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Social Support Experiences of Stably Housed Emancipated Foster Youth

Camron L. Whitacre
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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Camron L. Whitacre

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Social Support Experiences of Stably Housed Emancipated Foster Youth

by

Camron L. Whitacre

MS, University of Dayton, 2004

BA, Miami University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

Walden University

August 2021

Abstract

Youth emancipating from foster care are at increased risk of housing instability and homelessness and have reduced access to needed social supports to aid in the difficult transition to independent living. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived formal social support experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth. Purposive sampling techniques and inclusion criteria guided the recruitment of nine study participants from a state-administered postemancipation services program to take part in semistructured interviews. A conceptual framework, including social convoy and attachment theories, informed inquiry, and interpretation of findings. Participant lived experiences illuminated the importance of program and case manager social support in maintaining housing. The social support roles of mentor, parental figure, and role model also emerged as significant among case manager social support experiences and how emancipated foster youth perceive the supporter. Case manager characteristics and values emerged as contributors to how participants perceived the quality of the case manager support. Finally, participant experiences of formal social support emerged as contributing to housing stability and maintaining housing contributed to a sense of accomplishment and general stability. Findings from this study suggest postemancipation services programming addressing housing stability and formal social support during the transition from foster care to independent living could improve outcomes and have direct implications for child welfare and postemancipation service providers.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the countless former foster youth who have and who will continue to put one step in front of the other hoping for a brighter tomorrow and to the human service professionals walking alongside them trying to make a difference. Human service work is challenging, and the results of the work are not always apparent or immediate. To those professionals who continue to clear a path or offer a steppingstone, despite the challenges, keep tending to your craft. You may be the one who provides the foundation to bridge the gap to a hopeful future.

Acknowledgments

This journey was, at times, a solitary one with countless hours spent alone, often late at night, staring at a computer screen. Knowing that I had the support and encouragement from those closest to me helped give me the motivation needed to find my way. To my friends who heard me utter, “sorry, I can’t right now” too many times, thank you for the continued invitations and including me in your plans. To my partner who through this process also led a solitary journey at times, thank you for continuing to walk alongside me even when our paths weren’t always parallel to the other’s. Your patience and understanding were unwavering. To my mom whose strength and determination are beyond imaginable, thank you for being an example in courage.

Without question, my path on this journey was made clearer by the support and guidance of my dissertation committee. Dr. Hickman, thank you for your willingness to be a part of this process, as well as your challenging and insightful feedback and encouraging words. Dr. Heinrich, as my committee chair, I am indebted for the guidance, direction, and support you have provided me throughout my time at Walden. I asked you both to be part of my committee because of your high expectations and the challenging critiques you offered during my coursework. I knew that your guidance throughout this process would yield a quality product, for which I am eternally grateful. Thank you both.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

Nearly 40% of the estimated 30,000 youth who emancipate from the foster care system become homeless within 18 months of emancipation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019a, 2019b). Also, almost half of emancipated foster youth lose housing after leaving care (Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019). When compared to youth with no foster care histories, former foster youth experience increased challenges with housing (Berzin et al., 2011; Courtney, et al., 2018; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018).

Youth who age-out of the foster care system often have limited social supports (Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). In contrast to youth with no foster care histories, emancipated foster youth may experience gaps in social supports, resulting in limited safety nets or individuals to turn to when facing adversity (Davis et al., 2013; Rosenberg, 2019). Because 9 in 10 foster youth aging out of the system have been victims of trauma and are at increased risk of revictimization (Dorsey et al., 2012), forming and maintaining healthy relationships can be challenging (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Dorsey et al., 2012;). The particular difficulties that this population faces are compounded by frequent relationship disruptions during time in the foster care system (Dorsey et al., 2012; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). Many lack positive role models or experiences to promote the development of healthy relationships (Dorsey et al., 2012; Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). As a result, some emancipated foster youth

have trouble making informed decisions, resulting in increased risk for a variety of challenges and relationship-related issues (Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018).

Emancipated foster youth often have limited skills and resources needed to successfully transition into adulthood (Fowler et al., 2011; Olson et al., 2017; Yates & Grey, 2012). Without needed social supports, emancipated foster youth may possess inadequate abilities to avoid challenges and escape problems with maintaining housing when navigating early adulthood. Therefore, poor social support among youth leaving the foster care system could affect the ability of emancipated foster youth to maintain housing after emancipation.

Statement of the Problem

Nearly 20,000 youth exit the foster care system via emancipation each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019a). Up to 42% of youth exiting foster care become homeless by age 21 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019b), costing U.S. taxpayers up to \$40,000 per year per individual (Khadduri et al., 2010; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). In addition to homelessness, nearly 50% of youth who emancipate from the foster care system lose stable housing after transitioning to adulthood (Courtney, et al., 2011; Dion, et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019). On average, youth without stable housing are at increased risk when compared to youth with stable housing (Berzin et al., 2011; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Also, emancipated foster youth with housing instability

experiences have increased difficulties with the development and maintenance of healthy relationships (Dorsey, et al., 2012; Hetling et al., 2018; Marcal, 2018).

Social support plays a significant role in the transition to adulthood (Bender et al., 2015; Katz & Courtney, 2015; Rosenberg, 2019) and contributes to establishing and maintaining housing (Aubry et al., 2016; Patterson et al., 2015) and making confident independent decisions (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013). Nonparental adults can play a significant role in the provision of social support for older foster youth (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Collins et al., 2010; Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014), yet youth exiting foster care appear to experience perceived deficiencies in social support (Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018) despite the seminal Midwest study including information about social support availability during and after foster care exits (Courtney et al., 2011). Reduced emancipated foster youth support contributes to difficulties with decision-making and maintaining housing while navigating the transition to adulthood (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013).

Although the aforementioned research regarding housing instability among emancipated foster youth illuminates important findings, I have found no research with information about formal social support experiences among stably housed youth emancipated from foster care. Given such, further research was warranted that could examine emancipated foster youth lived formal social support and housing stability experiences in an effort to address the documented problem of housing instability among emancipated foster youth (Bender et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2010; Courtney, et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Purpose Statement

For this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I sought to understand lived formal social support experiences among stably housed emancipated foster youth and developed common lived experience themes for this phenomenon. Results from this study fill a gap in understanding how emancipated foster youth experience formal social support and housing stability.

Research Question

I used the following research question to guide this study: What are the experiences of formal social support among a small group of stably housed emancipated foster youth from an urban setting in the U.S. Midwest?

Conceptual Framework

In hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers use theory to focus inquiry, make assumptions about the research topic, guide methodology, and interpret and analyze findings (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1962; Lopez & Willis, 2004). I used a hermeneutic mode of inquiry informed by social convoy and attachment theories as interpretive and orienting frameworks as I explored the experiences of formal social support among stably housed emancipated foster. Social convoy and attachment theories had implications on the methodology of this study, particularly when analyzing the resulting data.

I used social convoy and attachment theories to help interpret the lived experiences of the emancipated foster youth in the study, as prior experiences with relationships and attachments could affect the worldview of emancipated foster youth.

Social convoy theorists assert that the attachment relationships that individuals experience in infancy are analogous to the relationships the individuals form with other individuals during development (Antonucci et al., 2004; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). Additionally, I used attachment theory to understand relationship-related issues, past traumatic experiences and struggles forming and maintaining lasting relationships that surfaced when interpreting study participants' formal social support experiences. As such, I used attachment theory as a basis for constructing primary and secondary interview questions and interpretation of participant responses.

According to social convoy theorists, individuals form personal networks or convoys throughout life, offering social support and influencing wellbeing (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). The convoy of supporters provides a sense of security through supportive relationships that allow individuals to explore the world and make informed decisions (Antonucci et al., 2004). The convoy relationships can benefit individuals by helping with education and maturity, sharing life experiences, providing guidance through difficult times, and offering supportive advice (Antonucci et al., 2004). However, relationships can be harmful if convoys misguide or undermine individuals or discourage or interfere with the individuals' hopes, rather than helping with problem-solving and finding healthy solutions (Antonucci et al., 2004). Emancipated foster youth, therefore, may have relational networks, however, may choose not to utilize the networks, or the quality of the support that the emancipated foster youth receive may be insufficient (Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). Emancipated foster youth may lack the guidance needed to make healthy, informed decisions.

Nature of Study

For this study, I used hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of emancipated foster youth. Researchers use phenomenology as a form of qualitative inquiry to explore similarities of experiences among study participants to derive the essence of the phenomenon (Levering, 2006; Petty et al., 2012). Heidegger (1962) expanded Husserl's original philosophy of phenomenology and developed hermeneutic phenomenology to move from a descriptive to an interpretive form of inquiry (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Researchers who use hermeneutic phenomenology go beyond discovering the essence of the phenomena and look for the embedded meaning in the participant experiences (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1962; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

I not only described participant experiences with formal social support relative to housing stability, but also interpreted and found meaning in those experiences through thematic content analysis. To conduct such inquiry, Heidegger (1962) suggested that researchers should not use bracketing techniques, but instead should be aware of and welcome experiential or researched knowledge of the phenomenon, as this knowledge can help guide inquiry (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Reiners, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). I had prior knowledge and experiences related to the identified problem; therefore, to adhere to hermeneutic philosophy, I sought to be explicit about my preconceptions and how I used that knowledge throughout the study (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

I used intensity sampling, a form of purposive sampling, as a method of identifying research participants for this study (Suri, 2011). Researchers use intensity sampling to select cases strategically and purposefully based on the purpose of the study and the resources available to the researchers (Suri, 2011). Researchers rely on informants knowledgeable of the field of study to identify cases that will produce information-rich examples of the phenomenon (Suri, 2011). I gathered data via semistructured interviews with 9 participants among emancipated foster youth enrolled in a grant-funded, state-sanctioned postemancipation services (PES) program offering financial assistance and formalized postemancipation support services in a Midwestern state. I recruited participants using purposive sampling methods. I inquired of state and local PES program supervisors to identify potential participants deemed receptive to program services and maintained housing for a minimum of one year while enrolled in the program.

Definition of Key Terms

The following list of key terms promote a common conceptual understanding throughout this hermeneutic phenomenological study.

Emancipated foster youth: Young adults who exit the foster care system to adulthood without finding permanency through adoption or reunification with family (Yates & Grey, 2012).

Housing instability: The threat of losing or loss of a stable residence due to frequent moves, moving due to economic hardship, doubling up with others to save on costs, being behind on rent or mortgage, or homelessness (Burgard et al., 2012).

Housing stability: Maintaining and affording one's residence with applicable necessary appliances and utilities, without frequent housing moves or threat of losing housing (Leaver et al., 2007).

Assumptions

During hermeneutic phenomenological research, the researcher is the primary data collector and analyst (Heidegger, 1962; Levering, 2006; Petty et al., 2012); therefore, personal experiences and expectations of the phenomenon will influence data interpretation. Prior knowledge of the foster care system and the issues that emancipated foster youth face can help guide data collection and interpretation (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

Because the interpretation of the shared subjective experiences of research participants is central to hermeneutic phenomenological research (Heidegger, 1962; Levering, 2006; Petty et al., 2012), I relied on the reports of participants' experiences. One assumption of this study was that participants would understand and answer interview questions openly and honestly based upon recollections and perceptions of experiences. Another assumption was that participants would respond to interview questions based upon perceived lived experiences of formal social support and housing stability.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study focused on former foster youth from metropolitan areas in a Midwestern state. The study did not include other states or localities outside of the identified metropolitan areas and may not reflect the experiences of emancipated foster

youth in other areas of the United States. This study only included emancipated foster youth enrolled in one PES program; therefore, the experiences of study participants may not reflect experiences of emancipated foster youth enrolled in similar programs.

Recruitment was restricted to the following inclusion criteria: current enrollment in the PES program and maintaining housing for a minimum of one year while in the PES program.

Limitations

While no apparent concerns with trustworthiness arose from the execution of the study, potential limitations include the credibility of participant descriptions of experiences and transferability. In qualitative research, transferability refers to the degree to which a reader can draw conclusions from a study and later apply it in another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that transferability occurs when researchers offer “thick” descriptions of the research and use purposive sampling methods to maximize the range of data relevant to the study. In this study, I adhered to methods outlined in the data analysis plan and engaged in extensive reflective writing through data collection and analysis stages to provide thick descriptions of participant experiences. I used purposive sampling strategies to seek a homogenous sample regarding inclusion criteria, and participants offered valuable data about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods in this study appear to be replicable, enhancing the reliability of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Suggested methods to promote credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and

member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I used persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking. Despite the efforts to promote credibility, the trustworthiness of findings was reliant on participant recollections and honest accounts of experiences receiving formal social support and housing stability. Recruitment relied on PES program administrators and workers providing information about the study to eligible participants. The inclusion criteria (enrollment in the PES program and maintaining housing for a minimum of one year while in the PES program) were unverifiable due to the confidentiality of PES program enrollment. To encourage honest interview responses, participants received information about the scholarly nature and implications of the study, data security and privacy, and confidentiality and anonymity of the information shared.

The presence of the researcher as the interviewer and data analyst in qualitative research could also challenge trustworthiness. While researchers embedded in research can yield in-depth data collection and analysis, there is concern that the researcher conducting the interviews could influence the responses of the participants (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012). To address this, I provided descriptions of the research to participants, encouraged open and honest answers, and utilized member checking to verify the accuracy of participant responses. Additionally, I provided detailed descriptions of participant experiences and concurrently self-reflected throughout the data gathering and interpreting phases of the study using a reflexive journal (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Significance of the Study

These findings have direct implications for child welfare system and for youth leaving foster care and entering adulthood. Service providers and child welfare agency staff could use the knowledge gained from this study to help adapt service delivery and programming. To promote social change on a larger scale, key stakeholders, including public children services agencies, private child-placing and foster care agencies, independent living providers, postemancipation service providers, and policy-makers, among others directly involved with the child welfare system, may be able to use the findings from this study to inform decisions about instituting changes for how to help emancipated foster youth with maintaining housing and improving youth outcomes.

Summary and Transition

Chapter 1 included the research problem and explained the purpose and significance of the study. Foster youth in the United States face significant postemancipation challenges, including housing instability and homelessness (Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019). Emancipated foster youth experience inadequate social supports to help during the transition from foster care to adulthood (Goodkind et al., 2011; Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018), which may contribute to housing instability (Singer et al., 2013). Further research was warranted to examine the lived social support and housing stability experiences among emancipated foster youth to address the problem of housing instability and homelessness among emancipated foster youth (Bender et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). For this study, I sought to understand the lived formal

social support experiences among stably housed emancipated foster youth. I used hermeneutic phenomenology to focus on participants' perceptions of lived experiences and to develop common lived experience themes for the phenomenon. Chapter 2 includes an exhaustive review of pertinent historical and current literature on emancipated foster youth housing stability and social support.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 includes an exhaustive review of current and historical literature related to housing stability and social support among emancipated foster youth. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand experiences of formal social support and housing stability among emancipated foster youth and to develop common lived experience themes for this phenomenon. Foster youth in the United States face significant challenges after emancipation from the child welfare system, particularly housing instability and homelessness (Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019). Emancipated foster youth have inadequate social supports to help guide the transition from foster care to adulthood (Goodkind et al., 2011; Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018), which may contribute to housing stability challenges (Singer et al., 2013). A need existed for targeted research to examine emancipated foster youth lived social support and housing stability experiences to address the problem of housing instability among emancipated foster youth (Bender et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Chapter 2 includes three main sections. The first section outlines the literature search strategy, including the keywords and search databases used to examine the problem and research findings and the conceptual framework. The second section includes a historical overview of the foster care system and applicable laws. The final section contains current findings on the foster care system, emancipated foster youth challenges, housing instability, and social support.

Literature Search Strategy

The topics researched for this literature review included adjoining fields of study, including human services, child welfare, foster care, and mental health. I used multiple databases, search engines, and combinations of key search words and phrases to seek scholarly and peer-reviewed articles for this literature review. I accessed the Walden University library to explore the following search engines: Academic Search Complete, SocINDEX, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, and PsycARTICLES. Additionally, I utilized Thoreau and Google Scholar to search multiple databases. In total, I reviewed approximately 300 articles when conducting this review.

I used a combination of the following key terms and phrases to search the aforementioned research databases and search engines: *emancipation, emancipated, emancipate, youth, foster youth, transitional youth, foster care, foster care system, risk factors, independent living, outcomes, child welfare, support, social support, formal social support, housing, housing stability, housing instability, homelessness, and housing challenges*. I also searched the identified search engines and databases using the names commonly found in research conducted on the topics discussed: *Bender, Courtney, Dion, Dworsky, Geenen, Nesmith, Singer, Thompson, Tyrell, Yates, and Zlotnick*.

The first section of this literature review includes background information on foster youth, the United States foster care/child welfare system, and appraisal support. In the second section, I offer current findings on the foster care system, emancipated youth issues, and housing challenges among emancipated foster youth. I also provide a review

of the literature on social support associated with former foster youth and housing stability.

Conceptual Framework

In hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers use theory to focus inquiry, generate assumptions about the research topic, guide methodology, and interpret and analyze findings (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1962; Lopez & Willis, 2004). With hermeneutic phenomenology as the overarching framework, I used theory to provide a perspective of and conceptualize the experiences of youth who have emancipated from the foster care system and have received formal social supports. Previous researchers have identified the significance of relationships (Ahrens et al., 2011; Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Hetling et al., 2018; Marcal, 2018; Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018), developmental experiences (Havlicek, 2011; Greeson, 2013; Thompson & Greeson, 2017; White et al., 2018); and community and environmental influences (Fowler et al., 2011; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Thompson & Greeson, 2017) as factors contributing to foster youth outcomes. As a result, I employed a conceptual framework and considered such factors when conducting this study. I used social convoy and attachment theories as interpretive and orienting frameworks as I explored the experiences of formal social support among emancipated foster youth maintaining housing.

Attachment Theory

Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) formulated an ethological approach to personality development called attachment theory. Based initially on theoretical works by Bowlby

(1958) and later expanded by empirical research by Ainsworth (1970), attachment theory contains descriptions for how the relationship between parent and child is formed and how the attachment process influences developmental processes in childhood and beyond (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Ainsworth (1973) and Bowlby (1958) defined attachment as a deep, enduring psychological connection between humans that is influenced by the initial interactions and bonds between infant and caregiver.

According to attachment theory, early experiences with caregivers influence youth beliefs and expectations regarding the availability and responsiveness of significant others, which over time become internalized, formulating an internal working model of self in relation to others (Bowlby, 1969). Emotionally responsive, available caregiving is predictive of reliable, secure attachments with caregivers (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). During times of instability, attachment-secure youth are likely to seek support from caregivers or trusted others, while attachment-insecure youth are likely to avoid such interactions (Bowlby, 1977). Attachment-secure youth, therefore, should experience life challenges with less distress than insecure youth (Bowlby, 1969).

Researchers have used attachment theory as a basis for conceptualizing the experiences of foster youth (Ahrens et al., 2011; Bederian-Gardner et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2011). Using attachment theory as a lens, Ahrens et al. (2011) considered how early attachment patterns and developmental issues affected the ability for individuals to connect with others and establish relationships. Bederian-Gardner et al. (2018) used attachment theory to conceptualize findings of increased residential, school, and mental health instability among youth in foster care. Also, Ahrens et al. (2011) and Hong et al.

(2011) used attachment theory as a basis of understanding of the significance of relationships among foster youth currently in foster care.

Social Convoy Theory

Kahn and Antonucci (1980) originally developed the convoy model of social relations to provide a life-span theoretical perspective on the developmental impact of interpersonal social relationships. According to the model, individuals form personal networks, or convoys, throughout life and experience life events as part of larger groups or convoys. The supportive networks serve as secure bases that influence individuals' coping and wellbeing (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) and allow individuals to explore the world and make informed decisions (Antonucci et al., 2004). Members of the convoy extend beyond immediate family or significant nonparental figures and have varying degrees of influence on individuals at different life stages (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980).

The general purpose of the social convoy is to protect or insulate individuals from adverse outcomes (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). The convoy relationships can benefit individuals by helping with education and maturity, sharing life experiences, providing guidance through difficult times, and offering supportive advice (Antonucci et al., 2004). Relationships can be harmful, however, if convoys misguide or undermine individuals or discourage or interfere with the individuals' hopes, rather than helping with problem-solving and finding healthy solutions (Antonucci et al., 2004).

Researchers have used social convoy theory as a lens to aid in conceptualizing the relationship between social networks, behavioral risks, and resiliency among foster youth (Blakely et al., 2017; Leon & Dickson, 2018). Blakely et al. (2017) discovered reduced

risk behavior among foster youth with increased kinship involvement and suggested the significance of the convoy network influencing positive outcomes. Additionally, Leon and Dickson (2018) explored the relationship between increased engagement by kin and significant other figures on foster youth internalizing symptoms (depression, anxiety, somatization, and trauma experiences) and found high involvement associated with lower levels of internalizing problems. Leon and Dickson asserted that the more people among a youth's social convoy, the more significant opportunity to meet the youth's changing needs.

Attachment Theory and Social Convoy Theory as a Lens

In qualitative research, researchers commonly use multiple perspectives when designing and conceptualizing studies (Leon & Dickson, 2018; Havlicek, 2011; Hong et al., 2011). Havlicek (2011) used a life course and ecological perspective when examining the perspectives of former foster youth's involvement in foster care and the child welfare system. Hong et al. (2011) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to examine ecological and environmental factors and attachment theory to understand how development affects relationships. Also, Leon and Dickson (2018) used a person-centered approach and social convoy theory to analyze the relationship between social network involvement and foster youth outcomes. I used social convoy and attachment theories to help interpret the lived experiences of emancipated foster youth in this study, as relationships and attachments could affect foster youth's worldviews and willingness to accept support.

Social convoy theorists assert that the attachment relationships that individuals experience in infancy are analogous to the relationships the individuals form with others during development (Antonucci et al., 2004; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). Foster youth leaving the foster care system, already at increased risk of attachment insecurity (Bowlby, 1980) and limited social support (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Rosenberg, 2019), may have increased difficulties accessing needed social supports to aid in the transition to adulthood. In addition to limited access to social networks, some emancipated foster youth may choose not to utilize the networks, or the quality of the support that the emancipated foster youth receive may be insufficient (Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). As such, emancipated foster youth may lack the guidance needed to make healthy, informed decisions.

Social convoy and attachment theories had implications on the methodological design of this proposed study. Given the fundamental significance of attachments (Bowlby, 1980), relationships, and social networks (Blakely et al., 2017; Leon & Dickson, 2018) in foster youth outcomes, social convoy and attachment theories influenced the development of primary and secondary interview questions and the interpretation of participant responses. I explored participant social networks, particularly formal social supports contributing to participants' involvement in postemancipation services. I used attachment theory to understand relationship-related issues, past traumatic experiences, and struggles forming and keeping lasting relationships that surfaced when interpreting the experiences of social support that emancipated foster youth receive. Finally, I employed the principles of social convoy and attachment

theories to guide the interpretation of results and the formulation of discussion and implications for the field of human services and future research. The following section contains a historical overview of the child welfare system, including legislation affecting foster care and emancipated foster youth.

Historical Overview

The evolution of the child welfare system has occurred in response to problem areas that have arisen among youth involved with the system. While initially, grassroots and private citizens signaled the need for formalized child protection, the involvement of federal, state, and local governments expanded services across the country (Myers, 2009; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Federal legislation has affected wide-spread changes to services and mandates to formalize practice (Myers, 2009; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014).

History of Child Protective Services

Before 1875, children had no legal rights to protection from parental abuse (McGowan, 2014; Myers, 2009). In 1874, aided by the founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), attorneys used animal protection laws to assist the removal of an abused girl from her parents' care (McGowan, 2014; Myers, 2009). In 1875 the founder of the ASPCA founded the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC), the world's first formal child protective organization (McGowan, 2014; Myers, 2009; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). By 1922, private agencies formed 300 other nongovernmental Societies for the Protection of

Cruelty to Children (SPCC) across the country, yet the agencies were private and funded by charitable donations (Myers, 2009).

The early 20th century marked an increase in governmental protections of children through the developments of state departments of welfare and social services (McGowan, 2014; Myers, 2009). With the onset of the Great Depression, SPCCs lost funding from private donors, requiring local, state, and federal governments to formally introduce programs to protect children (Myers, 2009). The Social Security Act of 1935 contained Aid to Dependent Children, funding for states to support low-income families, and the Children's Bureau, a federal department overseeing provisions at the state level to protect and care for children at risk due to homelessness, abuse, neglect, or delinquency (McGowan, 2014; Myers, 2009).

In the late 1970s, U.S. Congress instituted a formal nationwide governmental child protection system with child abuse reporting laws requiring professionals to report suspicion of abuse toward children (McGowan, 2014; Myers, 2009; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). U.S. Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 due to increased reporting and research on the topic of childhood maltreatment (Myers, 2009; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014) and established the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect to enhance measures to report and monitor child maltreatment (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Consequently, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 was enacted to provide provisions around the removal of children from parental care, the placement of children in out-of-home care, and the reunification of children and parents (McGowan, 2014; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Under the

Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Congress established, through Title IV of the Social Security Act, a federal mandate for states to develop plans to administer child welfare services (Phillips & Mann, 2013; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). The law allotted federal matching funds for states to cover foster care maintenance costs, including housing, food, and other incidental expenses. In response to the lenient standards and promotion of family preservation in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89). The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 instituted standards for child safety and established limits of the length of stay of children in the foster care system before termination of parental rights (Phillips & Mann, 2013; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014).

Title IV-B of the Social Security Act

Title IV-B of the Social Security Act contains legislation that authorizes funding to states to offer child welfare-type services to children and families under a broad umbrella, regardless of whether a child is living in a family home or in foster care, or if the child was formerly in foster care (Stoltzfus, 2014). Congress distributes funds through two separate programs under Title IV-B, The Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services (CWS) program and the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program (Stoltzfus, 2014). CWS, under Title IV-B, subpart 1 of the Social Security Act, supplies funds for states to promote services aimed at protecting children and strengthening families (Stoltzfus, 2014). PSSF, under Title IV-B, subpart 2 of the Social Security Act, allocates funding for family support services, family preservation, family reunification, and promotion and support of adoption services (Stoltzfus, 2014).

Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (§470) appropriates federal payments for foster care, prevention, and permanency. In response to the problem of increasing numbers of older youth remaining in foster care and exiting without appropriate means for self-sufficiency (O’Neil-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004), the U.S. Congress enacted the Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative of 1986, prompting states to develop and implement programming to address the needs of youth emancipating from foster care. Despite the changes and implementation of independent living programs nationwide, reports to Congress suggested the programs did not adequately support foster youth transitions to independence (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999).

John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

The U. S. Congress enacted the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (HR 3443), P.L. 106–169, replacing the national Independent Living Program with the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) and adding funding to support the needs of older foster youth and youth exiting foster care (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019; O’Neil-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 appropriated funds to supply financial and housing aid for adolescents emancipating from foster care and former foster youth under the age of 21 years. Additionally, the law supplied funding for mental health treatment and other services to support emancipating foster youth transitioning to independence (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019; O’Neil-Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). Also, CFCIP required the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families to implement a National Youth in

Transition Database to track CFCIP services as well as demographics and outcomes of current and former foster youth (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019).

Congress has amended the Chafee program five times (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019) to:

- add an education and training voucher program (P.L. 107-133),
- expand eligibility for youth exiting foster care to access the programs (P.L. 110-351),
- establish methods of informing foster youth about the ability for designees to make health care decisions on foster youth's behalf (P.L. 111-148),
- increase funding for the program (P.L. 113-183), and
- amend requirements for collecting program data and program eligibility (P.L. 115-123).

The Chafee program has seven key focus areas or purposes:

- All youth in foster care at age 14 shall obtain transitional services aimed at education, career exploration, development of daily living skills, and physical and mental health prevention.
- Foster youth age 14 and older shall have permanent connections with caring adults.
- Foster youth, age 14 and older, shall engage in developmentally-appropriate activities and experiences to help normalize adolescence.

- Former foster youth between ages 18-21, or up to age 23 in some states, shall have access to services and supports to help with finances, housing, employment, education, and counseling.
- Emancipated foster youth shall have access to education and training vouchers.
- Youth leaving foster care for kinship, guardianship, or adoption after age 16 shall have access to Chafee-funded services.
- Youth likely to remain in foster care until age 18 shall have access to consistent activities appropriate for age and development (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019).

State legislators may choose to use up to 30% of the designated Chafee funds to support the basic housing needs of youth ages 18-21 or up to the age of 23 for states extending foster care to age 21. Housing needs may include rent payments or deposits, utilities, food, and start-up costs for housing. States cannot use funds to purchase property to house current or former foster youth (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019).

The Family First Prevention Services Act

In 2018, Congress enacted the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA; H.R. 5456 and S. 3065) as part of Division E of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018. The law emphasizes prevention and treatment services that enable youth to remain safely in the care of parents or kin. In 2020, states may access Title IV-E funds to pay for prevention treatment services for up to a year for children at risk of entering foster care (Stoltzfus, 2018). Additionally, FFPSA extends funding authority for CWS and PSSF

child and family services programs under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act. FFPSA enables states to use PSSF funds to support and retain quality foster families and to supply post-reunification services to youth and families (Stoltzfus, 2016). FFPSA also revises the CFCIP purpose and eligibility to help all youth experiencing foster care access program funds and supports to improve success with transitioning to adulthood (Stoltzfus, 2018).

Current Findings

Nearly 4.3 million maltreatment allegations involving 7.2 million children are reported annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019b; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Approximately 700,000 of the investigations result in findings of substantiated abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019b; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014), and approximately 260,000 youth enter foster care annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019a). Among the victims, 60.8% experience neglect, 10.7% are physically abused, and 7.0% are sexually abused (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019b; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). In 2018, 1738 youth died because of child maltreatment (U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019b).

Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is an act of omission or commission by a parent or caregiver resulting in harm to a child through physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, neglect, commercial or other exploitation, and intimate partner violence (World Health Organization, 2016). In the United States, an estimated 37% of children experience an investigation of maltreatment before the age of majority (Kim et al., 2017). While the general reasons for youth placed in foster care are due to child maltreatment, other underlying factors contribute to the propensity of child maltreatment (Maclean et al., 2017; McCloskey, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Race is a significant determinant for investigations of child maltreatment, with African American children experiencing the highest rates of child protective services investigations at 53% and Asians/Pacific Islanders experiencing the lowest at 10% (Kim et al., 2017). The rates of maltreatment are similar for males and females, except for sexual abuse which girls experience at higher frequencies (Katz et al., 2017; McCloskey, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020). Disabled children are also at increased risk of maltreatment by a parent or caregiver (Maclean et al., 2017; U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019).

Family of origin and environmental factors are also associated with child maltreatment (Berger et al., 2009; Gilbert et al., 2009; Havlicek, 2011; McCloskey, 2017; Kim & Drake, 2018). While racial differences exist among child maltreatment investigations (Kim et al., 2017), poverty is a significant risk factor (Imran et al., 2019) and increases child maltreatment risk across all demographics (Morris et al., 2018; Kim & Drake, 2018). Higher parental unemployment rates are associated with childhood neglect (Morris et al., 2018). Parental stress (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2010), mental health problems, and substance use (Doidge et al., 2017) also increase the risk of child maltreatment. Furthermore, socioeconomic inequalities (Doidge et al., 2017; McCloskey, 2017) and high neighborhood stress through crime or lack of social cohesion correlate positively with high rates of child maltreatment (Morris et al., 2018; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2020).

Implications of Child Maltreatment

The experiences of childhood maltreatment do not appear to be prescriptive. Resiliency and protective factors vary between children in response to abuse or neglect (Cicchetti, 2013; Thibodeau et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2019); however, the implications of child maltreatment are overwhelmingly adverse (Chitiyo & Pietrantoni, 2019; Marusak et al., 2015). Child maltreatment is associated with attentional (Boyd et al., 2019) and educational problems (Chitiyo & Pietrantoni, 2019; Kiesel et al., 2016), mental and emotional challenges (Kugler et al., 2019; Marusak et al., 2015; Sweeting et al., 2020),

substance use (Kugler et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2020), and suicidal ideation and behaviors (Miller et al., 2013; Paul & Ortin, 2019). Childhood maltreatment is also associated with increased rates of risky sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, poor physical health (Kugler et al., 2019; Sweeting et al., 2020), and poor socioeconomic wellbeing (Bunting et al., 2018; Fergusson et al., 2013). The risks associated with childhood maltreatment carry over and have implications into adulthood.

Economic Outcomes

The economic effect of all substantiated nonfatal incidents of child maltreatment is \$428 billion annually, and an estimated burden for investigated nonfatal annual cases is as large as \$2 trillion when factoring per-victim lifetime costs. The estimated lifetime cost of each maltreated child is \$830,928 for nonfatal cases and \$16.6 million for fatal cases (Peterson et al., 2018).

In addition to the economic burden on society, child maltreatment can lead to victim financial stress in adulthood (Bunting et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2018). Adults with childhood maltreatment experiences have increased rates of unemployment and lower income (Bunting et al., 2018). Financial strain experiences among victims of child maltreatment are directly correlated with fewer accumulated years of education, early parenthood, and depression (Henry et al., 2018).

Educational Outcomes

Children with maltreatment experiences are at risk of poor educational performance (Chitiyo & Pietrantoni, 2019; Kiesel et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2018). Child victims of maltreatment score significantly lower on standardized tests (Ryan et al., 2018)

and perform poorly in math and reading (Kiesel et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2018). Also, children experiencing maltreatment are more likely to experience poor school attendance (Kiesel et al., 2016), reduced total years of education (Horan & Widom, 2015), increased involvement in special education programs, and higher rates of school retention (Ryan et al., 2018). Also, adults with histories of child maltreatment are at increased risk of poor educational qualifications and reduced involvement in educational and training programs at age 18 (Jafee et al., 2018).

Emotional Outcomes

Early trauma exposure and childhood maltreatment can alter brain development and the way emotional information is processed and expressed (Marusak et al., 2015). Childhood maltreatment correlates with high amygdala reactivity, poor emotional regulation (Gerin et al., 2019; Marusak et al., 2015), and high emotional lability (Bunford et al., 2017; Kim-Spoon et al., 2012). Individuals with childhood maltreatment experiences are also at risk of higher levels of internalizing symptomatology (Gerin et al., 2019) and psychological distress (Dion et al., 2016; Sweeting et al., 2020).

Mental Health Outcomes

Childhood maltreatment has serious adverse consequences on adolescent and, subsequently, adult mental health (Cicchetti et al., 2016; Kisely et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2013; Sweeting et al., 2020). Youth with multiple concurrent forms of maltreatment are at particularly high risk of mental health problems (Kisely et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2013; Sweeting et al., 2020), suicidal ideation (Miller et al. 2013; Miller et al., 2017), and suicide attempts (Miller et al., 2013). Childhood maltreatment is also associated with

substance abuse (Cicchetti & Handley, 2019), anxiety, and mood disorders (Horan & Widom, 2015; Kisely et al., 2018).

Physical Health Outcomes

The adverse life events and psychological distress resulting from childhood maltreatment can have adverse consequences on physical health (Cicchetti et al., 2016; Danese & Tan, 2014; Kugler et al., 2019; O’Sullivan et al., 2018; Sweeting et al., 2020). Children with maltreatment experiences are at risk of poor health outcomes in adolescence (Kugler, 2019) and adulthood (Cicchetti et al., 2016; O’Sullivan, Watts, & Shenk, 2018). Additionally, childhood maltreatment is associated with increased rates of obesity (Danese & Tan, 2014; Sokol et al., 2019) and increased risk of chronic illness and disability (O’Sullivan et al., 2018).

Foster Care Entry

In 2018, among the more than 260,000 youth entering foster care in the U.S., 47% were Caucasian, 21% African American, 20% Hispanic, and 12% other (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2019a). Among the youth entering care:

- 62% experienced neglect,
- 36% entered care due to parental alcohol or substance abuse,
- 13% experienced physical abuse,
- 4% were victims of sexual abuse,
- 10% came from inadequate housing situations, 1

- 4% had parents unable to cope with the parental role, and
- 9% entered foster care due to the youth's behavior (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019a).

Trauma and Attachment

Youth entering foster care have disproportionately high rates of adverse traumatic childhood experiences when compared to nonfoster and other marginalized youth (Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Youth experiences before and during placement in foster care increase susceptibility to a host of problems not experienced by nonfoster peers (Davis et al., 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2017; Yates & Grey, 2012). Foster youth are already at risk due to the situational issues that led to child welfare involvement (Turney & Wildeman, 2017; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Some are retraumatized by the removal from primary families and disruption in meaningful relationships (Mitchell, 2018), additional abuse and neglect while in foster care (Katz et al., 2017), and multiple placement moves (Chambers et al., 2018). The experiences of complex trauma often manifest as symptomatic of PTSD, including re-experiencing traumatic events and anger reactivity (Steenbakkens, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2019).

Due to the experiences of early trauma, foster youth are at increased risk of insecure attachments (Bowlby, 1980; Casanueva et al., 2014), restricting social connectedness (Symanzik et al., 2019). Securely attached youth should seek trusted others in response to distress (Bowlby, 1977); however, insecurely-attached youth are less likely to do so (Mikulincer et al., 2015). Consequently, foster youth are at risk of not

accessing supportive relationships in response to distressing situations (Bowlby, 1980).

Also, insecurely-attached foster youth are increasingly susceptible to a variety of interpersonal and mental health problems (Bowlby, 1977; Symanzik et al., 2019).

Implications of Being in Foster Care

Because youth entering foster care have encountered various forms of maltreatment, foster youth and victims of child maltreatment have shared experiences. The added implications of removal from the care of biological families and placement in foster care, however, could intensify the problems associated with maltreatment (Mitchell, 2018; Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Early exposure to adverse experiences in childhood increases the risk of issues while in foster care (Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Such risks associated with education, mental health, and physical health are prominent.

Education

Foster youth experience frequent foster placement moves and school placement changes that disrupt academic performance (Chambers et al., 2018; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). More than a third of foster youth aged 17 or 18 have experienced more than five school changes, and up to 75% of all foster youth change schools when first entering care (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Foster youth are twice as likely as nonfoster peers to experience learning disabilities, developmental delays (Turney & Wildeman, 2016), absenteeism, and out-of-school suspensions (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Also, foster youth are three times as likely to experience expulsion when

compared to nonfoster youth (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018).

Mental Health

Attachment insecurity due to early trauma exposure (Bowlby 1977, 1980; Symanzik et al., 2019) and the instability foster youth experience while in foster care (Bedereian-Gardner et al., 2018; Casanueva et al., 2014; Okpych & Courtney, 2018) increase foster youth risk for mental health problems. The frequency of placement moves (Bedereian-Gardner et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018), maltreatment type, and time youth spend in foster care correlate with severity and types of psychiatric problems (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Foster youth experience increased rates of behavioral and emotional instability (Symanzik, 2019) and are at risk of trauma-related conditions like attachment disorders (Lehmann et al., 2016; Symanzik, 2019) and PTSD (Bedereian-Gardner et al., 2018). Foster youth also have increased levels of affect dysregulation (Narendorf et al., 2016), mood and substance use disorders, and suicidality (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Additionally, when compared to nonfoster peers, foster youth are more likely to be diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (three times as likely), anxiety (five times as likely), and depression (7 times as likely) when compared to nonfoster peers (Turney & Wildeman, 2016).

Physical Health

As with victims of maltreatment, foster youth exposed to adverse childhood experiences are at risk of poor health outcomes (Turney & Wildeman, 2017; Winter et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2018). Multiple adverse life experiences contribute to increased

rates of medical and hospital visits among foster youth (Jackson et al., 2016). Youth in foster care have asthma-related complications at twice the rate as the general population (Dunnigan et al., 2017; Turney & Wildeman, 2016) and hearing and vision problems at three times that of nonfoster youth (Turney & Wildeman, 2016). Foster youth also have increased body mass indexes, have heightened levels of body dissatisfaction (Winter et al., 2018), and are twice as likely to be diagnosed with obesity (Turney & Wildeman, 2016) in comparison to nonfoster peers. Also, foster youth engage in increased rates of sexual risk-taking (Gonzalez-Blanks & Yates, 2016; Winter et al., 2016) and have increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, HIV (Thompson & Auslander, 2011; Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2019; Winter et al., 2016), and pregnancy (Fergusson et al., 2013; Gilbert et al., 2009; Norman et al., 2012; Winter et al., 2016).

Leaving Foster Care

More than 240,000 youth leave foster care annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2016). In 2015, among the youth leaving foster care, 124,000 reunified with family, 22,000 discharged to kinship or guardian care, and 53,000 were adopted (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2016). Youth without established permanency through reunification, kinship placement, or adoption may remain in foster care until emancipation (Davis et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on

Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2016). The number of youth emancipating from foster care ranges between 20,000 to 30,000 annually (Davis et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2016).

Exit Plans

Most youth enter the foster care system with the initial goal of reunifying with families (Davis et al., 2013; DePanfilis, 2018). Child welfare agency workers develop case plans to help families with addressing the problems that led to children's removal from the care of parents (Davis et al., 2013; DePanfilis, 2018). Because the causes of child welfare involvement and placement in foster care vary in severity (Maclean, et al., 2017; McCloskey, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014), family case plans have variable levels of expectations and objectives that must be met for the youth to return to parental care (Davis et al., 2013; DePanfilis, 2018; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Youth staying in foster care due to the termination of parental rights are eligible for adoption (DePanfilis, 2018; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Youth not achieving permanency remain in care until transitioning to independence upon emancipation from care. Youth discharging from, or aging-out of, foster care without achieving permanency are referred to as emancipated foster youth (Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Emancipation

Foster youth emancipating from the foster care system experience additional challenges postemancipation (Courtney et al., 2011, 2017, 2018; Davis et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2011; Hudson & Nandy, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2012; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Youth leaving foster care are often inadequately prepared for the transition from foster care to independent living and have inadequate resources, supports, or skills to manage independently (Fowler et al., 2011; Olson et al., 2017; Yates & Grey, 2012). Also, emancipating foster youth often do not receive adequate services postemancipation to promote a smooth transition to independent living and adulthood (Courtney et al., 2017; Fowler et al., 2011; Hudson & Nandy, 2012; Mares, 2010; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012).

Postemancipation Challenges

Youth leaving foster care encounter significant difficulties during and after emancipation. The new challenges foster youth face with emancipation compound the risks associated with foster care involvement (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Davis et al., 2013; Havlicek, 2011; Mares, 2010; Yates & Grey, 2012). Emancipated foster youth are at added risk of experiencing pregnancy (Combs et al., 2018; Font et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2016), poor sexual health (Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2019), issues with substance abuse (Courtney et al. 2018; Greeno et al. 2019) and mental health (Bederian-Gardner et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2011, 2018; Havlicek et al., 2013), victimization (Courtney et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2017; Hudson & Nandy, 2012), poor education, and struggles with attaining and maintaining employment (Combs et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2018; Yates

& Grey, 2012). Former foster youth also experience problems maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships (Courtney et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2016) and reduced rates of civic engagement (Courtney et al., 2018), decreasing the likelihood of forming social networks and community connections. Additionally, emancipated foster youth are at significant risk of unemployment (Okpych & Courtney, 2014) and housing instability (Berzin et al., 2011; Comb et al., 2018; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Davis et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2011; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012).

Various factors promote foster youth experiencing difficulties postemancipation (Courtney et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2011; Mares, 2010; Yates & Grey, 2012). Poor preparation through skill development and planning for emancipation contributes to postemancipation challenges (Courtney et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2011; O'Brien et al., 2012; Olson et al., 2017; Yates & Grey, 2012). Poor programming designed to assist youth postemancipation adds to the adversity in the transition from foster care to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2011; O'Brien et al., 2012; Yates & Grey, 2012). Former foster youth report experiencing inadequate assistance with housing (Greeno et al., 2019; Katz & Courtney, 2015), skills to promote employment and social engagement, skills for living independently (Greeno et al., 2019), and finances from independent living programs. Such experiences increase among youth with mental health problems (Katz & Courtney, 2015). Also, aging out of foster care without achieving permanency increases the risk of housing instability and homelessness (Bender et al., 2015).

Housing Instability

One of the more challenging issues facing former foster youth after emancipation is housing instability (Courtney et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2011; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). When compared to youth with no foster care histories, former foster youth experience increased challenges with housing (Berzin et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2018; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Almost half of emancipated foster youth lose housing after leaving care (Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019). Former foster youth experience an increased number of housing moves, are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods, and are less likely to return to a stable family home than youth without foster care experience (Berzin et al., 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015). Public housing is also more common among former foster youth (Berzin et al., 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Estimates of 36% (Courtney et al., 2018) to 100% (Greeno et al., 2019) of emancipated foster youth experience housing instability. Approximately 25% of former foster youth experience homelessness at some point after emancipation (Courtney et al., 2018; Kelly, 2020; Mares, 2010; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Emancipated foster youth with children, with prior experiences with housing instability, and African American youth are at increased risk of housing instability, as are former foster youth experiencing disrupted adoptions, involvement with the juvenile justice system (Shah et al., 2016), or multiple placement moves (Rome & Raskin, 2019; Shah et al., 2016). Also, emancipated foster youth with poor connections to family or kin are at

increased risk for housing instability (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Risk of homelessness decreases among youth remaining in foster care until age 21 (Dworsky et al., 2013; Kelly, 2020), youth with connections to adults upon leaving care (Kelly, 2020), youth placed with relatives while in foster care, and youth with increased grade point averages (Shah et al., 2016).

Housing Instability Definition

Definitions of housing instability and homelessness are varied (Kelly, 2020). U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020) refers to housing instability as couch hopping, homelessness, and frequent housing moves. According to the Health Centers Consolidation Act of 1996 (42 U.S.C., § 254b(h)(5)(A)), homelessness refers to lacking permanent housing or living in a supervised temporary housing facility or transitional housing. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §11434a(2)(A)&(B)) further defines homelessness as “lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” including living on the streets or in a shelter, a single-room occupancy facility, inhabitable buildings, vehicles, parks, or other unstable shelter situations. Couch hopping or “surfing” is “sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason” (42 U.S.C., §11434a(2)(B)(i)). Frederick et al. (2014) defined housing instability as the “extent to which an individual’s customary access to housing of reasonable quality is secure (p. 964).” Frederick et al. (2014) developed a 13-item Housing Security Scale (HSS) based on eight dimensions of housing security. Fowler et al. (2019) characterized housing instability as falling into at least one of three categories: living with family without attaining appropriate means to

support self independently, engaging in transient or run-away behavior and multiple housing moves, or losing housing without access to supportive adults. Burgard et al. (2012) offered an operational definition suggesting that housing instability is the threat of losing or loss of a stable residence due to frequent moves, moving due to economic hardship, doubling up with others to save on costs, being behind on rent or mortgage, or homelessness.

Housing Instability Challenges

Housing instability can exacerbate other challenges that emancipated foster youth face (Dorsey et al., 2012; Fowler et al., 2011; Hetling et al., 2018; Marcal, 2018; Yates & Grey, 2012). Emancipated foster youth with experiences of housing instability are at increased risk of substance abuse (Berzin et al., 2011; Fowler et al., 2011; Greeno et al., 2019; Kelly, 2020; Smith et al., 2017), mental illness (Fowler et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2017), and involvement in crime or violence (Smith et al., 2017). Housing instability is also correlated with increased risk of victimization (Gilroy et al., 2016), teen parenting, living in impoverished neighborhoods (Berzin et al., 2011), unstable employment (Desmond & Gershenson, 2016; Rosenberg & Kim., 2018) and high-risk sexual behaviors (Daniel & Roldós, 2019). Also, emancipated foster youth with housing instability experiences have increased difficulties associated with the development and maintenance of healthy relationships (Dorsey et al., 2012; Hetling et al., 2018; Marcal, 2018).

Securing Housing upon Emancipation

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Dion et al., 2014), only 31% of youth exiting foster care receive postemancipation services, leaving a majority of youth without adequate assistance to navigate the transition to adulthood. Due to the significant challenges that housing instability poses for emancipated foster youth, securing housing upon emancipation is critical for positive outcomes as youth exit care (Courtney et al., 2017; Tam et al., 2016; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Supportive housing programs can mitigate risks associated with transitioning from foster care (Tam et al., 2016). Former foster youth transitioning to adulthood with stable housing are likely to experience vocational, educational, and mental stability (Fowler et al., 2011; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012) and have improved access to services in the community (Romo & Ortiz, 2018). Emancipated foster youth would benefit from additional housing services to help with searching for and securing housing and obtaining necessary housing start-up items (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2020).

Emancipated Foster Youth Social Support

Social support plays a significant role in the transition to adulthood (Dion et al., 2016; Bender et al., 2015; Katz & Courtney, 2015; Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Rosenberg, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016). Having available supports during this transition can mitigate distress (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). Paulsen and Berg (2016) categorized four subtypes of social supports that emancipated foster youth need when transitioning to adulthood: practical support, emotional support, affirmational guidance support, and

participation support. Practical support is a type of support offering economic and financial guidance, housing, and other day-to-day necessities. Emotional support reinforces youth feeling loved or cared for. Affirmational guidance support through advice, feedback, and guidance helps youth to self-reflect and make appropriate decisions. Participation support is a type of support that supplies information and guidance on the transition to adulthood while allowing the youth to remain in control and make decisions independently (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). While needed to promote transitioning to adulthood, emancipated foster youth report difficulty accessing such supports (Paulsen & Berg, 2016).

In contrast with nonfoster peers, emancipated foster youth have deficient safety nets or individuals to turn to when facing adversity (Davis et al., 2013; Paulsen & Berg, 2016) and report perceived deficiencies in social support (Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). Some youth report reduced access to informal supports when transitioning to adulthood and relying on formal support networks from the child welfare system (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Such networks can offer needed practical, emotional, affirmational guidance, and participation support; however, youth are reluctant to reach out due to the internal struggle between wanting to be independent and still needing help (Paulsen & Berg, 2016).

Youth leaving care encounter difficulties accessing and maintaining supportive relationships due to childhood maltreatment, general and relational instability, and attachment problems (Thompson et al., 2016). Because 90% of foster youth aging out of the system have been victims of trauma and are at increased risk of revictimization

(Dorsey et al., 2012), forming and maintaining healthy relationships can be challenging (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016). The frequent relationship disruptions during the time in foster care compound the difficulties that emancipated foster youth face when leaving care (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Dorsey et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2016). Also, emancipated foster youth report challenges accessing healthy role models or experiences that promote healthy relationship development (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Dorsey et al., 2012).

Because social support contributes to making confident, independent decisions (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013), emancipated foster youth experiencing reduced support are at risk of hasty, impulsive decision-making without consideration of consequences (Olson et al., 2017). Poor decision-making, therefore, may result in increased risk for a variety of challenges and relationship-related issues (Dorsey et al., 2012; Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018).

Social Support and Housing Stability

Social support plays an essential role in the transition to adulthood (Aubry et al., 2016; Bender et al., 2015; Katz & Courtney, 2015) and contributes to establishing and maintaining housing (Aubry et al., 2016; Collins, 2010; Patterson et al., 2015). Also, having social support and connections with adults postemancipation reduces the risk of housing instability (Kelly, 2020). Youth exit foster care, however, with deficient resources (Courtney et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2011; O'Brien et al., 2012; Olson et al., 2017; Yates & Grey, 2012) and reduced social supports (Courtney et al., 2018; Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). The reduction in emancipated foster

youth support contributes to difficulties with decision-making and maintaining housing while navigating early adulthood (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013).

Social Support Networks

Social networks can improve foster youth outcomes (Blakely et al., 2017; Leon & Dickson, 2018). Increased involvement among network members correlates to reduced risk behavior (Blakely et al., 2017) and reduced internalizing behaviors (Leon & Dickson, 2018). Leon & Dickson (2018) asserted that the more people among youth social support networks, the more significant opportunity to meet youth changing needs. Emancipated foster youth with perceived increased levels of social support report having less unmet service needs (Katz & Courtney, 2015), suggesting that perceived social support provides a level of security when navigating the transition to adulthood. Youth capable of seeking out social support from their network may also more readily seek out needed social services (Katz & Courtney, 2015).

Emancipated foster youth support networks vary in size and composition. On average, emancipated foster youth report having a total network size of 5 people to seek support, three that could provide tangible support or advice, and four that could offer emotional support (Courtney et al., 2018). Campos et al. (2020) suggested youth seek out non-family adults. Yet, the emancipated foster youth social networks often contain formal supports from social service and other professionals and informal supports like friends, family, or partners (Campos et al., 2020).

The quality and stability of emancipated foster youth networks can determine the capacity for meeting the unique needs of the youth (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Strained or

disrupted connections with family relationships and inconsistent relationships or poor communication with social service professionals can be barriers to formulating the level of support needed for emancipated foster youth success (Blakeslee & Best, 2019).

Engaging youth in the process of building a social support network involving a variety of supports and participating in support network mapping could improve the quality of support to the youth and help mediate the transition to adulthood (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Dion et al., 2016).

Nonparental Adult Social Supports

Nonparental adults play a significant role in the social network and provision of social support for emancipated foster youth (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Collins et al., 2010; Duke et al., 2017; Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). Emancipated foster youth with poor family or peer supports may turn to other critical nonparental adults (Paulsen & Berg, 2016) due to the caring and respectful nature of such relationships (Duke et al., 2017). Emancipated foster youth report seeking out various types of support from nonparental adults like former foster parents or other natural mentors (Courtney et al., 2018; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018) and having such supports improved outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016). Nonparental adults within the youth's social network could be coaches, teachers, current or former service providers, or extended family members (Greeson, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016).

Emancipated Foster Youth Transitional Programming Support

Despite the federal and state programs designed to ease transitions to adulthood, independent living programs have insufficiently promoted social support for

emancipating youth (Greeson et al., 2015). Greeson et al. (2015) suggested this problem could be attributed to a poor definition of social support. Greeson et al. challenged researchers to seek emancipated foster youth perceptions of social support to help define social support, rather than using a prescriptive definition without youth input. A clearer understanding of what social support means to youth emancipating from foster care could help fill service gaps and program development.

Given the poor focus on social support (Greeson et al., 2015), further program development emphasizing social supports and modifications to transitional support programs that focus on earlier intervention, opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes, and life skills education are warranted (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2020). Greeson et al. (2015) asserted the need to change transitional programming to address deficient adult role models and provide opportunities to practice independent living skills (Greeson et al., 2015). Olson et al. (2017) suggested the need for program improvements that include adaptive decision-making supports for program youth. In addition to programmatic change, focusing on characteristics of program workers that promote building and maintaining trusting relationships and demonstrating genuine care and concern for program youth could improve program satisfaction (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2020).

Specialized Case Management Services

Through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (The Chafee program), states can provide Title IV-E funded supportive services to former foster youth aged 18-21 or through age 23 in states with extended

foster care to age 21 (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). Professionals with added qualifications or receiving additional training to work specifically with transition-age youth provide specialized case management services (McDaniel et al., 2019). To qualify for extended supportive services, young adults must complete high school or earn a GED, enroll in postsecondary or vocational education, participate in an employment program, work at least 80 hours monthly, or qualify due to medical concerns (McDaniel et al., 2019). Youth enrolling in the program must meet with a caseworker at least monthly and have a personal transition plan (McDaniel et al., 2019).

Midwestern State PES Program

The Midwestern state PES program is a Title IV-E extension program signed into law in 2016. Under the Chafee program, the Midwestern state developed a new transitional services program specifically for youth aging out of the system (Midwestern state partner organization, 2020¹). The PES program was designed by the state child and family services agency for youth ages 18-20, meeting the following requirements: Must be in school or working, must be enrolled in an employment program, or must qualify due to a medical condition. A statewide coalition organization administers the program through partnerships with a provider network of 25 agencies and corresponding staff. The program extends services to emancipated youth and helps with employment, housing,

¹ The Midwestern state PES Program was a partner organization helping to recruit for this study. The name and subsequent references to the organization's website were masked from publication to protect the identities of the partner organization, the staff, and participants of this study.

medical and behavioral health services, and skill-building (Midwestern state partner organization, 2020).

PES case managers provide a series of supports to youth. Case managers help program participants maintain enrollment in the program, ensuring participants abide rules and remain eligible for program benefits. Case managers complete an initial needs assessment and case plan to help participants identify and work toward established program goals. General duties include education on life skills, assisting with securing housing and transportation, working with participants on budgeting, preparing participants for and participating in court proceedings, and offering other support services based upon need. Case managers meet with program participants at minimum once or twice monthly based upon the level of need and have at least weekly communication through phone, text, or other forms of electronic communication to check-in and offer support (Midwestern state partner organization, 2019²).

Syntheses of Findings

Youth exiting foster care have experienced maltreatment (Symanzik et al., 2019; Turney & Wildeman, 2017), instability (Bedereian-Gardner et al., 2018; Casanueva et al., 2014; Okpych & Courtney, 2018), and disrupted relationships and attachments (Bedereian-Gardner et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). The experiences before and

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during foster care increase emancipated foster youth risks of problems related to mental health (Bederian-Gardner et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2011, 2018; Havlicek et al., 2013), educational and vocational deficits (Combs et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2018; Yates & Grey, 2012), and difficulties forming and maintaining healthy relationships (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Courtney et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2016). The struggles emancipated foster youth have with relationships, in addition to the experiences with disruptions and instability, increase the likelihood of poor social support (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). Consequently, reduced access to adequate supports during the complicated emancipation process increases the risk of encountering more challenges postemancipation (Courtney et al., 2018).

One challenging aspect of transitioning from foster care to adulthood is securing and maintaining housing (Courtney et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2011; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Without adequate supports from whom to seek guidance, reassurance, or objective advice could result in emancipated foster youth making poor decisions related to housing (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013). Emancipated foster youth are already at increased risk of poor decision-making; therefore, the added challenge of not having support when faced with adversity with housing could increase the risk of housing instability (Olsen et al., 2017). The results could include losing housing, finding temporary housing, couch surfing, or even homelessness.

Social support influences emancipated foster youth outcomes (Aubry et al., 2016; Blakely et al., 2017; Collins, 2010; Leon & Dickson, 2018; Patterson et al., 2015;

Rosenberg, 2019), contributes to establishing and maintaining housing (Aubry et al., 2016; Collins, 2010; Patterson et al., 2015), and reduces the risk of housing instability (Kelly, 2020). It is unclear, however, which specific types of social support and which providers of support yield more substantive results. Informal social supporters, like friends and family, may offer support during the emancipation process; however, the quality of the support could be insufficient (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Youth leaving care, however, often have decreased access to informal support and rely on formal relationships from foster caregivers or professionals from the child welfare system (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Paulsen & Berg, 2016).

Social support from nonparental adults, whether through formal relationships or natural mentoring, is linked to improved outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016). Nonparental adults offering such support could be teachers, mentors, current or former service providers, or extended family members (Greeson, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016). Where social support comes from may or may not be of great significance; however, the quality of the relationship between supporter and emancipated foster youth could be.

Although the aforementioned research regarding housing instability among emancipated foster youth illuminates important findings, I have found no research on the formal social support experiences among emancipated foster youth with stable housing. More research is needed to fill the gap in the literature and help describe the lived experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth receiving social supports from nonparental adults. Understanding the quality of such relationships could help others develop programming utilizing nonparental adults to meet the needs of emancipated

foster youth and improve outcomes. Additionally, knowledge about the formal social support experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth could help address the documented problem of housing instability among youth leaving foster care (Bender et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Summary

In Chapter 2, I highlighted the literature search strategy and conceptual framework for this study, historical and legal implications of the child welfare system, current finding on the unique challenges emancipated foster youth experience after leaving foster care and the importance of housing stability and social support during the transition to adulthood, and syntheses of findings. In Chapter 3, I describe the research and data analysis methods employed to conduct this hermeneutic phenomenological study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This chapter includes a detailed description of the research design I used for this study. This study aimed to understand the formal social support experiences of emancipated foster youth with stable housing. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, I not only sought the essence of the phenomenon but also explored the embedded meaning in the participant experiences and developed common lived experience themes for this phenomenon (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1962; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Results from this study fill a gap in understanding how emancipated foster youth with stable housing experience formal social support. The following sections include the research design and rationale, role of the researcher in this study, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

I employed a qualitative study to explore the following research question: What are the experiences of formal social support among a small group of stably housed emancipated foster youth from an urban setting in the U.S. Midwest?

The central phenomenon of interest in this study was the lived experiences of emancipated foster youth receiving formal social support and maintaining housing. I explored common experience themes among emancipated foster youth enrolled in a postemancipation program offering formal social supports and assistance with maintaining housing.

Research Tradition

I used hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the lived social support experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth for this study. Researchers use phenomenology as an interpretive form of qualitative inquiry to explore similarities of experiences among study participants to derive the phenomenon's essence (Levering, 2006; Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). Heidegger (1927/1962) expanded Husserl's original philosophy of phenomenology and developed hermeneutics to move from a descriptive to an interpretive form of inquiry (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Researchers who use hermeneutic phenomenology go beyond discovering the essence of the phenomenon and look for the embedded meaning in the participant experiences (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Lavery, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012; van Manen, 1997; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

I explored and described participant experiences with formal social support and housing stability and interpreted and found meaning in those experiences through data analysis. To conduct such inquiry, Heidegger (1927/1962) suggested that researchers should not use bracketing techniques but, rather, should be aware of and welcome experiential or researched knowledge of the phenomenon. This prior knowledge could help guide inquiry (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Reiners, 2012; van Manen, 1997; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). I had previous knowledge and experiences related to the identified problem; therefore, to adhere to hermeneutic philosophy, I sought to be explicit about my

preconceptions and how I would use the prior knowledge throughout the study (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; van Manen, 1997).

Rationale for Research Design

I chose phenomenology to explore the shared lived experiences of the target population of this study. Whereas Husserlian phenomenology contains a basis for exploring and describing phenomena, researchers using hermeneutics take the process further with a reflexive approach for interpretation of the phenomenon (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Neubauer et al., 2019; Reiners, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Heidegger (1927/1962) purported that interpretation is understanding experience through the lens of one's pre-understanding, including culture and history. Therefore, the reflexive understanding of experiences in the hermeneutic circle involves ongoing analysis based on pre-understanding and new knowledge (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Reiners, 2012). To make sense of common lived experiences, researchers process those experiences through an iterative, inductive process to interpret new findings (Neubauer et al., 2019; Petty et al., 2012a). Because I sought to understand the shared lived experiences of emancipated foster youth experiencing formal social support and maintaining housing, interpretation was an essential part of the research design to formulate plausible insights into the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997).

Role of the Researcher

According to Heidegger (1927/1962), understanding is self-understanding; therefore, while the focus of the study centers on a specific phenomenon or target population, researcher prior knowledge and experiences influence the understanding of

the phenomenon (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Reiners, 2012; van Manen, 1997). In hermeneutic phenomenological research, the researcher is embedded in the study (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013) and is the central instrument for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). As a hermeneutic researcher embedded in the study, I adopted reflexive and interpretive roles to analyze and interpret findings (van Manen, 1997).

Reflexive Role

In hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers do not bracket subjective perspectives; instead, they acknowledge the value of prior knowledge and experiences on methodological inquiry (Neubauer et al., 2019; van Manen, 1997). From a hermeneutic perspective, separating oneself from pre-understanding and historical experiences when encountering and interpreting new experiences is not likely possible (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1997). As such, to enhance rigor and credibility, hermeneutic phenomenological researchers employ reflexivity, a process by which researchers contemplate how prior knowledge, personal experiences, and cultural contexts enlighten the qualitative process and study outcomes (Jootun et al., 2009; Shaw, 2010). Researchers use reflexivity, embedded in research methodology, as an ontological process to interpret the interrelatedness of people, phenomena, and the world (Kafle, 2011; Shaw, 2010).

I was familiar with the problems and experiences of the target population through professional employment. As a researcher with prior knowledge of the phenomenon, I first reflected on my pre-understanding to bring awareness of the influence on new

knowledge gained through the study (Holroyd, 2007; Neubauer et al., 2019). While I had familiarity with the target population through my place of employment, I did not have direct contact or influence over the potential participants' care. Given such, there were no apparent perceived power differentials between myself or participants related to my employment; however, I used reflexivity to consider my role as a researcher and the inherent authority that potentially had on participants. Additionally, throughout this study, I engaged in reflexivity to inform my understanding of personal experiences as a researcher and observer.

Interpretive Role

Interpretation is a keystone of hermeneutic phenomenological research (Heidegger, 1927/1962; van Manen, 1997). Researchers seek understanding through contextual meaning and interpretation of research participant lived experiences (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1997). In this study, I employed an interpretive role during the data collection and analysis processes.

My interpretations were informed by the experiences of research participants and informed by the contextual framework referenced in Chapter 2. Using attachment and social convoy theories as a contextual lens, I considered participants' experiences and how attachment and social support networks shaped those experiences. I captured interpretations and contextual meanings in researcher reflections and highlighted such findings in research conclusions.

Research Methods

I used hermeneutic phenomenology as the overarching guide to methodology. This method of inquiry informed the sampling, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis and interpretation for this study. What follows is a detailed description of such methods.

Participant Selection Logic

The target population for this proposed study was emancipated foster youth from an urban area in the U.S. Midwest. I recruited participants from emancipated foster youth enrolled in a grant-funded, state-sanctioned postemancipation services (PES) program offering cash assistance and formalized postemancipation support services in a Midwestern U.S. state. Participants were age 18-21 years, emancipated from foster care, and enrolled in the PES program at the time of data collection.

Sampling

Robinson (2014) proposed a four-point approach to qualitative research sampling that includes the following: developing a sample strategy, defining a sample universe using inclusion or exclusion criteria, choosing sample size, and sourcing the sample through recruitment. When developing a sampling strategy, researchers consider the type of information sought through inquiry and the methods of gathering data (Palinkas et al., 2015; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). Purposive sampling strategies, commonly in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011), are nonrandom methods of sampling used by researchers to identify participants with valuable information or perspectives to offer on the research phenomenon (Robinson, 2014).

For this study, I used intensity sampling, a subtype of purposive sampling, to identify information-rich participants with unique knowledge specific to the research phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). Researchers use intensity sampling to select cases strategically and purposefully based on the intent of the research and the resources available to the researchers (Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011). Also, researchers rely on informants familiar with the field of study to help with identifying participants who will produce information-rich examples of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). Informants for this study included local and state officials associated with the PES program.

Sample Selection Criteria

I selected participants from a sample universe based upon three main inclusion criteria. Participants were enrolled in the PES program at the time of data collection (selection criterion one) and were stably housed for a minimum of one year postenrollment (selection criterion two). Also, as a requirement of program enrollment, participants enrolled in the PES program received formal social support through specialized case management services from PES case managers during their time in the program (selection criterion three; Midwestern state partner organization, 2020³).

³ The Midwestern state PES Program was a partner organization helping to recruit for this study. The name and subsequent references to the organization's website were masked from publication to protect the identities of the partner organization, the staff, and participants of this study.

Sample Size

In qualitative research, theoretical and practical implications relevant to the identified research question influence the sample size (Robinson, 2014). While researchers often propose a numeric range of study participants based on the aim of the study (Robinson, 2014), data saturation often determines the eventual number of participants in qualitative research (Bowen, 2008). Qualitative researchers with an idiographic aim begin with a small sample that will allow for an intensive analysis (Robinson, 2014) and may seek out additional participants to the point that additional information no longer provides substantive information about the phenomenon (Bowen, 2008; Robinson, 2014).

According to van Manen (1997), researchers seek the lived experiences of small demographically homogenous samples when conducting phenomenological research. Small sample size may be adequate to address the research question because the participants identified will be information-rich, with similar lived experiences (Guest et al., 2006; van Manen, 1997). Accordingly, for this study, I proposed a sample size range of 8 – 12 emancipated foster youth, or to the point of saturation of shared lived experiences. I sought participants with information on the phenomenon to glean sufficient knowledge to develop common lived experience themes. The eventual sample size was nine.

Saturation

When collecting data, researchers using purposive sampling strategies are likely to reach saturation due to the purposeful selection process (Suri, 2011). Saturation may

occur when data collection no longer meaningfully contributes additional knowledge or themes of the phenomenon (Bowen, 2008; Caelli et al., 2003; Suri, 2011). With purposive sampling, researchers typically reach saturation within the first 12 interviews; however, pertinent themes may be evident within six meetings (Guest et al., 2006). Researchers also use the point of saturation to help determine whether additional participants are needed (Bowen, 2008; Guest et al., 2006; Suri, 2011).

Participant Search and Contact

I inquired of state and local program supervisors or PES case managers to identify potential participants based on the PES program enrollees the informants considered receptive to program services and met inclusion criteria. I formally contacted the state administrator for the PES program to provide information on the purpose of the study, discuss the participant search and contact strategy, and seek formal written approval to engage program participants in the research study. Postemancipation services (PES) program administrators and case managers identified program enrollees meeting inclusion criteria and sent information about the study to potential participants, including the researcher's contact information. The program enrollees interested in the study either emailed, called by phone, or texted me, indicating interest in participation. I gathered contact information from the potential participants, sent information about the study and the consent form via email, then offered to answer any additional questions before scheduling interviews. As a courtesy for participation, I offered a \$50 gift card upon completion of interviews and member checks.

Participant Informed Consent

As a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor conducting research, I adhered to strict guidelines for research participant consent as outlined in section G.2 of the American Counseling Association (ACA) code of ethics (ACA, 2014). The parameters per the ACA are in addition to those established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In accordance with the ACA code of ethics, when obtaining informed consent from research participants (see Appendix A), I:

- accurately explained the purpose of the study and procedures for data collection and answered participant follow up questions,
- identified potential participant risks and benefits from the study,
- disclosed possible conflicts of interest or power differentials between researcher and participants,
- offered referrals for outside services should the need arise (i.e., counseling or psychotherapy),
- described limits to confidentiality,
- described how the findings would be issued and the potential target audience, and
- informed participants of the choice to withdraw consent and stop participation at any point without penalty (ACA, 2014).

Instrumentation

In phenomenological research, researchers use in-depth interviews involving open-ended questions and comments as data collection methods (Moustakas, 1994). For

this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I collected data using a demographic questionnaire and semistructured interviews. Using the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B), participants provided basic demographic information and basic information about involvement with foster care and PES services. I conducted interviews with participants during allotted one-hour timeframes per meeting. I used a digital audio recording feature within the audio-video conferencing program to collect data that I transcribed verbatim after the interview.

Researcher-Developed Instrument

When conducting phenomenological interviews, using an interview guide can help provide a general structure to the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). I used a researcher-developed open-ended semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix C) to conduct interviews with research participants. Interview questions directly linked to this study's research question. The interview format was semistructured to allow for relevant follow-up questions. In addition to the interview protocol, I wrote field notes during and upon completion of each interview to document observations, other pertinent data, and researcher insights.

Data Collection

In contrast to descriptive or transcendental phenomenology, when conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research, the researcher investigates the experiences of research participants without bracketing the researcher's preunderstanding of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019; Rittruechai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Through an iterative process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, the hermeneutic

phenomenological researcher attempts to find meaning in the experiences of research participants while attuning the researcher's own being, or *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1962) toward the essence of the phenomenon (Kafle, 2011; Neubauer et al., 2019; van Manen, 1997). The researcher's past experiences and pre-understanding help guide inquiry in hermeneutic phenomenological research; therefore, researchers use prior experience and knowledge in the data collection and analysis processes (Kafle, 2011; Neubauer et al., 2019; van Manen, 1997)

For this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I collected data using semistructured interviews and field notes. I conducted and audio-recorded semistructured interviews with participants during an allotted hour-long timeframe. I conducted interviews using a secured online audio-video conferencing program. Upon completion of each interview, I provided participants with a participant debriefing form (see Appendix D), reiterating the purpose of the study, explaining how to contact the researcher if additional questions arise, and informing participants about the complimentary gift card.

In addition to data collection via interviews, I wrote field notes before, during, and after the interview process. Field notes are useful for gathering nonverbal and other data not captured in audio recordings (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004).

According to Groenewald (2004), there are four types of field notes:

- observational notes that researchers write to comment on what happened during the interview,

- theoretical notes that researchers write to help derive the meaning of participant experiences,
- methodological notes that researchers write to serve as reminders or instructions on data collection processes, and
- analytical notes that researchers write as an end of interview summary of analytic impressions and preliminary analysis or interpretation

Phenomenological researchers incorporate field notes into the transcribed narrative texts for each interview and later analyze the field notes simultaneously with participant narratives (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004). Once I completed each interview, I transcribed audio recordings and incorporated written field notes with each transcript.

Data Analysis Plan

Because hermeneutic phenomenology is an interpretive approach that explicitly excludes the concept of bracketing (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Heidegger, 1962; Neubauer et al., 2019; Ritruethai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997), traditional phenomenological data analysis methods from transcendental or descriptive modes of inquiry are not sufficient for hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (Ajjawai & Higgs, 2007; Neubauer et al., 2019; van Manen, 1997). When conducting hermeneutic phenomenology, there are no strict methodological guidelines; however, hermeneutic phenomenological researchers rely on various research methods to uncover phenomenological themes to characterize the essence of the phenomenon (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Ritruethai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). van Manen (1997) expounded on Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological work and proposed a systematic approach for hermeneutic

phenomenological data collection and analysis, called thematic analysis (van Manen, 1997).

Thematic analysis is a method that researchers use to uncover rich, detailed information about the study phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and recover hidden meaning in phenomenological experience (van Manen, 1997). Researchers using thematic analysis uncover themes through analytic questioning and interpretation of textual representations of participants' stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; van Manen, 1997). Through dwelling in the language of participants (Heidegger, 1962), hermeneutic phenomenological researchers use thematic analysis to recover themes by interpreting participant experiences and linking researcher knowledge and assumptions to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; van Manen, 1997). This process involves engaging the hermeneutic circle (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1997).

My data analysis plan was informed by philosophical underpinnings of Heidegger (1927/1962) and thematic analysis methods offered by van Manen (1997) and later expanded upon through iterations by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), Braun and Clarke (2006), Crist and Tanner (2003), Groenewald (2004), and Rittruechai et al. (2018). The data analysis methods proposed by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), Braun and Clarke (2006), Crist and Tanner (2003), Groenewald (2004), Rittruechai et al. (2018), and van Manen (1997) are similar in context and contain overlapping steps. Moustakas' (1994) methods, while aligned with descriptive or transcendental approaches, include similarities to the aforementioned approaches in coding and synthesis. Using the six steps named by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) as a guide, I gleaned similarities in methodological tasks from van

Manen (1997), Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), Braun and Clarke (2006), Crist and Tanner (2003), Groenewald (2004), Moustakas (1994) and Ritruetchai et al. (2018) to construct my hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis plan (see Appendix E).

The data analysis plan included a series of 6 steps: immersion, understanding, abstraction, synthesis, illumination and illustration of the phenomenon, and integration and final interpretation. During the immersion phase, I transcribed audio-recorded data, began an iterative process of reflection and analysis, and determined if any further clarification was needed from participants (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Through the understanding phase, I identified first-order, initial codes and engaged in further reflection and interpretation (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). In the abstraction phase, I identified second-order codes and subthemes and began searching for shared meaning through writing, reflecting, and interpreting (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). During synthesis, I grouped subthemes, identified and compared emerging themes, and checked meanings against transcriptions of participant experiences (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Throughout the illumination and illustration of the phenomenon phase, I defined and named themes, grouped themes to uncover the essence of the phenomenon, and engaged in further interpretation (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004;

Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Finally, during the integration and final interpretation phase, I engaged in final reflections and interpretations and submitted written findings (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006). A detailed description of this plan is in the appendices (see Appendix E).

From a hermeneutic perspective, throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I acknowledged and reflected upon my assumptions, pre-understanding, and biases associated with the study phenomenon by engaging the hermeneutic circle (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Laverly, 2003; van Manen, 1997). The hermeneutic circle is a process for understanding how textual data (parts) contribute to understanding or a body of knowledge (whole) and how researchers, in turn, understand individual data (parts) based on new understanding (whole) gleaned from interpretation (Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1997). Researchers use the hermeneutic circle as an iterative process of attaining and making sense of knowledge that involves reading transcribed data, reflecting and writing about the data, and interpreting new information (Laverly, 2003). Crist and Tanner (2003) described the hermeneutic circle as having two arcs: the forward arc includes researcher recognition of pre-understandings or assumptions, and the return arc includes interpretations based on new knowledge. I engaged in reflective writing about my experiences through data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Coding Methods

To implement coding, I first transcribed interview data and then incorporated field notes with each transcribed interview. I utilized NVivo12, a qualitative data analysis software program, for coding procedures (QSR International, 2020). I used NVivo12 for

coding purposes during my data analysis plan's understanding, abstraction, and synthesis stages. During the *understanding* stage, I first read interview transcripts, highlighted critical statements or phrases, and used NVivo12 to code for first order participant constructs / initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007), and identified textual descriptions and themes (Moustakas, 1994). Through the *abstraction* stage, I conceptualized the first-order codes into conceptual categories and critical concepts (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004) using NVivo12. During this stage, composite structural descriptions emerged (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout the *synthesis* stage, I further synthesized the in vivo categories into broader, general themes through reflective writing and analysis (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997) and integrated composite textual and structural meanings (Moustakas, 1994). I utilized NVivo12 to conceptualize overarching themes further to uncover the essence of the phenomenon of this study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Due to the subjective nature of hermeneutic phenomenological research, maintaining the quality of the study is significant to promote trustworthiness (Kafle, 2011). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four standards of rigor to address trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Specific to hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, van Manen (1997) suggests quality depends on the following four criteria:

- Orientation – researcher involvement in the lifeworld of study participants

- Strength – the degree to which the textual interpretations represent the meanings of the phenomenon expressed by participants' stories
- Richness – participant perception of the quality of meaning in research textual narratives.
- Depth – the degree to which the research text represents the participants' best intentions.

I used the rigorous methods proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Moustakas (1994) to enhance the trustworthiness of this study and incorporated the quality measures of orientation, strength, richness, and depth, as suggested by van Manen (1997).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Suggested methods to promote credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I used persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking. Persistent observation includes a high degree of attention to the qualities and characteristics of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I accomplished this through observation, writing field notes, and reflective writing. Triangulation is cross-checking data and interpretations amongst researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation also involves reviewing data and uncovering common themes by eliminating overlapping information (Creswell & Miller, 2000), a process I engaged in through data analysis. Member checking is when researchers return to participants to clarify that data reflect participant experiences

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), transcribing interviews verbatim and cross-checking transcripts with research participants increases credibility. As such, I returned transcribed interview transcripts to participants to determine if the data reflect participant experiences.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the degree to which a reader can draw conclusions from a study and later apply it in another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that transferability occurs when researchers offer a "thick" description of the research and use purposive sampling methods to maximize the range of data relevant to the study. In this study, I adhered to the methods outlined in the data analysis plan and engaged in extensive reflective writing through data collection and analysis stages. In data analysis and interpretations, I provided thick descriptions of the context of the phenomenon. According to Denzin (1989), thick descriptions are rich, detailed, in-depth accounts of participants' experiences. Additionally, I used purposive sampling strategies to seek a sample that is homogenous regarding inclusion criteria only. I will not employ other exclusion or inclusion criteria as I sample participants for the study.

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability refers to the consistency and stability of the method of inquiry to answer the research question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the following methods for establishing dependability: overlap methods/triangulation, stepwise replication, audit trail. For this study, I employed audit

trail methods to demonstrate the dependability of the study. The audit trail is a systematic detail of methodological steps in the research and includes access to raw and processed research data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers establish an audit trail by clearly documenting all research activities, including clear data collection and analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The audit trail consisted of field notes, reflective writings, raw data, coded data, and thematic data for this study. The audit trail included sufficient information for other researchers to critique the findings' methods, decision-making strategies, and interpretations.

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described confirmability as the ability to employ the same audit trail for promoting dependability to verify that the data and interpretations meaningfully reflect the nature of the phenomenon. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended triangulation and reflexivity as exercises to help promote confirmability. To determine confirmability, in addition to the aforementioned triangulation strategy, I engaged in reflexivity, a self-evaluative process of exploration by which researchers contemplate how prior knowledge, personal experiences, and cultural contexts enlighten the qualitative process and study outcomes (Jootun et al., 2009; Shaw, 2010). I engaged in reflexivity through reflective writing during the data collection and analysis stages of the proposed study.

Managing Discrepant Cases

The proposed sampling strategy yielded a small sample of participants with similar backgrounds and experiences before and after emancipation. I gleaned shared lived experience themes among study participants. Discrepant cases were not apparent.

Ethical Procedures

I adhered to the ethical guidelines of the ACA and Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I obtained IRB approval (Walden IRB approval number 12-18-20-0411777) before the implementation of research methods. I obtained informed consent for participant involvement in the proposed study. When obtaining participant consent for research participation, I:

- accurately explained the purpose of the research and procedures for data collection and answered participant follow up questions,
- identified potential participant risks and benefits from the study,
- explained possible power differentials between participant and researcher,
- offered referrals for outside services should the need arise (i.e., counseling or psychotherapy),
- described limits to confidentiality,
- described how the findings would be issued and the potential target audience, and
- informed participants of the choice to withdraw consent and stop participation at any point without penalty (ACA, 2014).

In addition to a list of providers in the area that participants can reach out to for further assistance (i.e., counseling or other), I provided participants with the researcher and dissertation chairperson's name, office address, and phone number.

To promote participant confidentiality, I took the necessary steps to protect participant identity and personal information by assigning each participant a pseudonym and maintaining a confidential list of participant names and information with the assigned pseudonyms. I included this list, along with participant demographic information, digital audio-recordings, transcribed and coded data, and other information about participants in a password-protected digital file on a password-protected computer in my private office. While I have sole responsibility for maintaining and protecting the research data, I will provide the dissertation committee chair, committee member, and IRB Board access to the data upon request. I will store research data for five years after the research study's publication and destroy all digital copies of the data through digital document deletion from my computer and secured cloud storage.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I included a detailed description of the research methodology for this study. I supplied the rationale for the research mode of inquiry and design, discussed my role as the researcher in the study, and provided a detailed plan of the research methods. In the description of the methods, I detailed the research participant selection logic and sampling strategy, data collection methods, and the data analysis plan. Finally, I addressed concerns about trustworthiness and ethical considerations for this study. In Chapter 4, I will present the results from the data analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study to understand the formal social support lived experiences of emancipated foster youth with stable housing. I used hermeneutic phenomenology to look for the embedded meaning in participant experiences and developed common lived experience themes for this phenomenon (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1962; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). In this study, I explored the following research question: What are the experiences of formal social support among a small group of stably housed emancipated foster youth from an urban setting in the U.S. Midwest?

Chapter Organization

Chapter 4 includes rich, descriptive analyses of interview data from nine research participants in this study. I provide information about the research setting, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis. Additionally, I offer emerging themes of participant experiences of formal social support and maintaining housing while enrolled in a postemancipation services (PES) program. I conclude Chapter 4 with information about trustworthiness and research results.

Setting

I selected participants for this study based upon three selection criteria: enrolled in the PES program at time of data collection, stably housed for a minimum of one year postenrollment and receiving specialized case management services from the PES program. I recruited participants with the assistance of the state PES administrator and

local PES supervisors and case managers, who disseminated recruitment information to the PES program enrollees.

I conducted 45-60-minute interviews with nine research participants via an online audio-visual teleconferencing software platform. Before each interview, participants received informed consent forms via email, briefly including information about the purpose of the study, risks and benefits of participation, payment for participation in the study, and privacy and confidentiality. I designed the interview protocol to elicit participant experiences with maintaining housing and receiving formal social supports while enrolled in the PES program. The interview questions were open-ended to allow for further elaboration of follow-up questions if necessary. I audio-recorded each interview, then listened to and transcribed the interviews verbatim. Once transcribed, I listened to the audio recordings while reading the textual data to determine accuracy. Finally, I emailed copies of the transcribed interviews to the respective participants for member-checking, along with debriefing forms, further explaining the research and offering information about seeking additional services if needed.

I conducted this research during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected each participant in different ways. The impact of COVID-19, though not an initial inquiry for this research, was considered, particularly as the pandemic influenced participants' housing experiences. The details of this information relative to this research study are available in Chapters 4 and 5.

Demographics

Participants in this study consisted of seven females, one male, and one participant identifying as nonbinary and ranged in age from 19 to 21 years. Two study participants identified as multiracial, six participants identified as either Black or African American, and one identified as Caucasian. Two of the participants were single mothers, parenting either one or two children. All participants had maintained housing for a minimum of 12 months while in the PES program, and all had received specialized case management services from the PES program. Figure 1 highlights the participant demographic information, and the following includes detailed demographic and background information for each of the nine research participants.

Participant 1

Participant 1 was 19 years old at the time of the interview. They described their gender as nonbinary and race as multiracial. Participant 1 first entered foster care at the age of 17 and spent one year in the same foster home before emancipating. The time between Participant 1 emancipating from foster care and entering the PES program was two months. During that time, Participant 1 stayed with friends until entering college and moving into a college dorm. At the time of the interview, Participant 1 was enrolled in the PES program for a total of 19 months and experienced one housing disruption. Participant 1 left the college dormitory when the college shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, Participant 1 stayed with a friend's family for three months while the PES program case manager assisted with locating other housing. Participant 1

Figure 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Age	19	20	19	19	21	19	21	19	20
Gender	NB	F	F	F	M	F	F	F	F
Race / Ethnicity	MR	MR	AA	AA	C	AA	AA	AA	AA
Age first entering foster care	17	11	14	15	14	17	17	16	12
Number of years in foster care	1	7	4	3	4	1	<1	2	6
Number of foster care placements	1	2	Multi [*]	1	2	2	1	2	5
Time between foster care and PES program	2 mo.	1 mo.	6 wk.	< 1 mo.	1 mo.	0	0	0	4 mo.
Number of moves since foster care	2	1	1	1	3	1	1	2	2
Current placement type	Dorm	A	A	Dorm & FH	Dorm	A	GH	A	STH
Length of time in PES program	19 mo.	30 mo.	18 mo.	12 mo.	35 mo.	12 mo.	35 mo.	16 mo.	23 mo.
Ever homeless	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Ever couch surfed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Employed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Currently enrolled in college	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Working while in college	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Parenting children	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No

Notes. NB = Non-binary; MR = Multi-racial; AA = African American. C = Caucasian; A = Apartment; FH = Foster Home; GH = Group Home; STH = Short-term Housing.

^{*} Multi refers to multiple foster home placements. Participant 3 was unsure of the exact number and reported multiple foster home placements.

was employed and not enrolled in college at the time of the interview due to financial aid problems. Participant 1 planned to enroll the following semester again.

Participant 2

Participant 2 was 20 years old at the time of the interview and identified as female and multiracial. Participant 2 entered foster care at the age of 11 and spent seven years in two different foster care placements before emancipating. Participant 2 entered the PES program approximately one month after leaving foster care and, during the month after foster care, couch-surfed with friends and family before services began and before moving into a college dormitory. Participant 2 had participated in the PES program for 30 months at the time of the interview. During that time, Participant 2 attended college and worked part-time.

Participant 3

Participant 3 was 19 years old and identified as a Black female. Participant 3 entered foster care at the age of 14 years and was in multiple placements during the four years in the foster care system. Participant 3 was pregnant when exiting foster care and indicated being homeless and couch-surfing with friends during the six weeks between leaving foster care and entering the PES program. Participant 3 had been in the same apartment since entering the PES program. While in the PES program, Participant 3 completed high school, obtained employment, and started college while parenting two children.

Participant 4

Participant 4 identified as a 19-year-old Black, African American female.

Participant 4 entered foster care at the age of 15 and remained in the same foster care placement during the three years in foster care until emancipating. Participant 4 entered the PES program less than one month after exiting foster care. Participant 4 was enrolled in college and employed at the time of the interview. Participant 4 reported having two different housing locations; a dorm room at college and a bedroom at the former foster home. Participant 4 reported continued relationships with the former foster parents and returned to the former foster home on college breaks.

Participant 5

Participant 5 identified as a Caucasian male and was 21 years of age at the time of the interview. Participant 5 reported entering foster care at the age of 15 and remaining in foster care for three or four years in two different foster care placements. After exiting foster care, Participant 5 spent time in a homeless shelter and couch surfed with family before entering the PES program. Participant 5 reported staying in two different apartments before enrolling in college and moving into a dormitory, where he lived for the past two years. Because of COVID and due to special medical needs, Participant 5 moved into three different dormitory locations during the pandemic, though he was not without housing during that period. While in college, Participant 5 also worked part-time. Participant 5 reported receiving an extension in the PES program past his 21st birthday due to an executive order by the state's governor.

Participant 6

Participant 6 identified as an African American female and was 19 years of age at the time of the interview. Participant 6 entered foster care at the age of 17 and remained in foster care until emancipating at 18 years old. While in foster care, Participant 6 experienced two separate foster home placements. Participant 6 reported deciding to remain in foster care past her 18th birthday until after giving birth to her daughter and finishing high school. Participant 6 reported exiting foster care and entering the PES program the same day. Participant 6 maintained employment for the duration of time in the PES program and remained in the same apartment for one year at the time of the interview. Participant 6 had planned to attend college; however, was uncomfortable with the online format colleges moved to due to the COVID pandemic and chose to work and enroll in college later once in-person classes resumed.

Participant 7

Participant 7 identified as an African American female and was 21 years old at the time of the interview. Participant 7 reported entering the foster care system at the age of 17 and remaining in the same foster home for four months before emancipating. Participant 7 indicated moving directly from the foster home to the PES program housing on the same day. Participant 7 initially lived in group housing through the PES program; however, later moved to an apartment. At the time of the interview, Participant 7 had remained in the PES program for nearly three years; however, Participant 7 indicated losing program eligibility at one point and couch surfing with friends for approximately three months before regaining eligibility. The college Participant 7 attended closed during

the COVID pandemic, and Participant 7 indicated losing eligibility due to not attending school and not finding employment timely. Participant 7 regained eligibility for the program once securing employment.

Participant 8

Participant 8 was 19 years old at the time of the interview and identified as an African American female. Participant 8 entered foster care at the age of 16 years and experienced two different foster home placements while in care. Participant 8 emancipated at the age of 18 and entered the PES program upon exiting foster care. Participant 8 remained in the PES program for one year and had been attending college, then, in the Fall of 2020, her college moved to online classes, and the online format was a difficult adjustment. As a result, participant 8 withdrew from school and misunderstood the expectations explained about the PES program eligibility, and lost housing temporarily until securing employment and meeting program eligibility once again. During the time while not meeting eligibility, Participant 8 lived temporarily with friends. Participant 8 reported working several jobs and planned to return to college once in-person schooling returned.

Participant 9

Participant 9 identified as an African American female and was 20 years old at the time of the interview. Participant 9 entered foster care at the age of 12 and remained in foster care until emancipating at 18 years old. While in foster care, Participant 9 reported having about 4-5 different foster home placements. Additionally, Participant 9 reported being homeless and couch-surfing with friends during the four months between exiting

foster care and entering the PES program. Since enrolling in the PES program, Participant 9 has worked and attended college. Participant 9 lived in campus housing; however, during summer breaks when campus housing closed, Participant 9 lived in temporary month-to-month housing due to having no other place to stay for the short-term.

Data Collection

For this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I collected data using semistructured interviews and field notes. I conducted and audio-recorded semistructured interviews with participants during an allotted hour-long timeframe. I collected demographic information and completed interviews via an online audio-visual teleconferencing platform. I used a researcher-developed demographic form to gather demographic information and a researcher-developed interview protocol to guide the semistructured interviews. Upon completion of each interview, I provided participants with a participant debriefing form (see Appendix D), reiterating the purpose of the study, explaining how to contact the researcher if additional questions arise, and informing participants about the complimentary gift card. In addition to data collection via gathering demographic information and conducting interviews, I wrote observational, theoretical, methodological, and preliminary analytical field notes to capture initial impressions and interpretations.

Upon completion of each interview, I transcribed the interviews verbatim. Then, I listened to the recorded interviews while transcribing the data into text. After each transcription, I relistened to the interviews while reading the textual data to promote

accuracy. After finalizing the transcribed interviews, I emailed participants copies of the interview for member-checking and to promote accuracy. After participants acknowledged the accuracy of the interview transcription, I sent the participant a gift card as a courtesy for participation, then uploaded the participant data into NVivo 12 for data analysis.

Data Analysis

My data analysis plan (see Figure 2) was informed by philosophical underpinnings of Heidegger (1927/1962) and thematic analysis methods offered by van Manen (1997) and later expanded upon through iterations by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), Braun and Clarke (2006), Crist and Tanner (2003), Groenewald (2004), and Ritruetchai et al. (2018). The data analysis methods proposed by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), Braun and Clarke (2006), Crist and Tanner (2003), Groenewald (2004), Ritruetchai et al. (2018), and van Manen (1997) are similar in context and contain overlapping steps. Moustakas' (1994) methods, while aligned with descriptive or transcendental approaches, include similarities to the aforementioned approaches in coding and synthesis. Using the six steps named by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) as a guide, I gleaned similarities in methodological tasks from van Manen (1997), Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), Braun and Clarke (2006), Crist and Tanner (2003), Groenewald (2004), Moustakas (1994) and Ritruetchai et al. (2018) to construct my hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis plan.

The data analysis plan included a series of six steps: immersion, understanding, abstraction, synthesis, illumination and illustration of the phenomenon, and integration

and final interpretation. During the immersion phase, I transcribed audio-recorded data, began an iterative process of reflection and analysis, and determined if any further

Figure 2

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Data Analysis Plan

Phase	Tasks
1. Immersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcription of recorded data and iterative review of textual data • Identify areas needing further clarification with participants • Preliminary reflections / interpretations (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997)
2. Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify first-order participant constructs, exemplars, paradigm cases • Isolate initial codes using NVivo software • Reflect on text, thematic statements, codes, and further interpretations (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997)
3. Abstraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify second-order researcher constructs • Cluster coding units to form subthemes • Search for shared meaning through written interpretive summary (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004)
4. Synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesize and group subthemes to develop themes • Compare emerging themes • Summarize each interview based upon emerging themes • Seek validity checking • Search for shared meaning through written interpretive summaries and thematic summaries • Check / recheck meaning against shared experience descriptions (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997)
5. Illumination & Illustration of Phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define and name themes • Develop overall ideas / theories of phenomenon • Link literature to themes and reconstruct interpretations into participant stories • Grouping thematic experiences to uncover essence of phenomenon • Further search for interpretation through iterative process between narratives, field notes, and reflections (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997)
6. Integration & Final Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate and critique findings • Conduct final interpretations • Produce findings through scholarly report (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006)

clarification was needed from participants (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Also, during the immersion phase, I reflected on initial transcribed data to determine if additional questions surfaced to inquire of future participants. Through the understanding phase, I identified first-order, initial codes and engaged in further reflection and interpretation (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). In the abstraction phase, I identified second-order codes and subthemes and began searching for shared meaning through writing, reflecting, and interpreting (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). During synthesis, I grouped subthemes, identified and compared emerging themes, and checked meanings against transcriptions of participant experiences (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Throughout the illumination and illustration of the phenomenon phase, I defined and named themes, grouped themes to uncover the essence of the phenomenon while engaging in further interpretation (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997). Finally, during the integration and final interpretation phase, I engaged in final reflections and interpretations and prepared written findings (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

From a hermeneutic perspective, throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I acknowledged and reflected upon my assumptions, pre-understanding, and biases associated with the study phenomenon by engaging the hermeneutic circle (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Laverly, 2003; van Manen, 1997). The hermeneutic circle is a process for understanding how textual data (parts) contribute to understanding or a body of knowledge (whole) and how researchers, in turn, understand individual data (parts) based on new understanding (whole) gleaned from interpretation (Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1997). I utilized the hermeneutic circle in an iterative process of attaining and making sense of information through reading transcribed data, reflecting and writing about the data, and interpreting new information (Laverly, 2003). Crist and Tanner (2003) described the hermeneutic circle as having two arcs: the forward arc includes researcher recognition of pre-understandings or assumptions. The return arc includes interpretations based on new knowledge. I engaged in reflective thought and writing about my experiences with data collection, analysis, and interpretation throughout my research. Reflective writing is evident in initial interview reflections, field notes, and reflexive journaling.

Coding Methods

I implemented coding methods based on detailed steps of the data analysis plan. During the *understanding* stage of data analysis, I first read interview transcripts, highlighted critical statements or phrases, coded for first order participant constructs or initial codes (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006), and identified textual descriptions and themes (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, I wrote and conducted an

iterative review of field notes, comparing to initial coding and textual descriptions.

Through the *abstraction* stage, I conceptualized the first-order codes into conceptual categories and critical concepts (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004). Throughout the *synthesis* stage, I further synthesized the in vivo categories into broader, general themes through reflective writing and analysis (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997) and integrated composite textual and structural meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I conceptualized overarching themes to uncover the essence of the phenomenon of this study.

I utilized NVivo12, a qualitative data analysis software program, for coding procedures (QSR International, 2020). I uploaded all gathered data, including interview transcripts, demographic questionnaires, and field notes to NVivo12. I used NVivo 12 coding features to construct primary and secondary codes, subsequent subthemes or categories, and themes. Additionally, I used NVivo 12 to create a reflexive journal, that I updated through the iterative process of analysis, reflecting, and writing. Figure 3 includes examples of coding and thematic analysis through the understanding, abstraction, and synthesis stages to formulate overarching themes.

Figure 3*Understanding, Abstraction, and Synthesis Stages of Data Analysis Example*

Understanding		Abstraction	Synthesis
Textual Data	Initial Codes	Categories	Theme
P9: <u>Calls and checks in on me. Like a parent. She's like my parent.</u> The parent like I haven't had. She calls; we talk. <u>I can trust her with stuff and I can tell her and talk to her when I need to talk to her,</u> and I can reach her when I need to reach her.	Check-in Like a parent Trust	Affirmational Guidance Support Supportive Role Emotional Support	Case Manager Social Support
P5: <u>These guys guided me every step of the way and they</u>	Guidance	Participation Support	
P8: Like when I speak with my worker, I'll tell her like what's been going on like how my week went and stuff. So like she like, like little stuff that I told her about like she like is like <u>a role model</u> for me.	Role Model	Supportive Role	
P1: <u>I could always call her and say, "Hey, this is going on."</u> and I would expect her like she would pick up, or I would expect for her to call back within like a few hours...	Reliable	Reliable and Consistent	Case Manager Qualities and Values
P5: <u>...caring and compassion</u> because these kids really don't know much coming out of the system.	Compassionate	Empathic and Understanding	

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Due to the subjective nature of hermeneutic phenomenological research, maintaining the quality of research is significant to promote trustworthiness (Kafle, 2011). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four standards of rigor to address trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Specific to hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, van Manen (1997) suggests quality depends on the following four criteria:

- Orientation – researcher involvement in the lifeworld of study participants
- Strength – the degree to which the textual interpretations represent the meanings of the phenomenon expressed by participants’ stories
- Richness – participant perception of the quality of meaning in research textual narratives.
- Depth – the degree to which the research text represents the participants’ best intentions.

For this study, I used the rigorous methods proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Moustakas (1994) to enhance the trustworthiness of my study and incorporated the quality measures of orientation, strength, richness, and depth, as suggested by van Manen (1997) throughout the narrative.

Credibility

To promote credibility in this study, I used persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking. Persistent observation includes a high degree of attention to the qualities and characteristics of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I accomplished this

through observation, writing field notes, and reflective writing. Triangulation is a process of cross-checking data and interpretations amongst researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and also involves reviewing data and uncovering common themes by eliminating overlapping information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Through rigorous data analysis, I uncovered common themes among textual representations of participant experiences. Member checking is a process by which researchers return to participants to clarify that data reflect participant experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), transcribing interviews verbatim and cross-checking transcripts with research participants increases credibility. I emailed copies of transcribed interviews to the respective participants for review to confirm the accuracy of the content.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to how a reader can draw conclusions from a study and later apply it in another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that transferability occurs when researchers offer a “thick” description of the research and use purposive sampling methods to maximize the range of data relevant to the study. In this study, I adhered to methods outlined in the data analysis plan and engaged in extensive reflective writing through data collection and analysis stages to provide thick descriptions of participant experiences. I used purposive sampling strategies to seek a sample that is homogenous regarding inclusion criteria, and participants offered valuable data about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The research methods I employed in this study appear to be replicable, enhancing the generalizability of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability refers to the consistency and stability of the method of inquiry to answer the research question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I employed audit trail methods to promote dependability in the study. The audit trail is a systematic detail of methodological steps in the research and includes access to raw and processed research data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail consisted of field notes, reflective writings, raw data, coded data, and thematic data for this study. The audit trail includes sufficient information for other researchers to critique the methods, decision-making strategies, and interpretations of the findings.

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described confirmability as the ability to employ the same audit trail for promoting dependability to verify that the data and interpretations meaningfully reflect the nature of the phenomenon. In addition to the aforementioned audit trail strategy, I engaged in reflexivity through reflective writing during this study's data collection and analysis stages. I typed field notes taken during and after each interview and entered into NVivo for analysis. Additionally, I maintained a reflexive journal, gathering and typing thoughts on data collection, analysis, and initial interpretations.

Results

Four over-arching themes and 15 categories emerged from data analysis. The four emergent themes include: PES program social support, PES case manager social support, PES case manager qualities and values, and housing stability. Figure 4 includes the main

themes and categories. Information about each follows. Additionally, program improvements and the effect of COVID emerged; however, because the two topics do not directly relate to the research question, I have not included the topics as themes. Instead, I

Figure 4

Emergent Themes and Categories

Main Theme	Category
PES Program Social Support	Practical Support
	Participation Support
	Without Program Support
PES Case Manager Social Support	Affirmational Guidance
	Participation Support
	Emotional Support
	Practical Support
	Supportive Roles
PES Case Manager Qualities and Values	Relatable and Communicative
	Reliable and Consistent
	Knowledgeable and
	Resourceful
	Empathic and Understanding
Housing Stability	Sense of Stability
	Sense of Accomplishment

presented information about program improvements and the COVID pandemic separately.

Main Theme 1: PES Program Social Support

Participants described experiences receiving support from the PES program. Support included tangible assistance with finding housing, paying rent, enrolling in college, completing FAFSA applications, transporting, finding employment, managing finances, buying a car, and ensuring all basic needs met. Participants described experiences receiving support connecting to other services or support networks, solving day-to-day problems or crises, and preparing for the future. Participants also described experiences without PES program support before program enrollment or when losing eligibility. The descriptive experiences highlighted three key sub-themes or categories about PES program support: practical support, participation support, and life without PES program support.

Participation Support

Participation support is a type of support that supplies information and guidance on the transition to adulthood while allowing the youth to remain in control and make decisions independently (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Participation support is akin to informational support, a type of social support involving information sharing to individuals in times of need (House, 1981; Krause, 1986) that assists with problem-solving (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Participants in this study described detailed accounts of participation support offered by the PES program. The specific supports described include: problem-solving, connecting to resources, connecting to mental health supports,

connecting to supports for the future, goal-setting, and preparation for the future.

Participant 1 described the problem-solving aspect of participation support when stating, “I had somebody to talk to if I had like a question that I didn’t know even where to start. Like, how can I find this? Where should I go for this? And how to do stuff like that.”

Participant 3 referenced connection to resources stating, “they give you resources instead of like ‘here’s the money, do this,’ they’ll like show you the resources, how to get it cheaper.”

Regarding connecting to supports for the future, Participant 3 added, “So they set me up with those people who I can go to for help that will always be around. And they set me up with other resources around my city to like go to if I like ever need anything.”

About future planning, Participant 7 stated, “So they prepared me with budgeting, financial-wise, like budgeting my money, saving my money, on stuff like that. They prepared me for ... when I do like leave the housing that I’m at right now.”

Practical Support

Practical support is a type of aid offering economic and financial guidance, housing, and other day-to-day necessities (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Practical support is akin to instrumental support, a type of social support involving the provision of tangible aid (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Krause, 1986). Practical or instrumental support may involve providing financial assistance or performing a specific needed task for an individual. Each participant described experiences of PES program practical support, primarily through financial assistance, ensuring fulfillment of basic needs, and helping secure housing. Regarding tangible aid, Participant 9 reported, “They give you money for

food and for household and transportation. They pay for the stuff that you need. Not really your wants, but your needs.” Participant 1 described receiving “money for helping with rent, and like food, gas, bills, stuff like that.” Participant 3 reported receiving PES program support for “rent, personal, for kids, transportation, stuff like that; anything that you need help with ... even little things, like when you move into a new place, they’ll help you get, like, everything that you need for it.”

Participants also described experiences with the PES program being generally helpful with services including transportation, locating employment, and enrolling in college. Participant 6 indicated, “They help as far as if you want to go to college, or what schools to look for or anything like that.” Participant 6 also stated, “They help you find jobs, apartments if you want to move, houses.”

Without PES Program Support

Participants described experiences before entering the PES program and times when not eligible for the program. One common challenge was the time between emancipating from foster care and entering the PES program. Some participants experienced homelessness during that time. Participant 3 stated, “I was like, I have no place to live right now,” and described being homeless with children for six weeks before enrolling in the PES program and securing housing. Participant 5 described experiencing homelessness and staying in a shelter for about a month before entering the PES program. Participant 9 reported experiencing homelessness for four months after exiting foster care and enrolling in the PES program. All but one of the participants reported either

experiencing homelessness or couch surfing with friends or family before entering the PES program.

Participants described what life would likely have been like without the PES program support. Three of the nine participants reported feeling either prepared or somewhat prepared for adulthood after leaving foster care. Five participants reported a lack of preparation for adulthood and indicated that they likely would've been homeless had they not enrolled in the PES program. Participant 5 stated, "I wouldn't be where I'm at right now. I feel like I would be at ... a shelter or something, and I would not be as successful as I am now." Participant 8 stated, "I'd probably still be living with a friend, or I probably would be homeless right now."

Main Theme 2: PES Case Manager Social Support

Participants described experiences receiving support from the PES program and the PES case managers. While participants described the program support as primarily practical and participation, participant descriptions of case manager social supports included participation, emotional, affirmational guidance, and practical support. Additionally, participants included descriptions of the supportive roles case managers played when discussing PES case manager social supports. The descriptive experiences included five key sub-themes or categories about PES case manager support: affirmational guidance support, emotional support, participation support, practical support, and case manager supportive roles.

Affirmational Guidance Support

Affirmational guidance is a type of social support including advice, feedback, and guidance that helps youth self-reflect and make informed decisions (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Affirmational guidance is akin to appraisal support, the type of social support that includes information or affirmations that can help others make decisions or self-evaluate (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Singer et al., 2013). This type of evaluative support helps individuals develop the confidence to make independent decisions (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Singer et al., 2013) and differs from the problem-solving aspect of informational support (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Singer et al., 2013).

Participants described PES case managers as providing helpful feedback to guide informed decisions and likened the support to parenting, checking in, helping with adulting, helping keep life on track, and holding accountable. Participant 1 discussed the PES case manager providing evaluative feedback about the responsible use of money and how the participant handled a work situation. Participant 2 referenced questioning different situations and turning to the PES case manager, stating, “they’re the type of people that you can call.” Participant 6 stated, “If I feel like I think a decision that I am making for myself is good or isn’t as good, she would tell me, like, ‘I feel like this is not good for you because it’s not good for you, or it’s not going to go how you think it’s going to go ... I’ve been there,’ or ‘hey I don’t think that’s a very good idea.’” Participant 7 described the support from the PES case manager as helping to gain “insight from someone that’s older who has been in the position.” Participant 8 shared a similar

experience, stating, “Every time I speak with her, she gives me good insight into life, like on becoming an adult.” Participant 5 described the support as helping with accountability in decision-making, particularly after receiving feedback when poor decisions were made, and stated that the support helped “keep my life on track.”

Emotional Support

Emotional support is the type of social support that includes displays of caring, empathy, and trust (Krause, 1986) and reinforces youth feeling loved or cared for (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Participants described experiences of emotional support from PES case managers and indicated the case manager would be one of if not the first persons to call for support. Participants also described limited family involvement and turning to the PES case manager for needed support, likening the worker to a parent or parent figure.

Participants described empathy, understanding, and the sense that someone cares. Participant 1 stated, “They’ve understood like how it is to be right now with everything going on and how difficult it can be.” Participant 3 stated, “If there’s anything I’m going through, I can just call my worker, tell her, and she’s like there for me.” Participant 5 also reported, “The most important thing is they didn’t leave me. They kept going cuz they believed in me, and they still do.” Also suggesting a sense of someone being there, Participant 1 stated, “They’ve really stuck by me whenever I’ve needed it.” Participant 7 described the PES case manager support as, “they do anything ... in their power just to make sure that we are okay and ... to let us know that they are here whenever we need them.” Participant 9 described the PES case manager as, “I can trust her with stuff, and I

can tell her and talk to her when I need to talk to her,” and indicated the case manager is like a parent who listens without judgment.

Participation Support

In addition to describing experiences of participation support from the PES program, participants described receiving participation support from the PES case manager. Participants described experiences of PES case managers offering support through guidance, problem-solving, answering basic questions, connecting to resources, teaching life skills, and planning for the future.

Participants described experiences of PES case managers connecting to resources as particularly helpful. Participant 1 reported not knowing what was needed when moving into an apartment and indicated that the PES case manager walked through every step in the process, helping create a list of items to obtain, tasks to complete, and resources in the area. Regarding the transition into the PES program, Participant 3 stated the PES case manager “helped me with every resource possible. She gave me a whole entire book of resources that I had to call, and I had to set up.” Participant 7 described resource support, reporting the PES case managers “give me different resources to ... guide me or help me ... and I appreciated that.” Participant 5 described experiences connecting to resources when PES case managers helped link to mental health treatment, disability services on the college campus, and support services that will continue after leaving the PES program.

Participants offered detailed descriptions of receiving support from PES case managers in times of crisis or when needing to problem-solve. Several participants

reported losing housing temporarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic and receiving support from PES case managers linking to services and offering guidance on finding new or temporary housing. Participant 3 described, “there was an incident in my neighborhood I live in, and somebody shot through my whole entire window, and I was like, I don’t know what to do with something like that.” Participant 3 described reaching out to the PES case manager to help problem-solve, seek guidance, and find temporary housing. Participant 1 reported being unsure how to handle not having enough money to pay for utility bills, and the PES case manager offered support by providing guidance and discussing solutions.

As was previously mentioned, participants reported not feeling prepared for adulthood before entering the PES program. While in the program, participants described experiences of PES case managers teaching life skills and future planning for when the PES program is no longer available. Participant 3 stated, “there’s ... a lot of stuff that I didn’t know before like I know now, like how to manage money,” and indicated that the PES case manager offered resources and support on money management. Participant 3 added, “I’m already preparing now so I can be financially set for when I don’t have their help.” Participant 3 described the PES case manager helping find resources for grocery shopping and couponing and teaching life skills about taking care of an apartment and cleaning. Participant 4 indicated the PES case manager helped connect to resources for tuition assistance for when the participant chooses to return to college. Participant 7 described assistance with filling out job applications, suggestions for updating a resume, couponing, or finding better deals when grocery shopping. Participant 5 reported

planning for discharge from the program with the PES case manager and connecting to resources in the community for housing and continued social support.

Practical Support

Participants described experiences receiving practical support, a type of assistance including financial guidance, housing, and other day-to-day necessities (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Participants described the support provided by PES case managers separate from the PES program support. Participants described receiving assistance from PES case managers with finding housing, setting up a budget, shopping for and furnishing an apartment, teaching cooking skills, and providing transportation. Whereas descriptions of participation support included connecting to resources or providing guidance, participant descriptions of practical support included tangible, concrete, and service-oriented assistance.

While the PES program provided financial aid for housing, PES case managers assisted by seeking out housing, establishing lease agreements, and ensuring payments were made. Participants reported differing experiences with locating housing. Participants described PES case managers assisting by securing housing on behalf of the participant or looking for housing alongside the participant. Some participants described housing in a dorm room when entering college and indicated that the PES case manager assisted with establishing financial agreements with the college to cover housing.

Participants also described budgeting assistance. In addition to teaching or guiding in budgeting with participation support, participants reported that PES case managers created and reviewed formal budget agreements monthly. Participant 5

described the support with budgeting and the changes made as a result. Participant 5 stated, “I can remember I spent \$1000 all at once, and I really didn’t have, like, I really didn’t have a grasp of money. So he helped me out with that.” Participant 7 described assistance with setting up a monthly budget, completing tax forms, and filling out loan applications.

Participant experiences also included support with necessities, including hygiene products or items needed to maintain an apartment. Participant 6 reported, “anything that you need, contact your... worker, and nine times out of ten, they’ll get you what you need.” Regarding the PES case manager, Participant 7 stated:

Any little thing that ... she would see that we didn’t have or needed, she’d go on and get it for me. Like, she’s gave me cutting boards for my new apartment, like a whole bunch of other stuff ... like, cleaning products. So they are really big on getting like donated stuff that they have at their building to give to youth.

PES Case Manager Supportive Roles

Participants in the current study described the various support roles the PES case managers filled. I included the support roles, separate from the actionable support, as the term role suggests the participant may view the PES case manager as part of a social support network. Nonparental adults play a significant role in the social network and provision of social support for emancipated foster youth (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Collins et al., 2010; Duke et al., 2017; Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). Emancipated foster youth seek out various types of support from nonparental adults like former foster parents or other natural mentors (Courtney et al.,

2018; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018), including coaches, teachers, current or former service providers, or extended family members (Greeson, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016).

Participant descriptions of PES case manager social support roles emphasized three role categories: case manager as mentor or guide, case manager as parental figure, and case manager as role model. Seven participants referenced the role of mentor or guide when describing experiences with the PES case manager. Four participant descriptions included references of case managers as parental figures; however, the references were more pointed and specific. Participant 1 reported the PES case manager “holds the instincts of a parent” when describing the support provided. Participant 9 described the PES case manager as, “Like a parent. She’s like my parent. The parent like I haven’t had.” Participant 8 described the role the PES case manager fills, stating, “When I speak with my worker, I’ll tell her ... what’s been going on, like how my week went and stuff. So ... she like is like a role model for me.”

Main Theme 3: PES Case Manager Qualities and Values

Participants in this study highlighted perceived key PES case manager characteristics and values. Characteristics of program workers that promote building and maintaining trusting relationships and demonstrating genuine care and concern for emancipated foster youth may improve outcomes (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2020). Participant descriptions of PES characteristics and values suggested the importance of the following four categories: empathic and understanding, knowledgeable and resourceful, relatable and communicative, and reliable and consistent.

Empathic and Understanding

Participants described the characteristics of PES case managers perceived as helpful or necessary for the position. Participant descriptions of essential qualities included a sub-theme of empathy and understanding. Descriptions included terms of caring, compassionate, understanding, non-judgmental, and instilling trust. Participant 9 described the ideal qualities of a PES case manager, stating, “Somebody that understands and listens and is not judgmental.” Participant 5 suggested PES case managers should display “caring and compassion because these kids really don’t know much coming out of the system.” Participant 6 suggested the significance of the qualities to build a bond and to instill trust.

Knowledgeable and Resourceful

Participants also identified knowledgeable and resourceful as essential qualities of PES case managers. Descriptions of participants suggested experienced case managers are more knowledgeable and that having experience is essential. Several participants described having multiple case managers in the PES program and indicated that the experienced case managers were knowledgeable and resourceful. Participant 1 described differences between experienced versus inexperienced case managers, stating, “There were a lot of differences because she was new, she didn’t really know much, and she was just kind of more carefree with it and, like, ‘Hey, I’m your friend,’ instead of, like, ‘Hey, I’m your mentor. This is what we need to do.’” Participant 4 also described experiences with multiple case managers, stating, “So, the second one has been there for a while, so I feel like she ... knew what she was doing, if that makes sense?” Participant 4 described

the significance of PES case managers offering different resources or options to help provide guidance. Participant 6 suggested that PES case managers should have “some experiences in life.”

Relatable and Communicative

Participants suggested PES case manager qualities of relatable and communicative are essential. Participant 2 described the significance of a “personal connection” between PES case managers and enrollees. In addition, Participants 3 and 4 suggested relatability was necessary for establishing a connection with PES case managers. Participant 4 indicated relating with the PES case manager because the case manager had a daughter who shared similar experiences and challenges attending college during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants also identified communication as an essential case manager quality. Participant 5 suggested communication should be direct and “straight to the point.” Participant 6 suggested that communication was vital for the development of a bond leading to trust. Participant 7 stated, “Communication, that’s ... the biggest thing for me.” Several participants described the need for PES case managers to communicate using multiple formats, such as text, phone, email, FaceTime, and Zoom.

Reliable and Consistent

Participant descriptions of PES case manager characteristics and values included the category reliable and consistent. Descriptions included references to consistency, dedication, accountability, work ethic, helpfulness, planfulness, timeliness, and responsiveness to needs. Participant 1 describe the PES case manager, stating, “I could

always call her and ... I would expect her, like, she would pick up, or I would expect for her to call back within ... a few hours, I know that.”

Participants described PES case manager work ethic as a strength. Participant 1 reported the PES case manager was “very dedicated to her work.” Participant 2 had similar experiences, stating the PES case manager had “a great work ethic.” Participant 3 stated, “You have to actually care about your job. You have to have a passion for it and want to do it,” when referencing the PES case manager, and added, “You have to want to put your time into the person ... put your time and energy into the job and actually show you want to do it.”

Main Theme 4: Housing Stability

Social support contributes to establishing and maintaining housing (Aubry et al., 2016; Collins, 2010; Patterson et al., 2015). Having social support and connections with adults postemancipation reduces the risk of housing instability (Kelly, 2020). Participants described experiences maintaining housing while in the PES program and what the experiences meant. Two categories emerged: sense of accomplishment and sense of stability. Participant 1 highlighted both categories when referencing what it meant or how it felt to maintain housing, stating, “Good. It leads to stability and also like, well, like it reflects ... like, wow, I really did this!”

Sense of Accomplishment

Participants described experiences of accomplishment, referencing feelings of pride, motivation, confidence, and accomplishment. Participant 3 stated, “I never thought I was ever going to have my own place, but ever since <the PES program> like, I don't

know, it just makes me feel more confident, like I know I can do this. I know I can finish school, work, and raise my kids.” Participant 8 shared, “It just feels like I would say ... free. ... Like I ... feel like I'm just progressing in life the way that I want to now.”

Participant descriptions also included references to changes from life before the PES program and after when discussing what it meant to maintain housing. Participant 2 suggested, “You never know what's going to happen, so it's just like you always want to be better than ... what you've seen or what you've been around.” Participant 9 reported, “It's good to know that you have something ... that can help you better yourself versus what you were when you got in foster care.” Participant 1 shared similar experiences when discussing pride, stating, “It's just like how far you've come along, from nothing to having something.”

Sense of Stability

Participants also described experiences of stability and relief while enrolled in the PES program. As previously reported, Participant 1 shared that maintaining housing leads to stability. Other participants concurred. Participant 4 indicated, “I feel like it really took ... a big weight off my shoulders.” Participant 6 stated, “Actually, it means a lot because I've actually been places where ... a bill was not paid, and I didn't want to have to go through that. And then with me having a baby, you have to stay on things; like that is important cuz I don't want to have to have a toddler in a home where ... it's not stable.” Participant 1 described what maintaining housing meant, stating, “I know what to expect when I come home.”

Discrepant Cases

The sampling strategy yielded a small sample of participants with similar backgrounds and experiences relative to the research question. Common experience themes emerged, and I did not identify discrepant cases.

Summary

This chapter included an overview of findings from this research study. The primary research question was: What are the experiences of formal social support among a small group of stably housed emancipated foster youth from an urban setting in the U.S. Midwest? Participants described lived experiences receiving formal social support from case managers in a postemancipation services (PES) program. Participants described the social support experiences from the PES program, including informational support, instrumental support, and experiences and expectations without PES social support. Participants discussed social support experiences from the PES case managers, including informational guidance support, emotional support, participation support, practical support, and case manager supportive roles. Participants also discussed PES case manager qualities and values, including the following categories: empathic and understanding, knowledgeable and resourceful, relatable and communicative, and reliable and consistent. Finally, participants shared experiences of housing stability while enrolled in the PES program and the resulting instilled senses of accomplishment and stability.

Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the significance of the findings from this chapter, along with interpretations and support from the literature in Chapter 2. In

addition, Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the study's limitations, recommendations for further study, and implications for social change and the field of human services.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

For this study, I sought to understand lived formal social support experiences among stably housed emancipated foster youth. I used hermeneutic phenomenology to focus on participants' perceptions of lived experiences and to develop common lived experience themes for the phenomenon. This chapter includes major findings from the study and interpretations and meanings of participants' common lived experiences. This chapter also includes study limitations, recommendations for further study, implications for social change and the human services field, and a summary of conclusions.

I used the following research question to guide this study: What are the experiences of formal social support among a small group of stably housed emancipated foster youth from an urban setting in the U.S. Midwest?

Participant common lived experiences included four over-arching themes: PES program social support, PES case manager social support, PES case manager qualities and values, and housing stability. Participant PES program support experiences included participation support and practical support. Participants also described experiences without PES program support, either before entering the PES program or upon losing eligibility, and suggested housing instability and homelessness were common experiences. Participant PES case manager social support experiences included affirmational guidance support, emotional support, participation support, and practical support. Participants also described the supportive roles PES case managers fulfill, including mentor or guide, parental figure, and role model. Participant common lived

experiences included descriptions of PES case manager qualities and values, suggesting the importance of the following four categories: empathic and understanding, knowledgeable and resourceful, relatable and communicative, and reliable and consistent.

Interpretation of the Findings

I used social convoy and attachment theories as interpretive and orienting frameworks as I explored the formal social support experiences among stably housed emancipated foster youth enrolled in a postemancipation services (PES) program. Given the fundamental significance of attachments (Bowlby, 1980), relationships, and social networks (Blakely et al., 2017; Leon & Dickson, 2018) in foster youth outcomes, social convoy and attachment theories influenced the methodology and interpretation of key findings in this study. I explored participant social networks, particularly formal social supports contributing to participants' involvement in postemancipation services and maintaining housing. I used attachment theory to understand the implications of participants' past traumatic experiences and struggles forming and keeping lasting relationships when interpreting the experiences of social support that participants received. I employed the principles of social convoy and attachment theories to guide the interpretation of key findings and the formulation of implications for human services and future research.

PES Program Social Support

Only 31% of youth exiting foster care receive postemancipation services, leaving a majority of youth without adequate assistance to navigate the transition to adulthood (Dion et al., 2014). Supportive housing programs can mitigate risks associated with

transitioning from foster care (Tam et al., 2016). Armstrong-Heimsoth et al. (2020) suggested emancipated foster youth would benefit from additional housing services to help with searching for and securing housing and obtaining necessary housing start-up items.

Through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (The Chafee program), states can provide Title IV-E funded supportive services to former foster youth aged 18-21 or through age 23 in states with extended foster care to age 21 (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). To qualify for extended supportive services, young adults must complete high school or earn a GED, enroll in postsecondary or vocational education, participate in an employment program, work at least 80 hours monthly, or qualify due to medical concerns (McDaniel et al., 2019). Youth enrolling in a PES program must meet with a case manager at least monthly and have a personal transition plan (McDaniel et al., 2019). Case managers in PES programs have added qualifications or receive additional training to work specifically with transition-age youth providing specialized case management services (McDaniel et al., 2019).

Participants in this study were enrolled in a PES program for youth ages 18-20. A provider network of 25 agencies and corresponding staff across a U.S. Midwestern state administer the PES program. The program extends services to emancipated youth and helps with employment, housing, medical and behavioral health services, and skill-building. Participants met the following requirements for program enrollment: in school or working, enrolled in an employment program, or qualified due to a medical condition.

All nine of the participants in this study reported working, and five reported also attending college.

Participants enrolled in the PES program received program social support and specialized case management support. Participants received assistance with maintaining enrollment in the program, abiding by program rules, and remaining eligible for program benefits. Each participant completed an initial needs assessment and case plan with the assigned PES case manager to help participants identify and work toward program goals. Participants received education on life skills, assisting with securing housing and transportation, budgeting, preparing for court proceedings, and other support services based upon need.

Social support plays a significant role in the transition to adulthood (Dion et al., 2016; Bender et al., 2015; Katz & Courtney, 2015; Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Rosenberg, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016) and contributes to establishing and maintaining housing (Aubry et al., 2016; Collins, 2010; Patterson et al., 2015). While needed to promote transitioning to adulthood, emancipated foster youth report difficulty accessing such supports (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Paulsen and Berg (2016) categorized four subtypes of social supports that emancipated foster youth need when transitioning to adulthood: practical support, emotional support, affirmational guidance support, and participation support. Two categories of support emerged from participant experiences of PES program social support: practical support and participation support.

Practical Support

Practical support is a type of social support comprising economic and financial guidance, housing, and other day-to-day necessities (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). While Rosenberg (2019) illuminated former foster youth practical support deficiencies, specifically in housing, education, and transportation, each participant in this study described experiences of PES program practical support. Practical support experiences primarily included financial assistance, ensuring fulfillment of basic needs, and helping secure housing. Participants received assistance securing housing and paying rent, reportedly alleviating worries about whether or not they had stable housing. Additionally, participants received financial assistance and tangible aid for basic necessities. Participant lived experiences of practical support promote findings from Gowdy and Hogan (2021), suggesting reliance of former foster youth on nonparental adults for support with finances, household, transportation, housing, and food assistance.

Financial support was a key contributor to participant experiences of housing stability while enrolled in the PES program. Participant 1 described receiving “money for helping with rent, and like food, gas, bills, stuff like that.” Participant 3 reported receiving PES program support for “rent, personal, for kids, transportation, stuff like that; anything that you need help with ... even little things, like when you move into a new place, they’ll help you get ... everything that you need for it.” Participants also described experiences with the PES program being generally helpful with services including transportation, locating employment, and enrolling in college. Participant 6 indicated, “They help as far as if you want to go to college, or what schools to look for or anything

like that.” Participant 6 also stated, “They help you find jobs, apartments if you want to move, houses.”

Participation Support

Participants in this study described detailed accounts of participation support offered by the PES program. Participation support is a type of social support that includes information and guidance on the transition to adulthood while allowing the youth to remain in control and make decisions independently (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Blakeslee and Best (2019) and Dion et al. (2016) suggested that engaging emancipated foster youth in connecting to various supports and resources to develop a support network can mediate the transition to adulthood. The specific supports described by study participants include problem-solving, connecting to resources, connecting to mental health supports, connecting to supports for the future, goal-setting, and preparation for the future.

Participants suggested the program offered a place or person to turn to when needing guidance or when unsure how to navigate a challenging situation. Participant shared experiences included accounts of PES program support connecting to resources and preparing for the future with the goal of participant self-sufficiency. Participant 3 described program support assisting with preparing for the future, stating, “I’m already preparing now so I can be financially set for when I don’t have their help.” Participant 3 added, “They set me up with other resources around my city to ... go to if I ... ever need anything.”

Practical and participation support were inherent in the PES program design. Participants reported receiving financial assistance monthly to help with rent and other

necessities. Participants also reported having regular contact with the PES program, receiving specialized case management services to help guide and promote all necessities are cared for. In addition to receiving financial assistance, Participant 3 described, “they give you resources instead of like ‘here’s the money, do this.’ They ... show you the resources, how to get it cheaper.”

Without Program Support

Almost half of the foster youth leaving foster care lose housing (Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019) and approximately 25% experience homelessness after emancipation (Courtney et al., 2018; Kelly, 2020; Mares, 2010; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Similarly, participants in this study described housing instability experiences before enrollment in the PES program and periods when losing eligibility. Participants endorsed housing instability and homelessness as common lived experiences without program support. Participants described not having access to stable housing after emancipating from foster care before enrolling in the PES program. Participant 3 stated, “You emancipate on the 18th birthday, and you really don’t have anywhere to go.” Participant descriptions included experiences of couch-surfing with family or friends, staying temporarily in a homeless shelter, and homelessness on the streets, including with children. Participant 5 experienced homelessness and stayed in a shelter during the time between leaving foster care and entering the PES program. Without program support, Participant 5 stated, “I wouldn’t be where I’m at right now. I feel like I would be ... somewhere different at like a shelter or something, and I would not be as successful as I am now,” and added, “I don’t think I would be able to make it.”

Participants losing program eligibility, resulting in loss of housing, shared similar experiences, suggesting challenges accessing stable housing without the PES program support. Participant 8 lost program eligibility due to not being enrolled in college during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 8 reported staying with a friend for three or four months before becoming eligible for the PES program again.

PES Case Manager Social Support

Having social support from adults postemancipation reduces the risk of housing instability (Kelly, 2020) and can mitigate distress (Lee & Goldstein, 2016); however, forming and maintaining healthy relationships can be challenging (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016). Informal social support from friends or family may aid during the emancipation process; however, the quality of the support could be insufficient (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Additionally, due to decreased access to informal support, emancipated foster youth rely on other critical nonparental adults like foster caregivers or professionals from the child welfare system (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Nonparental adults play a significant role in the social network and provision of social support for emancipated foster youth (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Collins et al., 2010; Duke et al., 2017; Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). Nonparental adult support providers could be coaches, teachers, current or former service providers, or extended family members (Greeson, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016).

Participants in this study indicated having poor relationships with families of origin. When referring to relationships with biological parents, Participant 1 reported

feeling resentment, and Participant 3 experienced ongoing conflict with family members. As a result of poor familial relationships, Participant 9 suggested experiencing difficulties or hesitancy connecting with others, stating, “I’m just worried about myself ... I ain’t trying to build a whole bunch of relationship people because I have a lot of stuff that I need time to be by myself and get over.”

Although participants reported poor familial relationships, participant descriptions of experiences connecting with PES case managers were substantive. Participants enrolled in the PES program met with PES case managers at minimum once or twice monthly based upon the level of need and had at least weekly communication through phone, text, or other forms of electronic communication to check in. Participants described PES case managers as the first person they would call when encountering a new or challenging situation. Participant lived experiences of PES case manager social support included the following categories: affirmational guidance support, emotional support, participation support, practical support, and PES case manager supportive roles.

Affirmational Guidance Support

Affirmational guidance is a type of social support including advice, feedback, and guidance that helps youth self-reflect and make informed decisions (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). This type of evaluative support helps individuals develop the confidence to make independent decisions (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Singer et al., 2013). Participants in this study shared lived experiences of social support from PES case managers to help guide decision-making and provide helpful feedback.

Participants likened PES case manager support to parenting, checking in, helping with adulting, helping keep life on track, and holding accountable. Participants experienced the PES case manager as the person to turn to when in need of guidance. Participant 6 stated, “If I feel like I think a decision that I am making for myself is good or isn’t as good, she would tell me, like, ‘I feel like this is not good for you because it’s not good for you, or it’s not going to go how you think it’s going to go ... I’ve been there,’ or ‘hey I don’t think that’s a very good idea.’” Participant 7 described PES case manager support as helping to gain “insight from someone that’s older who has been in the position.” Participant 8 shared a similar experience, stating, “Every time I speak with her, she gives me good insight into life, like on becoming an adult.” Participant 5 described the support as helping with accountability in decision-making, particularly after receiving feedback when poor decisions were made, and stated that the support helped “keep my life on track.”

Olson et al. (2017) suggested the need for PES programs to include adaptive decision-making supports for emancipated foster youth. Similarly, Curry et al. (2021) reported the significance of programming and supportive engagement that promotes youth self-determination. Social support from nonparental adults like teachers, mentors, or service providers is correlated with improved outcomes (Greeson, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016) and contributes to making confident, independent decisions among emancipated foster youth (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013). The shared lived experiences of participants in this study suggest the affirmational guidance support provided by PES case managers helped with evaluating decisions. Regarding the support

provided by the PES case manager, Participant 8 shared, “If it weren’t for her, I probably wouldn’t know how to navigate ... life as an adult.”

Emotional Support

Youth exiting foster care have experienced maltreatment (Symanzik et al., 2019; Turney & Wildeman, 2017), instability (Bedereian-Gardner et al., 2018; Casanueva et al., 2014; Okpych & Courtney, 2018), and disrupted relationships and attachments (Bedereian-Gardner et al., 2018; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). The experiences before and during foster care increase emancipated foster youth risks of problems related to mental health (Bederian-Gardner et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2011, 2018; Havlicek et al., 2013) and difficulties forming and maintaining healthy relationships (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Courtney et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2016). However, having support after emancipation improves emancipated foster youth outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016).

In contrast to previous findings of former foster youth deficiencies in emotional support (Rosenberg, 2019), participants in this study experienced emotional support from PES case managers. Emotional support is the type of social support that includes displays of caring, empathy, and trust (Krause, 1986) and reinforces youth feeling loved or cared for (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Participants described experiences of emotional support from PES case managers and indicated the case manager would be one of if not the first persons to call for support. Participants with inadequate family involvement turned to PES case managers for needed support and likened the worker to a parent or parental figure.

Participant lived experiences of emotional support included empathy, understanding, and the sense that someone cares. Participant 3 stated, “If there’s anything I’m going through, I can just call my worker, tell her, and she’s like there for me.” Participant 5 reported, “The most important thing is they didn’t leave me. They kept going cuz they believed in me, and they still do.” Similarly, Participant 1 stated, “They’ve really stuck by me whenever I’ve needed it.” Regarding the PES case manager, Participant 9 stated, “I can trust her with stuff, and I can tell her and talk to her when I need to talk to her,” and indicated the case manager is like a parent who listens without judgment.

Nonparental adults play a significant role in providing social support for emancipated foster youth (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Collins et al., 2010; Duke et al., 2017; Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). Participant shared lived experiences suggest the support provided by PES case managers helped with the transition to living independently, particularly having someone trustworthy in whom to confide. Additionally, participants experienced the feeling that the PES case manager cared about them. Participant 7 stated, “Having them by my side ... is really a huge help to me in my life right now.” Participant 7 also described receiving acknowledgment and cards from the PES case manager for birthdays and holidays and added, “just to show ... their appreciation.” Participant 5 suggested not having adequate family support and sought emotional support from the PES case manager. Participant 5 indicated appreciation for the PES case manager’s support and knowing the PES case manager cares.

Participation Support

In addition to describing experiences of participation support from the PES program, participants described receiving participation support from the PES case manager. Participation support is akin to informational support, a type of social support involving information sharing to individuals in times of need (House, 1981; Krause, 1986) that assists with problem-solving (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Participants described participation support experiences including guidance, problem-solving, answering basic questions, connecting to resources, teaching life skills, and planning for the future. Participant lived experiences support findings from Gowdy and Hogan (2021) that former foster youth access support through valued advice-seeking from nonparental adults like mentors or human service professionals.

Blakeslee and Best (2019) and Dion et al. (2016) posited that engaging emancipated foster youth in building a social support network involving various supports and participating in support network mapping could improve the quality of support to the youth and help mediate the transition to adulthood. Participants in this study experienced PES case managers connecting to resources, identifying additional community support to turn to when needed or during times of crisis, or when needing to problem-solve. Such supports included resources for participants to turn to after leaving the PES program. Participant 3 stated the PES case manager “helped me with every resource possible. She gave me a whole entire book of resources that I had to call, and I had to set up.” Participant 5 described experiences connecting to resources when PES case managers

helped link to mental health treatment, disability services on the college campus, and support services that will continue after leaving the PES program.

Participant enrollment in the PES program is limited to participants aged 18 to 20. At the age of 21, participants discharge from the PES program with the expectation of having the resources needed to live independently without formal support. PES case managers prepare participants for independent living by providing education and connecting participants to the various resources and social supports the participants will need after program discharge. Leon and Dickson (2018) asserted that the increasing number of people among emancipated foster youth social support networks, the increasing chances of significant opportunity to meet youth changing needs. Participant experiences suggest PES case managers helped to increase the number of supports in the participant's support network.

Emancipated foster youth with perceived increased levels of social support report having less unmet service needs (Katz & Courtney, 2015), suggesting that perceived social support provides a level of security when navigating the transition to adulthood. Youth capable of seeking out social support from their network may also more readily seek out needed social services (Katz & Courtney, 2015), particularly when formal social supports are no longer available. Participants experienced PES case managers teaching life skills and helping to plan when the PES program is no longer available. Participant 3 indicated that the PES case manager offered resources and support on money management, stating, "I'm already preparing now so I can be financially set for when I don't have their help." Participant 4 indicated the PES case manager helped connect to

resources for tuition assistance for when the participant chooses to return to college.

Participant 5 reported planning for discharge from the program with the PES case manager and connecting to resources in the community for housing and continued social support.

Practical Support

In contrast to previous research suggesting deficiencies in practical support among emancipated foster youth (Rosenberg, 2019), study participants experienced receiving practical support, including financial guidance, housing, and other day-to-day necessities (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Participants described the support provided by PES case managers as separate from the PES program support. Participants received assistance from PES case managers to find housing, set up a budget, shop for and furnish an apartment, teach cooking skills, and provide transportation. Participant experiences of practical support included tangible, concrete, and service-oriented assistance.

PES case managers assisted with seeking housing, establishing lease agreements, and arranging for rent payments. PES case managers helped with securing housing on behalf of the participant or looking for housing alongside the participant. Participants also received budgeting assistance and experienced support with necessities, including hygiene products or items needed to maintain an apartment. Participant 6 reported, “anything that you need, contact your... worker, and nine times out of ten, they’ll get you what you need.” Regarding the PES case manager, Participant 7 stated, “Any little thing that ... she would see that we didn’t have or needed, she’d go on and get it for me.”

PES Case Manager Supportive Roles

Emancipated foster youth report challenges accessing healthy role models or experiences that promote healthy relationship development (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Dorsey et al., 2012). While adequate support may not be available from family or friends, emancipated foster youth seek various types of support from non-family adults like former foster parents, natural mentors, or service providers (Campos et al., 2020; Courtney et al., 2018; Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018). Having such supports during the transition to adulthood improves outcomes for emancipated foster youth (Thompson et al., 2016).

Greeson et al. (2015) asserted the need to change PES programming to address the problem of inadequate adult role models. Participants in this study suggested the PES program case managers fulfilled the following roles: mentor or guide, parental figure, or role model. Participant 1 reported the PES case manager “holds the instincts of a parent” when describing the support provided. Participant 9 described the PES case manager as, “Like a parent. She’s like my parent. The parent like I haven’t had.” Participant 8 described the role the PES case manager fills, stating, “When I speak with my worker, I’ll tell her ... what’s been going on, like how my week went and stuff. So ... is like a role model for me.”

Case Manager Characteristics and Values

Armstrong-Heimsoth et al. (2020) suggested the characteristics of program workers that promote building and maintaining trusting relationships and demonstrating genuine care and concern for program youth could improve program satisfaction.

Similarly, Curry et al. (2021) suggested staff behaviors and attitudes are significant for engaging youth faced with housing challenges. The quality of and how emancipated foster youth perceive the relationship with the supporter could be significant. Blakeslee and Best (2019) suggested that the quality of the support network can determine the capacity for meeting the unique needs of emancipated foster youth. Participants in this study highlighted perceived key PES case manager characteristics and values when asked what qualities were important for PES case managers. Participant descriptions of PES characteristics and values suggested the importance of the following four categories: empathic and understanding, knowledgeable and resourceful, relatable and communicative, and reliable and consistent.

Empathic and Understanding

Participant experiences support findings from Armstrong-Heimsoth et al. (2020) that program worker characteristics that promote building and maintaining trusting relationships could improve program satisfaction. Participants described the characteristics of PES case managers perceived as helpful or necessary for the position. Participant descriptions of essential qualities included the category of empathy and understanding. Participants experienced PES case managers as caring, compassionate, understanding, non-judgmental, and instilling trust. Participant 9 stated, “Somebody that understands and listens and is not judgmental,” when describing PES case manager qualities and Participant 5 reported, “caring and compassion.” Participant 6 suggested the significance of the qualities to build a bond and to instill trust. Participant experiences support findings that emancipated foster youth may turn to critical nonparental adults due

to such relationships' caring and respectful nature (Duke et al., 2017). Participant lived experiences also support findings suggesting the importance of understanding, flexibility, and a non-judgmental temperament when engaging with youth facing housing challenges (Curry et al., 2021).

Knowledgeable and Resourceful

Participants identified knowledgeable and resourceful as essential qualities of PES case managers. Participant descriptions suggested experienced case managers are more knowledgeable and that having experience is essential. Several participants described having multiple case managers in the PES program and indicated that the experienced case managers were knowledgeable and resourceful. Participant 1 described differences between experienced versus inexperienced case managers, stating, "There were a lot of differences because she was new, she didn't really know much, and she was just kind of more carefree ... like, 'Hey, I'm your friend,' instead of like, 'Hey, I'm your mentor. This is what we need to do.'" Participant experiences suggest that knowledgeable and resourceful PES case managers may also have invaluable life experiences that lesser experienced workers have not had, supporting findings that the quality of support can determine the capacity for meeting emancipated foster youth unique needs (Blakeslee & Best, 2019).

Relatable and Communicative

Blakeslee and Best (2019) posited that the quality of communication could affect the level of support for emancipated foster youth. Participants in this study suggested PES case manager qualities of relatable and communicative are essential. Similarly,

Curry et al. (2021) reported strong communication is an important worker quality for engaging housing challenged youth. Participants described the significance of being able to relate to and connect with the PES case manager. Participant 7 stated, “Communication, that’s ... the biggest thing for me.” Participants also identified communication as vital for developing a trusting relationship, further supporting findings from Armstrong-Heimsoth et al. (2020) of the significance of program worker characteristics that promote building and maintaining trusting relationships.

Reliable and Consistent

Inconsistent relationships with social service professionals can be barriers to formulating the level of support needed for emancipated foster youth success (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Several participants recounted experiences with child welfare workers while in foster care, suggesting not receiving the same level of consistency and follow-through as PES program workers. Participants in this study suggested reliability and consistency were essential PES case manager qualities. Participant descriptions of lived experiences included references to consistency, dedication, accountability, work ethic, helpfulness, planning, timeliness, and responsiveness to needs. Participant 1 describe the PES case manager, stating, “I could always call her and ... I would expect her, like, she would pick up, or I would expect for her to call back within ... a few hours, I know that.”

Housing Stability

One challenging aspect of transitioning from foster care to adulthood is securing and maintaining housing (Courtney et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2011; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Without adequate

supports from whom to seek guidance or reassurance could result in emancipated foster youth making poor decisions related to housing (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013). Emancipated foster youth are already at increased risk of poor decision-making; therefore, the added challenge of not having support when faced with adversity with housing could increase the risk of housing instability (Olsen et al., 2017). The results could include losing housing, finding temporary housing, couch surfing, or even homelessness.

Housing stability emerged as a key theme from participant experiences. As previously described, participants in this study reported experiencing housing instability and homelessness before enrollment in the PES program or during periods when losing eligibility for the program. A common concern was the length of time between foster care exit and PES program entrance. Without a stable home to go to in the interim, participants reported couch-surfing with family and friends, staying in a shelter, or experiencing homelessness. Participants also described feeling unprepared for adulthood when exiting foster care and indicated they would likely be homeless without having the PES program.

Participants described experiences maintaining housing while in the PES program and what the experiences meant. To maintain housing and support from the PES program, participants reported needing to maintain program eligibility. As Participant 9 stated:

do what you're supposed to do, and everything will go good. And if you don't, you'll have a hard time. There's not much to it. Just do what you're supposed to, go to work, and go ... to school. Pick one and just do it.

While some participants suggested maintaining eligibility was an easy process, others had experienced temporarily losing eligibility by not meeting qualifications and lost housing as a result.

Two categories emerged from the theme of housing stability: sense of accomplishment and stability. Participants described feelings of pride, motivation, confidence, and accomplishment. Participant 3 stated, "I would've never pictured my life like this because before I found out about <the PES program>, I was ... just pregnant. I knew I was going to be homeless. I knew I was going to lose custody of my kids ... I never thought I was ever going to have my own place, but ever since <the PES program> ... it just makes me feel more confident, like I know I can do this. I know I can finish school, work, and raise my kids." Participant 1 stated, "It's just like how far you've come along, from nothing to having something." Participants also described experiences of stability and relief while enrolled in the PES program. Participant 4 indicated, "I feel like it really took ... a big weight off my shoulders." Participant shared experiences suggest having stable housing alleviates the worry and potential struggles that emancipated foster youth not enrolled in a PES program might experience (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013). Participants felt confident as a result of maintaining housing.

Due to the significant challenges that housing instability poses for emancipated foster youth, securing housing upon emancipation is critical for positive outcomes as

youth exit care (Courtney et al., 2017; Tam et al., 2016; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Former foster youth transitioning to adulthood with stable housing are likely to experience vocational, educational, and mental stability (Fowler et al., 2011; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012) and have improved access to services in the community (Romo & Ortiz, 2018).

Program Improvements

While not a primary point of inquiry, program improvement emerged as a common topic among participant descriptions of experiences receiving formal social support and maintaining housing. Participants identified three main categories of program improvements: child welfare worker knowledge of PES program, foster youth knowledge of PES program, and PES program strict requirements. Participants described child welfare workers as having limited knowledge of the PES program, not informing participants of the PES program, and not linking participants to the PES program before emancipation.

Participants experienced not having adequate information about the PES program while in foster care and not receiving adequate education about the PES program before emancipation. Participants described homelessness and housing instability as shared lived experiences after emancipation before entry into the PES program. Perhaps earlier linkage and increased knowledge for youth and child welfare workers about the program before youth emancipate could improve PES participant experiences. Participant 9 stated, “The caseworkers when they know a kid’s about to be grown ... say something. Some just close the case, and that’s it.”

In a study examining programming targeting youth homelessness, Curry et al. (2021) suggested flexibility with rule adherence as important for youth engagement and program involvement. Participants in the current study described strict program rules and not having rules thoroughly explained as barriers to program involvement. Participants experienced losing program eligibility and, as a result, housing while involved with the PES program. Participants reported experiences of PES program case managers not informing them that they were losing housing until receiving a termination letter. When referring to program recommendations, Participant 8 suggested that PES case managers “should check up on <program enrollees> ... a little sooner than what happened to me because it definitely would make it easier on them to maintain their housing.”

Participants suggested that having clearer guidelines for program enrollees living in dormitories would help with program involvement. Participant 4 stated, “I honestly feel like <the PES program> is a great program, but with the guidelines, I wish were ... not as strict ... at least for like my situation. It was ... super complex.” Participants also experienced complications with funding for college housing, reporting confusion over separating room and board to determine how much money the PES program would provide for housing.

COVID-19 Pandemic Implications

This study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and participant experiences of formal social support and maintaining housing were affected. Participants described experiences of program extension, housing instability, and dropping out of college during the pandemic. Participants described PES program rules changing during the COVID-19

pandemic, allowing participants to remain in the program past their 21st birthday.

Participants reported the extension was time-limited and would end in September 2021.

Participants described losing dormitory housing when colleges shut down during the pandemic and described couch-surfing and staying with others until the PES program secured alternative housing. Participant 5 reported his college moved him several times during the pandemic while the college dormitories became temporary hospitals.

Participants experienced difficulties with the online format of college schooling and dropped out of college as a result. Participants also experienced postponing education when colleges shut down. Because college enrollment was a requirement for the PES program, participants losing educational status needed to find employment to meet program eligibility. Participants experienced difficulties finding employment during the pandemic and lost housing due to not meeting program eligibility, resulting in temporary homelessness or housing instability.

While COVID-19 was not a focus of this study, the implications of the pandemic highlighted the housing insecurity that emancipated foster youth experience and the importance of the PES program. While some participants experienced temporary housing instability, staying with friends or couch-surfing, when colleges shut down during the pandemic, PES case managers helped locate alternative housing. Without the PES program, emancipated foster youth enrolled in college may not have other housing options when colleges close. I question, where did the emancipated foster youth college students not enrolled in a PES program go when colleges shut down campuses and dormitories? Participant 4 reported a continued relationship with former foster parents,

returning to the foster home on college breaks and returning to the home when colleges shut down. Participant 4's experience is likely not common and was not an experience of other study participants. Participant 9 reported staying in temporary housing, paying month-to-month, while on college breaks when the college dormitories close. The PES program assisted Participant 9, providing support securing and paying for housing. Without the PES program, housing insecurity and instability, including homelessness, could have increased prevalence.

Limitations of the Study

While no apparent concerns with trustworthiness arose from the execution of the study, potential limitations include the credibility of participant descriptions of experiences and transferability. In qualitative research, transferability refers to the degree to which a reader can draw conclusions from a study and later apply it in another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that transferability occurs when researchers offer "thick" descriptions of the research and use purposive sampling methods to maximize the range of data relevant to the study. In this study, I adhered to methods outlined in the data analysis plan and engaged in extensive reflective writing through data collection and analysis stages to provide thick descriptions of participant experiences. I used purposive sampling strategies to seek a homogenous sample regarding inclusion criteria, and participants offered valuable data about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods in this study appear to be replicable, enhancing the reliability of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Study participants included emancipated foster youth willingly responding to recruitment methods and inclined to participate in an interview. Some respondents to the recruitment methods did not follow through with an interview. Additionally, despite the breadth of recruitment attempts, a relatively small number of PES program-enrolled emancipated foster youth responded and participated. Perhaps those reluctant to participate had differing experiences than study participants or were uncomfortable sharing experiences with social support and housing maintenance. Additionally, the participant sample in this study was from a U.S. Midwestern state and may not reflect the experiences of emancipated foster youth in other areas of the United States.

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Suggested methods to promote credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I used persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking. Despite the efforts to promote credibility, the trustworthiness of findings was reliant on participant recollections and honest accounts of experiences receiving formal social support and housing stability. Recruitment relied on PES program administrators and workers providing information about the study to eligible participants. The inclusion criteria (current enrollment in the PES program and maintaining housing for a minimum of one year while in the PES program) were unverifiable due to the confidentiality of PES program enrollment. To encourage honest interview responses, participants received

information about the scholarly nature and implications of the study, data security and privacy, and confidentiality and anonymity of the information shared.

The presence of the researcher as the interviewer and data analyst in qualitative research could also challenge trustworthiness. While researchers embedded in research can yield in-depth data collection and analysis, there is concern that the researcher conducting the interviews could influence the responses of the participants (Cutcliffe & Harder, 2012). To address this, I provided descriptions of the research to participants, encouraged open and honest answers, and utilized member checking to verify the accuracy of participant responses. Additionally, I provided detailed descriptions of participant experiences and concurrently self-reflected throughout the data gathering and interpreting phases of the study using a reflexive journal (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Recommendations

This hermeneutic phenomenological study includes an in-depth perspective of how emancipated foster youth experienced formal social support relative to housing stability. The limited scope of this study included participants enrolled in a formalized postemancipation services (PES) program in a U.S. Midwestern state. Greeson et al. (2015) suggested that despite federal and state programs designed to ease the transition to adulthood, programs have insufficiently promoted social support for emancipating youth. Findings from this study indicate that the PES program promoted social support, evidenced by the PES program design and by study participant experiences. To further explore the lived experiences of this phenomenon, one recommendation for further inquiry is to explore the lived experiences of emancipated foster youth enrolled in PES

programs in different states. Information gleaned from the additional inquiry of a similar study with participants enrolled in different PES programs and locations could help increase understanding of the unique experiences of the population and provide further evidence of transferability.

Armstrong-Heimsoth et al. (2020) suggested further development of programs emphasizing social supports and modifications to transitional support programs that focus on earlier intervention and life skills education is warranted. Another possible point of inquiry is to explore the formal social support experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth with independent living skills education and early intervention. Some study participants reported experiences with independent living skills education, while others did not. Additionally, participants had varied experiences receiving information about and connection to the PES program.

The focus of inquiry of this study was on stably housed emancipated foster youth to glean information addressing the problem of housing instability and homelessness. Another potential point of inquiry is the social support experiences of emancipated foster youth without stable housing. Learning about what was not helpful or missing from the social support experiences of emancipated foster youth without stable housing could offer useful information about the experience gaps and additional areas for developing PES programs.

Implications

One major challenge during the transition from foster care to adulthood is securing and maintaining housing (Courtney et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2011; Nesmith &

Christophersen, 2014; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Without adequate support to offer guidance, reassurance, or objective advice, emancipated foster youth may make poor decisions related to housing (Olson et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2013), increasing the risk of housing instability (Olsen et al., 2017). Social support influences emancipated foster youth outcomes (Aubry et al., 2016; Blakely et al., 2017; Collins, 2010; Leon & Dickson, 2018; Patterson et al., 2015; Rosenberg, 2019), contributes to establishing and maintaining housing (Aubry et al., 2016; Collins, 2010; Patterson et al., 2015), and reduces the risk of housing instability (Kelly, 2020). Social support from nonparental adults, like current or former service providers or mentors, is linked to improved outcomes (Greeson, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016).

The exhaustive literature review in Chapter 2 presented the unique challenges emancipated foster youth experience maintaining housing and receiving adequate social support postemancipation. However, I could find no studies with information about the formal social support experiences among emancipated foster youth with stable housing. The findings of this hermeneutic phenomenological study highlighted the lived experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth receiving social supports from nonparental adults. Participant experiences of formal social support illuminated the importance of PES program social support, PES case manager social support, PES case manager characteristics and values, and housing stability among emancipated foster youth enrolled in a PES program. Knowledge about the formal social support experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth gleaned from this study may help address the documented problem of housing instability among youth leaving foster care (Bender et

al., 2015; Collins et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

This study could have direct implications for the child welfare system and youth leaving foster care, particularly when considering the importance of formal social support experiences. Foster youth exiting the foster care system are at increased risk of attachment insecurity (Bowlby, 1980) and limited social support (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Rosenberg, 2019) and may have increased difficulties accessing needed social supports to aid in the transition to adulthood. Connecting foster youth with nonparental adults or mentors in a formal capacity could offer the level of support needed to ease the transition to adulthood and help with maintaining housing.

Stakeholders and child welfare systems could consider a model like the PES program, offering key practical and participation program social support and specialized case management services that include practical, participation, emotional, and affirmational guidance social support. Because previous studies have addressed that the quality of the support that emancipated foster youth receive may be insufficient (Singer et al., 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2018), programmatic changes that include attention to the various types of social support might produce improved outcomes. Also of note for program development and PES program administrators are the qualities and characteristics of the individuals offering specialized case management services. Having lived experiences that emancipated foster youth can relate to, the ability to communicate effectively, empathic regard, reliability, and dedication were highlighted by study participants as key qualities and values for PES case managers. Participants in this study

identified the importance of the support roles of mentor, parental figure, and role model when discussing PES case manager social support, which could have implications on the types of individuals targeted for PES case management positions. Participants did not endorse the same degree of support from lesser experienced case managers as case managers with lived experiences or advanced knowledge or resources. While applicants for such positions may be newly degreed or lesser experienced individuals, perhaps targeted recruitment of individuals perceived as mentors, parental figures, or role models could yield emancipated foster youth improved outcomes.

To promote social change on a larger scale, key stakeholders might use the findings from this study to inform decisions about instituting changes for how to help emancipated foster youth with maintaining housing and improving outcomes. Such changes could include large-scale restructuring or reprogramming of postemancipation services to provide standardization of practices based on empirical findings. Given the fundamental significance of attachments (Bowlby, 1980), relationships, and social networks (Blakely et al., 2017; Leon & Dickson, 2018), a targeted focus on inclusion of different types of social support could improve participant experiences. Integrating formal social supports that include not only practical or tangible supports but also affirmational guidance, participation, and emotional support could improve emancipated foster youth perceived experiences of social support and outcomes.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived formal social support experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth and to

develop common lived experience themes for this phenomenon to address the documented problem of housing instability and homelessness among emancipated foster youth (Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019). Four main themes emerged from participant lived experiences: PES Program Social Support, PES Case Manager Social Support, PES Case Manager Characteristics and Values, and Housing Stability. Participant lived experiences illuminated the importance of PES program and case manager social support in aiding in the transition to independent living and maintaining housing. The social support roles of mentor, parental figure, and role model also emerged as significant among PES case manager social support experiences and how emancipated foster youth perceive the supporter. Additionally, case manager characteristics and values emerged as contributors to how participants perceived the quality of the case manager support. Finally, participant lived experiences illuminated formal social support as contributing to housing stability and maintaining housing contributes to a sense of accomplishment and general stability.

Findings from this study suggest the importance of postemancipation programming to assist with the transition from foster care to independent living among emancipated foster youth. With half of the foster youth leaving foster care losing housing (Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Greeno et al., 2019) and 25% experiencing homelessness after emancipation (Courtney et al., 2018; Kelly, 2020; Mares, 2010; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012), implementing programming that specifically addresses housing stability and formal social support could improve outcomes. Before enrollment in the PES program and during the COVID-19 pandemic, study participants

experienced housing instability and homelessness. The PES program included formal supports to provide stability and assist with the transition to independent living.

Regarding the PES program, Participant 5 stated, “Take advantage of these supports ... because in the end, you’re going to come out a better person ... like I’ve said ... I didn’t know what was going to happen if I didn’t have this program.”

The results of this study contribute to the growing body of research about the experiences of emancipated foster youth transitioning to adulthood. Understanding the formal social support experiences of stably housed emancipated foster youth gleaned from this study may help address the documented problem of housing instability among youth leaving foster care (Bender et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Dion et al., 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Further research is needed to understand the formal social support experiences of emancipated foster youth in different PES programs and emancipated foster youth without stable housing.

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Appendix A: Research Participant Informed Consent

Research Participant Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about former foster youth experiences with housing and support from case managers in the Postemancipation services program. The researcher is inviting former foster youth who have been enrolled in the Postemancipation services program and have maintained housing for at least one year. I obtained your name/contact info via Postemancipation services program workers. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Camron Whitacre, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of former foster youth who have maintained stable housing while enrolled in and receiving support from the Postemancipation services program.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher, which will last approximately 1 hour.
- Review the researcher’s transcription of the interview for accuracy.

Here are some sample questions:

- Tell me about your experiences leaving foster care and entering adulthood.

- Describe the relationship you had with your Postemancipation services program worker.
- After leaving foster care, what did you find helpful to maintain your housing?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. No one at Postemancipation services will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to be in the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress, or becoming upset. Being in this study could also result in additional discomfort by remembering unpleasant events. Becoming aware of feelings associated with those events could bring about strong or painful emotions such as sadness, guilt, anxiety, anger, frustration, or other uncomfortable feelings. If you experience such feelings during the interview, please inform the researcher and, if you like, the interview can stop. If these feelings surface after the interview, the local number for counseling support will be provided after completion of the interview.

The potential benefit of this study is gaining an understanding of the experiences of former foster youth who have maintained housing and received social support from a formal postemancipation program. Additional knowledge about the successes of former

foster youth transitioning to adulthood could help inform program development or improvements in current programming.

Payment:

As a courtesy for participation, you will receive a \$50 gift card that will be delivered to upon completion of interviews and review of interview transcripts.

Privacy:

Reports coming out of this study will not share the identities of individual participants. Details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, also will not be shared. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. All data will be kept secure by storage in a password-protected digital file. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms so names and identities will not be revealed. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at Camron.Whitacre@waldenu.edu or phone at 937-389-7778. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at my university at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is _____ and it expires on _____.

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by either signing and returning this form or replying to this email with the words, "I consent."

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Date of consent: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix B: Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Name (will be redacted by researcher): _____

Participant # (assigned by researcher): _____ Age: _____

Gender: Female ____ Male ____ Non-binary ____ Trans-Male ____ Trans-Female ____

Other ____; please indicate here: _____

Ethnicity: Hispanic/Latino ____ African American ____ Caucasian (non-

Hispanic) ____ Native American ____ Asian American ____

Other _____

Age first entering foster care: _____ Number of years in foster care: _____

Approximate number of placement moves while in foster care: _____

Date leaving foster care: _____ Date entering postemancipation services
program: _____

Number of moves since leaving foster care: _____

Length of time in current housing (apartment, home, etc...): _____

Have you ever been homeless: _____ When: _____

Have you ever couch-surfed or stayed temporarily with friends or relatives: _____

Please explain: _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your experiences finding and maintaining housing after leaving foster care.
 - a. If applicable, describe those experiences before and after entering the postemancipation services program.
 - b. Follow-up “how” and “why” or clarifying questions, as appropriate.
2. What does it mean to you to have maintained housing for more than a year since enrolling in the postemancipation services program?
 - a. Follow-up “how” and “why” or clarifying questions, as appropriate.
3. Describe the assistance you receive from the postemancipation services program.
 - a. Follow-up “how” and “why” or clarifying questions, as appropriate.
4. More specifically, tell me about the assistance you receive from your postemancipation services case manager (case manager).
 - a. Follow-up “how” and “why” or clarifying questions, as appropriate.
5. What does it mean to you to have received that support from your postemancipation services case manager?
 - a. Follow-up “how” and “why” or clarifying questions, as appropriate.
6. What other information do you care to share about your experiences maintaining housing or receiving support from the postemancipation services program?
 - a. Follow-up “how” and “why” or clarifying questions, as appropriate.

Appendix D: Participant Debriefing Form

Participant Debriefing Form

Thank you for your participation in the research study about former foster youth experiences with housing and social support from case managers in the postemancipation services program. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of former foster youth who have maintained stable housing while enrolled in and receiving support from the postemancipation services program. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Camron Whitacre, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. The researcher may contact you again to review partial transcripts of the interview for verification of accuracy, or to conduct follow-up questions if necessary. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Camron Whitacre at Camron.Whitacre@waldenu.edu or his dissertation chairperson, Dr. Randy Heinrich at Randy.Heinrich@mail.waldenu.edu.

As a courtesy for participation, you will receive a \$50 gift card that will be delivered to upon completion of interviews and review of interview transcripts. The gift card will be delivered electronically to the email address or cell phone number you provided.

As noted on the informed consent form, talking about past experiences could result in uncomfortable feelings. Should discomfort arise, talking through those difficult feelings may be helpful. Below is a list of providers in the area who provide counseling services and accept your insurance:

- Crisis Care (24-hour emergency support) – 937-224-4646

- Samaritan Behavioral Health – 937-734-4310
- South Community – 937-293-8300
- Specialized Alternatives for Families & Youth (SAFY) – 800-532-7239
- TCN Behavioral Health – 937-376-8701

Appendix E: Hermeneutic Phenomenological Data Analysis Plan

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Data Analysis Plan

Phase	Tasks	Justification
1. Immersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcription of recorded data and iterative review of textual data • Identify areas needing further clarification with current and future participants • Preliminary reflections / interpretations 	Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997
2. Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify first-order participant constructs, exemplars, paradigm cases • Isolate initial codes using NVivo software • Reflect on text, thematic statements, codes, and further interpretations • Textual descriptions / themes 	Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997
3. Abstraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify second-order researcher constructs • Cluster coding units to form subthemes • Structural descriptions / themes • Search for shared meaning through written interpretive summary 	Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994
4. Synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesize and group subthemes to develop themes • Compare emerging themes 	Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize each interview based upon emerging themes • Seek validity checking • Search for shared meaning through written interpretive summaries and thematic summaries • Integrate composite textural and structural descriptions • Check/recheck meaning of themes against shared experience descriptions 	Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997
5. Illumination & Illustration of Phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define and name themes • Develop overall ideas/theories of the phenomenon • Link literature to themes and reconstruct interpretations into participant stories • Grouping thematic experiences to uncover the essence of the phenomenon • Further search for understanding through an iterative process between narratives, field notes, and reflection 	Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Ritruetchai et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997
6. Integration & Final Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate and critique findings • Conduct final interpretations • Produce findings through scholarly report 	Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006
