about the main causes of events in his/her life (Neubauer, 2019; Rotter, 1966). The main cause of events may be internal or external. An individual with internal locus of control believes he or she can influence the events and outcomes of their life. The individual with an external locus believes he or she cannot influence the events and outcomes of their life, but environmental factors influence the events and outcomes that occur (Grinnell, 2016). Meaning the reason, they believe to be the cause of their success or failure to transition may be due to factors within themselves or factors within their environment. The theory is perceived as a way of explaining outcomes of events in order to reach understanding of a phenomenon (April, 2012; Scherer, 2018; Wiener, 1992).

Phenomenological Study: An approach concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual experiencing the event. The approach includes gathering "deep information" and perception through qualitative methods, interviews, observations, and representation through the perspective of the research participants (Tuffour, 2017).

Transition: The process of changing from one stage of life to another stage. For the foster care youth, the change is moving from life in foster care where the state

provides finances, food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and other needed services to living outside of formal care independently. During this process youth are faced with the responsibility of adulthood and move from total dependence on the foster care system to self-sufficiency and the challenges of independent living (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Youth: A time of life when one is young; specific age range between young adult 18, years old and adulthood, 25 years old (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Assumptions

I assumed that participants were willing to answer all survey questions honestly and truthfully to the best of their abilities as confidentiality is imperative for participants. I also assumed that the desire of African American foster youth to participate indicated that they were open to sharing their experiences as the study explored the lived experience of the participants.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study I sought to examine the lived experience of African American foster youth who had aged out of the foster care system in hope of learning the specific needs of said youth, factor or factors that contributed to their outcomes, and why African American youth are transitioning unsuccessfully in spite of all of the implementations to ensure successful transitioning outcomes. The scope of this study does not include the lived experience of foster youth under 19 years old or the lived experience of their families. Even though the lived experiences of younger foster youth can impact the future perception of aging out, they are not a part of this study. The scope of this study is

a small sample of African American youth who spent anywhere from six months to five years in foster care, and are between the ages of 19 through 25 years old. The focus is on the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to adulthood and their outcomes. The scope of this study represents only a single community. Other communities and states may have different programs and procedures that promote successful transitional outcomes for foster care youth.

Participants took part in responding to a prepared survey or preinterview questionnaire and engaged in an interview, which I analyzed and interpreted with caution.

Transferability is the extent to which research results can be applied to another community and/or setting (Merriam, 2018). Smith (2017) indicates that transferability is strengthened with the addition of rich details of the research participants, setting, and process. Individual readers of the study with proper information can more confidently decide if the study can be transferred to their population (Hill, 2012). The present research study was conducted in the metropolitan area of New York. The participants were a small representation of an ethnic group of African American foster youth ages 19 to 25 years old that aged out of the system. Conducting this study using a different ethnic group, under different conditions or settings may or may not render different results.

Limitations

The study included a small sample size which consisted of 12 participants. The sample is not generalizable, but that was not the desire of this study. There was a potential for participants not to respond honestly to surveys and or interviews and the results not accurately reflect the opinions of all included in the population. There was a

potential for bias on my part during the interpretations and a chance that I would have influenced the participants' response during the interviews. I used Husserl's concepts, of epoché, or "bracketing out" and set aside my own experiences to the best of my ability in order to have a fresh perspective of the phenomenon. In addition to "bracketing out," I conducted semistructured interviews, audiotape, and note taking to ensure accurate transcribing of transcripts. A discussion of issues of trustworthiness and validity are presented in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

This research was important because it explored the lived experience and viewpoints of transitional African American youth involved in the foster care system. The literature provided information of past studies that reflect the economic and social climate of 1998 through 2016. The literature also provided information identifying the limited studies, specific laws, generated funds, and directives for implementation of programs and services to be provided (Dworsky, 2009). These programs and services were put into place to assist youth in the transitional process (Child Welfare League of America, 2009). There are African American foster youth who are still experiencing unacceptable outcomes transitioning from foster care to adulthood irrespective of the available resources. The literature indicates that 36% of the aged-out population will find themselves homeless, and 56% unemployed (Child Welfare League of America, 2009, Child Welfare Outcomes, 2015). The result of this study gave insight into the lived experience of African American youth who aged out of the foster care system, their needs, and the functionality of foster care professionals working with transitional youth.

The gaining of insight may help identify any breakdowns, failed programs, or services that would possibly attribute to the unsuccessful transition process. African American foster youth helped as a result of the increased awareness and understanding of the needs and development of this vulnerable population is suggestive of positive social change.

The result of this study may render insight into the operation of the foster care system and the transitional process as viewed through the lived experience of African American youth once and currently involved in the foster care system. In this research study I sought to add knowledge to the literature and bring a greater awareness of a serious need for a more effective transition process and to give a voice to those youth who have unsuccessfully transitioned from foster care to adulthood to share their experiences and common needs. Focusing on professionals: educators, social workers, and practitioners, the implementation of professional development with the purpose of informing cultural sensitive practices, and adding knowledge concerning ways to improve the transitional process which will foster successful outcomes of African American youth, thus creating change in the life of these youth and bringing about a positive change in society.

There are implications for positive social change; an increased awareness and better understanding of the lived experience of African American youth, needs, and their transitional outcome. The potential positive social change includes: An increased awareness of foster youth falling through the cracks as they transitioned to adulthood, improvement of professional practices and policies within and out of the foster care system, and amended supportive services. Information from this study is designed to

inform the development of new programs geared to meeting the individual needs of aged out African American youth thus creating a transitional process that will result in successful outcomes.

Summary

In Chapter 1 I presented brief insight into the foster care system and provided information relevant to African American youth exiting the foster care system. The transitional process was a very daunting experience for these African American youth aging out of foster care. The challenges of independent living were vast and extremely difficult for any youth. For those African American youth in foster care who have reached the age of majority and are moving out of the foster care system without support, the challenge was devastating. All of the services and support that were available to African American youth while in foster care stopped at the point of aging out. The food, shelter, medical supplies, and other services needed had to be obtained by the aging out African American youth themselves. Approximately 30,000 youth emancipate from the foster care system at any given year (USDHHS, 2011, 2013, 2017). Too many youths unsuccessfully age out and find themselves without adult support, safety nets, or funds. African American youth experiences of unsuccessful transitional process, disproportionality and disparity in the foster care system occurs in every state. This phenomenon continues to stimulate national studies to search for a solution.

In this study I sought to gain knowledge of the needs specific to African American youth, and understand the issues that contributed to the aging out process of former African American youth by exploring their lived experience and perception. The

central question for the exploration of the lived experience of African American youths' transitioning outcome was: What is the lived experience of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system? The second question was: To what do African American youth who have aged out of foster care system attribute their transitional outcome? This qualitative phenomenological study included 12 African American participants 21 years and older that aged out of the foster care system after being in the system at least six months. Sources used for gathering information consisted of preinterview questionnaires, semistructured interviews, and an audio digital recorder. The collected data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological process.

The phenomenological approach and emerging adulthood theory along with Heider (1958) attribution theory served in bringing about meaningful understanding to the lived experience of this vulnerable populations' transitional process as they viewed it thus, gaining knowledge and insight into their needs. Personal interviews of participants in reference to their lived experience and transitional process supported the existing literature. I sought to inform new strategies that fosters motivation, build self-esteem, and lead to early training and preparation for independent living. People are active interpreters of the events that occurred in their lives (Hieder, 2013; Scherer, 2018). They use consistent methods of sense making in their interpretations. I used this framework because it provided a foundation for understanding explanations individuals use to explain why certain outcomes occur.

In Chapter 1 I presented the purpose of the proposed study and the background information for exploring the lived experience of African American youth aging out of

the foster care system unsuccessfully. In Chapter 2 I included a review of the literature and provided a discussion of the framework, and a brief history of the foster care system in the United States. In Chapter 2 I also provided a discussion of the continuing problem of the racial and ethnic disparities within the foster care system, and explore the needs of African American youth in the foster care system. I also presented a discussion on youth aging out of the foster care system, at risk youth, policies, and laws designed to help youth aging out of the system, and the transitional process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Youth unsuccessfully aging out of the foster care system and unable to self-support or obtain and maintain independent living, affects every state across America. The United States has approximately 442, 995 children in the foster care system and of that number, 23% are African American (USDHHS, 2012, 2017). There are roughly 23,000–30,000 youth including African American youth, who leave foster care each year because they have reached the age for aging out of the foster care system (USDHHS, 2014, 2017). The problem that I addressed in this study was the sparse attention related to the disparities in outcomes of African American youth, needs specific to African American youth, and African American youth aging out of the foster care system unsuccessfully in spite of the efforts, funds, and policies enacted to meet their needs and ensure a positive transitional outcome. The literature indicates that African American youth are faced with disparity experiences before, while in the system, and even after aging out of the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2015; USDHHS, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system. I sought to gain an in-depth knowledge of the needs and issues that are specific to African American youth, explore their perspective of their transitional process and outcomes, inform the public and make recommendations that may help improve the future transitional process of African American youth. A review of the literature is divided into

four sections. In the first section, I provided the theoretical framework. In the second section, I explored the foster care system in the United States. The third section, I discussed the topic of youth aging out of foster care, examining at-risk youth, social ills, and the policies put in place to remedy the social ills which impact youth transitioning to independent living. In the fourth section, I discussed the racial, ethnic disparities, and the overrepresentation of African American youth within the foster care system. In the final section, I also considered the transitional process and the marginalization of those youth aging out.

Literature Search Strategy

I used several sources of information for this literature search. The literature search was performed using Walden University Library; the databases I used included ProQuest, Sage Full-text, PsycArticles, which rendered peer reviewed literature. Key terms such as *foster care*, *youth aging out* and *transitioning outcome* were used in the search to gain access to helpful articles. Also, PsycInfo was accessed by using terms such as *aging out*, and *foster care system* as origins of inquiry. Other search terms, words, and phrases were used to narrow down the search. These terms include, *African American foster youth*, *transitioning to adulthood*, *outcomes*, *exiting foster care*, *health outcomes*, *education*, *crime*, *African American youth*, and *at risk youth*. To find additional articles, journals, and other information, I used EBSCO host. I used other online sources to find additional related literature, however, the information concerning the transitional process, lived experiences, outcomes, and needs specific to African American foster youth and their perspective were sparse. To address this gap, I reviewed

the existing literature using the terms and databases specified above. The literature reviewed provided information of past studies that reflected the economic and social climate of 1998 through 2020.

The literature search revealed a plethora of articles on the foster care system, laws, policies, and the funds allocated to states with stipulations concerning youth transitioning from the foster care system and the challenges they face. I explored the social and cultural factors that influenced African American youth aging out of foster care using the established research questions to gain information. I conducted the present literature review for a better understanding of the background of the problem.

Theoretical Foundation

I used both the attribution theory and the emerging adulthood theory as the theoretical framework in this study (Murray, 2019; Rotter, 1966; Weiner, 1974). The attribution theory, a main research paradigm, is used to focus on whom or what individuals attributed as the cause of events and how people attribute explanations for the events. There are three aspects of the attribution theory that I used in exploring the explanations individuals render for positive or negative transitional outcomes. The attribution theory includes: locus of control, stability, and controllability. According to Murray (2019), locus of control indicates that the cause of success or failure can stem from an internal or external source. An individual may succeed or fail due to factors stemming from within the individual or external factors stemming from the individual's environment. The second aspect or characteristic of the attribution theory is stability. Factors resulting in failure or success may be stable or unstable in nature. If the cause is

believed to be stable, then the behavior will be the same on other occasions. If the cause is believed to be unstable then the resulting behavior will be different on other occasions (Murray, 2019). Controllability is the third characteristic. When individuals believe that they can change the factors at will, then the factors are considered controllable. If the individuals believe they are unable to change the factors, then they are considered uncontrollable factors (Rotter, 2016).

Attribution theory is a social psychology concept that focuses on explaining the cause of behavior and events. As I looked for the reasons related to the success or failure in the experience of those aging out, it is important to understand the mind-set and underlying factors that contributed to their outcomes. Understanding any given situation brings awareness and contributes to the knowledge base of the participants and the general population. The literature indicates that the attribution theory was used in previous research to explore the causal attribution made by individuals relating to their behavior (Dweck, 2018). The literature revealed an additional study in which the attribution theory was used to examine the causal attributions made by African American youth that related to academic success. In a study conducted by Austen-Smith and Fryer, 2006 all three dimensions are used in determining the cause participants attributed to their academic outcomes.. A basic assumption of the attribution theory is that an individual's understanding of the causes of past events influences their future action.

Emerging Adulthood

African American youth are aging out of the foster care system with unsuccessful outcomes. These youth encountered challenges that were not experienced by non-

African American youth or the general population of youth not a part of the foster care system. Billions of dollars are allocated to various states specifically for the support of former foster youth annually (USDHHS, AYCF, CB, 2012). However, there are still individuals who have and are experiencing poor transitional outcomes. Fowler (2018) indicated that these poor outcomes are an indication that some African American youth who have aged out of the system lack provisions, skills and or the wherewithal to live independently. This is a phenomenon that needs to be addressed in order to bring about change that improves the outcomes of these youth as they transition to adulthood.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a very important developmental stage of youth. It is a time when youth emerge into adulthood with the support of their parents or trusted adult caregiver to help them through the difficult times as they adjust to independent living.

Arnett's emerging adulthood theory, is the second theory that I used in the framework of this present study. The concept of emerging adulthood is a useful framework for understanding the struggles and hardships experienced by foster youth and the importance this population entering independent living at the time of readiness and not to early. According to Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood is a distinct time in the development of individuals ages 18 to 29 transition into adulthood. Arnet (2009) defines emerging adulthood as a period of development connecting adolescents and young adulthood. It is during this time when youth are no longer adolescents, and have not reached adult status. There are five key features of emerging adulthood: identity

explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities. As these young people emerge into adulthood, they must accomplish each milestone.

The literature indicates that during the period of identity of exploration, youth are trying to decide what they want out of life concerning school, job, and love. They are searching for stability. During the age of instability there are frequent moves and changes. Youth may leave home and live with a friend or a romantic partner, or enter college, and still have the support of their parents. However, African American youth often experience changes that renders them homeless without the necessary support (Courtney, 2011; Fowler, 2018). Emerging adulthood presents numerous opportunities for young people to explore freedom during the age of self-focus. These youth are trying to determine what they want to do, where they want to go, and with whom to develop a relationship. During the feeling in between period, many emerging youths start to take on responsibility as an adult, but do not feel like adults. During the age of possibilities emerging adults are confident that they will live better than their parents (Arnett, 2002; Murray, 2019). Transitioning from dependent living to independent living is a difficult task for many, especially for African American foster youth (Naccarato, 2010; Courtney et al. 2012). The literature indicates that there is a need for further qualitative research concerning African American youth and their lived experience (Lane, 2020).

In this study, I sought to find the meaning, structure, and fundamental nature of the lived experience of this populace. I focused on the lived experience and how that experience was remembered and the understanding of the world through the perspective of the African American youth participants. I explored emerging themes that were

common from the life experiences of the participants and their perceptions of the phenomenon. The approach revealed the lived experience of African American foster youth as it connected to the transitional process. In this study I sought to gather hidden information through the use of interviews, discussions, and observations. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of African American foster youth who have age out of the foster care system. To accomplish this goal, I used the phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology focuses on the experienced phenomenon and how understanding that phenomenon provides meaning and clarification (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

The purpose of phenomenological research is to discover the human experience by describing the voice of its participants (Bloomberg, 2012; Creswell, 2018).

Phenomenology, is the appropriate approach for this study. The frameworks provided hidden information that rendered a direct correlation as to the success or unsuccessful transition of youth who have aged out of the foster care system (Gypen et al., 2017; Smith, 2009). Using this approach along with the attribution theory, I gained knowledge and understood the help these youth needed to understand certain behaviors they exhibited or observed during their transition process.

Literature Review

History of the Foster System in the United States

Foster care started in the United States as a result of the work of Charles Brace in the mid-19th century. Charles Brace took approximately 30,000 homeless, neglected children who were living in the streets and slums of New York City and placed them with

various Christian families in states around the country (Anderberg, 2011). O'Connor (2009) stated that as an alternative to children living in custodial institutions, for example, orphanages and almshouses, Brace is known for the "placing-out system" or foster care in which orphans and abandoned children from New York were sent to families who resided on farms in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana. This process, in which children traveled to different states by way of train, was deemed, "The Orphan Train Movement" (Staller, 2020).

Charles Brace founded the Children's Aid Society and gave rebirth to the foster care approach. The foster care approach, after a period of time, met with much adversity. Those operating orphanages were somewhat critical of the foster home approach. They believed that custodial institutions were better equipped to provide professional care and attention to the needs of the children whereas foster care families lack the proper training to meet the needs of various youth (Karell, 2018; Trammell, 2009). It is necessary that foster families receive proper training in order to meet the needs of youth in foster care. Periodic visitation by the caseworker is also necessary for the protection of the youth in their environment. There were no checks and balances (Karell, 2018; Lindsey, 2004; Trammell, 2009). The children placed in homes of families across the country made it difficult to adequately supervise the families and safeguard the children (Staller, 2020). Brace, in response to his critics, put procedures in place to help improve the placement of children in foster homes. He funded studies in order to monitor the outcomes of the foster care approach. However, it was not until an extended length of time after the death of Charles Brace that the Children's Aid Society applied those procedures (Weindinger,

2010). Foster care was clearly different from indentured servitude in that the children were placed in homes and the Children's Aid Society caseworker conducted home visits to monitor the child's progress and make sure the child was properly cared for in a suitable environment (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Smith, 2011).

Foster care is a system that was devised to be a temporary safe haven for youth who are unable to stay with their parents, family members, or live on their own. Child welfare would then step in, take responsibility, make decisions, offer protection, and provide and care for said youth (Denby, 2009). These youth were removed from their homes and placed in care for a number of reasons: the unfortunate death of one or both parents, truancy, poverty, deviant behavior, or other family crisis. The main reasons youth were removed from their homes was neglect and abuse (Karger, 2014; Rochefort, 2020; Tam, 2012). Nearly 1,854 youth are abused or neglected on a daily basis in America (Children of Defense Fund, 2017). This number represents a total of 676,569 youth a year that could potentially end up in foster care (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2011).

Smith (2011) indicated that if it was determined that youth were exploited, neglected or abused they would be removed from the home and placed in what was considered a safe and more appropriate setting. When youth are taken out of the home, they are placed temporarily in what is called an intake home. These youth are experiencing separation and detachment, which carries over into the aging -out to adulthood process. These youth grow up in foster care, an environment and culture

unfamiliar to them. The effect on their development and social lives may be life changing (Haggman-Laitila et al.; Smith, 2011).

The United States has approximately 442,995 youth in the foster care system (USDHHS, 2010, 2015, 2017). Nearly 24,000 of some 442,995 youth exit the foster care system each year. In 1950 the child welfare system started to provide foster care and other services for youth in need. The concern was that the child welfare system nationwide was not providing for the safety, health, permanency, and well-being of said youth (USDHHS 2010, 2014).

Laws and policies were put in place to improve those services rendered for the needs of youth in foster care (Smith, 2011). Such enactments were The Foundation for the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 was signed into law by President Bill Clinton. This act impacted foster care in a major way. Adoption and Safe Families Act was one of the most significant sections of legislation dealing with child welfare prior to the signing of the act within twenty years (Trammell, 2009). This was the biggest increase in the adoptions since the origin of the National Foster Care Program (Golden, 2009). The Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010, a federal health insurance program designed to provide more people with access to health insurance, also made provisions for foster youth. ACA requires states to provide health care coverage for youth aging out of the foster care system (Pergamit et al., 2012). The CFCIP, is another program put in place and provides assistance to current and former foster youth in an effort to help them achieve independent status. States and tribes that submit plans to assist foster youth who are aging out in various areas received grants to help them

implement their plans (USDHHS, 2009). In spite of the implementations of plans to assist foster youth aging out of foster care, gain self-sufficiency, and transition with positive outcomes, there were still many foster youths who approach aging out unprepared and not self-sufficient resulting in negative outcomes (Avery, 2010; Collins, 2011; Courtney, 2017).

Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Youth aging out, is a phrase that refers to the youth in foster care who have reached the age of 18 and are not considered to be the responsibility of the state any longer. These youth are not qualified to receive services or funds from the foster care program (Myers, 2010). In the United States, nearly 30,000 youth age out of the foster care system yearly. Many of these youth exiting the system were emancipated at age 18 without necessary support, a caring family member, someone they can depend on, or a safe permanent venue to call home (USDHHS, 2009, 2010).

The literature indicated that youth aging out of foster care upon reaching age 18 years of age, encounter hard challenges. They encounter such challenges as increased mental health issues, homelessness, unemployment, and more. Aging out youth are at high risk for these negative outcomes than their peers in the general population (McGuire et al., 2018; Pecora, 2010).

In order for them to succeed, they would need an advocate, someone to support them and assist them as they transition to adulthood (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2019). As foster youth prepare to leave care, they need counseling, certain skills, and essential services to help them successfully make the transition. They require housing, funds,

medical insurance, and training to help them prepare for employment and their own personal responsibilities. Studies of youth, who leave foster care without a safe, sound, permanent family, and positive relationships, consistently reveal negative life outcomes (Wehman, 2011).

Developmental Stage and Transitional Process

Transitioning is a process that involves a specific type of change. It is a change that signifies moving from one stage in life to another. Youth are moving from a dependent position to an independent position. The transitioning process occurred between the ages of 16 and 24, depending on the state (Wehman, 2011). There were also changes in youth development that takes place when individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood. During this period of development physical, sexual, cognitive, and emotional changes occur. This transition is a period of difficult growth. Navigating the journey from adolescence to adulthood is a challenging time. When youth are not prepared for transitioning, they are not ready for change and are vulnerable for environmental adversity. The developmental process requires youth to take precise steps towards levels of independence in the areas of emotional maturity, employment, finance, housing, and education (Miller et al., 2017). Change can be an easy process or a difficult one, but a process that can be accomplished. When at the threshold of transition all youth experience some form of fear, apprehension, and difficulty adjusting. The difference between youth not in foster care and youth in care, is youth in care have parents or guardians to help them through the transition process. Too many foster care youths do

not have the needed relationship and love. These youth starting out at a disadvantage are pushed out of the system without a net to fend for themselves (Wehman, 2011).

The transitioning process is decided upon and initiated by each state. The literature points out that some foster youth struggle to clothe and feed themselves, obtain housing, find a job, and get medical insurance (Courtney, 2010; Fowler, 2018). It is extremely difficult for youth struggling, without proper support to focus on doing well academically, going to college, or thinking about socializing with friends. Transitioning foster youth have no support system that they are able to depend on (Courtney, 2010). They have to manage by themselves. It is important that one understands the different challenges transitioning foster youth encounters in order that the youth can be helped through the transition process (Turnball, 2009).

The literature indicated that 25 percent to 50 percent of foster youth do not complete high school compared to 7 percent of their peers in the general population. Only 20 percent to 30 percent of youth who have aged out of foster care attend college compared to 53 percent to 60 percent of their peers in the general population (USDHHS, 2009, 2014). There is a need for additional studies of the transitional outcomes of foster youth in order to help foster youth transition successfully. Transitioning must concern itself with the whole life pattern of the youth as it relates to their future. Youth aging out experience difficulty integrating themselves with the real adult world (Turnball, 2009). This vulnerable population needs to be well developed and well prepared at the time of transitioning.

Racial and Ethnic Disparities within Foster Care

Youth of color are documented as disproportionately represented in the United States foster care system. Disproportionality refers to the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group in the child welfare system compared to its percentage in the general population (CWIG, 2016). In most states there are higher proportions of African American youth in foster care than in the general youth population (Hill, 2006). African American youth hold a distinctive and recognized racial disproportional position in the out of home care system. These youth, depending on the state, may be overrepresented or underrepresented. Research indicates that African American youth nationally are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and the disproportionality can indicate the disparate outcomes, services, and treatment that African American youth and their families experience while affiliated with foster care (CWIG, 2011). Studies have been documented by the Federal government among African Americans from referrals to Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies (USDHHS, 2009; The Administration on Children, Youth and Families [ACYF], Children's Bureau [CB], 2012). Literature points to studies indicating the fact that African American foster youth are not considered for certain services although they represent a special needs population due to their disproportionate numbers in out of home care. This outcome is despite the intent of federal legislation (Curtis, 2011; Smith 2011). With all of the policies, programs, reforms, and interventions in place, the question is: Why does disproportionality exist? In order to answer this complex question, one would have to

consider the change in the historical approach, examine the social conditions youth are raised in, and the cultural context in which there are services rendered (Curtis, 2011). Evidence indicates that African American youth experience unfavorable outcomes concerning service in connection with ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being. The literature is limited concerning African Americans youth in and out of the foster care system, their transitional experiences, and outcomes (USDHHS, ACYF, CB, 2012).

What is known about African American foster youth is that African American youth are four times as likely as Caucasian youth to be in the foster care system (Barbell et al., 2018; Children Defense Fund [CDF], 2011). A prior study on improving the outcomes of African American males involved in the system indicates that African American foster males are 2.5 times more likely to be in foster care than their non-African American male peers (Gypen et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2014).

African American youth in the foster care system—a vulnerable population—make up 24% of the United States foster care system (CWIG, 2013). African American foster youth are overrepresented in the system, experience multiple placements, and spend a longer time in care than their peers in the system (Collins, 2015; Courtney, 2017; Miller, 2009).

African American youth are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. They are approximately 15.3 percent of the total youth population and 31 percent of the foster care population compared to Caucasian youth who are 58.6 percent of the total youth population, and 40 percent of the foster care population. Hispanic youth are 18.3 percent of the total youth population, and 20 percent of the foster care

population; and others count for 2.7 percent of the total youth population and 5 percent of the foster care population (USDHHS, 2009, 2010, 2014).

African American males in foster care experience more frequent placement moves. When it comes to placement 21 percent find themselves in group homes and institutional settings compared to 15 percent of all other foster care youth. In addition, exiting to permanent families is less likely for African American males than non-African American males (Miller et al., 2014).

Health Outcomes

The experiences African American youth encounter while in foster care placed them in a high at-risk position for the need of health care. Literature indicates African American youth are at greater risk for mental health issues, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (McGuire et al., 2018; Pecora et al., 2009). Being taken out of their homes and placed in foster care was a traumatic experienced for these youth. Unfortunately, there are foster youth, who have experienced abuse and neglect while in the system and are affected mentally, emotionally, and physically and in need of health care. However, the system falls short in addressing the mental and emotional issues that have developed as a result of their negative encounters (Ahrens, 2010; Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Smith, 2011).

African American youth are less likely than Caucasian youth to receive outpatient mental health services. Literature indicates that African American youth are faced with a different set of challenges while in and after aging out of the foster care system. While in the system, African American youth experience a more extended stay

in foster care than their Caucasian counterparts, they lack access to much-needed services, resulting in poor outcomes and more restrictive foster care placements (Miller et al., 2014). African American youth experience multiple placements in homes and schools which lead to insecurity, low self-esteem, low academic performances, and problems transitioning to adulthood (Leathers et al., 2019). The literature shows that numerous placements are associated with instability. There is little stability or guidance for African American youth and they find themselves at a greater disadvantage. These youth are vulnerable and as a result of the problems they encounter, many youth who age out of foster care do so unsuccessfully and with the odds against them (Cusick, 2010; Gypen et al., 2017).

Employment Outcomes

A study was conducted to explore former foster youth ages 17 to 24 experiences in the workforce. The study indicated that even if youth obtain a job and work, they do so at a disadvantage due to instability and a lack of skills. Education and skills are predictors of employment. Studies reveal that Caucasian youth aging out of the foster care system show better employment stability and earnings than African American youth (Gypen et al., 2018; Macomber, 2008). Literature indicated that African American youth aging out of foster care start work later, have lower rates of employment and have less stable employment than Caucasian youth. Only two-fifths of African American youth find employment by age 24 compared to three-fifths of Caucasian youth (Entwisle, 2000). Literature revealed that when African American youth age out of foster care more than 50% are unemployed and 20% find themselves homeless. Those youth who

experience being homeless and unemployed were lacking the necessary skills for living independently (Courtney, 2017; McGee, 2015). One study, in particular, partly influenced the present study because it used a qualitative approach and the attribution theory to research the achievement gap, a standardized measure identifying disparities in the educational achievement of a group of youth (Garmezy, 1993). A study revealed that the intellectual and emotional failures of youth are not evenly distributed and the failure falls disproportionately on youth of color (Education Week, 2004). The participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data was gathered through questionnaires, discussion groups, and surveys. The responses were analyzed, and classified with narrative description to highlight the participant's meaning, and added clarity to findings and assertions (Tuffour, 2017; Byrne, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

While the study viewed and explored the literature and the existing problems of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood, research on the outcomes of African American foster youth was limited and indicated that additional studies were needed (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2019; Smith, 2011). There is a need as indicated by prior studies, for further exploration on the transitional outcomes, perception, and needs specific to African American foster youth that have aged out and are aging out of the foster care system. This study will attempt to bridge the gap and add to the knowledge base concerning the transitional outcomes of aged out African American youth.

Summary

There are about 442,995 youth in the foster care system in the United States (USDHHS, 2010, 2015). In accordance with the law, the state took on the responsibility

of taking care of and providing for all these children. These youth, on average, may remain in the foster care system for two years. Others may remain in the foster care system five or more years or until they age out (Courtney, 2017).

This vulnerable population is faced with so many challenges from the onset of their “out of home” care (Smith, 2011). The literature indicated that African American youth are not considered for certain services although they represent a special needs population, due to their disproportionate numbers in “out of home” care. These youth are not being discriminated against in the policy however; there were problems or imbalances within the care of the system and the investigators making the decisions (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Harris, 2009; Smith, 2011).

African American youth are ready for emancipation between the ages of 16 and 24 depending on the laws of the state. When youth are ready to age out, they are terminated from all legal responsibility of the system. Depending on the state, youth may lose eligibility to receive needed services from the child welfare system after an extended time. The extended period of time may be ages 21 or 24 depending on the state (Goodkind, 2011; Miller et al., 2017). Unfortunately, older youth lose out on the protection, care, guidance, and support of the system.

Youth aging out of foster care are at risk for poor outcome and risky behavior entering adulthood. The literature indicates that 18 percent to 36 percent of youth who have exited the system have experienced homelessness and 35 percent found themselves having to move several times since exiting the system. In addition, 45 percent of aged out youth reported having problems with the law and 41 percent experienced time in jail

(Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Many foster care youth aging out of the system are doing so unsuccessfully. Aging out unsuccessfully for the purpose of this research is evidenced by a youth's inability to care for and support his or herself past the age of 21. They are totally dependent on others to provide the basic necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, employment, and finances.

The selected theory relates to this present study in that it identified reality as perceived by African American foster youth. This phenomenological study explored issues that have contributed to the successful or unsuccessful aging out process of African American foster youth. The literature indicated that phenomenology is the study of experiences that reveals complex meaning (Neubauer, 2019). It provides in depth meaning of the lived experience of foster youth aging out process. Literature also indicated that there are five sources of commonalities explored in phenomenology. These sources are situations, embodiment, temporality, concerns, and common meanings. Exploring these sources through shared experiences gave insight into the cultural and social environment. Exploring teen development, relationships, encounters, challenges, and foster care are important cultural factors that were considered as this study attempted to answer the research questions (Avery, 2010; Courtney et al., 2017; Zlotnick, 2012).

The focus of this literature review was on the foster care system of the United States as a whole, state funding, policies, laws, and the challenges foster youth encountered in and out of care. The literature provided information on the transitioning from dependent to independent living. The focus of this present study is on the lived experience of African American foster youth who have aged out of the foster care

system, their needs, and their perception of what contributed to their successful or unsuccessful transitional outcomes. The literature concerning the vulnerable population is limited. What is not known is why there are disparities in outcomes of African American foster youth, needs that are specific to African American foster youth, and their perception of their transitional process. What is known is that there are difficult challenges, unmet needs, and disparities in outcomes, high risk potential, and unsuccessful aging out process of African American foster youth that remains a phenomenon as long as there is no solution. Effective programs and services must be available for these youth in an effort to make sure their needs are met and they are prepared for independent living, thus resulting in more positive transitional outcomes. The literature review of this study provided a foundation and revealed the gap in the literature that validated the need for additional research studies. Gathering information, which is discussed in Chapter 3, from participating African American foster youth provides themes and patterns of former African American foster youth that helped African American foster youth approaching the transitional process experience positive transitional outcomes.

Chapter 3 provides information on the methodology for this research study, the research questions to be addressed, how the participants were identified and recruited, and how the information was organized and analyzed. This study explored the lived experience of African American youth who aged out of the foster care system and the cultural and social factors that attributed to the unsuccessful or successful transition to adulthood. There was a need to fill the gap in the literature concerning the needs of

African American foster youth and their perception of their successful or unsuccessful transition to adulthood in spite of all of the laws and services in place to help support them. This study sought to bring meaningful insight and public awareness through the perceptions of the participants of this research. Working to stimulate a move to bring positive transitional outcomes in the system brings about positive social change. A discussion of issues of trustworthiness and validity are also presented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience, supportive needs specific to, and outcomes of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system. This study was necessary in order to acquire more knowledge of the needs specific to African American youth and understand the issues that contribute to the success or unsuccessful transition of this vulnerable population. Numerous youth continue to transition with unsuccessful outcomes despite all of the provisions, laws, and supportive services (Dworsky, 2014; Pergamit et al., 2017). The gap in this study that I sought to fill was the lived experience, transitional perception, and needs specific to African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to independent living. In this I also focused on gaining meaningful understanding of the issues that attributed to the failure or success of their transitional outcomes. Courtney (2017) indicated that there is a need to understand the perceptions of foster care youth who are failing to transition successfully and are overlooked. These youth are having enormous difficulty transitioning to adulthood (Fowler, 2018). This research study provides additional understanding of the preparation process, and the role of African American youth involved in the transitional process. Chapter I provided information on the methodology for this research study. In this Chapter I also highlighted the research design and rationale, the research questions to be addressed, and how the participants were identified and recruited. I also examined the methods used to organize

and analyze data. Presented also in this Chapter were issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The research study was qualitative in nature and focused on answering the following research questions.

Research Question 1 (RQ1) What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the fostercare system to independent living?

Research Question 2 (RQ2) To what do African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system attribute their transitional outcome?

The purpose of this research study was to explore the lived experience, outcomes, and needs specific to African American youth, who have aged out of the foster care system and the factor or factors they attributed to the successful or unsuccessful transitional outcomes. Knowing and understanding causes may bring about an awareness and contribute to the knowledge base and improve transitional outcomes (Hayden, 2014).

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. Neubauer (2019) indicated that a phenomenological method is an appropriate approach to research with the purpose of understanding the meaning of a particular experience around a specific phenomenon. I selected the phenomenological method to explore the experience of African American youth aging out of the foster care system and the factors that contribute to or impede their transitioning to independent living. A phenomenological method was an appropriate approach for this study because the purpose of the study is to understand the meaning of the lived experience of the participants. I used this approach to identify the meanings

ascribed by the participants to their experiences. I also used this approach to gain an in-depth understanding surrounding the outcomes of the aging-out process. These descriptions of the meanings and essence of the phenomenon requires that each experience be viewed as unique with respect for the distinctions in perceptions, thoughts, and feelings (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, 2019). I explored the lived experiences of these youth through open-ended questions presented during one-on-one interviews with each participant.

Role of the Researcher

An important aspect of phenomenological research is the researcher's interest in understanding the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants. Knowing the reason for interest in a phenomenon, I gained insight into any potential biases. Self-reflection is often a catalyst for the most significant awareness of a phenomenon (Neubauer, 2019). Phenomenological research requires the researcher to engage in the use of Husserl's concepts of epoché. Epoché is when the researcher brackets their preconceived biases and set aside his or her experience in order to have a fresh perspective of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, 2019).

My interest in the study of African American youth aging out of the foster care system and their successful or unsuccessful transition to adulthood was sparked by working in the public-school system. Working in the school system in a predominately African American community afforded me the opportunity to work with students—some of whom were in the foster care system—and interact with their caregivers and caseworkers. I was able to observe foster youth of various ages, their performance

academically, socially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually in the classroom and community setting. Communicating with foster teens and their caregivers, I have learned that some foster youth experience negative transitions while others experience positive transitions. My questions concerning the plight of African American foster youth and their dilemma motivated me to research this population to learn as much as possible about the success or unsuccessful experiences of the transitional outcomes. My experiences working with foster youth and interacting with foster caregivers and social workers while in the school system, created more questions as to the factors that contributed to or impeded the outcomes of these foster youth. The research gave me insight into the lived experience of the participants in the study.

Only those who live through an experience are able to tell the story effectively. In a phenomenological study the investigator is a participant, who engages in self-reflection, which is an integral attribute of the research process. The role of the researcher is to show empathy, engage the participants in conversation and explore with them the meaning of the experiences of the identified phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, 2019). Phenomenology allows the participants to share their story through carefully planned, semistructured interviews. The research interview questions (Appendix D) were designed in such a way as to gain a vivid description of the phenomenon. My plan was to listen attentively to the participants, be open to their experiences, and receptive to new ideas, understandings and awareness. There were no previous relationships between myself and the participants.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The focus of this research was on the lived experiences of African American youth who aged out of the foster care system. In addition, I focused on factors related to their successful or unsuccessful transition to independent living. I used Neubauer's (2019) phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of African American foster youth who aged out of the system. In the selection process of participants for this research study, I used a purposeful sampling strategy. I selected the participants based upon specific criteria presented in the flyer/survey and the participant's willingness to engage in a semistructured interview using survey questions as a screening process. Each participant identified themselves as: (a) African American, Black, or Black Hispanic foster youth male or female, who have spent at least 6 months or more in the system prior to their 18th birthday, (b) between 18-25 years of age, and (c) have aged out of the foster care system at age 18 with an exit time of 6 months or more. I presented the above criteria to the potential participants on a separate form, and I discussed it with each participant prior to the semistructured interview. I determined participant eligibility for participation based upon the positive responses to the verbal and written questions given on the survey inclusion criteria form (Appendix B) indicating consent. The survey questions consisted of the following: (a) Would you classify yourself as an African American, Black, or Black Hispanic? (All classifications were included in the study and the fact that 12 endorsed being African American, rather than Black or Black Hispanic, does not mean there were no Black Hispanic in the pool.) (b) Are you between the ages

of 18-25? (c) What is your gender? (d) Are you or have you been under the care of the foster care system? (e) Were you involved with the foster care system for six months or more prior to your 18th birthday? (f) How old were you when you aged out of the system? (g) Would you be a research participant and share your experience or experiences with the foster care system as it relates to the aging out process?

The sample size for this phenomenological study consisted of 12 African American youth who have transitioned out of the foster care system. I used a purposeful sampling strategy in this study to gather data related to the lived experience of African American youth who have ageout of the foster care system. The lived experience of each participant gave important insight into their perceptions and factors relating to the transitional process. I determined that this was an appropriate sample size for a full description of the lived experience which provided a basis for analysis.). The sample size for this study was an appropriate size for data collection as it followed the guidelines provided for a qualitative phenomenological research study. It was difficult, however, to determine if the sample size of a minimum of 12 participants was appropriate for obtaining saturation prior to research interviews. Therefore, data collections began with interviewing participants and continued until saturation was achieved.

Potential participants in the study were recruited from the Metropolitan area in New York. I recruited participants through the distribution of flyers near such places as: subways, counseling centers, youth service centers, shelters, and secondary schools. Flyers (Appendix A) that were passed out in the New York City area included the reason for the study, the criteria and requirements for participation, confidentiality information,

and the contact information for this researcher. I contacted the participants who communicated an interest in the research study by phone, email, or mail and encouraged them to ask questions about the research study. Subsequent to the initial contact to discuss the dynamics of the research, any related research questions they had were answered. A convenient time and place to conduct the interviews were determined and agreed upon by each participant during the initial contact. Participants opted to select locations that were close to their homes such as a conference room, office, library, or church sanctuary. I traveled to each selected interview location.

Instrumentation

I used the instruments I produced for data collection in this study. A successful interview is contingent upon the skillfulness of the interviewer. A skillful interviewer is knowledgeable, understanding, open, organized, gentle, respectful, has a good memory, and able to interpret gathered information (McGrath et al. 2018). Instruments used for gathering data in this study consisted of face-to-face, open-ended generated questions and semistructured in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher. Other instruments used were the inclusion criteria screening survey and the demographic screening information form (Appendix C). The use of open-ended questions in interviews allowed research participants space to share recisely what occurred in their life.

The purpose of using the above instruments in this research was to gain knowledge and understanding from the elicited information about the participants' lived experience relating directly to the research question of African American youth aging out of the foster care system and the factors they attributed to their transitional outcomes. In

the semistructured interview, I gained data from the questions asked concerning participants' needs through their eyes. Questions were open-ended regarding the social and cultural factors that influenced the lived experience of research participants who aged out of care. The questions asked in this study rendered information as I explored the research participants' lived experiences and the meaning they attribute to their experience (Adams, 2010; Brown et al., 2017). I asked participants questions concerning their feelings, thoughts, and the impact their encounters with the foster care system and transitional process had on their outcomes. Each question was needed as they aligned with the overall research questions. The theoretical framework informed the development of the research question. The selection of the qualitative method for this research study was purposeful.

I used the phenomenological approach for exploration of difficulties of the lived experience of the aged-out participants. During the semistructured interviews I encouraged the participants to share their experiences and allow for understanding of the possible themes and patterns that materialized. I used the semistructured method for latitude and flexibility in exploration of each participant's experience, as I followed the interview guide (Appendix D). The interview guide focused on the research participant's foster care experiences related to: their aging out process, their experiences of successful or unsuccessful outcomes, participant's needs, factors that participants attribute to their outcomes, social and cultural influences, and the thoughts and feelings concerning each of the research participant's transitional outcomes. The interview guide was also useful in assuring consistency throughout the entire interview process and an opportunity for

each participant to share freely. I decided on the questions to obtain information through stimulating recall and encouraging self-reflection.

Data Collection

The interviewing process occurred after the collection of the screening survey form from each participant as it finalized their eligibility. The collection of the demographic information (Appendix C) and the collection of the informed consent forms indicated consent. The collection of the data occurred through a semistructured, one-on-one interview with each participant. All of the interviews were guided by the central question with allowances for questions that evolved during the interviews. For each evolving question, an assertive effort was made to try and visualize the depiction of the participant's perception. Every session started with an open-ended question in accord with the principle of phenomenology, as a way of documenting the lived experience of each participant (Neubauer, 2019). The interview began with a casual conversation to break the ice and make the participant feel relaxed, comfortable and ready to be interviewed. Then the research started with an overall depiction of the research study followed by a set of questions that led to the central and secondary questions. Participants were asked to share their experiences prior to aging out of the foster care system. This encouraged participants to self-reflect and recall their experiences. The following questions are sample questions that were used in the interviews: (a) What was your lived experience aging out of the system? (b) How would you explain your transitional process? (c) What were your thoughts and feelings relating to and during your transitioning process? (d) Do you consider your transitioning from foster care

successful or unsuccessful? (e) What do you deem a successful transitional outcome to be? (f) What do you believe an unsuccessful outcome to be? The above questions generated an answer for this central question. (g) What factor or factors do you as an African-American foster youth who has aged out of foster care attribute your transitional outcome? Additional questions were asked as the researcher continued to conduct the interview.

The interviews were held at a location selected by each participant as the focus was on issues concerning confidentiality and their privacy. The interviews were 65 minutes long. I recorded each session carefully using a digital recorder. Then I manually transcribed the interview data shortly after each session. I schedule a subsequent follow-up meeting once I completed the transcribing the data. At this meeting, I provided a transcript of the participant's interview, and I asked each participant to review and check their transcript for accuracy. This second meeting was very important to clear up any misinterpretations that had occurred. At the conclusion of the second meeting, each participant was verbally thanked for their participation in the study.

To ensure the validity of the data for the purpose of this study, strategies such as bracketing, interpreting, and participants review were used for accuracy (Creswell et al., 2018). Validity is the ability to infer valuable meaning to information gathered from the instrument interview. Creswell (2018) indicated that it is important that the findings accurately represent and are true to the intended phenomenon. Qualitative validity was achieved in accord with Creswell's definition. If for any reason this researcher needed to recruit additional participants, in the event the recruitment procedure failed to render the

expected number, this researcher would have utilized the snowball sampling procedure. Participants would be asked to refer other African American foster youth who may be interested in participating in the study and meet the criteria for participation.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis was initiated at the onset of the first interview and continued throughout the interviewing process. Analyzing the data involved direct communication with the researcher and the participants. The goal when implementing the phenomenological approach during one-on-one interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature or meaning of the everyday experiences of the research participants. This understanding was not the fixing of what may be understood but rather how the meaning was generated and transformed (Chan, 2013; Tuffour, 2017).

Moustakas (1994) described the major processes in phenomenological research as epoché, phenomenology reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Several steps were used to analyze the phenomenological data. Epoché is the first step in the phenomenological research process. Epoché is a process by which the clearing of the mind takes place, requiring the researcher to conduct ongoing self-reflections to ensure that there is openness, awareness, and presences as it relates to the participants. The researcher should be intense in listening with care, and remain unbiased. This process helps the researcher have a fresh view of the phenomenon and be open to its totality (Moustakas, 1994).

Researchers must understand how important it is to take part in bracketing. Bracketing involves making sure that the researcher is focused and his/her attention and

concentration addresses the phenomenon of inquiry. The second step in the phenomenological research is known as phenomenological reduction. The researcher must clearly be involved, listen, and be open to what each participant has perceived, thought, and felt in regards to their lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) indicated that a vital step in the analysis is the process of horizontalization. This process requires the researcher to focus on identified noteworthy statements in the transcripts data, and cluster the statements into themes. The researcher viewed each participant's interview data, looked for and identified statements that were relevant to the lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Collected data from the one-on-one interview, response to open-ended questions, audio recordings, and note taking were transcribed, and categorized the data. All data analysis included organizing data into patterns or themes as they emerged, exploring the data, and making connections or sense of the data so research questions were answered (Creswell, 2018). Research data was hand coded using the thematic analysis which is commonly used in the phenomenological approach. The coding involved transcribing the text, categorizing, and indexing sections of the collected data. The researcher compared the themes and patterns read and reread until saturation or no new patterns or themes occurred.

The researcher extracted statements with significance to the central research questions: What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to adulthood and independent living? The secondary research question was: What factor or factors do African American youth who

have aged out of foster care attribute their successful or unsuccessful transitional outcomes? The data analysis process rendered no variations or inconsistencies in the data. The information aligned with summarization and interpretations of the researcher. There was no discrepant research data discovered as a result of using the Moustakas (1994) phenomenological data analysis method to view or examine. During the second interview, participants were presented with findings to check for accuracy. Any discrepant research data would not have been ignored or disregarded.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The literature indicated that trustworthiness of a qualitative study refers to the degree of confidence in data gathered, interpretation of the data, and methods used to ensure the quality of study (Pilote & Beck, 2014). The trustworthiness of a research study and how the study was conducted is vital to the usefulness and the integrity of the findings. The ensured trustworthiness and thoroughness of this qualitative research process is by following the principles of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Korstjens, 2017; Patton, 2002). The credibility of the study is concerned with the confidence in the truth of the study and thus, the findings (Pilot & Beck, 2014). Nowell, (2017) indicated that credibility addresses how well the participants' views are represented by the researcher. Credibility included the ability of this researcher to self-reflect and analyze during the data analysis process. The limited experience of this researcher was shared with research participants, African American youth who aged out of the foster care system. Credibility of this study was strengthened by the participants examining their respective transcripts for accuracy. Dependability refers to the stability

of data over a period of time and the conditions of the study (Nowell, 2017). Dependability is concerned with the stability of the findings. In this study the participants evaluated the findings and the interpretations to ensure they were all supported views of the participants (Cohen, 2011; Korstjens, 2017). Transferability relates to the researcher providing rich descriptive data about the context or participants so the participants can determine if the results speaks to or relate to their experiences. Some of the results may not always be transferred. It is important that researchers and readers of the study understand that research results that occurs in one situation may not occur in similar situations (Anney, 2014; Nowell, 2017). Through documentation of methods used throughout the study it was evident that dependability and confirmability was maintained. The research was a document outlining the process of the study. The documented information such as data transcripts, data analysis, findings, forms, and more were secured under lock and key for a period of five years. Only the researcher has access to the data. In terms of confirmability there are key components that led to the trustworthiness of this qualitative research process. It is an important implementation of Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological process, the interviews, digital audio recorder with word-for-word transcripts. The data collections, data analysis, and participant's review of the interview transcripts for accuracy support the trustworthiness of the data collection and findings (Benner, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, 2019).

Ethical Procedures

Prior to the data collection process for this research study, the researcher sought the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University. Upon

obtaining IRB approval, the participant's ethical concerns were considered. The study ensured confidentiality, and informed consent. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Flyers were distributed in designated areas approved by IRB, providing information concerning the purpose for the study, participant criteria, and confidentiality. Interested participants were able to contact the researcher using a private cell phone number, a secure email address, or by mail using the pre-stamped self-addressed envelopes attached to the flyers. Participants were informed both verbally and in written form of the confidentiality process for collecting data. Participants were reminded and assured of the confidentiality in the reporting process, and their right to withdraw their consent and discontinue the study at any time during the process without penalty. Participants were made aware that a licensed counselor was available should they need to speak with someone in the event they were upset by answering questions that caused them to remember adverse events that they had experienced. Each participant was provided with the counselor's contact number. A written informed consent process was conducted outlining the confidentiality agreement between the researcher and the participant and signed by each participant before the start of the research interview (Appendix D). The answered questions and the consent form process were reviewed with participants before they signed the consent form.

The interview data for each participant was kept confidential. The research participants were assigned pseudonyms or fictitious names, in the form of codes which were used in all of the data reporting processes. In efforts of assuring confidentiality, codes were assigned to each participant that consisted of: RP1, RP2, RP3, and continued

in order until all participants had a corresponding code. All information shared by the participants was kept confidential. All interview transcripts and items related to data analysis along with digital recordings, files, and consent forms, were placed in a cabinet secured under lock and key. Access to the data is restricted to this researcher. After a five-year period following the completion of this study, all existing data have been dealt with (deposed of or destroyed) in accord with Walden University's protocol.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience, outcomes, needs, and factor or factors that attributed to the transitional process for African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system. The viewed perspectives of adults who have experienced the transitional process and outcomes were beneficial. This chapter provided information concerning the research design, methodology, and ethical considerations for the study. A phenomenological study was selected to explore the lived experience of a vulnerable population relating to their transitional outcomes, and to develop further understanding of this phenomenon. This chapter also presented information concerning the participant's selection process, sampling strategy, participant criteria concerning the factors that attribute to the aging out process and youth continuing to fall through the cracks. Moustakas' (1994) steps to phenomenological process, trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability were also explained. A discussion of ethical considerations concerning informed consent, confidentiality during and after data collection, and storage of all documents related to the research was presented.

Chapter 4 provides information regarding the findings of the research study, data collection procedures, data analysis, identification of themes and sub-themes, and supporting data from the participant's interviews.

Chapter 4

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences, outcomes, and perceptions of African American youth who aged out of the foster care system. The recruitment of participants and the research occurred within the New York metropolitan area. In this study I sought to gain knowledge of the lived experiences, needs and issues that are particular to African American foster youth as well as explore issues that contributed to their transitional outcomes. Many African American youth are faced with the challenge of having to deal with the difficulties of life upon reaching the age of majority without support, resulting in poorer outcomes than their foster and non-foster care peers (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2015). Research indicated that these youth are less prepared than other non-foster care youth in their age group to manage independent living. They were more likely to become homeless, unemployed, and unable to obtain health care than their foster and non-foster care peers (Miller, 2017). Thus, many African American youth in foster care found themselves suddenly forced out of a secure environment into an unstable setting without the necessary resources (Courtney, 2017; Zlotnick, 2012).

The literature indicated that African American youth were aging out of the foster care system at a disadvantage compared with Caucasian foster youth aging out of care (Macomber, 2008; Miller, 2017). These youth, at the point of aging out of the foster care system, became responsible for supporting themselves. They had to obtain their finances, food, shelter, and medical insurance. The challenges of independent living were difficult.

Many African American youth who aged out of the foster care system were doing so unsuccessfully, facing homelessness, hunger, unemployment, physical and mental abuse, and other adverse outcomes (Fowler et al., 2017; Nesmith, 2014). I used a modified phenomenological approach to obtain detailed responses from each participant. The central questions used to guide this study were: RQ1: What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to independent living? RQ2: To what do African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system attribute their transitional outcome?

The present Chapter contains an introduction, setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, the findings, and summary.

Setting

The interviews took place at a location selected by each participant as the focus was on issues concerning confidentiality and their privacy. A private setting, such as the conference room of the library and various restaurants were areas participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The interviews were 65 minutes long. Each session was carefully recorded using a digital recorder. I manually transcribed the interview data shortly after each session. Then I scheduled a subsequent follow-up meeting with the participants. I asked the participants to review and check the transcripts for accuracy. I verbally thanked each participant after the transcript review process, for their participation in the study. There were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants, their experience, or the interpretation of the study results.

Demographics

The participants for this present qualitative study consisted of 12 African American adults who aged out of the foster care system. These individuals were asked to complete a demographic form (Appendix C). Table 1 reveals a summary of the characteristics of the participants from the demographic information. The participants were from the New York Metropolitan area, 10 of the participants were women and two were men. Eleven participants identified themselves as Black/African American, and one identified herself as a Black Hispanic. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 25 years. Three of the participants were 21 to 22 years of age, and nine of the participants were 23 to 25 years of age. Individuals participating in this research aged out of the foster care system between 3 and 7 years before the interview process for this study. They were in the foster care system for 4 to 12 years. Participants were part of the study because they volunteered and met participant inclusion parameters.

Table 1

Participant demographic and characteristic

Characteristics	Number of participants (N=12)
Gender	
Female	10
Male	2
Race	
Black/African American	11
Black Hispanic	1
Age	
21 – 22	3
23 – 25	9
Total Years Since Aging Out of Foster Care	

3 – 4	2
5 – 7	10
Highest Level of Education	
High School	6
General Equivalency Diploma	1
Some College	4
College Degree	1
Employment	
Employed Full Time	4
Employed Part Time	2
Unemployed	6
Health Care Insurance	
Coverage	4
Medicaid	2
No Coverage	6
Annual Yearly Income	
Less Than 10,000	4
10,000 – 35,000	3
Over 35,000	1
No Income	4
Current Living Conditions	
Living with Spouse and Children	2
Living with Children	1
Living with Boyfriend	2
Living Between Friends	4
Living Alone	3

Research participants post-transition struggled due to limited or no capital: 50% of the participants were unemployed, 33% employed full time, and 17% were employed part-time prior to the study. Education of participants varied: 50% had a high school

diploma or GED, 33% had some college credit, and 8.5% had a college degree at the time of the study. The annual income and living conditions of the participants were as follows: 33% had an income of less than 10,000, 25% had an income between 10,000-35,000, 8.5% over 35,000, and 33% had no income. At the time of the study, 17% of the participants lived with their spouse and children, 8.5% lived with their children, 17% lived with a boyfriend, 33% were living between friends, and 25% were living alone.

Data Collection

The data collection process for this phenomenological study began after the approval of the Walden University Institutional Review Board. The data collection process was in accord with the recruitment method discussed in Chapter 3. The recruitment process rendered 20 potential participant responses, and of the 20 responses, 12 respondents met the criteria eligibility. The sample size of this research study consisted of 12 African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system to adulthood and independent living. Participants were between 21 to 25 years of age. The interviewing process took place after the collection of the screening surveys, demographic information, and the informed consent forms, in which each participant indicated their consent. The receipt of the screening surveys finalized the eligibility of the participants. During the interview process, each participant engaged in a scheduled 65-minutes digitally recorded, semistructured interview in which I asked open-ended questions. The validity of a study is very important and is concern with the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings (Creswell et al., 2017). To ensure the validity of the data, validity strategies such as bracketing, interpreting, and participants' review of transcripts

for accuracy were used. Validity is the ability to infer valuable meaning to information gathered from the instruments used in the interviews. Creswell (2009) indicates that it is vital that the findings accurately represent and are true to the intended phenomenon. The locations for the data collection varied in that each participant selected their preferred location based on their level of comfortability. Interviews took place in conference rooms in the public library and closed section areas within several different restaurants. The data was recorded during the face-to-face semistructured interviews. After each session, I manually transcribed each participant's response in accord with the plans discussed in Chapter 3. There were no variations from the data collection plan discussed in Chapter 3 or unusual circumstances encountered.

Data Analysis

I used a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis recommended by Moustakas (1994) and the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for analyzing the phenomenological data. Moustakas described the major processes in phenomenological research as epoché, phenomenology reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Several steps were used to analyze the phenomenological data of this research study.

Epoché or Bracketing

The first step in this process was epoché or bracketing. It is during this step in which the suspension of judgment and the clearing of the mind occurs. I conducted ongoing self-reflection during each interview to ensure that there was openness, awareness, and presence as it was related to the participants. To accomplish this task, I

examined my views and involvement from previous experiences, although limited, to avoid pre-judgment or biases. I shared with the participants her feelings, limited involvement, and her experiences with African American youth and the foster care system, as shared in Chapter 3. I faced each interview with a fresh clear view. During the interviews, this researcher listened intently to the participants, making an effort to remain unbiased by moving away from her views, engaging the participants in conversation, and relying totally on the statements given by the participants. This difficult process helped to have a fresh view of the phenomenon and be open to its totalit.

Phenomenological Reduction

The second step of the process was phenomenological reduction. I approached this step, considering the phenomenon with an open mind and from different perspectives. This step involves cleaning up the raw data and describing the essence of the phenomenon. First, I was involved, attentive, and opened to what each participant shared, perceived, thought, and felt in regard to their lived experience of the phenomenon. I transcribed verbatim the data collected from each interview. Each participant's thought, feelings, and ideas were reflected upon, and this I accomplished by listening carefully without judging the participants and asking for clarity when necessary. Sometimes while the participants were sharing, if clarity was needed, and I did not want to interrupt the continuity of thought, the researcher noted the question(s) and sought clarity later. Trying hard not to take a position for or against the phenomenon, I attempted to describe the phenomenon's general features and essences.

Horizontalization is a part of the phenomenological reduction process. Moustakas (1994) indicated that a vital section in this analysis is the process of horizontalization. I identified and eliminated vague and repetitive expressions. The use of horizontalization assigns equal value to every relevant statement and adds to the understanding of the participants experience with regards to aging out of the foster care system to adulthood and independent living. This action allowed for the exposure of meaningful statements directly related to the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, 2019).

Clustering is the next section of the phenomenological reduction process. During the clustering process I was afforded a means by which to identify possible subgroups within a sample that may differ in terms of the relevance of various codes. This section involves the clustering of meaningful statements of participants' information emerging from the gathered information. During this process I focused on identifying noteworthy statements in the transcribed data, coding the data, organizing the data, and clustering the statements into themes. In order to answer the research questions this process included organizing the data into patterns or themes as they emerged, then exploring the data, and making connections or sense of the data. I reviewed each participant's interview data, looked for and identified statements that were relevant to the lived experience of the phenomenon. The outcome is a textural (the what) description of the phenomenon).

Imaginative Variation

The third step of this process is imaginative variation. An imaginative variation involves looking at the data phenomenon from different perspectives. I took the participants' varying views and unified them into structural themes so that they represent

the essence of the experiences. This was done by taking the participants' exact words and using them to illustrate their experiences and provide examples of each participant's lived experience transitioning from foster care to adulthood and independent living. From the textual description, the construction of the structural (the how) of the experience was developed (Neubauer, 2019).

Synthesize

The fourth step of the process is synthesis. Synthesis represents the understanding of the phenomenon at a particular point in time. In this section the textural and structural descriptions were combined to form a textual-structural essence of the experience, emphasizing the space and time when the phenomenon was observed (Moustaka, 1994; Neubauer, 2019). The collected data was gathered from the one-on-one interviews, responses to open-ended questions, audio recordings, and note-taking. The research data for this study was hand-coded using the thematic analysis commonly used in the phenomenological approach (Braun, & Clarke, 2006; Tuffour, 2017). This method allowed for the emergence of themes unique to each interview. The six steps of the thematic data analysis consist of: 1) Familiarization 2) Coding 3) Generating themes 4) Rewriting themes 5) Defining and naming themes and 6) Write up.

Familiarization

Before coding occurred, I listened carefully to each one of the interview recordings prior to the transcribing of the interview data. The interview data was transcribed verbatim. After the data was transcribed, I read the transcribed data multiple times to make sure I was familiar with and had a thorough overview of all of the gathered

data. This involved transcribing audio interviews, reading the information and taking initial notes on the side. Once the data interviews were transcribed, a second meeting was scheduled to meet with the participants and have then I checked the transcripts for accuracy.

Coding

Coding is the process of organizing and sorting qualitative data. Line by line codes were used to describe the content. I highlighted various phrases in different colors corresponding to different codes. Each code described the idea or feeling in the particular section of the data. To be thorough I went through the transcript of every interview and highlighted everything that stood out as relevant to the lived experience of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system to adulthood and independent living. The highlighting of phrases and sentences that matched the codes and the adding of codes continued as I went through the text. After going through the data, the data was collated into groups by codes.

Generating Themes

Using codes, I gained a short overview of the main and common meanings that recurred throughout the data. During the process of this study, I reviewed the created codes and searched for patterns and themes that could be identified. Codes that were too vague, not relevant or did not make sense as a theme were eliminated. Identifying meaning units, categorizing and naming similar meaning units, and coding sections of the collected data revealed the themes, as seen in Table 2. Each statement representing a segment of meaning was assigned equal value. The transcripts were reviewed then

compared several times, as I looked for themes, patterns and connections between the codes. Out of this process generated codes were recoded, compared, and reorganized into minor categories. Then I checked the codes against the data, recoded compared and reorganized the data into major categories out of which the themes emerged as seen in Table 2. This process continued until saturation occurred, and no new patterns or themes emerged. I pulled significant statements, codes, and themes of the final analysis and formulated a textural and structural description of the phenomenon. The phenomenological approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature or meaning of the everyday experience of the participants (Chan, 2013; Tuffour, 2017).

Reviewing Themes/ Defining and Naming Themes

This section of the analysis process involves developing a detailed analysis of the themes and formulating what is meant by each theme and how it helps in the understanding of the data. The following list was formulated from the data analysis process described above to answer the central research questions: (a) What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to independent living? and (b) To what do African American youth who have aged out of the foster system attribute their transitional outcomes? The data as indicated in Table 2, revealed seven themes that emerged from the major category of codes recoded from the list of codes in the minor category in the above process and the number of participants endorsing each theme. These seven themes revealed the process the participants experienced from the foster care system to adulthood and independent living, beginning with the first theme, transitioning: What did I do to deserve this? The first theme and

subsequent codes that emerged in exploration of the central research question previously mentioned was endorsed by twelve out of the twelve participants. Each participant shared their transitional experience from foster care to independent living.

Table 2

Code Categories, Themes, and Participants Endorsing

Minor Categories	Major Categories	Themes	Participants Endorsing
Aging out was hard Horrible Like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire Tough Scary What did I do to deserve this?	Devastating Sudden Abrupt Difficult	What did I do to deserve this?	7
Anxiety Uneasiness Worry	Apprehensiveness Nervousness A gripping sense of foreboding	Living in constant fear	12
Unemployed Did not know what to do No food Homeless	Need of guidance No forewarning Lack training Lack adult skills	Unprepared	12
Left all alone No one to depend on No one to trust	Loneliness Abandonment Bewildered Rejected	Lonely and confused	12
No medical insurance The system failed me No health services	Need Assistance No support services No protection No training	Set up for failure	12

Unable to be around people Inner turmoil Self-esteem issues	Trust issues Struggle with PTSD Suffer with depression	Unresolved issues	12
Survival is key Son can't grow up in care Hope Became involved with church positive influence	Gained strength Increased faith Empowered by the church community Much needed support system	Inner strength	12

Themes

The participants of this research study aged out of the foster care system without being reunited with their parents, family members, or being adopted. The experiences while in care for eleven of the twelve participants were very emotional. They expressed that their experiences caused negative emotions to emerge. The emotions experienced, as shared by the participants included, but were not limited to fear, disgust, anger, loneliness, and confusion. One participant indicated that her experience within the foster care system was pleasant. During the process of sharing their lived experience, each participant revealed the experiences that affected their current positive or negative living conditions or outcomes. The shared experience of each participant's encounters while in care and after foster care revealed the pathway, barriers, and challengers at the onset and throughout their adulthood and independent living. The themes that emerged out of the shared data, were presented in the order in which participants encountered them during their transitional process (Table 3). There were seven themes that emerged from the gathered data: (a) What did I do to deserve this? (b) Living in constant fear (c) Lonely

and confused (d) Unprepared (e) Set up for failure (f) Unresolved issues and (g) Inner strength. There was one discrepant case to be factored into the analysis.

One of the participants indicated that her experience in foster care was “ok and safe.” In contrast with the eleven participants’ negative experiences, the participant’s positive experience presented a discrepancy.

The data revealed seven themes that outlined the process by which participants shared experiences encountered at the onset and throughout their adulthood and independent living. Table 3 consists of samples of the participants’ quotes from which the themes derived see Table 3.

Table 3

Themes and Quotes

Themes	Interview Excerpt
Theme: 1 What did I do to deserve this?	<p>RP1 “In care I was abused, locked in the basement and only allowed out when someone from the foster care system visited the foster home. After years of [] I was forced out of care. No money, No food, and no place to go...what did I do to deserve this?”</p> <p>RP2 “I had no clue as to what to do when I was forced out of the system. “It was so hard for me.”</p> <p>RP6 “Aging out of care.... was horrific. Living on the Streets, being abused mentally and physically.”</p> <p>RP8 “I struggled...it was hard. I got involved with drugs and got in trouble with the law. I was hurting with no one to turn to and nowhere to go.”</p> <p>RP3 “It was a shocker for me, tough and very hard aging out.”</p>
Theme: 2 Living in constant fear	<p>RP5 “I was afraid not knowing what to expect. I had no place to go and no plan.” I was hurt when I was in care and when I, when I had to leave care the fear of being hurt was magnified..... there was nobody to protect me”</p>

- Theme: 3 Lonely and confused
- RP8 “I was very unprepared when I exit the system to live on my own. I had no clue about adult life and no support or help from the system or family.”
- RP4 “There were no training sessions to prepare me for living on my own.... I did[n’t] even know how to apply or fill out a job application. The first couple years were a nightmare for me....no medical, no money, no food, nowhere to live, no support....is a recipe for failure.”
- RP4 “No one to depend on, no one to trust, I was all alone and confused.”
- RP3 “I was lonely with no support. I had to fend for myself, but confused as to how to fend for myself.”
- RP7 “There was no family for me to turn to when I was told I had to leave care. I was confused and felt no one cared for me. I was left all alone.”
- Theme: 4 Unprepared
- RP4 “I was alone.” I didn’t have anyone to help me out or show me how to fill out an application for school.”
- RP2 “There was no forewarning as to what one was to do once I was on my own.”
- RP9 “You know, I was not prepared for leaving the system...no one taught me how to be on my own or fend for myself.”
- Theme: 5 Set Up for Failure
- RP12 “leaving care to live independently, was a very difficult time for me. I no training or understanding of how to be an adult or carry out adult responsibilities.”
- RP3 “Living independent of the system was ruff. I had to figure out how to survive each day. There was no forewarning or set of instructions to follow.”
- RP8 “I was very unprepared when I exit the system to live on my own. I had no clue about adult life and no support or help from the system or family.”
- RP4 “There were no training sessions to prepare me for living on my own.... I did[n’t] even know how to apply or fill out a job application. The first couple years were a nightmare for me....no medical, no money, no food, nowhere to live, no support....is a recipe for failure.”
- Theme: 6 Unresolved Issues
- RP3 “As the years went by there were things, I kept inside and did not deal with because I needed to survive.... I am even in my adult life struggling with feelings of being abandon and I find that I just break down and start crying
- RP11 “The emotional roller coaster that I have experienced in the past, now as an adult left me with feelings of depression.”

Theme: 7 Inner Strength

RP4” Even now living on my own I am not able to trust others.”

RP1” Survival was a must for me...I did not want my baby to suffer and grow up in the system like I did. I had to be strong. God gave me the strength and help me to do what I had to in order to provide for me and my child.”

RP4 “I must say that God and the church community was a strong impact in my life motivating me and giving me the determination I need to move forward in life.”

RP7 “In my mind I had to succeed and make a good life for my son and God gave me the mindset and the determination.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The literature indicated that trustworthiness of a qualitative study refers to the degree of confidence in data gathered, interpretation of the data, and methods used to ensure the quality of study (Korstjens, 2017; Pilot & Beck, 2014). The trustworthiness of a research study and how the study was conducted is vital to the usefulness and the integrity of the findings (Cope, 2016). The ensured trustworthiness and thoroughness of this qualitative research process is by following the principles of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Korstjens, 2017; Patton, 2002).

The credibility of the study is concerned with the confidence in the truth of the study thus, the findings (Korstjens, 2017; Pilot & Beck, 2014). Nowell, (2017) indicated that credibility addresses how well the participants’ views are represented by the researcher. Credibility included the ability of this researcher to self- reflect and analyze during the data analysis process. The limited experience of this researcher was shared with research participants, African American youth who aged out of the foster care

system. Credibility was strengthened by the participants reviewing their respective transcripts for accuracy.

Dependability refers to the stability of the data over a period of time and the conditions of the study (Polit, & Beck, 2014). Dependability was concerned with the stability of the findings. In this study the participants evaluated the findings and the interpretations to ensure they were all supported views of the participants (Cohen, 2011; Nowell, 2017).

Transferability relates to the researcher providing rich descriptive data about the context or participants to determine if the results speak to or relate to their experiences. Some of the outcomes were not transferrable. It is important that researchers and readers of the study understand that the research results that occurs in one situation may not occur in similar situations (Anney, 2014). Transferability was not a focal point of this particular study. Saturation of data was addressed by ensuring a minimum number of participants in the study and a rich description of the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Through the use of thorough documentation of the method throughout the study dependability and confirmability were maintained.

In terms of confirmability there were several components that led to the trustworthiness of this qualitative research process. The researcher reviewed all of the interview sessions, the participants' transcribed information, and observations. The data collection, data analysis, and participants' review of the interview transcripts, supported

the trustworthiness of the data collection and findings (Benner, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, 2019).

Results

In Response to the First Research Question

The following list of themes were generated from the data analysis process described previously to answer the central research question. The twelve participants willingly shared aspects of their lived experiences as they responded to the central research question: “What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to adulthood and independent living?” In response to the research question, the aging out process for the participants of this research study was stressful, confusing, fearful, and very challenging. The shared lived experiences showed tremendous similarities as they were presented through the information gathered from the face-to-face interviews. The participants spoke of the heartbreaking struggles, barriers, and challenges they encountered trying to survive in what they perceived at times as impossible. The following themes were selected from the data analysis section as described previously to answer the research questions.

Theme: 1 What did I do to deserve this?

Theme 1 reveals the participants shared their thoughts and feelings in response to the research question asking them what their lived experiences aging out of the system was and how they would explain their transitional process. The twelve participants entered the transitional stage of their lives suddenly and unprepared for living

independently of the foster care system. The aging out experience was described as difficult, traumatic, and horrific. They expressed how lonely and confused they were living in the streets without adult support or help. The majority of the participants questioned what they did to deserve their negative outcomes.

Specifically, RP1 indicated:

“Aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adulthood and independent living was the gateway into entering an adults’ world with no clue as to what one should do or expect. The transitioning process for me was horrific. I had no money, food, and nowhere to go when I left care. I was not ready for the adult world.”

Other participants provided the following statements: RP2 “Me...[I had] no clue as to what to expect when I was forced out of the system... [i]t was so hard...why me?”; RP3 “I found myself out on my own with nothing or no one... [n]o one deserves this.”; RP4 “I was out in the street all alone with no money and nowhere to go... What did I do to deserve this?”; RP5 “[t]he transitioning process was traumatic... drugs... abuse... Why me?”; RP6 “[a]ging out of care... was horrific. Living on the streets, being abused mentally and physically...what did I do?” and RP7 “[t]ransitioning for me was like a really bad dream and your trying to wake up.” RP8 – RP12 shared, “[a]ging out of care was a traumatic experience for me. I was alone, no place to live, no food, and did not know what to do” (RP8); “[l]eaving care... I had nothing but the clothes I was wearing and a few pieces in a bag. It was so hard for me...I was alone and homeless” (RP9);

“Transition[ing] to independent living was very difficult... not knowing what [to] do...the things I encountered...why...what did I do?” (RP10); “Leaving the system to live on my own was hard...I was not ready...I was all alone...living on the streets.” (RP11); and “I was lost...when I left foster care, I had no one to turn to. It was hard for me.”RP12. In sum, all participants described the journey to independent living as lonely, isolated and filled with anguish, misery, and uncertainty.

Theme: 2 Living in constant fear

Theme 2 revealed that fear was a common factor among the twelve participants as they aged out of the foster care system to independent living. The participants experienced constant fear while in foster care, and having to fend for themselves. One shared that her foster care experience was not a nightmare, but a place where she was ok and felt somewhat safe. The participants were fearful on many levels. The abrupt transition, and not knowing what to expect from one minute to the next was frightening for the participants. They feared not knowing what would happen to them and being alone on their own. They were left on their own without money, shelter and other much needed support. There was a daily concern for one’s safety and future outcomes. Participants shared responses include: RP1 “Transitioning from foster care to liv[ing] on my own, was scary....”; RP 2“Being on my own was a frightening experience for me....”; and RP3 “Leaving foster care was pretty scary. All I had was one bag with all my stuff and nowhere to live.” The other participants remarked that “Aging out of foster care... [was terrify[ing] ...I was alone on my own with no money and no place to go.” RP4; RP5 “Living on the street I was so scared because of the danger there, on the

streets... you learn not to trust anyone.”; RP6 “When I aged out, I was... alone, scared, and did not know how to fend for myself.” Other participants shared RP7 “.... I was so scared on the street... I did not know who to trust or where to go.”; RP8 “When I was on the streets, I was afraid of being ‘jumped’ ...no one had my back.”; RP9 “I remember how scared I was day after day, being on my own. I did not know whatto do.... too afraid to trust anyone and afraid not to. I didn’t know what to expect.”; RP10” Each day I feared I would not make it through the day. I searched for food to stop the hunger pains.”; RP11 “I was afraid on the streets...not knowing what will happen from one minute to the next.”; and RP12 “I was on the street walking around...hungry and scared....”.

Theme 3: Lonely, and Confused

Theme 3 indicated that the transition from depending upon the foster care system to adulthood and living independently was a long, arduous, and lonely time for the twelve participants. The lives of the participants were confusing not knowing how to take care of themselves without the simple necessities such as food and shelter. They were lonely and dealing with periods of aggressive behavior not knowing who to trust. Feelings of abandonment plagued the majority of the participants, as they tried to navigate through the maze of life alone. Some of the participants responses were; RP1 “There was no one to help me through my confusion...I was all alone.”; RP2 “I was homeless.... very lonely. There wasn’t anyone to turn to...”; RP3 “I was lonely with no support. I had to fend for myself, but confused as to how to fend for myself.”; RP4 “No one to depend on, no one to trust, I was all alone and confused.”; RP5 “I needed someone to help me...I felt abandoned...lonely and lost.”; RP6 “Aged out of care...I was going around in a

circle...confused...I felt helpless.” Other responses include: RP7 “There was no family for me to turn to when I was told I had to leave care. I was...confused and felt no one cared for me. I was left all alone.”; RP8 “I was hurt...lonely...I remember crying because I felt no one cared.”; RP9 “I was alone...roaming the street defenseless.”; RP10 “felt abandoned...with nothing...all alone.”; RP11 “I had no idea of what to do...I was left by myself”; and RP12 “I was confused, always angry and I found myself fighting with everyone...I tried moving in with a family member hoping to get on my feet, but it didn’t work out...”.

Response to the Second Research Question

The following list was formed from the data analysis steps as described above to answer the second research question. Participants expressed their thoughts and feelings as they responded to the research question: “What factor or factors do African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system attribute their positive or negative transitional outcomes?”

Theme 4: Unprepared

Theme 4 reveals the twelve participants’ feelings of being unprepared exiting the foster care system. The participants shared that upon aging out of the foster care system they were unprepared for independent living. They did not have the skills needed to manage the day to day responsibilities of life. Participants indicated that they had no support system and no one to render guidance as illustrated by the below statements: RP1 “I had no plan... I did not have the skills.”; RP2 “There was no forewarning as to what to do once I was on my own.”; RP3 “I was unprepared for living on my own.”; RP4 “I was

alone. I didn't have anyone to help me out or show me how to fill out an application for school or an apartment... The support services were pulled when I left care." ; RP5 "When I aged out of foster care, I did[n't] know how to open a bank account...no guidance."; RP6 "There was no one to help me move forward."; RP7 "I had no one to teach me how to be an adult...I was unprepared to living [sic] on my own." ; RP8 "I could not find a job for the two years of aging out of care."; RP9 "I struggled... I was not able to figure out how to apply for housing."; RP10 "I had no money...there were no financial support."; RP11 "I had no medical ... no food... no know how..."; and RP12 "I was not ready to live on my own...I had no clue."

Theme: 5 Set Up for Failure

Theme 5 describes the feelings of the twelve participants after their experience of independent living. All of the participants expressed the same ideas and belief that they were set up for failure. From their perspective the foster care system did not prepare them for the transition to adulthood and independent living which confirmed what research literature has revealed (Courtney, 2017). The individuals who participated in this research study faced the challenges of dealing with the vicissitudes of life without instructions, guidance, and forewarning of the possible pitfalls. There were no support systems or available resources for the participants.

Participants RP1 through RP12 expressed the following: RP1 "Living on your own is hard.... It is even harder when there is no food, no money, no support, or training.....that leads to failure."; RP2 "No one told me how to live independent of the system.... Why didn't they prepare me?"; RP3 "Living independently of the foster care

system was rough. I had to figure out how to survive each day. There was no forewarning or set of instructions to follow.”; RP4 “There were no training sessions to prepare me for living on my own...I didn’t even know how to apply or fill out a job application. The first couple of years were a nightmare for me...no medical, no money, no food, nowhere to live, no support...is a recipe for failure.”; RP5 “The system did not prepare me for living on my own.”; RP6 “I was on my own with no skills...”; RP7 “I was not ready to live on my own after aging out of the system...”; RP8 “I was very unprepared when I left the system to live on my own. I had no clue about adult life and no support or help from the system or family.”; RP9 “Taking care of myself was hard.... I did not know how”; RP10 “No one show me how to provide for myself.... I was set for failure.”

RP11 “I was not prepared to live in an adult’s world...I had to figure out stuff on my own.”; and RP12 “Leaving care to live independently, was a very difficult time for me. I had no understanding of how to be an adult or carry out adult responsibilities.”

Theme: 6 Unresolved Issues

Theme 6 revealed the innermost feelings that were hidden away that surfaced during the interview of six participants. These African American youth shared aspects of their lived experience that they indicated was especially difficult for them to talk about, but felt the need to share as a way of dealing with the issues. Some of the revealed issues that participants struggled with were: emotional stress, feelings of hopelessness, mental illness, depression, loneliness, inability to trust or socialize, and living in confusion and uncertainty. RP11 shared “The emotional roller coaster that I have experienced in the past, now as an adult left me with feelings of depression. RP4 shared “Even now living

on my own I am not able to trust other[s].” RP3 expressed that she was “emotionally traumatized...” and RP1 stated “I went through so much...in foster care... I was abused by my foster mom... after aging out I struggled with depression. It was hard...even as an adult I go through time of depression.”

RP2 stated, “I have a mental illness...I don’t talk about...don’t feel good about myself.”

RP3 continued,

“As the years went by there were things I kept inside and did not deal with because I needed to survive.... Even in my adult life struggling with feelings of being abandoned and I find that I just break down and start crying.”

And RP5 shared, “I struggle with feelings of loneliness...there are times when I think about...that time...being on my own...and I cry.”

Theme: 7 Inner Strength

Theme 7 depicted how participants of this study negotiated through their transitional experiences. They forged through with every reason to yield to defeat, but with a determination to survive the barriers and challenges. Twelve participants shared how they found God to be the source of strength they needed to help them through their struggling situations. Participants shared that if it had not been for God’s guidance, and His strength they would not have survived the transitional process. Spirituality and the participants depending on God’s faithfulness, during terrifying times, fortified and encouraged them to move forward and not give up. RP1 shared,

“Survival was a must for me.... I did not want my baby to suffer and grow up in the system like I did. I had to be strong. God gave me the inner strength and helped me to do what I had to, in order to provide for me and my child. I prayed and searched for a job and God blessed me with a job.”

RP2 through RP12 shared,: RP2 “God helped me and I was able to stay away from drugs and prostitution.”; RP3 “I had to survive and I realized that I could not do it on my own. Prayer was the key to connecting with God and surrounding myself with positive people resulted in sheer determination to trust God and survive.”; RP4 “I must say that God and the church community has a strong impact in my life motivating me and giving me the determination, I needed to move forward in life.”; RP5 “Spirituality, religion kept me grounded. After three years I applied for school and I was accepted in college.”; RP6 “Prayer and God given motivation helped me through the stormy transition.”; RP7 “In my mind I had to succeed and make a good life for my son and God gave me the mind set and the determination.... I found a place for me and my son to live.”; RP8 “Whenever I couldn’t see my way a gospel song would help me through the day. In my heart I knew the Lord would help me.”; RP 9 “Aging out was a shocker, but God helped me through.”; RP10 “Going [to] church learning about God and being around positive people helped me.”; RP11 “Faith in God kept me going. When I had no money and needed a job God helped me find one through the church community.; and RP12 “Praying helped me.”

In response to the second research question, the participants attributed a lack of training and unpreparedness as factors leading to their negative experiences and unsuccessful transitional outcomes. They indicated that they were not equipped with the

skills required for living as an adult. Participants shared that they could not fill out an application for a job, school or housing because they did not know how. They did not have the adult support and guidance they needed to help them through their transitional process. Participants felt that they were set up for failure by the system. Living on your own without the necessary training, skills, and other support services as stated by a participant, RP1 “is a recipe for failure.”

The participants attributed prayer, their belief in God, and inner strength as factors leading to positive aspects of their transitional outcome. Twelve participants shared how during their struggles for survival they realized that prayer and their belief in God gave them the strength to move forward and not give up. Ten of the participants shared that attending church enabled them to surround themselves with people who impacted them in a positive way. Participants indicated that they developed a strong inner strength to survive and make a good life for themselves and their children through the connections that were made.

Summary

The participants in this research study shared their lived experience of time spent just before leaving care and their transition from foster care to adulthood and independent living. The transition from the foster care system to independent living was sudden, lonely, painful, and scary. Participants were confused, and uncertain as to their future. They did not know what to do about finances, food, housing, or employment. Each of the twelve participants expressed the fact that they were unprepared for the transition to the adult world and independent living. The foster care system, unfortunately, as participants

indicated, did not prepare them for the sudden and traumatic transition they experienced. Each of the 12 participants shared the hurt, fear, and depth of their struggles after aging out of the foster care system. Some participants have experienced physical and mental abuse. Some endured emotional and sexual abuse after aging out of care.

Participants experienced neglect and abandonment and other types of negative encounters, such as homelessness, substance abuse, unwanted pregnancy, and unemployment. Six of the participants in this study shared that they suffer from mental health issues, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from their negative encounters. They shared numerous challenges and adverse outcomes encountered during the early years of living on their own. The participants attributed their adverse outcomes to not being prepared for such a traumatic change in their life, transitioning from foster care to adulthood and independent living by the foster care system. Participants expressed that they knew they had to make it and were determined to survive. Despite difficult times, barriers, and challenges, participants started experiencing positive outcomes. Participants were able to establish themselves and attribute their positive outcomes to prayer, their belief in God, their God-given inner strength, determination and church support. Participants were able to provide for themselves and their families. Themes presented in this chapter emerged from data gathered, transcribed, data analysis, and interpretation of the data gathered from a total of 12 participants. Chapter 5 will discuss the interpretation of the findings, the limitation of the study, recommendations for future research and practices, implications for social change, and the conclusion.

Chapter 5

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system and the factor or factors that may have contributed to their successful or unsuccessful transitional outcomes. My goal for the study was to gain understanding and insight into those experiences to inform more positive transitional outcomes. This study was conducted out of a need as indicated by prior studies for further attention and exploration of this populace. There is limited information concerning the transitional outcomes, perception, challenges, and needs specific to African American youth who have aged out and are aging out of the foster care system. The findings that emerged from the execution of this research revealed that the lived experience of the 12 participants of this study was that of hardship, confusion, homelessness, loneliness, fear, unmet needs, and despair as they attempted to adjust to independent living. This vulnerable population experienced significant impediments in education and employment opportunities. They lacked knowledge and were limited when it came to life, academic, and social skills. This is consistent with prior research on foster care youth Casey Family program [CEP], (2010). Participants expressed that they did not know how nor were they ready to take on the responsibility for living on their own. The present research findings revealed that there is a need to understand the plight of African American foster youth who are transitioning unsuccessfully and address the barriers they face as they transition to independent living. Leaving the foster care system is a challenging experience for some

African American foster youth. The findings revealed that there are African American foster youth, as in the case of the participants of this study, who are transitioning unassisted, without guidance, or medical support. These youth were unable to live self-sufficiently because of a lack of training. Participants were faced with physical abuse, mental and emotional abuse, homelessness, unemployment, and thoughts of suicide. This is consistent with prior research on the foster youth population (Dworsky et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2014).

Such findings indicated that compared to their non-foster care peers, African American foster youth are at risk for adverse transitional outcomes (Shah et al., 2016). The term at risk characterizes foster youth as having an increased probability of falling victim to drug abuse, sexual, physical and mental abuse, teen pregnancy, suicide, and other adverse outcomes (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Fowler et al., 2012). Non-foster care youth are, for the most part, shielded from the type of trauma faced by foster youth because they have the much-needed support, guidance, and an open invitation to return home. There are African American youth who are not receiving the much-needed support and guidance after transitioning from the foster care system to adulthood and independent living. They lived in constant fear and confusion as a result of aging out of care. These youth need to have a voice in the decision-making process affecting their lives. This study reveals various findings such as those stated above, that are consistent with previous studies conducted and discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Interpretation of Findings

During this research study, 12 participants shared their lived experience and perception for this phenomenological study in response to the research questions, RQ1: What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to independent living? RQ2: To what do African American youth who have aged out of the foster care system attribute their transitional outcomes? The shared negative experiences of 11 of the 12 participants' encounters in care, and the entire group of participants' after foster care revealed their pathways, barriers, and challenges at the onset and throughout their adulthood and independent living. I transcribed, interpreted, and analyzed the data from interviews to explore the lived experiences of African American youth who aged out of the foster care system. Information gathered for this study adds to the limited knowledge base of the research studies revealed in Chapter 2.

I used the emerging adulthood and attribution theories to explore how African American foster youth perceived, viewed, and attributed cause and meaning to their transitional outcomes. Seven themes emerged out of the gathered data. The presented themes as previously stated were in the order in which participants encountered them during their transitional process. The seven themes that emerged from the gathered data were: (a) transition: What did I do to deserve this, (b) living in constant fear, (c) lonely and confused, (d) unprepared, (e) set up for failure, (f) unresolved issues, and (g) inner strength, there were no discrepant cases to be factored into the analysis.

The research questions, RQ1: What is the lived experience of African American youth who have transitioned from the foster care system to adulthood and independent living?

Theme: 1

The first theme: What did I do to deserve this?

Theme 1 revealed that the period of transition was a challenging time for these African American foster youth. The participants described their transitioning experiences from foster care to independent living. The transitioning as shared by the participants from firsthand experience, was harrowing. While in the system, all except one participant expressed that they were living a nightmare, experiencing mental and physical abuse, and numerous placements. Upon exiting the foster care system, participants encountered similar and other difficult challenges and unmet needs. Participants expressed that aging out of the foster care system was not a process but a sudden occurrence. They were not ready to take on adult responsibilities and live independently as an emerging adult. Forced out of care, participants were faced with homelessness, unemployment, lack of support, abuse, substance abuse, pregnancy, and problems with the law. The above-mentioned encounters experienced by the participants, confirms information revealed in previous studies presented in the literature review (Courtney et al. 2017). For many, the question was: What did I do to deserve the things I encountered? This question is in line with individuals trying to understand the meaning and explain the reason certain events occurred in their lives (Heider, 2013).

Theme: 2

The second theme: Living in constant fear

Theme 2 revealed that there was a fear factor that existed throughout the shared lived experience of each participant. Participants lived in constant fear, not knowing what to do, where to go, whom to trust, or how to navigate through life. Aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adulthood and independent living was the gateway into entering an adults' world with no clue as to what one should do or expect. It is a frightening process for any youth, but it is even more frightening for youth aging out of care (Wehman, 2011). The expectation on the part of the system was for these youth to leave and support themselves; however, according to the participants, there was no support system in place to help them. These youth were in the street all alone, confused with no adult guidance, no one to care, no money, and nowhere to go. Feelings of abandonment and loneliness plagued the majority of the participants, as they tried to navigate through the maze of life alone (Courtney et al., 2011).

The participants shared feelings of being unprepared to leave care and did not have the skills to manage adult responsibilities. Upon entering the world of independent living, the participants shared that some of them encountered mistrust, molestation, emotional and mental abuse, homelessness, criminal activity, substance abuse, and unemployment. Literature indicated that it is very difficult for aged out foster youth living independently to build social support that will assist them through challenges and fears they may encounter (Jones, 2014; Salazar et al., 2011).

Theme: 3

The third theme: Lonely and Confused

Theme 3 indicated that the journey from depending upon the foster care system to adulthood and living independently was a long, arduous, and a lonely time for the twelve participants. The life of the participants was confusing not knowing how to take care of themselves without the simple necessities such as food and shelter. They were lonely and dealing with periods of aggressive behavior. Feelings of abandonment plagued the majority of the participants, as they tried to navigate through the maze of life alone (Smith, 2011).

Theme: 4

The fourth theme: Unprepared

Theme 4 reveals the 12 participants' feelings of being unprepared exiting the foster care system. The participants shared that upon aging out of the foster care system they were unprepared for independent living. They lack the knowledge and skills needed to manage the day to day responsibilities of adult life. Participants indicated that they had no support system and no one to render guidance along the way. Youth leaving the system are not equipped with the skills for life after care. They are faced with numerous challenges, such as employment, homelessness, lack of social and interpersonal relationships which greatly impacts their adult life (Wehman, 2011).

Theme: 5

The Fifth theme: Set Up for Failure

Theme 5 reveals participants as they continued to share, described their feelings, beliefs, and resentments for what they viewed their failure as being orchestrated. From their perspectives, the foster care system did not prepare them for the transition to adulthood and the responsibilities of independent living. Participants shared that they aged out of the foster care system without resources or a support system. Each participant, at this point, remembering their experiences during the onset and well into their independent living journey, expressed feelings of loneliness, confusion, hurt, and rejection. Participants indicated that several times on their independent journey, they wondered what they did to deserve the negative encounters they experienced. When youth are not prepared for transitioning from foster care to adulthood and independent living, they are not ready for change and are vulnerable for environmental adversity (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2013).

Theme: 6

The sixth theme: Unresolved Issues

Theme 6 revealed hidden feelings of unresolved issues that surfaced during the interview process. These feelings are part of the trepidation, trauma, and mental anguish that confronted the participants daily. These findings were in accord with prior research studies, which defined emerging adulthood as the phase between adolescence and adulthood. It is a process of exploring alternatives in order to ultimately make responsible decisions (Fowler et al., 2017). Aged out foster youth are faced with many pitfalls that could affect them for life. Many African American youth who transition from the foster care system to independent living are vulnerable and experience many

negative outcomes. They were forced to face the transition period alone with little to no support (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). The aging out process for the participants of this research study was stressful, confusing, and demoralizing.

Theme: 7

The seventh theme: Inner Strength

Theme 7 revealed how the shared lived experiences of the participants showed tremendous similarities as they moved through the information gathered from the face-to-face interviews of the heartbreaking struggles. The barriers and challenges they encountered trying to survive in what they perceived in many instances as impossible. Many of the participants, as they reflected on their past experiences, shared how they found God to be the source of inner strength that they needed to help them through their struggling situations. The participants indicated that if it had not been for God and His guidance, comfort, and strength journeying down the scary, and lonely road, they would have not survived. Spirituality and the participants depending on God's faithfulness, during terrifying times, fortified and encouraged them to move forward without relenting. Participants shared how they would not have made it through the challenges they encountered had it not been for the strength God gave them. Their increased faith in God, connecting with the church, and surrounding themselves with individuals of the congregation allowed participants to engage in fellowship, develop relationships, and receive the help and support they needed.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include a small sample size, which consists of 12 participants. The findings of this study were limited to one ethnic group and participants who were urban youth. The concerns of other ethnic groups and rural youth may not be the same as the concerns of those in other areas. The results are not generalizable.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have shown that there are African American youth who have and are aging out of the foster care system without the necessary skills for living independently. It is recommended that future research be done on the foster care system's transitional process. Research is needed to ascertain at which developmental stage African American foster youth have the coping skills to begin training before aging out of foster care. There is a recommendation for future research study of the foster care support system and the impact it has on youth transitioning successfully. This recommendation for future research of the support system places a focus on housing, employment, mentoring, and mental health services.

Recommendation for future studies should include research on the disparities in needed services for African American foster youth in foster care. This research showed that there is a need for further research studies on outcomes, needs, and transitional processes of African American foster youth. Information gathered from this study was to inform the development of new programs geared to meet the individual needs of aging out African American foster youth, thus creating a transitional process that will result in successful transitions.

Implications

The findings of this study hold implications for education and research. The concepts that emerged from this research study was inner strength and moving forward in spite of opposition. Further study is needed on African American youth who have aged out of the system to better understand how to improve upon the transitional process. Understanding the transitional process provides professionals in the system with information necessary to support and improve transitional outcomes. Implications for positive social change include bringing awareness of foster youth falling through the cracks as they transition from the foster care system to independent living. Bringing awareness is necessary as it draws attention to the challenges, needs, and plight of this vulnerable population. The findings of this study also implicated a need for improved professional practices and policies within the foster care system and mandatory training for African American foster youth before the age of transition. Implications for social change include giving African American foster youth a voice. Youth involvement in the decision-making process concerning their future is paramount for successful transitional outcomes. Additionally, the implications for social change include an increase and improved support services.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experience of African American foster youth who transitioned from the foster care system to adulthood and independent living. The study also focused on gaining a meaningful understanding of the issues attributed to the failure or success of their

transitional outcomes. The participants of this study shared their individual experiences and their perspectives as it related to the foster care and aging out of the foster system to adulthood and independent living. The research study provides some implications for further understanding of the preparation process and the role of African American foster youth involved in the transitional process, however, the data did not directly examine these issues. While this study viewed and explored the literature and the existing problems of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood, research on the outcomes of African American foster youth is limited and indicates a need for additional studies.

There is a need, as indicated by prior studies, for further research on the transitional outcomes, perception, and needs specific to African American foster youth that has aged out and is aging out of the foster care system. This present study has attempted to bridge the gap and add to the knowledge base concerning African American foster youth and their positive or negative transitional process. Limited research has a focus on African American youth who aged out of care. However, there is a need for a more in-depth study of the transitional outcomes of this vulnerable population.

It is essential to bring awareness of this phenomenon that still exists. Raising awareness is a way to inform or spread knowledge about the plight of African American foster youth transitioning from the foster care system unsuccessfully. Raising awareness helps to draw attention to the problem. Public awareness will inspire, increase support, and enthusiasm. Until people are aware that African American foster youth still have unsuccessful transitional outcomes, many African American foster youth will continue to experience adverse transitional outcomes. The findings reveal that African American

foster youth continue to have extreme difficulty transitioning to adulthood. Further research is needed to improve and ensure successful, positive transitional outcomes for this vulnerable population.

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Appendix A: Flyer

Looking for African-American Foster Youth Who Have Aged Out of the Foster Care System to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experience of former African-American foster youth and their Transitional Outcomes

Participation will include: Two 45-65 minutes interview sessions that will be audio recorded. Participants must be between the ages of 19-25 years old, having spent at least 6 months or more in the system prior to their 18th birthday. Participation will be confidential.

Appendix B: Inclusion Criteria Screening Survey

*How would you classify yourself? (Circle one of the following).

African American Black Hispanic Black

*Are you between the ages of 19-25 years old? (Circle one) Yes No

How old are you? _____

*What is your gender? (Circle one of the following).

Female Male

*Were you in the foster care system 6 months or more prior to your 18th birthday?

(Circle one of the following) Yes No

*How old were you when you aged out of the foster care system? _____

Appendix C: Demographic Information

Participant Code: ____

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your gender? (Circle one please).

Male Female

3. How would you classify yourself? (Circle one please).

African American Asian Caucasian Hispanic

Other

4. What age did you enter the foster care system? _____

5. What age did you exit the foster care system? _____

6. How many placements did you experience while in the foster care system? ____

7. How many times did you change elementary school while in foster care? ____

8. How many times did you change secondary/ high school while in foster care? ____

9. Did you have supportive adults in your life during and after aging out of foster care? ____

10. What is the highest level of education that you completed? (Circle one)

High School General Equivalency Diploma (GED) Vocational
School Some College Graduated College None of the above

11. Marital Status: (Circle one)

Single Married Divorced Separated

12. Are you a parent? (Circle one) Yes No

13. How many children do you have? _____

14. Does your child or children live with you? (Circle one)

15. Are you employed? (Circle one) Yes No
16. Are you homeless or about to be homeless? (Circle one) Yes No
17. Have you been convicted of a crime resulting in time spent in prison? (Circle one)
Yes No
18. Have you encountered problems with drug abuse? (Circle one) Yes No

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Interview Questions

- *How would you share your experience prior to aging out of the foster care system?
- *What was your lived experience aging out of the system?
- *How would you explain your transitional process?
- *What were your thoughts and feelings relating to and during your transitioning process?
- *Do you consider your transitioning from foster care successful or unsuccessful?
- *What do you deem a successful transitional outcome to be?
- *What do you believe an unsuccessful outcome to be?
- *To what factor or factors do you as a former African-American foster youth attribute your transitional outcome?
- *What would you say as a former African-American foster youth were your needs during and after aging out of care?
- *What social and cultural factors influenced your lived experiences?
- *What are your experiences as an African-American foster youth who has transitioned from the foster care system to independent living?
- *Have your encounter with the foster care system and transitioning process impacted or currently impacting you in anyway?
- *Do think that having been an African-American foster youth in foster care has influenced other's reaction or responses to you since leaving foster?

Closing Questions:

*Is there anything else you would like to tell me concerning your experiences, disparity in outcomes, specific needs, or transitional outcomes that would help me to better understand your lived experiences?

*Are there questions that have not been asked or unaddressed topics that will help me visualize your aging out process?

Prompts:

*What preparation for aging out of the system did you received?

*What types of adversities did you encounter?

*How did you deal with the adversities you encountered?

*What types of support did you received?