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“A Comfort I Couldn’t Find in Nobody Else”: Relationships Between Emancipated Former Foster Youth and Their Biological Parents

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“A Comfort I Couldn’t Find in Nobody Else”:
Relationships Between Emancipated Former Foster Youth
and Their Biological Parents

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Social Welfare

by

Leah Rose Hanzlicek

2017
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“A Comfort I Couldn’t Find in Nobody Else”:
Relationships Between Emancipated Former Foster Youth and Their Biological Parents

by

Leah Rose Hanzlicek
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017
Professor Todd M. Franke, Chair

When foster youth emancipate from the child welfare system they no longer have professionals overseeing decisions about contact with their biological parents. While there is a general awareness in the field of child welfare that former foster youth often do choose to reconnect with their biological parents as adults, there has been scant research investigating former foster youths’ lived experiences of contact with them. Little is known about the potential functions of these relationships as sources of support, conflict, healing, or resilience. Without an understanding of how decisions about contact are made, and how such contact impacts their lives, it is not possible to assess how prepared, or unprepared, emancipated youth are when they
leave the child welfare system to negotiate these relationships in whatever manner is most beneficial to them.

This qualitative study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis in order to describe the experiences of a small sample (N = 8) of emancipated youth. This research also investigated the potential for theories of emerging adulthood, attachment and ambiguous loss, and resilience to contribute to a theoretical framework that could aid in understanding their experiences and decision making processes with regards to their relationships with their biological parents. Data were collected primarily via two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and topics explored included descriptions of contact, ways in which relationships with biological parents served as supports and challenges, how emancipated youth made sense of their decisions about contact, identity development, forgiveness, and closure.

Overall, participants described their biological parents as still struggling with the issues that led to foster care placement, and their relationships with them were often both supportive and challenging in different respects. For some, having children of their own had changed their relationships with their biological parents in rather complex ways. Despite the presence of difficulties in many of their relationships, participants expressed a great deal of empathy for their biological parents. Many had gone through a process of forgiveness in order to move on from the past. Practice implications and the applicability of theories of emerging adulthood, ambiguous loss, and resilience were also explored.

Keywords: emancipated foster youth, biological parents, emerging adulthood, attachment, ambiguous loss, resilience, independent living
The dissertation of Leah Rose Hanzlicek is approved.

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2017
This work is dedicated to the memory of H.W.

and

to the brilliant, hilarious, tenacious, resilient young people I had the privilege

of working for as a child welfare caseworker. You changed my life.
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Introduction

Purpose of Study

This study explored how emancipated emerging adults understand their relationships with their biological parents, the factors that influenced their decisions to make and, for some, to continue contact with biological parents, the extent of this contact, and what roles these relationships play in their lives. This information may be useful not only in informing future research, but may also provide child welfare professionals with new ideas about how better long-term outcomes for emancipating youth might be achieved by providing information about a largely unexplored dimension of these youth’s transitions out of substitute care and into adulthood.

The child welfare system is designed to investigate reports of child maltreatment, intervene in situations where maltreatment allegations are substantiated, and then either return children to their parents or, if that is not deemed to be a safe option, find an alternative permanent placement for those children. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) established strict time limits for parents attempting to regain custody of their children in order to prevent children from spending long amounts of time waiting in foster care for a decision to be made about whether or not they will return home. In most cases, if a child welfare agency has made “reasonable efforts” (provided services necessary for a safe return) and a child has been in substitute care for 15 out of the past 22 months, the agency is required to file for Termination of Parental Rights, which “frees” a child for adoption. However, for older children whose parents have “run out of time” to regain custody, there are simply not enough adoptive parents who are open to adopting older youth.
In 2013, over 24,600 young people ages 18-20 exited the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014d). Some youth run away from care rather than “officially” emancipating; over 1,100 foster youth were reported to have exited care via running away in 2013. However, the vast majority of exits occurred through legal emancipation, which is widely referred to as “aging out.” More than 23,000 young people legally emancipated from the system in 2013. In the past, foster youth would “age out” on their 18th birthday with few to no transitional services or resources provided. Unsurprisingly, many of these youth experienced poor outcomes as adults.

**Research Approach**

The perspective of those who have actually lived in (or are actually living in) substitute care is one that is not often explored in child welfare research or included in discussions of child welfare policy (Collins, 2001; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Fox, Berrick, & Frasch, 2007; Grover, 2004). Grover (2004) has emphasized the need for children to be involved as collaborators in research, as this “has the potential to lead to social policy which more accurately and compassionately reflects the concerns of children” (p. 83). While the proposed research is not focused on children, the population of interest is defined by a common childhood/adolescent experience, and has implications for child welfare practices affecting emancipating young people. This study will utilize an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) to explore the lived experiences of a small sample of emerging adults who emancipated from substitute care and their relationships with their biological parents.
Background

Risk Factors, Challenges, and Outcomes

There is an ever-expanding body of scholarly literature pertaining to outcomes for young people who emancipate from the child welfare system. Additionally, the federal government adopted a rule establishing the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) in 2008 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). States are now required to collect and report specific data concerning independent living service provision as well as outcomes for transitioning youth at 17 years old, 19 years old, and 21 years old (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c). So far the first longitudinal cohort for whom data were collected by the NYTD have participated in two “waves” of data collection, once at age 17 in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2011, and again at age 19, in FFY 2013, though follow-up response rates have been wildly different across states (ranging from 26% to 95%), making data susceptible to non-response bias. Despite these issues, the NYTD is still providing access to new information about the provision of transitional services and outcomes for transitioning young people at the national level.

Perhaps one of the best known studies in this area is the longitudinal, mixed methods Midwest Evaluation of Adult Outcomes of Former Foster Youth (the “Midwest Study”) which has provided an unprecedented look into the outcomes of more than 700 emancipated former foster youth from three states over the course of a decade, starting in 2002 with baseline interviews when they were ages 17 or 18 (Courtney et al., 2011). Follow-up interviews have been conducted at ages 19, 21, 23 or 24, and, most recently, 26. This most recent round of interviews was successfully conducted with 596 of the original sample, an 83% response rate.
Courtney et al.’s (2011) findings are myriad, and cannot all be detailed here, but in sum: the sample is not doing well in a number of spheres when compared to a nationally representative sample of other young adults of the same age. Further, youth who were likely to be the most vulnerable during transition, such as those who had run away or were missing from their foster placements, were incarcerated, were in a psychiatric hospital, and those “with developmental disabilities or severe mental illness that made it impossible for them to participate in the initial interviews” (p. 3) were not included in the Midwest Study, so it’s possible the results may be understating difficulties experienced by the group as a whole.

The following is a brief review of some of the findings from both the NYTD and the Midwest Study. As previously mentioned, there is a large body of literature investigating outcomes for former foster youth. Providing results from these two sources is intended to provide snapshots of two different phases of the process (in transition at 19 versus fully emancipated at 26) from recently collected, large, longitudinal datasets, and is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the outcome literature.

**Housing.** NYTD data indicated nearly 20% of 19 year olds had experienced homelessness in the two years prior, and about one third of those who had reported experiencing homelessness by age 17 had been homeless again between ages 17 and 19 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c). Youth who were still in foster care at 19 had lower rates of homelessness in the past two years (10%) than those who had left foster care (24%) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b). Courtney et al. (2011) found higher rates in their older sample; almost a third had been homeless or “couch surfed” in the two years between their last interview and their most recent interview at age 26.
**Employment, finances, and self-sufficiency.** NYTD data show that only 34% of sampled 19 year olds were employed either full or part time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b). Of the 68% of the sample who had exited foster care by that time, 36% were receiving some kind of public assistance. There was a gender difference in public assistance receipt for those who had exited care by 19, with 43% of females reporting receiving aid compared with 26% of males (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c).

The Midwest Study collected an abundance of more specific information at 26 years old. Less than half of their sample were currently employed (Courtney et al., 2011). Those who had been employed in the past year had a median annual employment income of less than $9,000, compared to a median of about $27,000 in the nationally representative comparison group sample. Further, less than half of the sample had a bank account and less than half owned a vehicle. Courtney et al. point out that this is of particular concern for this population, who tend to have less financial support from parents or other relatives than their peers who did not age out of foster care. They were significantly more likely compared to their peers to have experienced one or more financial hardship (things like having phone service or utilities turned off, not being able to pay rent, etc.). Over a quarter were rated as having “low food security” or “very low food security” on a USDA food insecurity measure. Sixty-four percent had received at least one means-tested government benefit in the past year.

**Education.** At 19 years old, 55% of youth in the NYTD had earned either a traditional high school diploma or a General Equivalency Degree (GED), though 54% did report being currently involved in an educational program of some sort (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c). Of those participating in educational programs, 49% had already earned a diploma or GED, so those participants were presumably pursuing some form of higher
education. Those youth who were still in foster care at 19 had higher levels of educational participation and had higher rates of achieving a high school level education as compared with those 19 year olds who were no longer in care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b).

Just under 20% of emancipated youth in the Midwest Study had not earned a high school diploma or GED by age 26 (Courtney et al., 2011). However, only eight percent had earned either a two year college degree, four year college degree, or attended at least one year of graduate school, and almost 80% reported needing further education in order to have the career they wanted.

**Physical and mental health.** Courtney et al. (2011) found that their sample had poorer outcomes in the areas of both physical and mental health compared to their peers. More than half had visited an emergency room at least one time in the prior year, and overall they were significantly less likely to have health insurance. It is possible, however, that insurance coverage has improved for this population since this wave of Midwest Study data were collected due to the implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) starting in 2010, which included changes to Medicaid eligibility (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c). Recent NYTD data showed that only 14% of 19 year olds were without medical insurance, and 71% had insurance via Medicaid, though of course this could still drop off at age 26 (the maximum age of expanded eligibility under ACA). There was some observed drop off in rates of Medicaid receipt between 17 and 19 years old, and both NYTD and the Midwest Study found low rates of non-Medicaid health insurance coverage (Courtney et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b).
Fifteen percent of 19 year olds in the NYTD reported having been referred for either a substance abuse assessment or some form of counseling in the past two years, and 33% had been referred for those services in their lifetime (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c). Courtney et al. (2011) found concerning mental health outcomes in the Midwest Study, with 35% of the sample reporting having an “unusually strong fear” of at least one social situation (p. 51), and 30% reporting avoidance of social situations where they might be the “center of attention” (p. 52). In the year prior, one quarter reported having experienced at least one depressive episode, 6% had thought about committing suicide, and 2% had attempted suicide. Over 60% had experienced or been exposed to a traumatic event, and 60% of those reported having experienced at least one PTSD symptom related to that event. Despite these mental health concerns, emancipated youth were no more likely than the comparison group to have received counseling.

Criminal behavior and victimization. The NYTD data showed that 43% of the cohort had been incarcerated at some time in their lives by the age of 19, with 24% having been incarcerated between 17 and 19 years old (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c). There was a notable difference across gender lines, with 14% of females having been incarcerated as compared with 33% of males. Three percent of those who had participated at 17 were not able to participate in the second wave due to being “incarcerated, incapacitated, or deceased” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b, p. 3).

Five percent of Midwest Study participants were incarcerated at the time of their interviews at 26, and Courtney et al. (2011) found that rates of arrests, convictions, and incarceration were significantly higher for emancipated youth as compared with peers who did
not emancipate from foster care. Further, female emancipated youth were significantly more likely to be both victims of and perpetrators of intimate partner violence than their peers.

Policy Responses to Poor Outcomes

There have been several pieces of legislation intended to address these troubling outcomes. The Independent Living Program (ILP) was first established in 1986 as part of an amendment to the Social Security Act’s Title IV-E (Courtney et al., 2011). The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) replaced prior iterations of independent living programs in 1999 as a result of the Foster Care Independence Act (P.L. 106-113), which extended eligibility for services and funding for state ILPs, among other positive changes.

In 2008 the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351; “Fostering Connections Act”) gave states the ability to allow wards of the court who are engaged in educational or vocational programs, working 20 hours per week, or who are medically disabled to voluntarily stay in foster care until the age of 21 with funding support from the federal government (Courtney et al., 2011). This change has extended service provision with the intent of improving outcomes for this population, and as of March 2015, 22 states have extended foster care to either 20 or 21 years old with federal support, and several other states have established similar programs that are solely state funded (Wiltz, 2015). The Fostering Connections Act not only extended the time young adults could stay placed within the system, it also emphasized the need for more transitional services and planning in order to boost outcomes.

In FFY 2012 more than 100,000 foster or former foster youth accessed transitional services via the CFCIP, 69% of whom were still living in foster care at the time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014a). In FFY 2013 just under 100,000 people
accessed one or more transitional service, and 70% of those receiving services were still living in foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b). Many of those who had accessed any transitional services had utilized a minimum of three services (nearly 60%). Interestingly, rates of any service use, as well as the utilization rates of different types of services, have been stable for FFYs 2011-2013 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b).

It may be important to take notice that much of the transitional service provision documented in the NYTD is occurring with younger youth, presumably in order to begin transition preparation well in advance. Fifty-two percent of those receiving services in FFY 2013 were entering the transitional years (18 to 21 years old), while 44% were between 14 and 17 years old (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014b). Only 2% of those receiving services were between 22 and 26 years old, which may be a concern in light of Courtney et al.’s (2011) previously discussed findings with regards to outcomes at age 26. Iglehart and Becerra (2002) have raised the possibility that early provision of ILP services may be developmentally “out of step,” providing services to youth who do not yet see their importance, and may even cut developmental processes short (p. 103).

The focus on preparing adolescent foster youth for the transition to independent living primarily centers around building “concrete” skills (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003; Samuels, 2008). According to the National Youth in Transition Database the most commonly utilized services for FFY 2012 were academic support, an Independent Living Needs Assessment (it should be noted that this “service” appears to be the assessment itself and an individual may be counted as receiving this regardless of whether they were subsequently referred for services related to the needs that were assessed), career preparation, housing
education and home management, health education and risk prevention, and budget and financial management (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014a). Other services tracked by the NYTD include things like family support and healthy marriage education, financial assistance (for education, room and board, or other costs associated with living independently), vocational training, and mentoring. It is noteworthy that social and emotional learning skills, which are vitally important to healthy adult functioning, appear to be largely absent from the services provided. It is possible that this may make navigating relationships with biological parents particularly challenging.
Literature Review

Relationships with Biological Parents after “Aging Out”

Research indicates that many emerging adults who age out of foster care (“emancipated youth”) choose to reestablish contact with their families of origin, including their biological parents (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Dumaret & Coppel-Batsch, 1998; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Reilly, 2003; Samuels, 2008; Wade, 2008). However, this contact is occurring after youth have emancipated and are no longer within the child welfare system, and so there is no formal “audience” to observe how these relationships develop (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). Frequently the information we do have about contact with families of origin has been collected in the context of quantitative studies, with questions about biological parents representing a small portion of questions that explore a variety of topics and outcomes. As a result, some is known about rates of contact but little can be concluded about the quality or function of these relationships based on that information alone (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Collins et al., 2008; Wade, 2008).

Feelings prior to emancipation about possible future reconnections. Fox, Berrick, and Frasch (2007) found that 61 of the 100 foster youth who were interviewed for their study believed they would go on to live with at least one of their biological parents some time in the future. Analysis of a subsample of over 300 youth between the ages of 6 and 15 from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being dataset found 47% would choose, if they could live with anyone, to live with their mother and 19% would choose their father (Chapman, Wall, Barth, National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being Research Group, 2004). More
than half of the sample believed they would live with one or both biological parents again, and nearly three-quarters of those youth were optimistic that their home situation would be improved since the time they were removed from the care of their parents.

Bush and Goldman (1982) found that more than half of the foster youth in their sample who were identified as being “unable to return home” to a biological parent did not wish to be adopted, even if they were able to choose their own adoptive parents, and even though 87% of them desired to stay in their current placement. The most common reasons given for not wanting to be adopted had to do with their attachments to their biological families and not wanting to abandon their identity as part of their family of origin. Samuels (2009) found plans for future reunification with biological parents, and an aversion to the idea of “belonging to” (p. 1234) someone else, to be a commonly cited reason for rejecting adoption in her sample. Iglehart and Becerra (2002) have also suggested some youth may have cultural reasons for wanting to maintain connections to biological families.

It makes sense that for many youth in substitute care these attachments, feelings of connection, and expectations for future relationships would continue into the transition and post-emancipation years. In Geenen and Powers’s (2007) sample, which included youth in ILPs preparing for transition and recently emancipated youth, as well as professionals working with foster youth, foster parents, and educators, the discussion of future contact with birth families was a common theme. Caseworkers in the sample appeared to assume that most emancipated youth would go on to reconnect with their biological parents “…even if it’s been years since they’ve seen them or heard from them” and “…whether you tell them they can’t see them or not” (p. 1094).
Professionals and youth alike saw the potential for these relationships to be both supportive and detrimental (Geenen & Powers, 2007). One youth said “I honestly think I could do better without my family. They cause me a lot of hard times” whereas another stated “You can learn a lot from them…they can help you out with struggles…” (p. 1094). Some of the caseworkers recommended reinitiating contact while the youth is still in foster care so that they would still have access to other supports if it did not go well: “…if [the birth parents] aren’t going to help, the kids [sic] got to find that out…So you have to encourage the contact because either it’s going to be good for the kid, or they’re going to know that there is a reason I’m not living there anymore” (p. 1094).

Iglehart and Becerra (2002) have similarly suggested it may be beneficial for ILPs to help youth learn how to come to terms with familial dysfunction, which may continue indefinitely, and Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith (2001) recommended ILP programs strengthen relationships between transitioning youth and their families as well, since they are often called upon by youth for assistance by force of circumstance when there are no other resources available, even when they have been disconnected from one another prior to emancipation.

There may be another benefit to facilitating contact between biological parents and foster youth well before emancipation as well. Biehal and Wade (1996) found some preliminary evidence in their longitudinal qualitative study of 74 youths that contact while still in care and parental support after leaving care may be related, where higher levels of contact while still in the system indicated higher levels of support for youth after emancipating. They also found that youth who reconnected with parents after leaving care needed emotional support from caseworkers that was largely unavailable to them because of their emancipated status, and
recommend conducting assessments well in advance of transition to determine what kinds of (and quality of) support their families are likely to provide during and after transitioning from care.

**Rates and frequency of contact with biological parents after emancipation.** While certainly not all emancipated youth resume contact with biological parents, the phenomenon is far from rare. Most of the existing information about reconnecting has focused on two dimensions of contact. First, whether *any* contact has occurred since emancipation, and second, if contact is occurring on an ongoing basis, which would seem to indicate some kind of relationship.

Reilly (2003) found that 37% of his sample, who had left substitute care a minimum of six months before participating, had contact with their mothers and 30% had contact with their fathers. A study in Wisconsin found that at 12 to 18 months out of care more than half of participants had seen their mothers a minimum of one time, and 35% had seen their fathers, and more than one fifth of the sample wanted to see more of their biological parents (Courtney et al., 2001). In the Midwest Study, frequent contact was not uncommon, with 46% of the sample having contact with their mother once a week or more, and 19% having this level of contact with their father; many participants reported having daily contact with a biological parent (Courtney et al., 2011).

There has been some research into this area internationally as well. One study in England found that “care leavers” overwhelmingly went on to have contact with family members in the months following emancipation, with 81% having “some contact” and two thirds having frequent (once a week or more) in-person contact (Biehal & Wade, 1996). Unfortunately, the authors did
not indicate if these particular figures specifically pertained to contact with parents or family members more generally. They also found that many of the emancipated youth in their sample either moved, or were trying to move, into close proximity of their families to facilitate more frequent interactions.

A more recent English study investigated familial support in the first 12 to 15 months after exiting care (Wade, 2008). They found that a little more than half of their sample had contact with their mothers at least every other week two to three months after leaving care (baseline), and a little less than a quarter had the same level of contact with their fathers. At follow-up they observed a slight decline, with 43% maintaining contact with their mothers and 17% with their fathers. Wade (2008) points out that this decline may not necessarily be an indicator of conflict, but could perhaps reflect increased independence; it’s not unlikely that the same decline might be observed in emerging adults who did not age out of foster care as they become less dependent on their families.

Another study conducted in France that included adults between the ages of 23 and 39 who had spent a minimum of five years in foster care found that 40% of their sample had “regular contact” with their parents (Dumaret & Coppel-Batsch, 1998). Those who had very little or no contact with both parents and foster parents after exiting the system had gone through multiple disruptions that had separated them from their parents even before placement in foster care, “[showing] that the difficulties of parent-child attachment…were generally maintained during placement and confirmed in adulthood” (p. 37).

Some emancipated youth return to live with a biological parent; Collins, Paris, and Ward (2008) found varying rates in the literature with a range of roughly 7% (in Reilly, 2003) to 17%
in the second wave of the Midwest Study (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Some of the literature reviewed in Collins et al. did not differentiate between parents and other biological relatives—this range represents only those studies that specified living with biological parents. Kroner and Mares (2011) looked at one ILP’s discharge data over a five year period and found that 7% of clients had gone to live with a biological parent (overwhelmingly with their mothers) upon leaving the program. Over 21% of the sample in the most recent wave of the Midwest Study reported having lived with a birth parent since turning 18 (Courtney et al., 2011).

Biehal and Wade (1996) found that 8% of their British sample went directly from substitute care to live with a biological parent, and that 12% lived with one or both parents for at least 3 months within the first 18-24 months since emancipating. They also found that some youth had stayed with parents for short periods of time, often “during a crisis” (p. 428), when they found themselves without any alternative place to go. While this seems to indicate biological parents aided some youth in preventing homelessness, Iglehart and Becerra (2002) found that of those emancipated youth in their sample who reported family conflict, nearly a third cited the conflict as playing a role in their becoming homeless. For example, one young woman reported staying with her mother for one week before leaving and becoming homeless, and cited her reason for leaving as being that “[she and her mother] could not resolve our past issues” (p. 94).

**Quality of relationships with biological parents.** It is clear that this contact is occurring, but information about the amount of contact doesn’t shed light on the quality and function of these relationships and there has been little research in this area (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Collins et al., 2008; Wade, 2008). Conflicting emotions are reasonably foreseeable given the past experiences of maltreatment within these relationships, and the possibility of lingering
unresolved feelings surrounding the “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 2004) of biological families during childhood or adolescence (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Lee & Whiting, 2007; Samuels, 2008, 2009).

More than 25% of Samuels’ (2008) small sample, which ranged in age from 17 to 26 years old, identified biological mothers as being in their “inner circle” (defined as “people you can’t imagine life without”), though the majority did not include biological parents anywhere in their network. Courtney et al. (2011) found that at 25 or 26 years old, 52% of the sample reported having “very close” or “somewhat close” relationships with their biological mothers and 30% reported the same with their biological fathers. These rates had declined since the second wave of the Midwest Study, when 67% had reported those levels of closeness with their mothers and 38% had reported the same for their fathers. Conversely, Wade (2008) found more emancipated youth identifying their mothers as the relative with whom they had the closest relationship at follow-up (27%) than at baseline (22%), despite finding the frequency of contact as having decreased. There was no change over time in the proportion reporting fathers as the relative they felt closest to (9% at baseline and follow-up).

Iglehart and Becerra (2002) found family conflicts, sometimes stemming from parental dysfunction, to be a recurring theme in their small sample of emancipated youths. At the time interviews were conducted about 54% of their sample reported conflict in their family. Samuels (2008) also found a considerable portion of emancipated youth to report persisting mental health and substance abuse issues among biological parents. In another study, 25% reported family relationships as being problematic “most” or “all of the time” in the first 12-18 months after emancipation (Courtney et al., 2001).
Wade (2008) also found persisting difficulties in familial relationships, however transitioning youth still largely reported improvements in relations with adult family members (not limited to parents). Some youth had worked on “[renegotiating] past relationships or [reconciling] differences” (p. 45), while others had shifted their perspectives on supportiveness after finding practical or material assistance from family to be extremely helpful, and still others appreciated having a readily available sounding board and source of advice. Of course not all reported improved relationships; some transitioning youth had been rejected by family, others had old schisms resurface or new ones develop that interfered with relationships. In spite of the prevalence of reported difficulties, only 11% of the sample characterized their relationships as being worse at follow-up, and only 12% reported not having contact with any family at follow-up (down from 16% at baseline).

This study also asked transition caseworkers about their impressions of these relationships, and this provides an interesting contribution (and contrast) (Wade, 2008). Workers’ responses frequently differed from those of transitioning youth with regards to key supportive familial relationships, strength of relationships, and changes in relationships over time, with youth tending to be more positive than workers. For example, in some cases when a youth reported improved relationships, a worker reported no change or negative changes, sometimes even seeing familial influences as “largely negative or destructive to the young person’s well-being” (p. 46). This could reflect bias or skepticism on the part of workers, a lack of meaningful communication between transitional workers and the youth, generous optimism on the part of youth, or some combination of these things. There was a wide range in workers’ self-reports of their involvement in larger family issues, from some thinking the youth could handle it themselves and not getting involved at all and others being actively involved in reconnections,
playing the role of mediator, or providing emotional support to the youth, helping them process difficulties that arose.

Biehal and Wade (1996) defined “positive relationships” as “those where young people perceived their relationship with family members to be of good quality and to offer them support in the broadest sense and where this view was confirmed by their social workers…” (p. 429), though they acknowledged the problematic nature of settling on one definition for a phenomenon as nuanced as familial relationships. They found that, using this definition, less than one third of their sample had positive relationships with a parent while they were transitioning out of care. However, by the time 18-24 months had passed after emancipation this had risen to one half. In some cases a crisis had occurred that ended up facilitating a reconnection, however circumspect, while others indicated that reinitiating a relationship after being separated was a process rather than an instant of reconnection: “It just felt weird…You have to grow to know your [mom] again…” (p. 431). Relationships between mothers and daughters in Biehal and Wade’s (1996) sample appeared to be particularly difficult, sometimes “[bringing] back to the surface old grievances about what they saw as parental failures leading to their initial entry to substitute care” (pp. 431-432).

Child Bearing and Child Rearing

Courtney et al. (2011) found that 80% of female emancipated youth in their mid-twenties had ever been pregnant, as compared with 55% of women in the comparison group of peers who did not age out of foster care. Almost one third had been pregnant before they turned 18. Ten percent of females in the NYTD had given birth to a child by the age of 17, and 17% had given birth to a child between the ages of 17 and 19 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c). The rates of females having given birth were higher than those of males having fathered
a child. Of males and females who had reported having a child by the time they were 17, 56% had gone on to have another child by the age of 19.

Wade (2008) has suggested that the tendency towards early parenthood could be related to the “accelerated transitions” this population is faced with negotiating, prompting some to attempt to create a new family (p. 49). Pryce and Samuels (2010) have identified three particularly important factors that may influence parenting experiences for many emancipated youth: having been raised by multiple caregivers due to being removed from the care of their parents, being denied a voice in decisions about continuing familial relationships, and finding that motherhood “presents [them] with what is potentially their first experience of purposefulness drawn from a family tie” and “positively [contributes] to their sense of familial belonging: a family in which their value and membership [can] not be questioned” (p. 208). At the same time, transitioning from care and being a new parent simultaneously makes the developmental tasks associated with emerging adulthood even more complicated (Pryce & Samuels, 2010).

As discussed previously, there are a number of risk factors facing emancipated youth, some of which have implications for possible child welfare involvement in the next generation. For example, an increased likelihood of involvement in intimate partner violence, either as victim or perpetrator (Courtney et al., 2011), could result in a protective services investigation, and higher rates of criminal justice system involvement than their peers as well as substance abuse and mental health concerns that often go untreated (Courtney et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014c) could likewise result in higher rates of foster care placement for the children of emancipated youth. The disintegration of turbulent relationships could also increase instability (Wade, 2008). Children of emancipated youth have also been
found to be more likely to have health problems and more likely to have learning disabilities than the children of their peers (Courtney et al., 2011).

All of these added stressors, often combined with a compromised system of supports, could make it more difficult to address other risk factors, as well as potentially causing emancipated youth increased exposure to mandatory reporters (health providers, educators, etc.). While much of the mandatory reporting literature has focused on underreporting of child maltreatment, there is evidence that many professionals have a misunderstanding of their state’s mandatory reporting statutes, causing reports to be made for liability concerns rather than actual suspicions that maltreatment is occurring (Foreman & Bernet, 2000).

In terms of supports for parenting emancipated youth, some of the parenting youth in Biehal and Wade’s (1996) sample identified their mothers as being important resources, and one third of the females who were parenting reported having increased the amount or quality of contact with family. Wade (2008) found parenting youth reported stronger relationships with the family member they felt closest to (not necessarily a parent) as well as more interactions with more relatives. For some female emancipated youth this effect was particularly salient in their relationships with their mothers.

Emancipated youth in the most recent wave of the Midwest Study overwhelmingly identified their biological mothers when asked where they get information about parenting and who or what taught them about being a “good parent,” despite their own histories of child welfare involvement (Courtney et al., 2011). Some transitioning parents have reported tapping into informal support systems rather than seeking professional help for fear of putting themselves on their radar and opening themselves up to “scrutiny” (Wade, 2008, p. 51). This could be a
concerning insight. If emancipated youth who are parenting don’t feel safe seeking professional help for fear of potentially opening themselves up to child protective services investigation, instead seeking parenting guidance from their own mothers (from whom they were removed), they may be inadvertently heightening the possibility of child welfare investigation in the long run by adopting their mothers’ parenting practices. When transitional workers engaged with parenting youth in Wade’s (2008) sample, offering help and support in a variety of areas related to parenting, their assistance was well-received for the most part.

Emancipated youths’ fears of being separated from their own children are not unfounded. By their mid-twenties, emancipated youth were significantly more likely than their peers to report having one or more child of their own who was not living with them; 8% of children born to female emancipated youth were in foster or adoptive homes (Courtney et al., 2011). Dworsky and DeCoursey (2009) found 11% of their sample had a child in substitute care, with 22% having been investigated by child protective services. Dumaret and Coppel-Batsch (1998) found that about 12% of the parents in their French sample had children being raised by someone else (the child’s other parent or another family member), but none had a child placed in foster care. However, a subsequent follow-up with some of the former foster youth from their sample, ranging in age from 23 to 39 years old, did find several individuals were at risk of having their children removed by child welfare authorities. Geiger (2014) assessed a sample of youth who had either recently emancipated or who were preparing to emancipate and found 79% to be at medium risk of child maltreatment and 17% to be considered at high risk. Further, the sample scored low on a measure of parental empathic awareness towards the needs of children. Perhaps all of this speaks to a need for ILP workers to be proactive in offering services specific to parenting, as opposed to waiting for youth to request assistance, as well as establishing trusting
relationships with parenting youth in order to decrease fears about receiving professional parenting help.

There is also evidence that, for some, biological parents become more of an “anti-role model” whose parenting example is not to be followed (Pryce & Samuels, 2010). Pryce and Samuels (2010) conducted a small qualitative study with a subsample of pregnant or parenting women from the Midwest Study. It was common for the women to describe providing their biological mothers with support, and very few participants reported being on the receiving end of support from their mothers. One young woman in Iglehart and Becerra’s (2002) sample said of her mother: “…I told her she would never see her grandson. I’m ashamed of the life she lives and I don’t want my son to know her” (p. 93). Another participant expressed reservations about having children of her own: “I’m real good with kids, but how would I be on my own?…What if I’m like my mom? I would never want to disappoint or hurt a child like she’s hurt me. I don’t want to be like her…” (p. 99). While there are clearly emancipated youth who identify wanting to do things differently with their own children, they are often not receiving help with learning alternative ways of parenting: “…these young adults know what not to do but rarely know what to do to remedy the wrong they have suffered” (Pryce & Samuels, 2010, p. 223). Even for those young parents who are determined to redefine “motherhood” for themselves there is still a risk of intergenerational transmission of maltreatment in the absence of healthy parenting supports.

**What Don’t We Know?**

Despite a general awareness that relationships with biological parents often do continue, little to no research explores former foster youths’ lived experiences of them. Very little is known about the ways in which these relationships might be supportive, detrimental, sources of conflict, and sources of healing and resilience. While child welfare systems have not focused on
building family resiliency as a vital part of independent living services, it is quite possible emancipated youth are attempting to do this work on their own. Without any information about how their decisions surrounding contact with biological parents are currently being navigated, and what these relationships look like when contact does occur, it is impossible to know the extent to which emancipated youth feel they have been prepared to negotiate these relationships on their own terms.

Collins (2001) has called for “more qualitative research about the mechanisms through which young people develop, maintain, and terminate social-support mechanisms” in order to “[intervene] in more age-appropriate and culturally appropriate ways than are now in use” (p. 286). More consideration needs to be directed towards the continuing interactions and influences, both supportive and challenging, of biological parents in the lives of emerging adults who aged out of the foster care system in order to improve not only their own outcomes, but potentially the outcomes for their own children as well.

**Primary Research Questions**

In IPA, primary research questions serve an exploratory purpose and are concerned with people’s experiences, their perceptions of those experiences, and what the meanings of those experiences are for them (Smith et al., 2012). Smith et al. (2012) explain that primary research questions should be constructed in a way that avoids establishing a particular theoretical lens. They propose questions relating to theory should be secondary, as they will be addressed not through interview questions but through interpretive processes during data analysis. Further, Smith et al. point out that it’s possible the data collected will not end up providing answers to theoretical questions, so it would be unwise to make answering them the central goal of the research. The goal of IPA is not to test theory, though interpretive analyses may engage with
theory (Smith et al., 2012). Primary research questions are presented here, and secondary research questions arising out of the theoretical framework are presented at the conclusion of the following chapter.

Primary research questions:

*Question 1:* How do they describe their experiences of having contact with biological parents since leaving the system?

*Question 2:* How do emerging adults who have aged out of substitute care make sense of their decisions about contact with biological parents?

*Question 3:* In what ways do they experience these relationships as being supportive of their independence?

*Question 4:* In what ways do they experience them as being challenging to their independence?
Theoretical Framework

Emerging Adulthood as a Developmental Stage

Emerging adulthood (EA), the developmental period proposed by Arnett (2000) to occur between the late teens and late twenties, is described as a distinct time “…when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course” (p. 469). Arnett sees EA as a relatively new developmental stage arising out of demographic trends in industrialized and post-industrial nations where the typical ages of marriage and childbearing have been shifting upwards in tandem with educational attainment. This has created a span of time in which individuals have greater autonomy than adolescents, but have not yet reached adulthood and so have fewer responsibilities than previous generations did at the same age. The theory of EA has five key elements: “identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities/optimism” (Arnett, 2014, p. 158).

According to Arnett (2000) emerging adults do not follow proscribed pathways, and there is a high degree of diversity in the trajectories of individuals. Because of this diversity, demographic trends are largely nonexistent for this age group as a whole, unlike adolescents and young adults—this is one piece of evidence Arnett offers to demonstrate that EA is distinguishable from the other stages. There is, however, at least one demographic trend that is apparent: numerous changes in living situations. Arnett believes this pattern is related to the “exploratory quality” of EA, and that changes in residence likely co-occur with different experiences such as going to school, moving for a job, or deciding to live with a romantic partner.
partner, and in this way moving around is reflective of instability in many other areas of life 
(Arnett, 2000; 2014).

All of this exploration is, according to Arnett (2000; 2014), part of the process of identity 
formation or identity exploration, which he argues begins during adolescence but is more 
prevalent, and more consequential, during EA. By exposing themselves to different people, 
relationships, viewpoints, jobs, living situations, geographic areas, and so on, emerging adults 
are shaping their own unique perspectives that will inform each individual’s identity. This 
process represents another key feature that Arnett believes clearly sets EA apart from 
adolescence and early adulthood. It’s also important to note that this identity development is not 
a passive process, but rather for many emerging adults it is a very intentional undertaking 
(Arnett, 2014). This is where the “self-focus” comes in, which Arnett (2014) is quick to say is 
not the same as “selfishness.”

“Feeling in between” has to do with when individuals feel, subjectively, “like adults” 
(Arnett, 2000; 2001; 2014). Emerging adults tend to identify as neither adults nor adolescents, 
but rather feel like they have characteristics of both stages. For some this has to do with 
continued financial or material assistance from parents or other supports, for others it has more to 
do with just not “feeling like a grown up” despite being self-sufficient (Arnett, 2014). This 
ambiguity reflects that EA provides a slow transition from one life stage to another, and takes on 
elements of both experiences.

Despite patterns of instability, a nationally representative sample of emerging adults 
displayed an abundance of optimism about the future, both generally and in terms of comparing 
their future lives with the lives of their parents (Arnett, 2014). Possible partial explanations for
this optimism, in the face of high levels of stress and anxiety that were also reported by the same sample, include generational changes in educational attainment and increased opportunities for women.

However, Arnett (2000) acknowledges that EA is not universal, and not everyone in the emerging adulthood age range has the opportunity to use this time to explore a variety of possibilities. Instead, the very existence of this developmental stage appears to be culturally bound. At the macro level this relates to a nation’s degree of industrialization, educational attainment needed to get a job in a particular economy, and broad cultural expectations about the timing of marriage, having children, and when one is expected to assume the responsibilities that define the role of “adult.” Variation in the presence of emerging adulthood also occurs within cultures or across sub-cultures. For example, poverty, a lack of access to education, or becoming a parent are all forces that might push an adolescent to adulthood without a transitional period of emerging adulthood, or might shorten the length of time spent in emerging adulthood. While EA is generally thought to encompass the late teens through the late twenties, in reality the experience will differ based on individual circumstance and experience.

Many emerging adults without a history of child welfare involvement look to their parents for support including assistance with finances, housing, or education, as well as emotional support and advice (Collins et al., 2008). This does not seem to be the case for most transitioning or emancipated youth. Rather than slowly transitioning to independence with a parental safety net in place, as is typical for many emerging adults, those who are transitioning to independence from substitute care often must adapt quickly, frequently based on an externally imposed timeline that is not tethered to their own readiness for independence (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002). Along these same lines, youth who emancipate and move out of substitute care
are less likely than non-substitute care youth to be moving out on their own for “positive, opportunity-oriented reasons, such as attending college” (Collins, 2001, p. 281).

Iglehart and Becerra (2002) point out that emancipation itself places an extra “developmental task” on the shoulders of youth who are aging out that their peers do not have to contend with (p. 83). Further, emancipated youth may have unresolved emotions surrounding the circumstances of their child welfare involvement and the loss of the normative experience of growing up with a biological parent (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Samuels, 2008). Emerging adults who lack the resources needed to exert agency over their life course decisions may be underprepared to successfully tackle problems that arise as they take on “adult roles,” including parenting, sooner than many of their peers (Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005). Despite an awareness that transitioning and emancipated youth are likely experiencing developmental processes differently than their peers, there has been little research examining the extent to which the theory of emerging adulthood may, or may not, be relevant to this population (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014).

Courtney, Hook, and Lee (2012) used Midwest Study data from ages 23 or 24 to test whether distinct subgroups of emancipated youth could be identified. Using latent class analysis, they did indeed find there to be four classes based on variables deemed relevant to transition experiences and outcomes. They named these classes accelerated adults, struggling parents, troubled and troubling, and emerging adults. Accelerated adults represented more than one third of the sample, and, despite experiencing challenges, were characterized by having the most successful outcomes in terms of having independent housing, being employed, and having higher levels of educational attainment. Struggling parents were the second largest class in the sample, and they were characterized by high levels of unemployment (75%), the highest rate of not
having completed high school, the lowest rate of post-high school education, low levels of social support, high rates of receiving government assistance, and almost all had at least one child living with them. The troubled and troubling group was the smallest, and had the most problematic outcomes including being incarcerated, homeless, or institutionalized, unemployed, having the highest rate of criminal convictions, having the lowest levels of social support, and struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues. Further, 48% of the troubled and troubling class had children, but none reported living in the same home as their children.

The emerging adults class in Courtney et al. (2012) comprised 21% of the sample and were named after Arnett’s (Arnett, 2000) theory because “they [were] delaying some transition markers…while generally avoiding hardship” (p. 414). Youth in this group were least likely to have children, had the lowest rate of criminal convictions (5.7%), and just under two-thirds were employed. No one in this class was living in a place of their own, but there were also no youth who reported being homeless, incarcerated, or in treatment. This analysis does seem to indicate that at least some portion of emancipated youth experience a period of “emerging adulthood.”

Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson (2014) conducted a qualitative study with youth between 18 and 21 years old who were currently transitioning out of care or who had already emancipated in order to explore the applicability of Arnett’s (2000; 2014) developmental theory for these youth. Specifically, they investigated whether transitioning/emancipated youths’ experiences reflected the five qualities associated with EA and explored how youth defined “adulthood.”

Perhaps surprisingly, most of their sample did identify as feeling “in-between” and going through a gradual process of transition, though this could be attributable to the nature of the sample, all of whom were receiving transitional services through community based agencies.
(Berzin et al., 2014). However, the sense of being “in-between” was more complex for this sample, reflecting not only a period of transition between developmental stages, but also a conflict between simultaneously feeling independent from and monitored by the child welfare system. Youth did report engaging in identity exploration, though Berzin et al. (2014) noted this was largely confined to internal work (i.e. thinking about their identity), with a lack of opportunities to “practice” (i.e. testing out different roles, especially in the domain of employment) (p. 626). A number of youth identified a desire to postpone pursuing romantic relationships in favor of working on achieving their own ambitions first.

In some respects, the experiences of child welfare-involved emerging adults in Berzin et al.’s (2014) sample had rather different experiences with Arnett’s (2014) five characteristics of EA compared to emerging adults without child welfare involvement. After experiencing instability while in the child welfare system (almost half of the sample had lived in more than five different placements), many of the youths were striving to find and keep long-term, stable housing. They were also more interested in deciding upon a career and working towards it than exploring a variety of employment options. Experiences with self-focus appear to be complex for many of the youth in the sample. While many did have self-focus in terms of concentrating on taking care of themselves and making progress, as is typical for emerging adults, nearly half contrasted self-focus with familial obligations, which were seen as “a distraction from focusing on themselves and their goals” (p. 627).

Despite these challenges, Berzin et al.’s (2014) sample was dominated by youth who felt optimistic about the future despite anticipating struggles to come. While some seemed to identify a need for further resolution of past experiences in order to “move on” to better things in the future, for many others having lived through past difficulties seemed to have increased a sense of
self-efficacy and reinforced their tenacity. Some of the confidence exhibited by these youth may be related to their “[feeling] like adults the majority of the time” (p. 629), which 65% of the sample reportedly already did. Eighty percent of the sample indicated feeling like they “[have] had to care of themselves for a long time” (p. 630). Unfortunately, this idea of taking care of oneself as being an important indicator of being an “adult” seemed to be connected for this sample with “no longer requiring help and support” (p. 629). This is concerning, as this attitude may prevent transitioning or emancipated youth from seeking help when needed, for fear of being seen as not self-sufficient or successful in their transition to adulthood, which could ultimately impact outcomes negatively.

On the whole, Berzin et al.’s (2014) findings do seem to indicate that at least some of this population has experiences associated with emerging adulthood, though this was an agency-connected sample, many of whom were enrolled in college, so their experiences may reflect a specific subset of these youth, similar to Courtney et al.’s (2012) findings that identified distinct subgroups of emancipated youth. Either way, the youth perspectives shared with Berzin et al. may point to some potentially important contradictions facing transitioning and emancipated youth.

For example, during the transition process “foster youth are left with a choice of help from the system, which they view as treating them like children, or adulthood that is free from support” (p. 631). While the sample did identify with feeling “in-between” and saw their transitions as occurring gradually, they are also faced with the reality that their connections to services and professionals are, ultimately, finite. As Berzin et al. point out, emancipated youth will not have the option of using child welfare resources as a safety net after the fact the way emerging adults outside of the system often can access ongoing or episodic support from their
parents, making their transition to independence both gradual and abrupt. Further, while some emancipated youth may receive offers of help from biological parents, they may not be comfortable accepting it, instead preferring to be in the “helper” role (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Emerging adulthood is not the only developmental stage of concern for youth aging out of substitute care, of course. Fox, Berrick, and Frasch (2007) have raised concerns about the effects of growing up in foster care on children’s ability to meet developmental markers due to their ongoing uncertainty about the permanency of any given placement. If this is the case, foster youth may already be at a disadvantage as they reach later developmental stages. Collins (2001) notes the wide variety of stressors transitioning youth are likely to experience, often simultaneously, as well as the negative effects of stress on development during childhood and adolescence. All of these factors have the potential to alter an individual’s experience of emerging adulthood.

The population of adults who age out of the foster care system has been found to struggle after emancipation, raising concerns about current ILP service provision (Berzin et al., 2014; Courtney et al., 2011). The focus on preparing adolescent foster youth for the transition to independent living primarily centers around “concrete skills” such as creating a budget, securing housing, and job searching, among others (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Propp et al., 2003; Samuels, 2008), but it appears that concrete skills alone cannot combat challenges that are often extremely complicated, sometimes spanning multiple generations. At the same time, the transitional period between adolescence and adulthood in the general population is increasingly being shown to be “one of the normative windows of opportunity” for the development of “late-emerging resilience” (Masten et al., 2004, p. 1092). This highlights the need for increased attention to this
developmental period in the lives of emancipated youth, especially since youth may now stay in care well into emerging adulthood.

Collins (2001) proposes independent living programs have come to focus on teaching the more tangible skills due to their tendency to be atheoretical. She suggests ILPs could potentially be made more effective by incorporating theoretical perspectives pertaining to the life-course/human development, resiliency, and social support, among others. Likewise, Stein (2006) has noted a need for more theoretical grounding of research into aging out, suggesting many of the same theories identified by Collins as potential starting points.

**Attachment and Ambiguous Loss**

Perhaps one of the more fraught and emotionally challenging ongoing tasks during emerging adulthood for emancipated youth will be their decisions about how much contact they will have, if any, with their biological parents. Bowlby’s (1973; 1980; 1982) theories of attachment, separation, and loss are frequently incorporated into child welfare research to provide a framework for understanding the consequences of child maltreatment, separation from parents, and changes in caregivers (Washington, 2008). Attachment theory is based in the idea that infants form bonds with their primary caregivers, learning to differentiate them from others as their needs are consistently met by the same person (Bowlby, 1982). The development of attachments is interactive, with the behaviors of an infant (i.e. seeking interaction) influencing the care received, and the care received influencing the infant’s behaviors. Caregiver responses to needs, over time, are proposed to lead to the creation of internal “working models” or “representational models” that the child uses to predict future caregiver responses (Bowlby, 1973).
Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) identified three distinct patterns of infant
attachment: securely attached, anxiously attached and avoidant, and anxiously attached and
resistant (Bowlby, 1982). Main and Solomon (1986, 1990) later added another classification,
disorganized-disoriented, to capture infants who were found not to fit with any of Ainsworth et
al.’s patterns (Cicchetti, Toth, & Lynch, 1995). The avoidant, resistant, and disorganized
attachment types are all considered to reflect “insecure” attachment patterns. A number of
studies have since shown that maltreated children frequently fit the disorganized-disoriented
category, though this classification has been found to become less stable as children get older
(see Cicchetti et al., 1995 for one overview). A meta-analysis conducted by Baer and Martinez
(2006) found that maltreated children had 80% greater odds of being classified with one of the
insecure attachment patterns; there were only 80 rated as having secure attachments, whereas
there were 319 maltreated children rated as having insecure attachments.

While patterns of attachment are commonly associated with infancy, Cicchetti, Toth, and
Lynch (1995) argue that patterns of attachment are shaped across the life course, interacting with
each new stage of development, and potentially changing trajectories. At the same time, they
acknowledge the potential for internal working models to carry through into adulthood,
“[guiding] interpersonal relations in ways consistent with prior experiences” (p. 28). Cicchetti et
al. (1995) suggest this may provide one explanation for instances of intergenerational
transmission of maltreatment, though this result is certainly not pre-determined.

Bowlby (1973) describes internal working models as being related to the child’s
impression of the caregiver’s general responsiveness, as well as being projected back onto the
self, leading to conclusions about one’s own deservingness of care: “Thus an unwanted child is
likely not only to feel unwanted by his parents but to believe that he is essentially unwanted,
namely unwanted by anyone” (pp. 204-205). It is in this way that early attachments are hypothesized to have a potentially lasting impact. An awareness of these internalized messages that may arise from experiences of maltreatment also helps explain attachment to caregivers that persists despite abuse or neglect; the child interprets maltreatment to be a reflection of themselves, rather than an issue the caregiver has independent of them. This provides context for why some children ultimately express blaming themselves for being placed in foster care or deny having experienced maltreatment, as many in Lee and Whiting’s (2007) did.

Samuels (2008) reminds us that “every placement into a foster home is intimately linked with the removal from a home” (p. 53). It is precisely because foster youth do have attachments to their parents that removal from an unsafe situation by the child welfare system is experienced as a loss, and these attachments do not simply disappear upon placement in substitute care. This reflects Bowlby’s (1980) theory that loss causes both emotional and physiological distress which will eventually become less chronically acute, but continues in an episodic manner. He interprets periods of renewed grief and attempts at reunion as evidence that “the person’s attachment behaviour is remaining constantly primed” (p. 42).

Several researchers have applied Boss’s (2004) theory of ambiguous loss to the experiences of foster youth (Lee & Whiting, 2007; Samuels, 2008, 2009). Boss defines ambiguous loss as “an unclear loss—a loved one missing either physically or psychologically. It results from various situations of not knowing if a person is dead or alive, absent or present, permanently lost or coming back” (p. 237). She identifies two types of ambiguous loss, one where the loved one is physically present but psychologically absent (she gives the example of dementia), the other involving a loved one who is psychologically present but physically absent (such as in the case of a missing person). Samuels (2008) proposes that the foster care experience
is a third “crossover” type (p. 13), compounded by the likelihood that foster youth have already experienced or will experience multiple instances of ambiguous losses.

One of the key complicating features of ambiguous loss is that because the loss is not “clear cut,” those dealing with it must do so without the cultural observances typically associated with the grief process and, ultimately, with the resolution of loss (Boss, 2004, p. 237). Because there is no opportunity to resolve the loss, “Family members have no other option but to construct their own truth about the status of the person absent in mind or body” (Boss, 2007, p. 105). For foster youth who are unable to return home, this “frozen grief” (Boss, 1999) can extend for years after the system has decided not to pursue a plan of parental reunification. Eagle (1994) highlights the distinction between loss (due to death) and separation, and argues against the projection of “the mourning model” onto children in foster care. She explains, “…finality may be much more difficult…to understand because the parent is known to be alive and, at least in principle, reunion is possible” (p. 426).

Issues of attachment and loss are even further complicated for foster youth, who are typically either placed into a foster home run by people they have never met or into a kinship placement with a relative, where any internalizing or externalizing behaviors observed may be seen as pathological rather than normative for the circumstance (Lee & Whiting, 2007). Lee and Whiting (2007) suggest responding to behavioral issues in foster care with ambiguous loss in mind by choosing not to further isolate the child, instead working to bring the child deeper into the fabric of the foster family. This strategy helps avoid “self-fulfilling prophecies of non-loveableness” (p. 426). This could prevent unintentional reinforcement of internal working models the child may have, and supports secure attachment rather than reinforcing insecure attachments.
Bush and Goldman (1982) challenged Goldstein, Freud and Solnit’s (1973, 1979) “permanency/psychological parenting” theory, which posits children are only able to maintain a strong psychological attachment to one parent (or one set of parents in the case of two parent households) at a time, and that these attachments can be broken rather quickly when a separation occurs. These assumptions are reflected in child welfare policies, like ASFA, that enforce strict timelines for reunification with biological families and prioritize permanency as the most important consideration in determining the child’s “best interests.” Bush and Goldman’s contention is that “psychological parenting” can’t be seen in such black and white terms, particularly with regard to older children, and that some may “prefer and are able to cope with several parent figures, giving to neither [biological] parents nor surrogate parents exclusive rights to psychological parenthood but drawing strength from both relationships” (p. 234).

This fits with Fox, Berrick, and Frasch’s (2007) assertion that, for foster youth in particular, the idea of “family” is not rigid, and can encompass a number of different types of relationships, all of which should be recognized and utilized as supports. Bush and Goldman (1982) stress the need for more nuanced theoretical frameworks in child welfare that “can acknowledge, without being paralyzed by, the untidiness of some human situations” (p. 235), which includes a shift away from conceptualizing attachment to parents and surrogate parental figures as mutually exclusive.

**Resiliency**

Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro (1987) proposed that experiences of trauma and loss in childhood could lead some to repress their recall of the affective experience while still maintaining clear memories of the objective experience into adulthood. This repressive coping skill, they theorized, led to an inability to identify with distress in their own children, resulting in
“an unconscious alliance and identification with the fearsome figures of the past” that maintains the cycle into another generation (p. 135). The past traumas that continue to be present in the next generation are metaphorically presented here as “ghosts in the nursery.” On the other hand, a parent’s ability to recall what it felt like to suffer, experience loss, and be afraid as a child acts as a protective factor, leading them to identify with the “childhood self” and say “I would never want that to happen to my child” (p. 135), effectively eliminating those “ghosts.”

Mucci (2013) uses a similar metaphor, describing the trauma survivor as “being haunted by the persecutor” (p. 202), and also explores the idea of switching between perspectives. This is connected to both attachment and forgiveness. Here, forgiveness is seen as a bridge between the two perspectives (those of survivor and perpetrator), and the recognition of each perspective by the survivor is seen as being a vital piece of the process of forgiveness. Mucci proposes forgiveness is essential to transcending, or “going beyond,” trauma, regardless of whether the perpetrator is even aware that forgiveness is being given.

The theories presented by Fraiberg et al. (1987) and Mucci (2013) may be translatable to a process by which foster youth are able to alter their existing working models of attachment, resolve past traumas, and ultimately embody resilience. This could connect directly to the types of services provided by ILPs. As one former foster youth, a 25 year old mother of an 11 year old, in Samuels (2008) put it: “…they’ll…teach you how to go to work…how to go to school, how to do hygiene. But they don’t never teach you how to… grow up and deal with what you’ve been through so you don’t just crack up somewhere” (p. 53).

There is an abundance of research that has demonstrated the risks facing emancipating youth, but more research is needed into resiliency, and what specific factors may promote
resiliency in this population (Collins, 2001; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; McGloin & Widom, 2001). Stein (2006) defines resilience as “the quality that enable some young people to find fulfillment in their lives despite their disadvantaged backgrounds, the problems or adversity they may have undergone or the pressures they may experience. Resilience is about overcoming the odds, coping and recovery” (pp. 427-428). He notes that the brevity of the transitional period many emancipating youth face makes psychological processing of change, something that promotes the ability to handle problems, especially challenging.

Resiliency is often discussed at the individual level, but it also operates at the family level (Masten & Monn, 2015). Masten and Monn (2015) suggest that opportunities for fostering resilience at the individual level may present occasions “where strategic, targeted intervention in one system or process can trigger changes across multiple domains and levels of functions” and call for “a more integrated understanding of opportunity windows and potential cascades across systems” (p. 15). Given the previously discussed possibility that emerging adulthood itself presents an “opportunity window” for fostering “late-emerging resilience” (Masten et al., 2004, p. 1092), this may be an opportune moment for attempts to foster family resiliency as well.

While there are valid concerns about emancipated youth having difficulties in their relationships with parents, there is also great potential for strengthening familial resources available to them, even when biological parents may continue to struggle with impaired functioning in some areas of their lives (Walsh, 2003). One study found that having a relationship with a biological parent in addition to other parental figures was associated with higher levels of competence and lower levels of vulnerability in emerging adulthood (Cushing, Samuels, & Kerman, 2014). This seems to support Bush and Goldman’s (1982) theory that combining the strengths of multiple parental figures can be more beneficial than privileging just
one set of “psychological parents.” Daining and DePanfilis (2007) found that social support from both friends and family was associated with higher levels of resiliency, and note that “Close familial bonds can serve to sustain youth through their transition to adulthood” (p. 1172). A conceptual change that sees these familial attachments from the perspectives of the youth themselves could, then, lead to an approach that is more capable of providing youth with a system of support to foster their ongoing development (Fox et al., 2007).

Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith (2001) recommend “building on family strengths while minimizing negative family impact” (p. 714). In building family resilience the goal is to “bounce forward” rather than “bounce back,” and “family members are encouraged to…[break] down walls of silence or secrecy around painful or shameful issues, to build mutual support and empathy (Walsh, 2003, p. 14). This hearkens back to Mucci’s (2013) theory of “going beyond” trauma.

The possible benefits of incorporating independent living program services that support emotional development and healthy coping skills, especially as they relate to interactions with families of origin, have been suggested before (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Propp et al., 2003; Samuels, 2008), but this has yet to emerge as a focal point in service delivery. In order to assess how these elements may be helpfully incorporated into transitional planning for youth preparing for emancipation more must be known about how these relationships currently evolve after emancipation.

**Secondary Research Questions**

The following secondary research questions arose out of the preceding theoretical framework. As stated previously, in IPA secondary research questions are not directly addressed
through interview questions (Smith et al., 2012). Instead, they are engaged with during analysis and incorporate the researcher’s interpretation of participant accounts.

Secondary research questions:

*Question A:* To what extent does a desire to forgive or resolve past trauma explain reinitiating contact?

*Question B:* To what extent do their accounts of their relationships relate to identity development?
Methods

Phenomenological Design and Rationale

This exploratory study employed a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research methods (Smith et al., 2012). These methods are borne from the phenomenological philosophical approach pioneered by Husserl, who emphasized not only the need to closely investigate the nature of experiences, but also for our perceptions of experiences to be scrutinized in detail in order to understand the “essence” of an experience (Smith et al., 2012, p. 12). For phenomenology the study of perception is key; the goal is to reveal those aspects of experience which are typically taken for granted (and so go unnoticed), in order to explore how exactly we make sense of an experience (Husserl calls this stance the “phenomenological attitude”) (Smith et al., 2012). Part of the reflective process entails “bracketing,” an intentional setting aside of one’s own preconceived ideas and assumptions in order to focus on consciousness (Smith et al., 2012).

By seeking to understand and thoroughly describe the meanings individuals make of their experiences, it is then possible to glean “general or universal meanings…in other words the essences or structures of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, among others, built upon and reframed Husserl’s philosophical conception of phenomenology, primarily moving towards a greater focus on interpretation and acknowledgment of the many individual factors that influence perspective and meaning-making (Smith et al., 2012).

A phenomenological approach to this study was selected for two primary reasons. First, there is a lack of existing research into relationships between emancipated youth and their
biological parents, making an exploratory research method most appropriate, and, second, phenomenology’s ability to provide a framework for investigating lived experiences will allow for the development of an understanding of how individuals come to understand or make meaning of their experiences. Galton (1883), a scientist who developed many commonly used statistical concepts, saw this level of sensitivity to detail at a more individual level as being foundational, noting:

Acquaintance with particulars is the beginning of all knowledge—scientific or otherwise…starting too soon with analysis and classification, we run the risk of tearing mental life into fragments and beginning with false cleavages that misrepresent the salient organizations and natural interactions in personal life.

(as cited in Smith et al., 2012, p. 31)

As noted previously, there is also a need for research that incorporates the perspectives of those most affected by the child welfare system (Collins, 2001; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Day et al., 2012; Fox et al., 2007; Grover, 2004), and in this study the lived experiences of the emancipated youth represent the focus of the research. There has been very little application of phenomenological perspectives and approaches in the area of child welfare research. Grover (2004), who argues specifically for the incorporation of children’s voices into child welfare research, sees phenomenological research as an important adjunct to quantitative investigation: “…the quantitative approach provides insights only within a delimited and particularized perspective driven by a particular hypothesis. Often as not that quantitative approach does not address the subjective experience of the persons who are the research participants” (p. 86). Arguably, this even more specifically makes a case for hermeneutic phenomenology’s place in child welfare research, as the qualitative to quantitative comparison is analogous to the
“hermeneutic circle,” where one continuously uses parts to make sense of the whole and the whole to make sense of the parts (Benton & Craib, 2001). The idea of the hermeneutic circle is that without this continuous examination of both part and whole we can understand neither (Benton & Craib, 2001). Quantitative approaches can give us a sense of the population of interest as a whole, but without investigation into the experiences and understandings of individuals we cannot claim to truly comprehend a phenomenon.

Phenomenological analytical methods follow from Husserl’s core philosophical ideas, but extend beyond his primary focus on the examination of one’s own perceptions and allow the exploration of the perceptions of others (Smith et al., 2012). Just as there are different “camps” within phenomenological philosophy, applied phenomenological research methods have also branched into a number of different approaches. In the process of narrowing the field of possible approaches, the researcher first chose to focus on the phenomenological methods developed in psychology rather than sociological phenomenology. While there is a structural element to the phenomenon of interest (i.e. the child welfare system context) the primary considerations of the project dwell more squarely in the psychological realm (attachment, developmental stages, behaviors, motivations, etc.).

Even within psychological phenomenology, there are varying research methods. The core concerns of perception and experience remain constant across approaches, with various methodological disputes (which can be quite contentious) following largely from epistemological differences (Finlay, 2013). One, though not the only, key divide among phenomenological methodological approaches has to do with whether an approach is descriptive or is both descriptive and interpretive (Finlay, 2009; Smith et al., 2012). Giorgi’s work, which has been influential in bringing phenomenology to psychology, aims for a rather strict adaptation of
Husserl’s phenomenology to the field, and focuses on description and the structure of a phenomenon (Finlay, 2009; Smith et al., 2012). Interpretive approaches are influenced by hermeneutic philosophers including Schleiermacher, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and especially Heidegger, who saw description and interpretation as being inextricably linked (Finlay, 2009; Smith et al., 2012).

The research approach in this study followed the methods of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2012). This is a comparatively recently pioneered approach that incorporates theoretical perspectives from Husserl’s phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2012). The connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics, as noted above, is not a new development, and there are other approaches to hermeneutic phenomenological research aside from IPA. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) explain idiography, which is “concerned with the particular,” as functioning at different levels in IPA: in terms of the level of detail in data collected, which influences the richness of the analysis, and in its “[commitment] to understanding how particular experiential phenomena…have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (p. 29). This is in contrast with strictly descriptive phenomenological research, which attempts “to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). Smith et al. are quick to clarify that this doesn’t mean IPA is concerned only with the individual, as experience is “a worldly and relational phenomenon”; the study of individuals provides information about their interaction with a given phenomenon (p. 29). In other words, the researcher is gaining access to the phenomenon through the accounts of individuals.

IPA has a number of strengths that made it a particularly appropriate method for this study, including its inductive nature, flexibility to be adapted to many different topical areas and
fields of inquiry, and its ability to investigate processes rather than restricting itself to measuring predefined outcomes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). The open-ended nature of semi-structured phenomenological interviews allows for participants to present information in unanticipated areas, something which could not occur in research that uses predefined measures or rigid questioning (Grover, 2004). It is also an inherently empathetic methodology, given the IPA researcher’s desire to understand the perspective of the participants, which makes it well suited to social welfare research and congruent with social work ethics. Furthermore, the focus on the participant’s own perspective holds the researcher accountable in a more tangible, personal way, and “the risk of having research independence coopted by establishment perspectives and social agendas is lessened” (Grover, 2004, p. 89).

**Sampling and Recruitment**

Adult former foster youth are often quite difficult to recruit for research, even when state agencies’ records are used to attempt to locate them (Collins et al., 2010; Reilly, 2003; Samuels, 2008). For just one example, Collins, Spencer and Ward (2010) started with a sampling frame of 660 youth who had been out of care for about a year, all of whom the state child welfare agency attempted to contact for recruitment. After two initial mailings, agency attempts to locate more recent addresses for a third mailing, cross-referencing with Medicaid records for a fourth mailing, and then the researchers deciding to shift to a convenience sample, and expanding inclusion criteria to include a larger age range, and extending recruitment to around 700 agencies, their sample ultimately included 96 participants. Some of the more well-known studies with large sample sizes, such as the Midwest Study (Courtney et al., 2011), have benefitted from sampling youth while they were still in care and following them longitudinally.
Given the challenges inherent in sampling this population even shortly after their leaving substitute care, much less years after, non-probability purposive sampling began with recruitment from a small group of individuals who were previously known to this researcher. From there, a “snowball” sampling technique was employed, with participants being asked to assist with recruiting other possible participants. A page was also created and promoted on a popular social media platform that included information about the study and inclusion criteria, and provided multiple ways to contact the researcher (email, telephone, social media direct messaging). A direct message was sent to anyone who engaged with the page during the recruitment period. Finally, recruitment materials were also distributed to organizations and programs including Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) at the county and state levels, a drop-in center offering programs for former foster youth, several other organizations at local and state levels serving and advocating for former foster youth, organizations that work with foster parents and child welfare workers, as well as individual workers and foster parents previously known to this researcher, independent living programs in multiple localities, and an alternative high school that serves many emancipated foster youth.

This strategy was consistent with the most commonly used recruitment methods in IPA: opportunity (existing contacts), snowballing, and referral (from “gatekeepers”) (Smith et al., 2012). In addition to providing an avenue for initial recruitment, starting recruitment using existing contacts may also have been beneficial in data collection, as this researcher already had some rapport and trustworthiness with participants. Given the population of interest, and the sensitive and highly personal nature of the study, this was of particular importance. Grover (2004) notes that reciprocal trust is vital to gathering data that is truly “authentic” (p. 87).
In many qualitative methodologies the sample size is said to be dependent on the number of individuals needed to reach “saturation,” however in IPA this can be a troublesome strategy due to the nature of analysis, which is iterative, and makes “saturation” less obvious (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). There are no hard and fast rules about sample sizes in this type of research, but due to this methodology’s “aim for depth” a sample size of 6 to 10 is typical (Padgett, 2008, p. 56). Brocki and Wearden (2006) found an apparent consensus that small samples are the norm in their review of IPA research studies in health psychology. They reviewed nearly 50 published studies that had used interviews in data collection, with samples between 1 and 30 people. More than half of the studies had fewer than 15 participants.

Smith et al. (2012) caution against thinking that a larger sample translates to superior research, and note that having a “large” sample size is more of a threat to achieving the aims of an IPA study than having a “small” sample size: “Successful analysis requires time, reflection and dialogue, and larger datasets tend to inhibit all of these things” (p. 52). They suggest from three up to six as a “default” sample size for those new to IPA, with adjustments made based on study aims and researcher experience with IPA. Collins and Nicolson (2002) started with 30 interviews, then pared down to four cases, but ultimately selected only one transcript to be used for IPA analysis, because “potentially subtle influences of meaning may be lost in the analytical process of coding large swathes of transcribed interview data” (p. 626). Grover (2004) argues that even though phenomenological data sets are too small to analyze statistically they have “social significance,” and provide insight that could not be achieved through other means.

In IPA it is usually preferable to have a homogeneous sample, with the level of homogeneity depending on the specific research questions (Smith et al., 2012). This allows for a “[detailed examination of] psychological variability within the group, by analyzing the pattern of
convergence and divergence which arises” (p. 50). In investigating a topic where not much is currently known, this strategy makes particular sense, especially when dealing with small sample sizes where trying to assemble a “representative sample” is something of a fool’s errand. Generalizability is not discounted in IPA, but it is seen as a longer process, achieved through the synthesis of a number of small studies.

For this study, initial inclusion criteria included: 1) being an emerging adult (18-29 years old); 2) who has been living in an unsupervised setting for at least one year; 3) was placed in substitute care as a minor; 4) was not successfully reunified with a parent or successfully adopted while child welfare system-involved (i.e. “aged out” of foster care); 5) has had, or currently has, contact with one or more biological parent since emancipating. Recruitment was originally focused on sampling women who had been in foster care in Oregon, and was expanded to include those who had been in care in California. Starting with narrower criteria but leaving open the possibility of extending beyond the initial criteria is recommended in sampling for IPA research (Smith et al., 2012, p. 50).

Initially, recruitment messages were sent directly to seven individuals, and they in turn referred three additional interested people to the researcher for screening. Of those ten contacts, six completed screening and met inclusion criteria, two did not respond, and two expressed interest but did not complete screening. Five additional people contacted the researcher as a result of the other recruitment efforts, all of whom completed screening and met criteria. Direct messages were sent to around 30 people who engaged with the social media page during the recruitment period. One person contacted through this method expressed interest in participating but did not follow through with attempts to schedule screening. A minimum of three attempts at follow up contact were made with each individual who had expressed interest in participating.
In total, there were 11 people who completed screening, and everyone screened met inclusion criteria. Three of those 11 did not complete interviews: One person’s interview was postponed and she did not follow through with rescheduling attempts, one did not respond to attempts to schedule an interview meeting, and the last was a no-show for her interview and stopped responding to attempts to reschedule. The final sample included eight participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions that maximized each participant’s ability to provide a narrative that embodied the richness of their experiences and their reflections on those experiences. The final sample consisted of eight participants, seven of whom participated in a second round of follow up interviews, for a total of 15 interviews. The first round of interviews was conducted between May and October of 2016, with follow up interviews taking place between January and March of 2017. The median time between first and second interviews was 9 months. First interviews were in-depth and ranged in length from 56 to 165 minutes, with a mean length of 106 minutes. Second round interviews ranged from 22 to 49 minutes with a mean length of 32 minutes.

Part of the interview included filling out a Network Map (Samuels, 2008, p. 91, see Appendix B) as well as a brief questionnaire to collect demographic information and basic foster care histories. Interviews were conducted face to face whenever possible, in mutually agreed upon, private locations. Videoconference or telephone interviews were conducted when in-person interviews were not possible. Ultimately, half of the sample participated in face to face interviews. Digital audio recordings were made of interview sessions, with permission from participants. These recordings were used to create verbatim transcripts, and the transcripts were used in data analysis. All first round interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and second
round interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service with participants’ permission. Participants were provided access to transcripts of their own interviews and given an opportunity to correct errors or make other amendments. No corrections or amendments were requested. For information pertaining to data security procedures please see the “Data Security Protocols” section below.

Meetings for interviews began with the informed consent process. For interviews conducted electronically a copy of the Study Information Sheet was provided ahead of time and consent was obtained verbally after reviewing the Study Information Sheet together. After completing the informed consent process or going over the Study Information Sheet, the semi-structured interviews began. In order to allow for participants to speak to the information they deemed important and relevant, and in keeping with the semi-structured nature of phenomenological interviewing, an interview guide (see Appendix D) was developed but was not rigidly adhered to. This interview guide served to help ensure that each interview touched on essential topics but, again, interviews were dynamic and the guide was not intended to serve as a verbal questionnaire. Incorporating “narrative or descriptive” and “analytic or evaluative” segments into interviews is suggested in IPA interviews (Smith et al., 2012, p. 59), and this was taken into consideration in the development of the guide. Early participants were also asked for feedback about the interview guide (Smith et al., 2012), and all interviews ended with an opportunity for participants to bring up any important topics they felt had not been addressed.

Next, the researcher asked the participant to fill out a Network Map (Samuels, 2008). Samuels (2008) adapted the Network Map from Antonucci (1986) for her qualitative research into supportive networks of emancipated youth and young adults. The Network Map is made up of concentric circles where participants place the people they identify as being important to
them. As the circles get further away from the center “bullseye” (which represents the participant) this is intended to represent a less close relationship to the participant. The circle closest to the participant includes “those people to whom you feel so close that it is hard to imagine life without them,” the intermediary circle includes “people to whom you may not feel quite that close but who are still important to you,” and the outermost circle includes “people whom you haven’t already mentioned, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be placed in your personal network” (Samuels, 2008, p. 91).

The Network Map (Samuels, 2008) provided a more holistic understanding of who the important people were in the participants’ lives than might have been discussed during the interview, which was focused more specifically on relationships with biological parents. This provided a more comprehensive context without needing to use a lot of interview time and energy. Additionally, the map also had implications for providing insight into the participant’s attachment. Rowe and Carnelley (2005) tested hierarchical mapping techniques and found mapping was able to provide more information about attachment hierarchies than either the Attachment Network Questionnaire (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997) or the Inclusion of Other in Self instrument (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) which is another graphic tool.

Other instruments were considered for use in the current study, but Samuels’ (2008) Network Map was best suited for this project. For example, the use of a standardized scale or questionnaire might have been more difficult for the participant to understand, or may have come off as intimidating or impersonal. Filling out the map was more like an interactive, open-ended activity facilitated by the interviewer, rather than a rigid process that established a power differential between questioner and questioned (which might have been evocative of memories of visits to mental health professionals or prior placements in residential treatment facilities).
Instead, the participant was put in the position of being “the expert” as they educated the interviewer, who was in a position of humility, about the relationships that were important to them. This is consistent with the aims of IPA, as well as anti-oppressive practices in social work research (Danso, 2015).

An electronic copy of the Network Map (Samuels, 2008) was provided ahead of time to participants whose interviews were conducted electronically so that they could have it front of them during the meeting. Typically for electronic interviews the participant told the researcher who to write in each circle, though one person opted to go over hers together in the meeting and then mailed a hard copy she filled out to the researcher. For face to face meetings the participants were given the option of filling it out themselves or telling the researcher who to write where, depending on what they felt most comfortable with. Finally, participants provided information for the Participant Demographic Information Sheet (see Appendix C).

In the second round of data collection, meetings began with semi-structured interviews that generally followed the second interview guide (see Appendix E), though as with the first round of interviews the guide was not strictly followed. For those participating in electronic meetings, a copy of their completed Network Map (Samuels, 2008) was provided ahead of time for their reference. After the conclusion of the interview portion of the meeting, Network Maps were reviewed and participants were asked if there were changes they would make. If they said yes, they given the option of filling out a new one or making changes directly on their first maps. Finally, they were asked for any updates or changes to that may need to be made to the Participant Demographic Information Sheet.
At the conclusion of each interview participants were provided with a $25 gift card for a local retailer as a token of appreciation for their time and willingness to share their experiences. If recruitment was still taking place at the time of the interview, this is also when the participant was asked about whether they knew any other potential participants they might be willing to connect the researcher with. After the participant left the interview, the interviewer wrote notes reflecting on the interview and interactions with the participant. This type of contextual data is recommended in IPA research (Smith et al., 2012).

**Data Security Protocols**

Informed consent paperwork, Network Maps, Participant Demographic Information Sheets, and any other “hard copy” documents pertaining to study participants were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s private office, which also remained locked at all times. They will be retained for five years and then the documents will be shredded. Audio files of interviews were transferred from recording devices immediately following interview meetings and were saved onto a computer that was password protected and kept secure. After transcription they were moved to a password protected external memory drive that was stored in the locked filing cabinet referred to above. The external memory drive will be erased after the study is completed. Transcripts of interviews were saved to the same external memory drive described above, as well as a password protected online data storage service that uses encryption and two-step verification. Transcripts used pseudonyms for participants and “placeholders” for anyone else who may have been named in the interviews (i.e. [friend – J]).

**Data Analysis**

As discussed earlier, in phenomenological research the researcher “brackets” or sets aside their personal preconceptions of the phenomenon in order to see it from a new perspective
(Moustakas, 1994; Padgett, 2008; Smith et al., 2012). The hermeneutic influence affects the role
bracketing plays in IPA, particularly with regards to the analysis stage: “…a consideration of
Heidegger’s complex and dynamic notion of fore-understanding helps us see a more enlivened
form of bracketing as both a cyclical process and as something which can only be partially
achieved” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 25). Rather than seeing bracketing as occurring “first,” Smith et
al. (2012) point out that in order to know the entirety of what needs to be bracketed, one must
first engage the text (here, the interview transcript, map, and notes) in order to identify one’s
own assumptions (“fore-structures”) in that area (p. 25).

This is not to say that bracketing does not occur prior to data analysis as well, but instead
highlights IPA’s emphasis on bracketing as an ongoing process, occurring before and during
interviews, as well as during data analysis. Here, it is an ongoing process for the researcher to
engage in, for “…the phenomenon, the thing itself, influences the interpretation which in turn
can influence the fore-structure, which can then itself influence the interpretation” (Smith et al.,
2012, p. 26). Data analysis is iterative in IPA research, again reflecting the hermeneutic circle’s
influence. In other words, it is important to remember that preconceived ideas or assumptions
aren’t static, but instead could be changing throughout the research process.

In light of the ever-changing nature of our own “fore-structures” the researcher must not
only engage in an ongoing scrutiny of preconceptions held in a broader sense, the researcher
must also bracket the analysis of each participant’s transcript in order to look at each subsequent
transcript “on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 100).
This bracketing from case to case prevents the researcher from missing new themes that may be
present in some transcripts but not in others (Smith et al., 2012).
Smith et al. (2012) developed IPA analytical processes to be fairly flexible, noting the focal point of the analysis (how participants make sense of their experiences) is the primary feature, and adaptations to their directions may be made when needed to better facilitate this endeavor. Key elements of analysis include careful, detailed analysis of raw data, identification of themes, an interpretive turn that incorporates the researcher and the coded data, and the synthesis of overarching connections seen between themes (Smith, 2011). They are quick to point out that this is not a linear process, but is instead a complex cycle. That said, there are “steps to analysis” presented by the developers of IPA to use as a guide.

Step One is “Reading and re-reading” the data, which can also include listening to recordings of interviews again, in order to actively engage with the data in a way that centers the analysis on the participant rather than jumping to data reduction (Smith et al., 2012, p. 82). Step Two, “Initial noting,” is exploratory, and includes both descriptive and interpretive comments. This step is extremely detailed, and involves a very close analysis of the entirety of each transcript. Smith et al. (2012) suggest it may be useful to include three distinct types of notes: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual, possibly approaching them one at a time in separate readings of the text (pp. 84-90).

Third, the researcher will transition to an analysis of the notes produced in the second step, moving in a more interpretive direction, in order to generate “emergent themes” (p. 91). These emergent themes tend to be more conceptual or psychologically oriented, though they remain rooted in the participants’ accounts, “reflect[ing] a synergistic process of description and interpretation” (p. 92). Next, the researcher may look for themes within the emergent themes, for it is possible to identify clusters of emergent themes that may further guide the analysis.
This basic process is repeated across transcripts, with the researcher being careful to bracket when moving to each new case in order to allow new emergent themes to become apparent throughout the process, rather than looking for the first case’s emergent themes in all subsequent cases (Smith et al., 2012). After all transcripts have been analyzed the researcher proceeds to look for similarities in emergent themes across cases, now with the possibility of identifying “super-ordinate themes” that encapsulate multiple previously identified emergent themes (p. 101). Divergences are also noted, as the idiographic aspect of IPA should not be lost in analysis. In looking for patterns in emergent themes, the analysis becomes more theoretically oriented, though it is important in IPA to keep the theory connected to readings of the participants’ accounts, as opposed to “importing” a framework that is not coming out of the text (p. 105).

As the researcher moves through and between these “steps” they are forming multiple layers of interpretation, beginning by gaining insight into the participants’ experiences, then deciphering the meanings the participants’ make of their experiences, and ultimately arriving at “an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking” (p. 80). At first glance this may seem unsatisfyingly detached or vague, but this ties back to the concept of a “double hermeneutic,” which acknowledges that “the researcher is not the participant, [she] only has access to the participant’s experience through what the participant reports about it, and is also seeing this through the researcher’s own, experientially-informed lens” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 36). The hermeneutic circle is also at play in the continuous movement from examining one piece of a transcript in isolation, to the context of the whole transcript in its entirety, and yet again when moving from looking at one transcript by itself, to the context of all the data.
collected in the study. This process works the other way as well, with the researcher taking their interpretations back to the text repeatedly to ensure they are grounded in the data.

Brocki and Wearden (2006) note that IPA is more aggressive than many other qualitative methodologies in acknowledging and confronting researcher reflexivity, pointing out that it is even incorporated into its theoretical framework explicitly. In light of this, they suggest IPA researchers should, as a “best practice,” specifically discuss reflexivity and the researcher’s personal role in interpretation when presenting findings (p. 92), noting that “A clear acknowledgement of authors’ particular perspectives (perhaps including research interests, theoretical groundings and why they sought to undertake this particular piece of research) might assist in this” (p. 99). Indeed, Smith et al. (2012) agree, citing “reflection of one’s own perceptions, conceptions, and processes” (p. 80) as being integral. They also advise keeping a detailed research journal throughout the analytical process in order to document decisions made and the reasons for them.

**Reflections on Researcher Reflexivity**

As a former child welfare caseworker who worked disproportionately with teenage clients, the researcher came into the project with some sense of what foster care experiences are like for many foster youth nearing transitions from care. While working with this population, the researcher was struck by the lack of direction provided around either supporting or restricting contact between older youth and parents who had not been successful in completing reunification services, but whose children had never been adopted or permanently placed either. It was more common than not to work with an older youth who had been placed many years prior, and to never have contact with a biological parent. It seemed these relationships were, effectively, ignored. After maintaining contact with some former foster youth who had been on her caseload,
the researcher’s curiosity was piqued. It was clear reunions were occurring, but how were they working out?

Throughout both data collection and analysis the researcher maintained notebooks to record her own impressions and questions as they arose. This allowed for critical reflection and investigation of possible biases or preconceived notions about the research topic itself or impressions of the research participants. Having worked in a position where the foster youth was viewed as the client, the researcher was already inclined towards seeing things from the perspectives of the former foster youths. It is possible this could have aided in the researcher’s attempts to understand how participants made sense of their experiences, though this could also inspire feelings of protectiveness. The researcher bracketed previous experiences working in the child welfare system by putting participants squarely in the role of expert, and herself in the role of learner.

Some, though not all, participants were aware by the time of their interviews that the researcher had been a child welfare caseworker. There were several participants who asked, seeming almost puzzled, why the researcher wanted to learn about this topic. In these instances the researcher was frank about her past as a caseworker and the role that played in her interest in the topic. Most seemed excited that someone was taking an interest in this subject, and the researcher’s status as a former caseworker appeared to either be a non-issue or, for some, to be an advantage, with lots of advice and recommendations for other caseworkers being offered up. For the few participants who were acquainted with the researcher prior to this project, the researcher was very careful to bracket any knowledge of their histories or circumstances and to only consider interactions and information discussed in the interview meetings themselves in data analysis.
Human Subjects Protocols and Ethical Considerations

Participation in phenomenological research can be an empowering experience. By positioning the participant in the role of the expert and inviting them to share their own lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences, “the researcher [assists] in giving the research subject ‘power’ and ‘voice’” (Grover, 2004, p. 84). At the same time, the sensitive nature of the research questions and the level of detail that was shared in the interviews highlights the importance of having protections in place for participants in the study.

Participants went through the informed consent process, or in cases where interviews occurred electronically they were provided a Study Information Sheet and gave verbal consent, prior to any data collection beginning. As part of this process participants were informed that they could decline to answer certain questions, take a break, or end the interview at any time. The researcher was prepared to debrief participants at the end of the interview session, and had a resource packet on hand in case information about services was needed or requested. The researcher was prepared to end any interview if they perceived the participant was being harmed by the interview, though this situation did not arise. It should be noted that participants were generally perceived to be quite upbeat at the end of their interviews, and several indicated that it had been a positive experience to talk to someone about their experiences. A couple participants have even contacted the researcher since completing their second interviews to check in on how the study was progressing. As previously stated, participants were provided access to their interview transcripts for review once transcription was completed for each interview. At that time they were given the opportunity to make corrections and request redactions prior to the use of their transcript in data analysis.
When reporting results in IPA research it is important to include direct quotations from participants. Beyond its usefulness in illustrating a point, quoting from interview transcripts provides some level of transparency and accountability, which is especially needed given the interpretive aspects of data analysis, and gives the reader some understanding of the researcher’s approach (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). False starts, stuttered words, and other verbal tics that interfered with the clarity of quotes were removed. Some quotes involving sensitive information or descriptions of illegal activity were used but are not attributed to a specific participant. All names used are pseudonyms. All research methods and study procedures were approved by the University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board.

Limitations

This study utilized a small, purposive sample, and participants are not representative of emancipated youth as a whole. It is biased based on inclusion criteria, and due to the lack of probability sampling. As such, its most obvious limitation is a lack of generalizability. Further, while there was diversity in a number of areas (age, foster care histories, outcomes) there was a clear lack of racial or ethnic diversity despite attempts to address this via expansion of the geographic area of recruitment to include areas with more diverse populations, and recruitment efforts aimed at agencies serving more diverse groups of former foster youth.

The primary reliance on semi-structured interviews has implications as well. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject participants may not have felt comfortable answering questions in a way that reflected their true experience as they perceived it. Finally, human relationships are not static over time, and while follow up interviews were conducted in order to get some sense of changes over time, the information provided is likely to reflect only accounts and interpretations of experiences at those two moments in any given participant’s life course.
Results

The presentation of these results is intended to reflect, as much as is possible, the richness of the data collected, as well as the iterative nature of analysis. Descriptive results are presented first, starting with sample characteristics and then moving through their accounts of their lives before, during, and immediately after their foster care experiences. Upon reaching the post-emancipation stage that is the focus of this research, descriptive results are still provided in order to ground results in the accounts of participants, but emergent themes across cases become the guiding structure. Starting with commonalities across descriptions of experiences and behaviors, and then moving into the more conceptual themes centered on the reflective and psychological aspects of participants’ accounts of how they make sense of their experiences, this process reflects the progression of analysis in IPA. Finally, in the Discussion and Implications chapter, the researcher’s lens is used to engage with theory, and the double hermeneutic concept of the researcher providing an interpretative account of the participants’ accounts comes to fruition.

Description of Sample

All participants had been in foster care in states located on the Western coast of the U.S. At the time of their first interviews two participants were living in states other than their “home” state where they had been in foster care. All identified as female at the time they were in foster care (one participant had recently begun identifying as female to male transgendered at the time of the first interview\(^1\)). At the time of the first interview ages ranged from 20 to 28 years old with

\(^1\) Because this participant was describing experiences that had, for the most part, occurred while he identified as female, and in order to protect his confidentiality, the pronoun “she” has been used throughout and a female pseudonym was used with the participant’s permission.
a median age of 24.5 years old. Six participants identified as white, one identified as Hispanic, and one identified as bi-racial (African-American and white).

Table 1

*Participants and Foster Care Histories – Self-Report*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age at first interview</th>
<th>Total time in care (years)</th>
<th>Total # of placements</th>
<th>Age left care</th>
<th>Abrupt exit from care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luna</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatiana</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20*</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* provided as estimate

Foster care histories within the sample were diverse (see Table 1). Age at first placement in substitute care ranged from 2 to 15 years old, with a median age of 4.5 years old. One participant had been reunified with a parent as a young child after their first foster care experience, and then was placed in substitute care again a number of years later as a teenager. Four participants experienced the removal from their family of origin’s care that ultimately
ended with emancipation before the age of 6, and four were 12 or older when they were
taken. No one in the sample had been placed into foster care from 6 to 11 years old. Two
participants had experienced failed adoptions through the child welfare system that had lasted for
2 and 3 years, respectively. The total amount of time spent in substitute care (including time
spent in ultimately failed adoptive placements) ranged from 3 to 16 years, with a median of 10.5
years spent in substitute care. Placement stability varied wildly, and an estimate was accepted
from one participant who had difficulty recounting an exact number of placements she had lived
in. Placement instances were counted as separate for those who experienced the same placement
more than once. This was done to provide a more accurate reflection of how many times they
moved and the level of instability they experienced. Failed adoptions were also counted as
placements. The number of total placements experienced ranged from 1 to 30, with a median of
eight placements.

Most participants had stayed in substitute care until at least 18 years old: one ran away
from her placement at 15 and her case was subsequently closed, five had their cases closed at 18,
and two kept their cases open in order to receive transitional services until the age of 21. The
amount of time that had passed since leaving the system varied greatly, given the variety of ages
included in the sample: at the time of the first interview one participant had been emancipated for
less than 1 year, ranging up to two participants who had been out of the child welfare system for
10 years. The median time since emancipation was 5.5 years.

What Came Before: Contextualizing What Comes After

Before presenting the results focused on the research questions, it is important to
understand the context of each participant’s life. Brief biosketches of each participant are
provided in Appendix F for reference. While everyone was able to speak about their biological
mothers in their interviews, having had relationships with biological fathers was not a universal experience. One participant’s father passed away before she was born, and another had never been able to get a clear answer from her mother about who her father is. Another participant’s father relinquished his parental rights after she was removed and “just wasn’t involved at all.”

**Before foster care.** The wide range of ages at which participants entered foster care meant that some had many vivid memories of living with their families of origin, whereas others had no memories prior to being in substitute care. For example, two participants who were placed as toddlers had no memories of living with biological parents before child welfare involvement, and another, who was removed when she was a few years older, said her only memory of living with her father was of a time he punched a hole in the wall. Those who were placed when they were older had a variety of perspectives about their family lives prior to child welfare involvement. Lucy recalled her family life as being “normal” and described her mom as being “a good mom” up until she was middle school aged, when she says over the course of a year “everything got messed up” and her family “broke apart” after her mother’s marriage ended and her older sibling moved away. Three other participants placed as pre-teens or teenagers had memories of their mothers and fathers having very different approaches to parenting when they were young, and they described feeling quite varied levels of closeness with or affection for each parent as a result.

As one example, Aria, who went into foster care as a pre-teen, was able to recall, and reflect quite thoughtfully on her memories of her parents as a child and her feelings about their behaviors which have lingered into adulthood. While she described a rather unpredictable situation with her parents, each of whom had their own addiction issues, the way they handled
their own instability greatly impacted how she internalized their parenting. She says of her father, who would often leave her with other people such as her grandmother:

I always felt like [he] did what he did for the best interests for me. Like he knew he wouldn't be able to feed me, or we wouldn't have a place to sleep, or something like that, and I feel like that's why he did what he did.

While she also described him drinking every day, often to the point of sickness and vomiting, for as far back as she is able to remember, she placed more importance on his being clear with her about why he was leaving her and, perhaps most importantly, that he would call to check in or would return when he said he would. In contrast, she says of her mother:

I felt like she just chose not to want me…But I also have the resentment towards my mom too because when I was 5, we went to the grocery store—me and my dad did—and when we came home she was just gone. And she took off to go do heroin. ‘Cus that was more important, or whatever.

Aria did not see her mother again until she visited her in prison several years later. The early understandings she developed appeared to reverberate through to adulthood, as we will see below.

**Contact while in care: “I couldn’t understand what was so harmful about a phone call.”** Given the extended periods of time most participants had spent in substitute care, it is not surprising that few experienced consistent levels of contact with bio parents from the time of placement until emancipation. For some, the lack of their parents’ presence was not necessarily seen as a wholly negative thing.
For example, Joanna’s father was in and out of jail and prison for much of her childhood. At one point he served 5 consecutive years and “when he came back it was like a stranger.” Her mother was also incarcerated, though far less frequently, and went to treatment for substance abuse more than once during that time. She described her childhood relationship with her mom as being “super tight” but also said “the amount that she was in my life would be comparable to an aunt that you see sometimes.” Despite her mother being more present in her life (she grew up in a kinship placement with a maternal relative, which she felt also gave her mother more access to her than her father), she reported feeling closer to her dad, largely due to his correspondence with her while in prison when “he was clear minded.” She experienced his letters as a way for him to be “able to be the dad that he wanted to be in there…He had the time to say what he wanted to say to me.” Joanna credited his letters as being “the only reason I have a relationship with my dad now” because she felt she had nothing in common with him after emancipation that would hold them together without that foundation. Penelope said that not knowing what was going on with her mom for so many years “made me feel hopeful. I was like ‘Well maybe she really wanted us but she just couldn't take care of us’ or…I had high hopes in my head I guess, high expectations.”

Everyone else in the sample described having, or taking, control of their contact with parents in one form or another, especially as adolescents. There were two clear ways this manifested: Some were empowered to choose to suspend contact (or to fluctuate between periods of contact and no contact), whereas others rebelled against restrictions put in place by their caseworkers in order to gain agency with regards to contact.

Tatiana described reaching a point where she “started realizing that there are a lot of things wrong with these people and talking to them might not be the healthiest thing for me.” She
was also led to believe that she had to choose between staying in contact with her bio parents and having contact with a sibling who was being adopted by a different family, though her relationship with him was never facilitated despite ending contact with her parents (something she said she still feels is surrounded by “a lack of closure”). It was only after her adoption failed and she was placed back in care that Tatiana reconnected with her bio parents via social media. She recalled that she did this without telling anyone at first, and then slowly started casually mentioning it in home visits with her caseworker and foster parents. Her interest in reinitiating contact began because she became interested in learning about her family heritage, and after experiencing a failed adoption she became more interested in seeking emotional support from them and “wishing that they could be more of a stable source of parental influence.” She said this did not really work out the way she had hoped, however, as she quickly discovered that her parents continued to relate to her as though she were still the very young child she had been when she was removed. She continued casual contact with them through the rest of her time in foster care, at least partially out of a desire to keep tabs on the sibling they were able to retain custody of after having left the state, but she no longer sought them out for emotional support.

Luna said that for about a year after she went into foster care she decided not to have contact with either of her bio parents. She said “I chose to pretty much disown my family, and unless I made contact first they were not allowed to make any sort of contact with me.” After reconnecting with her dad, who lived in another state and was not involved in the cause of her placement in foster care, she discovered their relationship felt markedly altered, saying their interactions were “very awkward, it didn’t feel natural anymore.” Her mother had been pregnant at the time child welfare got involved in her family, and this was a deciding factor for her in electing to start supervised visits with her: “I feel like if she hadn’t ever gotten pregnant and
didn’t have a kid…I don’t think I ever would’ve contacted her.” Still, the issues that brought her into care remained a sticking point between her and her mother, which led to strained visits where she said she tried to keep their focus on her new sibling in order to avoid conflict.

Two participants had experienced being returned home briefly and then being placed back in foster care, which it turned out they found was a better fit for them. Heather described her experience living with her mom as an “epic failure” due to the lack of structure or clear expectations, though she did not express that the attempt at reunification had much of an impact on their relationship moving forward. Her caseworker and foster parents left decisions about contact up to her. Julie recalled having concerns about the possibility of returning to either parent’s home, with one household providing virtually no structure, and the other possibly having too much rigidity: “I felt like they just wanted to use me…for chores and cleaning the house and stuff because that’s what [my sister and I] did growing up.” In the end, the experience of going home was very brief. After a domestic violence incident Julie said “I called my caseworker and was like ‘I want to go back to [my foster mom’s] if I can.’” Julie’s caseworker did continue to require visits to be supervised, though this requirement was usurped: “I was just at the age where I was like ‘Screw this, I’m gonna do my own thing’ and it was summertime, so I’d go spend time with my dad and they couldn’t really stop me.”

Lucy’s mom was largely absent while she was in care. She says “She was always doing bad stuff so…I didn’t get to talk to her very much because I wasn’t allowed to usually…I was just always being worried about her.” At one point she ran away from her placement and went halfway across the country to be with her mom. She described the situation she found her mother living in as “a lot of drugs and alcohol, my mom acting like a kid…She was living with some
boyfriend that was not good. It was all bad.” She chose to return to her home state pretty shortly after and did not see her mom again while she was in foster care.

Aria was the most rebellious of the sample in terms of contact while in care, and was also the only participant who exited care on her own while still a minor and without emancipating. Because she connected her early exit and issues around contact with each other throughout her interview, it’s worth delving into her perspective on this issue a bit more deeply. Her contact with her mom, who had been the custodial parent when she came into care, was supervised, which she found frustrating and unfair. She said she secretly emailed with her mom until a foster sister exposed her, leading to her computer use being supervised. She spoke about all the changes foster children go through after they are removed, and emphasized the importance of having contact with parents in order to retain some semblance of emotional continuity: “Even if me and my mom had a totally dysfunctional relationship, I still felt comfort in seeing her or talking to her…and that’s a comfort that I couldn't find in nobody else because that was my mom.” She emphasized how important she thinks it is for caseworkers to keep in mind that trying to protect the child via restricting access to parents can, however inadvertently or well intentioned, cause damage in and of itself.

Aria didn’t know where her father was while she was in foster care. He did call her on the phone one time, but her foster mother made her hang up on him. This incident was particularly baffling for Aria:

I could see if I was around my dad, like…if they let me go to his house and he was drinking and stuff like that—that I could understand…But I couldn’t understand what was so harmful about a phone call. Especially after I hadn't talked to him in so long.
Her mother moved to another state to care for an ailing family member, which was presented to Aria as being temporary but as it turned out, her mother decided to get married and stayed out of state. While Aria said she understood and was not angry about the original reason for the move, she also said she was under the impression that she was close to going home before her mom left, so the change of her mom’s plans was recounted as part of a larger pattern of indefinite absences without regard for how Aria would be impacted: “Whatever she was leaving for was for her. It’s like what she wanted…it was all about her, and how it would benefit her or something.”

Aria expressed resentment towards the various restrictions that were placed on her contact with her parents, and went on to describe an escalating power struggle over the issue. Eventually she began running away from her foster home and was placed in a residential treatment facility, which she also ran away from multiple times. Despite the way Aria’s foster care placement fell apart, she was very clear that her last foster parents were “very loving and caring” and she said that with hindsight she has come to believe:

…everything that they did for me made me so much better. I learned so much more—especially in school—in the time that I lived with them than I remember learning any time in my life. I concentrated better, I had a better home life.

Aria speculated that she never would have attempted contact secretly or started running away had she been afforded more freedom.

**Case Closed: “A Whole Roller Coaster of Change”**

Two starkly different pathways out of foster care were evident in the sample. While half of the participants described transitions that were, more or less, actually transitional and included
formal and/or informal safety nets, the other half experienced abrupt exits for which there was little to no planning ahead of time and few supports in place to assist them. Experiences varied quite a bit in terms of parental contact around and immediately after exiting the system, ranging from moving in with a parent to not having any contact with them whatsoever. Because the sample was so evenly divided between abrupt and orderly exits, both pathways are explored below. Brief sketches of the situation each participant found themselves in after leaving care are included as well to illustrate, in a small way, the complexity of their circumstances and to contextualize their later experiences.

**Abrupt exit: “I didn’t have anything.”** Reasons for sudden or unplanned exits from foster care did not reveal a pattern in terms of what triggered their exits: one person ran away, another had a placement disrupt and wasn’t provided with another one, one person experienced the death of her relative caregiver, and one participant couldn’t remember leaving her last placement or what the circumstances surrounding her exit were. The two participants with the most extreme numbers of placements experienced during their time in care (Lucy estimated she had been in around twenty placements, and Penelope reported having had thirty) were both in this group, and only one of the abrupt-exiters described any ILP involvement. What was clear is that the participants with unplanned departures from care were the most vulnerable, and had less established support networks to tap into as they attempted to move into the next phase of their lives. All four were essentially homeless the day they left foster care, staying with relatives, boyfriends, or friends temporarily while they tried to figure out their next steps with little help.

After running away, and staying away, Aria said she was “just living with whoever” for a short period of time until she decided to go live with her father in another state. She was 16 years old when she left her last placement. She said she and her dad had a hard time adjusting,
especially because she hadn’t lived with him since she was very little, and so he had never parented her as a teen before. She said they fought frequently and described her attitude at the time as being: “Dude, I don’t want nobody to control me or tell me what to do.” Her dad was still abusing alcohol at that point, though she was unsurprised by that because she knew he would go into withdrawal if he didn’t. That didn’t mean his drinking was not problematic for their relationship, however, and she said that he got “really mean” when he drank, and that he drank all the time:

I know that my dad loves me more than anything in this whole entire world. But it was just the fact that he would get that mean while he was drinking. Whether he meant it or not, it was still hurtful.

She said she spoke with her mother on the phone regularly during the period of time she stayed at her dad’s which lasted for a couple of months.

Penelope described an even more abrupt and chaotic exit from foster care when a small conflict with her foster parent over respite care escalated. Her foster parent, who Penelope said was inebriated at the time, called the police when one of Penelope’s siblings, who was already out of the system, came to the home to try to mediate. Penelope ended up leaving for the night because the situation was so uncomfortable, and when she came back the next day all of her belongings, with the exception of money she had been saving in her room, were outside in garbage bags. She said, “I called my caseworker and I was like, ‘I don't have anywhere to go.’ And she was like ‘Well, you’re out of foster care now…You’re 18, so…’ And that was it!” Penelope found that her “transition” out of foster care happened literally overnight, and she summed up the experience as “pretty terrible.”
At this point Penelope was not only enrolled in community college, but she also had her first job and was enrolled in ILP, all things that would have helped her greatly during a planned exit that involved some sort of actual transitional period or plan. However, she said she had to take public transportation everywhere and was in work or school from early in the morning until night, and she got a letter in the mail from ILP saying she was dropped from the program for missing meetings. Thinking back on this time period, she said:

When I was leaving the system I didn’t have anything. I had nowhere to live, I was in college, I didn't know how I was going to get food. And it was scary, but for some reason I was not afraid, I guess. I just knew I was going to find somewhere to live or somebody's couch to stay on.

She said she continued working and eventually was able to get her own apartment in town, despite having no help from the system. She had not had a relationship with her mother while she was in care, and she continued to know nothing about her mother’s whereabouts during this period of time.

In Joanna’s case, it was the death of her relative caregiver just months before her 18th birthday that pushed her out of the system. She said the timing of this loss led to “this weird limbo where I wasn't ‘aged out’ but I didn't really have any services.” Because of her stability for well over a decade in a relative placement, her time in foster care had been rather different than most other participants’ experiences: “I had a very normal upbringing in the mountains. I grew up happy, had space to run, and I had a [cell phone] and a car.” After the loss of her caregiver, she said she “was totally just shell-shocked though, because I went from having all that to pretty much having none of that. And then there was nobody to go to for help anymore.” Joanna’s story
is also a bit different here in that she didn’t want her child welfare case to be closed because she wanted transition services in place but it was closed nonetheless. She said she tried to get it reopened after the fact, though ultimately she was unsuccessful which she said left her “totally heartbroken” and feeling “defeated.” Her understanding was that she was ineligible because she had been in a kinship placement.

Joanna had the option of continuing to stay with her other caregiver in the home, but found it too emotionally painful to be there after the death of her loved one. She started staying with a boyfriend to avoid being in the house where she had grown up, and then moved in with her newly sober mother and her mother’s boyfriend. Her younger teenage sister moved in shortly after as well, which Joanna said caused some conflict over who was in a parental role: “My mom was trying to be like Super Mom and stuff, but my sister listened to me…she’s like my kid…But my mom wanted to be the mom, so she just was not having it.” Not too long after moving in with her mom, her mother relapsed, and her mother’s boyfriend began abusing substances as well, which Joanna believed exacerbated mental health issues he had, and her sister was eventually placed back in substitute care. Joanna’s father was incarcerated when she exited foster care, and she continued staying with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend during that period of time.

Lucy was the only participant who could not really recall the circumstances surrounding her emancipation, saying “I was pretty messed up back then.” She thought her case was closed when she was 18 and living in a residential treatment placement, and she remembered moving in with her former step-dad who had helped raise her until she went into foster care (“the only dad I remember”) around that time. That living situation didn’t last very long due to conflict with one of his family members, and after leaving there she said “I don’t know how I ended up going down to the ‘hood from my dad’s. I don’t know how I worked my way down there.” Lucy did
not have a job, had 11th grade school credits that she had earned in residential treatment facilities and group homes (the validity of which she was skeptical of, saying “my brain’s really messed up now, but I don’t really feel like I had much schooling”), and had few, if any, supports in place. She didn’t have contact with her mom, who was still living out of state, for several years after aging out and gave few details about the period between leaving her step-dad’s and reconnecting with her mom, saying there is a lot that she just doesn’t remember and that “that was a bad part of my life.”

**Orderly exit:** “It kind of just happened.” The rest of the sample generally had more organized exits out of care that provided smoother transitions. Notably, all four in this group were receiving ILP services, pursued higher education at community colleges or universities, and had housing lined up before leaving care. Three out of four in this group had a strong relationship with at least one foster parent during the period of time leading up to their emancipation.

Heather summarized her experience as being without much fuss, saying “it wasn’t a big deal.” Her foster parents, who she said she refers to simply as her parents, helped her move into the dorms at the university she was starting to attend. She described having a close relationship with her last set of foster parents, who specialized in fostering teenaged girls and “were very big on self-responsibility.” When she moved out she said she already had a job, a bank account, had purchased her own car, and had pre-paid a full year of car insurance. She also noted that she attended school rather close by their home so she often went home and stayed at their house on the weekends after moving out. She said her contact with her bio mom stayed about the same during this time, perhaps decreasing a little since she was so busy with school. She recalls feeling confident about her path and being “excited and happy.”
Tatiana’s placement during her senior year of high school was on shaky ground, and she said she knew she would have to leave once she graduated high school. She had made a friendly connection with a family who had a young child through a previous placement, and this resulted in an arrangement whereby she worked as a nanny for that family in exchange for room and board. She moved the day after her graduation and it went quite smoothly, though she was frustrated that her foster parents went through her packed belongings when she wasn’t home and removed most of what they had purchased for her with foster care payments: “I'm moving out on my own and I only have 14 boxes and a suitcase and then you go through and steal like 30% of what's inside of them.” She said she never saw those foster parents again, but her therapist continued to meet with her in her new home, her caseworker continued to check on her and helped get her to her college orientation, and she felt supported by the family she was living with as well. During this time she continued having contact with her bio parents on social media and occasionally talked to them on the phone.

Both Luna and Julie elected to voluntarily keep their cases open until they were 21 in order to have access to transitional resources over a longer period of time. Julie spoke quite a bit about being proactive and enthusiastic about making use of different programs, including housing assistance, mentoring, counseling, and setting up a matched savings account. Perhaps even more important were the support people those programs provided connections to, many of whom have continued to be informal supports after their formal roles came to an end. A number of moves around the time of case closure were mentioned, but a former foster parent served as a safety net and rented her basement when needed. All in all, Julie described aging out as something that “kind of just happened…I knew I was aging out so they just like were like ‘Okay you're aging out, we're closing you now’ and they sent me a letter saying I was aging out.”
Luna, whose case had been closed for less than a year at the time of her first interview, had made use of housing and educational assistance after moving out of her foster placement at 18 years old, and she and her fiancé had moved in together. She tended to describe her transition through a more psychological lens:

I went through a whole roller coaster of change from foster care to moving out. I definitely felt like I was working on being more stable in life when I moved out, but I was definitely feeling a little bit more lost, and unsure of things, and not really a sense of family feeling. Kind of having to feel like I was creating my identity still again.

Luna said she would go visit her bio family, who were all out of state by the time she was out of care, around once a year, staying with a non-parental relative, and had some social media and telephone contact with her bio parents fairly regularly as well.

**Reflections on Child Welfare Services: “It’s Like Skipping the First 2 Years of a Friendship”**

Participant comments about the child welfare system and services related to their being in foster care tended to focus on caseworker interactions and ideas or advice they would give to workers. They also reflected on services they either had received or wished they had received.

**Caseworker relationships.** The reality that caseworkers have large caseloads and that children have to switch workers too often (“nobody keeps their worker for more than like 2 years”) was brought up several times, which was tied to larger concerns of some participants. Tatiana connected having workers for only a short period of time to a sort of forced intimacy between foster kids and their workers, whereby workers don’t have time to get acquainted with a
child on a new case in an organic way and instead read the case file and then feel as though they know everything about the child. She said:

It's like skipping the first two years of a friendship and going straight for the stuff that’s really sensitive that makes you vulnerable, and nobody wants to be vulnerable when they first meet you. So the people that I've responded to best…were the people who didn't force me to feel vulnerable the first few times I met them. They didn't assume that they knew me, they didn't assume that they knew what I was going through.

Similarly, the caseworker that Luna felt most supported by “stepped back and didn’t try and force herself into my life.” She said there were so many people in the mix (bio parents, foster parents, caseworkers, supervisors) “trying to be your parent” that she appreciated it when she felt like her worker was simply there to make sure she was safe and being treated well. Penelope said she had wished for more informal, less awkward relationships with her caseworkers, and would have liked some way to have stronger connections with them.

While participants certainly had examples of negative experiences with caseworkers, almost everyone in the sample made quite positive comments about workers as well. Many times there was a disclaimer attached to positive statements indicating that they thought their experience was unusual. As one illustration of this, Julie said "I had really supportive caseworkers. I don't feel like most foster kids experience that, but I had really good ones, which I'm thankful for," noting that each caseworker had passed along a different set of skills that were valuable.

The issue of transparency and access to information was also raised in several different ways. Aria raised the possibility that her mother had been having a harder time than she knew
while she was in care, leading her to have inflated expectations about her prospects for going home. After her first interview Lucy, who was unable to remember quite a bit of her life, actually requested a copy of her old case file. Tatiana said she felt disrespected and pitied when people were less than straightforward with her.

The most dramatic example of a lack of transparency involved one of Penelope’s siblings, who she described as being like their mother figure as she was the oldest and was protective of them. She had been separated from the others at one point, though they continued visits. After some time, the visits stopped completely and she and her other siblings had been given a vague explanation that she was in a treatment center and couldn’t see them anymore, and they never saw her again. Many years later, after emancipating, she had received a package in the mail from a child welfare worker with information from their case file, and discovered that her sister had gone through a shocking, life altering experience that had been the cause of the end of their visits (the specifics are not detailed here due to publicity the incident had received and concerns for confidentiality). Penelope said:

I was just so hurt when I found out about it, because we were her support, we were her family. And they never told us. We never knew. And that’s so fucked up to me that we never knew about it, and she was just there alone, with no support…

Later in her interview, Penelope brought up this issue again and articulated clearly a key aspect of the problem from her perspective:

…that’s my information to know. That’s my family and…I have a right to know that and…and if I didn't get that package I would've gone the rest of my life never knowing that.
That makes me feel sick. Because it’s mine. And so I should be able to ask my caseworker upfront…and get the truth from them.

In essence, Penelope is describing being denied important pieces of her own life story.

**Services.** The other service that came up time and again was therapy. By and large most participants had good, if not glowing, things to say about their experiences with therapists and social workers providing mental health treatment. Some also mentioned the skills they had learned in therapy as still being helpful in everyday life, and remembered feeling supported by those helping professionals while they were in care.

There was, however, an interesting contrast that raised questions about if and how hard workers tried to engage participants in therapy. In hindsight, Aria believed she “probably should’ve had a lot of therapy,” but she speculated that had she been offered therapy when she was younger she would not have wanted it: “I probably would've been like ‘I don't need therapy. I’m pretty tough, I don’t need it.’” Luna was offered therapy, and did not want it: “I wasn’t ready to talk, I didn't want to talk…I didn't want to go talk about it and then have to resolve this stuff, when I'm not ready to do it, with a complete stranger.” Despite expressing these feelings, she said her worker essentially forced her to go to therapy by saying she could not have her personal belongings from her mom’s house unless she went. Ultimately, Luna says, she went until her therapist “fired her.”

**After the Transition: Themes**

Because the focus of this research is on experiences and relationships after leaving substitute care, the results in this section are organized by theme in order to delve more deeply into the experiences shared across cases. While the primary concern is identifying areas where
commonalities across cases were found, in keeping with the idiographic concerns of IPA there are instances where contrasting experiences are included to provide a counterpoint perspective.

| Table 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Primary Intersections Between Themes and Research Questions** | Primary Research Questions | Secondary Research Questions |
| Themes | Research Question 2: Contact decision making | Research Questions 3 & 4: Supports and challenges to independence | Research Question A: Forgiveness or resolution of trauma | Research Question B: Identity development |
| Behavioral/experiential themes | | | | |
| Formal to informal supports | | | X |
| Persisting problems | X | X | X |
| Parents as grandparents | X | X | X |
| Boundaries | X | X | X |
| Reflective/psychological themes | | | | |
| Adulthood as destination | X | X | X | X |
| Numbness and normalcy | X | | X |
| Empathy, forgiveness, and moving on | X | X | X |
| Fluidity of “family” | X | | X |
Themes have been grouped into two broadly defined clusters: behavioral/experiential, and reflective/psychological.

Table 2 illustrates which themes provided insight into the study’s research questions, both primary and secondary. Research Question 1, which concerns descriptions of contact, is not included in the table as each of the themes contributes to the rich descriptions provided in participant accounts.

Formal to informal supports: “Not going to be gone forever.” Participants spoke about tangible (i.e. money or help with housing) and intangible (i.e. emotional) supports that have helped them since they left care, as well as areas where supports were lacking or had fallen through. It became apparent that having tangible supports did not always translate to feeling supported in intangible ways. For many, there was a trend towards fluidity in whether supports were formal (provided by a professional or agency) or informal (provided by a friend or family member), with a number of support people being individuals that participants had had formal involvement with in the past carrying over and continuing to serve as informal supports.

One area where tangible supports were notably important was housing. Nearly everyone in the sample described periods of time when their friends, friends of their parents, former foster parents, or extended family members allowed them to stay in their homes when they did not have independent housing, and half had lived with one or both of their parents since leaving foster care (though one person made a distinction between having lived with her mom, which she said had not happened, and she and her mom having “stayed together for a little bit” at different times, which she said had happened, her characterization didn’t seem substantively different
from most of the others’ experiences, with instances of “living together” often referring to brief periods).

Living with a parent was often not portrayed as a particularly healthy situation. This took shape in different ways for different participants, though for most there was a mental health component to the effect the experience had on them. For example, when Joanna was living with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend she described their building being foreclosed and the family needing to move. She recalled trying for months ahead of the eviction date to get everyone motivated to figure out where they would live next, only to have her mother end up in jail right before they had to be out of the unit. This left it up to Joanna to handle acquiring a storage unit, moving all their belongings into it, and getting a motel room for everyone to stay in as they hadn’t ever figured out where to move.

Joanna described the stress of this situation, combined with her mother’s boyfriend’s mental instability, as taking her to a breaking point in her own mental health: “Never felt crazy before in my life, but I really felt crazy right at that point. Like I wanted to pull my own hair out of my head.” She even asked her mother to take her to be hospitalized, and remembers packing her bag and telling her: “I’m ready to go to the facility…I can’t be here anymore, and there’s nowhere for me to go, so I just need you to go drop me off at the hospital.” Her desperation to get out of the situation, paired with her not feeling like she had anywhere else to go, had made her feel hospitalization was the most reasonable course of action in that moment.

Ultimately her mother convinced her she did not need to be hospitalized, and Joanna called her dad. He was out of prison and staying with a family friend, and though she expressed really not wanting to do so she stayed with them for a few days while she tried to figure out an
alternative. At the time of her interview Joanna was staying with a relative, though she said she was “technically not supposed to be there” and said she was only there because she had no other options. She also mentioned staying in motels, with friends, and with her boyfriend’s family at various points in the 2 years since leaving care.

Beyond the mental health component to Joanna’s experience, her example also illustrates how having a place to physically stay does not, in and of itself, inherently serve as a stabilizing force. Despite having a number of people opening their homes to her at various points in time, that was not enough of a leg up to help her get into her own independent housing situation given the lack of resources available to her. Several participants described similar experiences with housing instability characterized by these sequences of frequently moving between various relatives’ and friends’ homes, sometimes including moves between cities or even states. For some it was difficult to keep track of all the places they had stayed since emancipation.

Three of the four participants who had lived with a parent described being exposed to, or victims of, violence while living with them. One person described a murder that occurred outside her mother’s apartment when she was staying with her; she stumbled on the scene before law enforcement arrived. Another participant described frequent conflicts with her mother, and remembered one fight that turned physical, with her mom grabbing her by the hair and controlling her by it. This incident was attributed with contributing to the participant’s PTSD, which continued to be an issue at the time of her interview. Another participant found that she couldn’t stand by while her mother was abused by her new husband without intervening. She recalled one particular incident when he was threatening to hit her mother with a heavy object and she got in the middle:
I was like ‘Dude, I will fuck you up. I will. I will kill you.’…And at that time I probably would’ve. I had nothing to live for anyways. I didn't have no kids. I wasn't going to school. I wasn't thinking. Nothing like that…I’d lived on the streets for so long that I probably would've, and had no regret over it. So I'm kinda glad that he didn't do that, ‘cus I’d probably be in prison.

All three of these examples reflect the vulnerabilities that can come with not having a stable place to live, and this last example illustrates how high the stakes can be when one feels they have nothing to lose.

In terms of other tangible supports received, several participants mentioned having borrowed small amounts of money or receiving groceries or clothing from bio parents, though these were not portrayed as being things they received regularly or relied on. Lucy and Joanna were the only two participants who identified working with social service agencies at the time of their interviews. Joanna was especially enthusiastic about some of the connections she had made with social workers outside of the child welfare system despite not being able to keep her case open. She identified getting help with securing Section 8 assistance as well as access to information about different vocational and educational opportunities as being supportive in helping her try to move forward.

One participant differed from the rest of the sample in that at the time of her first interview she had never lived in independent housing or had a job, despite being one of the older participants in the sample. Lucy had been living with friends or boyfriends for all 9 years since she left substitute care. She said she had difficulty performing basic day to day tasks because her
support people had always done everything for her, first when she was in foster care and continuing after she had left the system:

I went from other people taking care of me to my boyfriend taking care of me…and now it’s like, even to go out and try to find a job—I just close up and I don’t know how to do it. I’m just used to people helping me, doing it for me.

While not a common experience across the sample, Lucy’s experiences serve as a reminder that without help in developing life skills, tangible supports can actually hinder independence by enabling avoidance of learning to do new things.

Sources of more intangible support were, generally speaking, much more easily identified by participants than sources of tangible support. Most participants were in committed relationships and felt supported by their significant others. Siblings and friends were also very commonly mentioned as providers of emotional support, though for many sibling relationships had been impacted due to separation while in foster care, or mental health and substance abuse issues since leaving care.

Perhaps surprisingly, many participants identified important relationships with people who had been service providers in the past and stayed informally involved in their lives. These people generally provided help in the form of advice or emotional support. At least half of the sample said they still had supportive relationships with former child welfare caseworkers, and Heather and Penelope were still in contact with their Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) from when they were in care. Former foster parents, mentors, and therapists were also all mentioned as resources. Julie noted that many of these type of support people tended to cycle in and out, saying of one former mentor who wasn’t currently in touch but was still viewed as a
resource, “I feel like eventually she’ll come back into my life. She’s not going to be gone forever,” and then went on to identify former caseworkers who had been in more or less contact over time but had never stayed “gone forever.” As mentioned previously, Heather sees her primary foster parents as her parents, and Aria said if she gets married her primary foster dad will be the one walking her down the aisle. These transitions whereby formal support people continued to stay involved after their professional obligations ended reflects another facet of the fluidity of supports.

Assessments of intangible supports from bio parents were somewhat divergent. Luna said her mom does give her advice sometimes but, similar to Heather and Joanna, characterized her relationship with her as being more like an aunt in terms of the way advice was fairly carefully and gently offered. She did feel like both of her parents have been encouraging and let her know they are proud of her, and that even though they “have all the other complicated stuff” they do let her know they love and support her. Heather said her bio mom has shown up for important events in her life, such as graduations and when she had her child, to show support. Aria felt very supported by her mother, saying she goes to her for emotional support and advice frequently: “I can call her for anything and everything, no matter what time it is, she’ll always answer and always talk to me.” She also said her mother moved in with her when she was pregnant with her first child to help out.

On the other end of the spectrum, Julie’s father continuously said he was “owed” for the amount of time she was in foster care. While being somewhat puzzled about what he means by this, the demand has nonetheless not been well received: “I was like ‘I don't owe you anything. It's not my fault I went into foster care. Not at all.’…I don't owe him anything, and he’ll never get the years out of me.” Penelope and Tatiana are not in contact with their parents at all and thus
do not get support of any kind from them. In some instances, the lack of support received from parents was a notable source of sadness. For example, Julie felt her father and step-mother had been using access to a younger sibling to be manipulative, which had very negative mental health effects:

They just put me in a downward spiral in my depression pretty much. It's just like they set one trigger off and then I'm just down—like completely down—like not waking up, not doing anything, like sleeping all the time, and that's never good.

Lucy expressed sadness about not being able to talk to her mom in a meaningful way, and said that rather than being a support her mother has made things more difficult for her, “My whole life.” She said she has tried calling her for support or just to talk about things but her mom was frequently intoxicated and unable to understand, which made it “pointless.” Joanna seemed to have had similar experiences with communicating with her mom, saying that for the most part “She does not listen to me.” She did say they have had helpful conversations “once in a great while,” but this was actually something she found hurtful, because “I know she has the ability…I know she can be on that level with me…I don’t know what is holding her back in her life.”

Network Maps (Samuels, 2008) were useful in helping to gain an understanding of who participants felt were important in their lives. Frequently people were included who likely would not have come up in the interview otherwise. Significant others, siblings, participants’ children, and friends were the most frequently cited close supports. Beyond that, there were no real discernable patterns evident. Biological parents were placed in the closest circle, middle circle, outer circle, and not in the map at all by different participants. Only one participant moved a
parent to a different ring in the second interview than where they had placed them in the first interview.

The total number of supports identified in maps at the time of the first interview ranged from 7 to 40 people, with a median of 13.5 people. At the second interview, the total number of supports included ranged from 4 to 39 with a median of 14 people. There were several participants who made comments along the lines of “Wow, this is depressing…” when they had not identified many people in their personal networks. It’s possible some participants felt compelled to include people in their map they did not actually feel that close to in order to have a less “empty” map. While there were changes made to all maps for those participants who completed both interviews, there were no clear trends in the changes—some had more people included, some had less—and it’s possible some of the changes were related to all of the moves that occurred between interviews, and that participants were including people in their maps they were in closer proximity to at any given time.

**Persisting problems - Substance use and abuse, mental health, and conflict: “They just have their devils or whatever.”** Virtually all participants disclosed that their parents are still struggling, to a greater or lesser degree, with the issues that had brought them into foster care in the first place. Substance abuse was by far the most pervasive struggle among parents, though mental health issues and domestic violence also came up, some of which has already been touched on in previous sections. For most these persisting issues did not factor into their decisions about whether or not they wanted to maintain contact with their parents, though this is not to say it did not impact their relationships.
Some participants had much younger siblings who had not been placed in foster care. One participant described being “worried the whole time [my step-mom] was pregnant that [my sibling] is gonna go through the same thing that I went through.” She brought up having called child welfare to make a report more than once since her sibling’s birth, which caused a rift in those relationships (“they hate me for it still, like I still don't go over to their house for it”). Another had joined with an older sibling in another state and they tried to figure out a way to get their younger sister out of their parents’ home, though those efforts were unsuccessful.

Several participants, all of whom had lived with a parent, described using drugs with their parents. One person mentioned abusing prescription stimulants with her mother, another said she and her mom were smoking marijuana together. In those cases it was mentioned in passing, but for one participant there was a significant period of time where she and her mom were using together frequently. Lucy said:

> It didn’t feel like my mom…it was just another person doing bad stuff with me. But…we fought a lot…she put me in a lot of bad situations—like a lot—and we didn’t really have a relationship though besides that: drug use.

Eventually her mom went to prison, and after she got out she was clean. This development was described as being somewhat confusing because the dynamics of their relationship were so transformed:

> I didn’t know how to deal with it really. I didn’t really come around much because it was just weird. It wasn’t something I was used to, but she was really normal. I mean she definitely was the mom, cooking me dinner every night and stuff. It was nice.
Joanna also described having to figure out how to interact with a newly sober parent as being weird, and both she and Lucy said their parents were like completely different people when they were clean. At the same time, Lucy explained that part of her discomfort with the situation was that she felt like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop and her mom to relapse, which she did: “In like one day she lost her job, her apartment, everything. I was like, ‘How do you do that?’…I’ve never seen anything like it, someone could lose everything that fast, I mean that was insane.”

Most of those whose parents were struggling with addiction reported their parents asking them for money for drugs or alcohol, or sometimes asking them to get drugs or alcohol for them. Aria said she had dropped out of high school so she could support herself after moving to be with her mom, and then her mom “was always asking me for money for beer or weed or something.” Lucy said her mom would call her and ask if she had “any drugs, or if I can buy a bottle, or…if I can get some money from somebody” and said she had sent her money a couple of times “like an idiot.” Julie described being asked for money, but would only help financially if her mom could prove she needed the money for specific bills in order to avoid inadvertently giving her mom money for drugs. Another person’s dad needed cash for food and asked her to buy a small amount of marijuana from him, which she did (“and I don’t even smoke weed…I gave it away.”).

For many there was a clear emotional toll related to continued parental substance abuse, some of which was previously described in the section about supports. Others described being angry, frustrated, or stressed by their parents’ continued substance abuse. One person described trying methamphetamine themselves because “My family is an addict of meth…I wanted to know why my family liked it so much, and I did it one time and I was angry at myself.”
Both of Joanna’s parents were addicted to heroin, and, as she put it, “heroin addicts aren't very present people…Like ‘Helloooo? Are you there? I’m talking to you.’” She described how she had been able to prevent their continuing addictions from impacting her relationships with them as much as possible:

I had to learn early that…just because somebody has a problem, doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you, or that they don't love you…I always knew that my parents love me. Both of ‘em. They just have their devils or whatever, demons. And once I learned that, and I was able to really, really, truly, fully accept that and stop internalizing it and letting it affect my self-esteem or whatever it does to people, I was able to kinda like somewhat shut that down and just continue to grow as my own person.

She said they knew full well how she felt about their drug use and where she stands on that, and she had sort of left it at that in order to try to have relationships with them that didn’t center around their addictions, over which she had no control.

Aria actually lost her father to his alcohol abuse. She was the only participant to have had a parent die after leaving care, and this was a profound experience for her. As described previously, Aria went from foster care to living with her dad, where his drinking was a source of conflict that prompted her to move out. Eventually she did return to see her dad when he was hospitalized for organ failure related to his drinking, and planned on staying there to help him after he was released. However, she said he started drinking again as soon as he was out, and then went to jail for public intoxication, which caused her to leave again: “I felt like he just didn't care how would I feel if he was gone…So I was just super mad at him. And I just moved out.” He ended up passing away as a result of his drinking that same year, something Aria described
feeling guilty about, particularly that she hadn’t been there when he passed away, for a long time.

In a sense, Penelope also lost her mother to her methamphetamine addiction, though she was still alive so far as Penelope knew. She had found her mom a few years after emancipating and they had met up one time. Feeling very self-conscious beforehand, she recalled worrying about whether her mom would think she was too “clean cut.” She said: “I was so afraid she was gonna judge me or not relate to me enough. Not wanna be friends with—not think I'm cool, I guess.” She remembered wondering if she should talk to her about her own history with drugs and alcohol in order to establish some common ground.

Penelope said she could tell as soon as her mom walked in that she was high on meth. She said her mom didn’t really ask much about her or her siblings. She proceeded to tell Penelope all about her life and:

…she just kinda made it about her, and why she couldn't take care of us and that she got kicked out as a kid…but I was just thinking to myself ‘Well I didn't have an easy life either, but I'm not a shitty person. It's not that hard.’

At one point, Penelope’s mom got her confused with one of her sisters, “And that just made me feel so shitty. It made me feel so terrible. I was like ‘You don’t even know who I am.’” She speculated this mix up was at least in part because her mom was high, but that didn’t make it feel any less awkward or hurtful for her. Other than a text she had gotten from her mom on her next birthday Penelope had not had any further contact with her mom, even though her mom had said she was going to stay in touch.
Parents as grandparents: “What kind of grandma is that?” Half of the sample had their biological children living with them at the time of their second interviews, and one also had a relative foster child. Having children of their own introduced a new element into relationships with bio parents, and for many the experience triggered quite a bit of reflection. There was a bit of a divide in terms of where this reflection took them, and whether they saw their parents as resources for possible help or not.

Two participants had their moms come to stay with them prior to the birth of a child, though ultimately neither of these situations ended up as planned. For Aria, the experience of losing her father before she had children led her to prioritize her mom having a relationship with her kids: “I just really wanted her to be a part of my kids’ lives and for my kids to know her and stuff.” Before she had her first child her mom moved in with the understanding that if she was not going to work she would need to help out with things around the house. This arrangement went well at first, but eventually she said her mom was just staying in her room all the time and she ended up telling her she needed to find somewhere else to live.

In terms of parenting advice, Aria said she had solicited her mom’s opinion on multiple occasions, but she also noted that when it came to unsolicited advice from her mother, the way that it was delivered had a direct impact on how it was received. She said she had told her mom that giving advice was fine as long as she did it in a way that made it clear it was advice and not a directive that was contradictory to the way Aria was trying to raise her kids. She cited her mom “telling me how to raise my kids” as one of the things that contributes to their not getting along: “I always thought that she wasn't the greatest mom. So don't give me advice on how to screw my kids up.”
Lucy’s life had changed quite a bit between her first and second interviews. She found out she was pregnant, got clean and sober, she and her boyfriend moved into their own apartment, and had a new baby. This was actually Lucy’s third child; her previous two had been removed at the hospital and placed in foster care due to having tested positive for drugs at birth. Both had ultimately been adopted from the child welfare system in what was supposed to be an open adoption by a paternal relative, but she said the adoptive parents had stopped complying with the terms and she hadn’t seen or heard from them in the past two to three years. With this most recent pregnancy, her mom came to stay with her a week before her due date to keep her company, and so that she would be there when the baby was born.

At first Lucy said her mom was being really helpful, doing things like cooking and cleaning. After a few days, however, her mom told her she wanted to “go out and get high,” Lucy said she told her that she couldn’t do that if she was going to stay there, and her mom left two days before her baby was born. Her second interview was just a couple of weeks after the birth of her baby, and her mom had not yet met her grandchild. Lucy was upset and hurt by this, saying “I understand addiction but…I don’t feel like I got so much that I didn't care about other people…I don't know, I just don't understand it.” At the same time, she said she knew child welfare would be conducting an assessment of her and she “didn't want to have to explain [my mom]. So I figured the less bad shit I had going around me the better…It was kind of a relief.”

Lucy said she wouldn’t ask her mom for parenting advice, but not because she thought she was a bad parent (she explicitly said she didn’t think she was a bad parent). Instead, she just didn’t think her mom would remember how to be a parent because it had been so long since she had done it. In terms of thinking about the future and the level of contact she envisions her mom
having in her child’s life, she said “I don't know if I really want her too much involved in [new baby]’s life either, just because, I mean what kind of grandma is that?”

For both Heather and Penelope, their connections with their children made them reflect on their own pasts in a new light. Heather described feeling more judgmental of her bio mom since having her own child, and mentioned a key foundational difference between them: “She wants to trust everybody, and I'm like ‘I don't trust anybody.’ It’s just different, like as a parent you find yourself judging everybody else for how they parented—or didn't parent, in her case.” She was clear about being very uncomfortable leaving her son with anyone, and her former foster parents were the only people she had ever let babysit. She said she did want her bio mom and son to know each other, and she did see her mom trying, but her foster parents put more effort into spending time together and her toddler asks for them (and calls them grandparent nicknames), which he doesn’t do with her mom.

Heather’s allowing her bio mom to be in her child’s life had not been a forgone conclusion, however. She and her partner, who was not in foster care himself but did have difficulties within his family, had carefully deliberated during her pregnancy about who they did and did not think should be allowed contact with him. She detailed her thinking about the issue, which gave helpful insight into the way she was able to reflect on how her mom has made her feel, and her dedication to protecting her child’s feelings:

She lets me down and I get disappointed and depressed and it's hard…I had to think about it differently when I was having a baby. Do I want her around him? Do I want her to be like ‘Oh I'll be there’ and not show up?…I didn't know if I wanted him to grow up
thinking grandma doesn't love him like I thought when I was younger...before I realized that's just who she is I thought she didn't love me and it was on me.

Ultimately she and her fiancé decided they did want her to be in his life, but only with supervision.

Penelope’s circumstances are unique in the sample in that she has only seen her bio mom once since leaving care, and has never had a relationship or consistent contact with her after being placed in care at a young age. At the time of her first interview her daughter was only 6 weeks old. Despite not needing to figure out things like whether or not to allow her mother access to her child, the experience of becoming a mother brought up a lot for her about her own childhood and mother. She said of her daughter:

I love her so much sometimes I cry. But…I don't know if my mom felt that way about me. I'm assuming that she did. Hopefully…But, it kinda made me feel bad, in a way.

Like…I love her so much, and I can't help it. Even if I didn't want to love her, I have to. But then, sometimes when she cries, I think about ‘Well, was anybody there when I cried? Did anybody care?’

She described one particular instance when she thought she had overheard her husband slap their baby. She had rushed into the room and confronted him about it, and then realized she had completely misinterpreted what she had heard and that he was, in fact, burping her. This was a confusing incident for Penelope, and she had mulled over why her brain had so readily assumed her husband was hurting their baby when she knew him to be someone who would never do that. She said:

I think I'm just reflecting a lot of my childhood onto her. And I hope I don't continue to do that, but that kind of put things into perspective a little bit…I do that a lot, I’ll think
about me in the same situation as my baby’s in. I’ll be like ‘What were people doing around me at this point?’

At the time of her second interview 10 months later, she said she found herself thinking about her own mom more than she would like to. She said this was because now that she had experienced her connection with her daughter, it was hurting her feelings that her mom was, apparently, okay with not being in touch with her for so long, especially since her mom now had her phone number. Penelope did say she would let her mom meet her daughter if she wanted to, but she didn’t think her mom cared.

**Boundaries: “My own little area.”** Boundaries and the decisions behind them tended to be explained in terms that generally reflected desires to be more independent, and for some was also a way of protecting their own mental health. Notably, several people indicated that they didn’t necessarily think they had made the right decisions for themselves, or that they would give someone else in their position different advice. For those who had children, decisions also revolved around concerns for their kids’ safety and emotional well being.

Overall, participants represented a full spectrum of having no contact with parents, having occasional contact, and having frequent contact. While amounts of contact did not, for the most part, change drastically between first and second interviews, references to other time periods reflected that levels of contact were not static. Almost universally, those who had experienced abrupt exits from foster care had more chaotic relational patterns with their parents, characterized by more variability in contact and shifting of boundaries across time, whereas participants with more orderly transitions from care tended to have clearer boundaries in place and greater stability in their amount of contact.
Boundary setting or pulling away from parents as ways of exercising independence and becoming more free from having parents involved in their affairs was mentioned by several participants. For example, after Julie moved out of her mom’s and left the state again they weren’t communicating much with each other anymore beyond brief check-ins. Nothing dramatic had happened between them, Julie just saw it as them focusing on their own lives rather than meddling in each others’: “We're not in each other's business…I'm at the age where I shouldn’t have to answer to her. It's really none of her business what I'm doing, or when I'm doing it, or how I'm doing it.” Aria conveyed a similar sentiment when she re-enacted an exchange she’d had with her mom. They were talking about her possibly moving in with Aria again, and her mom had told her she couldn’t get an animal if they were going to live together, “And then I was like, ‘Well [scoffing noise] mom, I'm almost 26 years old so I'm pretty sure I can do whatever I want, but right there you're already trying to control me and we're not even living together.’” She said the possibility was pulled of the table at that point because they could see they were headed for more conflict if they did choose to live together.

Joanna was resolute that when she found an apartment she would be living alone, even though she speculated that her mom, mom’s boyfriend, and her dad probably all would expect to be welcome to come stay in her living room. She said that even though it would be hard for her to tell her parents they could not stay with her:

I have to do it for me. Because I think that I deserve to have my own little life, and my own little area, one time ever. And ‘cus it’s been so long since I’ve had anywhere, my own space.
Luna expressed a great deal of discomfort with the idea of her mom even being in her apartment, much less living with her. She said she had a fear of her mom asking to come spend a holiday there some time, and explained: “It’s like the personal space and having that control, not having to kinda feel like I need to be fake and very controlled in my home, and this is where I live.”

Lucy demonstrated quite a bit of change between interviews in terms of boundaries, much of which had to do with her new baby. In her first interview she expressed pride in herself for telling her mom that she wouldn’t talk to her on the phone whenever she was staying at a particular boyfriend’s house because the situation there was so bad, and then she had been consistent in sticking to her rule. By the time of her second interview, she had not only told her mom she could not stay with her if she was using, she also enforced that rule with everyone else she knew: “I let everybody know now. You can do it if you want, just not in my house. I don't want to be around it, period.”

Heather didn’t see not having contact with her mom as an option; she said she saw that as being unproductive and “the same thing as denial.” She was, however, also the most vigilant person in the sample when it came to issues of contact, and she identified boundaries with her mom as being something she had had to put work into, saying her mother was the only person she had experienced boundary problems with. She credited having her son as being the turning point. Her description revealed that she felt more protective of his feelings than of her own feelings, and that standing up for him helped her start standing up for herself:

…before, I let her hurt me, and my feelings, and I didn't take responsibility that I was *letting* her do those things, and that I have some control. I can say ‘no.’…Instead I’d
listen to her, and talk to her, and then start crying, and have a meltdown. Having a baby—just like, ‘No. You’re not gonna. No.’

She said she thinks her mom is really trying to do better, and she appreciates it, but she was also very frank with her in laying out what was and was not acceptable.

Tatiana was the only person in the sample for whom there was a very intentional decision to stop having any contact with her bio parents. She described an incident that involved her father’s PTSD when he had a “flashback episode” and was violent towards the sister who remained in their custody, which led to him being arrested. After the arrest she and her siblings were asked to pitch in money for his bail, which she declined to do. She had been experiencing increasing levels of stress associated with her parents prior to this, but in the end it was this particular situation that made her decide to stop having contact with them altogether: “I just had to think of it really logically, which is really hard when you have something so emotional.” At the time of her first interview she had not spoken to either parent for several years, though her mom does still send her messages, which she neither opens nor reads, on social media. During our second interview she pulled up a preview of the most recent message from her mom, which appeared to be a chain letter. She said she stopped opening them because “they don't have any substance behind them or personal connection.”

There were three participants who raised the possibility that perhaps their choices in terms of their relationships with their parents were not the best things for them. Lucy said it was never a question for her whether she wanted to be back in contact with her mom, and speculated that she had abandonment issues relating to her. When asked if getting back in touch had helped, she said it hadn’t, and that she “probably would have been better off somewhere else.” Luna said
there are still times when she questions why she decided to stay in contact, and said “Like if I knew me, I’d probably be like ‘don't bother having a relationship with them.’ I’d probably give myself other advice as an outsider.” Even though Joanna spoke about cutting off contact as being something she didn’t “believe in,” she also said it was something she constantly thought about, and that she hoped one day she would find a way to convince herself to separate from them “At least for a while. ‘Cus they just bring a lot of stress to my life. A lot...A lot a lot.”

**Reflective/psychological.** The themes in this section emerge from participants’ accounts of how their experiences have impacted them, including how they have come to see themselves, what “family” means to them, and the work they have done to make sense of their experiences in order to continue to move forward.

**Adulthood as a destination: “Finding my voice, and finding myself”** All but one person in the sample pretty readily identified as an adult. Most participants described “feeling like an adult” when they had become financially independent or purchased a car. The youngest participant, Luna, said “I feel more like an adult, but I also still know I'm still pretty young. So I sometimes feel weird. It's like you're a lower level of an adult...” Tatiana made sure to clarify that even though she was an adult “in the ways that it matters” she still didn’t act like one “because I don’t have to.”

As mentioned above, Lucy said she had had people taking care of her for a long time, which made it intimidating for her to try to take care of things on her own. In her first interview she gave a recent example of this. She had gotten her Medicaid set up, and then wanted to make a doctor’s appointment but:
I was freaking out. I didn’t know what to do, who to call. I’m like ‘I never did this shit on my own’…so I was feeling like I’m growing up now a little late. So it’s hard for me to know where to start.

By the time of her second interview, however, she said she felt like moving into her and her boyfriend’s apartment was a big transitional moment for her ''cuz that’s when I had to do big people things like buy shit, and I was like ‘everything’s so expensive.’ I’d never realized that in that time before I was grown up. I was like ‘This shit's not cheap.’”

Penelope said she thought she “should have felt that way a long time ago. But I feel like I'm a real adult now. Sort of.” Even though she cited having her first full time job as the thing that made her feel like she was an adult, she did describe another experience that seemed to illustrate her coming to the realization that she could make her own decisions and do what she felt was the best thing for her. She characterized her sister as someone who she really admired, and said for a long time she had acted like she had no interest in finding their mother because her sister was very opposed to the idea. However:

…once I started finding my voice, and finding myself, and finding out that I'm an adult now and I can make my own choices, and I don't have to listen to anybody else, and I don't have to ask anybody’s permission to do anything. I think at that point I kind of realized ‘This is what I want to do, and I’m gonna do it, because it's my feelings and it's what I want.’

Reflecting back on her 16 year old self, Aria said she had felt like she had things pretty together after she had left the foster care system. She found this pretty amusing in hindsight, though she did say she thought her experiences had helped her, and that she had grown up faster
because of them. For her though, having her first child “was pretty it for me” in terms of feeling like an adult. She was surprised at what a transformative moment that had been for her, saying she had gone through her pregnancy thinking things wouldn’t change that much after her child was born, but then:

…the moment my son was born, it was just completely different. I knew I had to live my life a completely different way, and now I have this little person that I was responsible for and I just didn't want to fuck up his life like mine was fucked up.

Joanna seemed to see her parents’ choices differently as she started separating herself out from them more and feeling more like an adult. She said, “Their life is their life. I’m an adult now, I have to let that go. I had my childhood—and I had a great one.” She seemed to connect her independence from their choices as being connected to her own independence, going on to say “I’m an adult now. I don’t want them bugging me anyways, to be real. Like really, to be real. I want my own life.”

**Numbness and normalcy: “I try not to feel too much about them.”** Those whose parents had continuing mental health or substance abuse issues were asked about whether they thought those circumstances might change in the future. While no one expressed any great amount of hope, for most there was no hope for, or expectation of, change. Many indicated they would like it if things changed, but that they did not foresee it happening. Penelope was pragmatic in her assessment: “I think after this long it's nearly impossible. And I think that if she did, I don't think she has the cognitive function left to be normal anyways…30 years of drug use…there's no coming back from that.” Several mentioned having had hope for change in the past and being
disappointed, often times over and over again, because, as Heather put it, “you wanna think deep
down that they’re gonna act like what you think a parent’s gonna act like.”

Every person in the sample conveyed at some point an understanding that they had no
control over their parents’ decisions, or the ways they choose to live their lives. This seemed to
be a significant realization or turning point in how people thought about or interacted with their
parents. Joanna said “At the end of the day it doesn’t matter how I feel, or how anybody feels,
it’s just it is what it is… you can’t change people, so I just try to better my life every day.” The
idea that they themselves were the only ones they had any power to change was a common
sentiment.

At least half of the sample described feeling desensitized with regards to their parents or
others, and most of them brought this up as part of their response to the question about whether
they thought their parents would change. Lucy described having few connections with other
people, saying “I kind of numb myself to feeling too much for people.” At one point in her
interview Joanna, initially in jest, said “I’m pretty dead emotionally, but—that’s not true—
but…a little bit.” Tatiana recognized an emotional toll on herself as well, and had developed a
strategy to try to counteract it, saying “you stop feeling a full range of emotions, so I focus on
things in small chunks and I let myself experience a full range of emotions when thinking about
those things.”

Penelope recalled having relational issues as a child, and expressed empathy for who she
was then. She reflected:

I feel sad, I think, for myself. But not for myself who I am now, but for who I was then.
For my childhood self. Because I had a hard time connecting emotionally to anybody.
And I think I was a really… I don't know, I think I was really angry child, but on the inside. I was always happy on the outside, and I always wanted attention… And it makes me feel bad for that girl. I wish that I could be… there for my younger self. Because I know that’s really all that I wanted, was some attention and some support.

When asked if making emotional connections was something that was still an issue for her, she said she finds that she is often at one end of the spectrum or the other, with some people she thinks she is too attached to, and some she is not attached to at all, with little in between.

When asked how she felt about her mom in the first interview, Penelope said “indifferent, she’s just another person.” She had described feeling “nothing at all” when she had met her mom. At the time she had felt like her emotions were doing something wrong, then she said she thought it was her brain easing up to give her a chance to process everything. She said she still didn’t feel anything at the time of that interview. Joanna said of her parents, “I try not to feel too much about them.” It was Lucy, though, who had the most extreme example of the lack of hope and emotional desensitization:

I’m numb to it, honestly, I am numb. And I know it sounds bad, but I’m kind of just waiting for her to like die or something, so that she can be out of her misery and we don’t have to stress on it no more… I know that sounds bad but right now she’s just killing herself anyway, just slowly… Not that I want that to happen but I’d rather that happen than her just the rest of her life be miserable. I mean, she ain’t gonna get her shit together.

*Empathy, forgiveness, and moving on: “The kind of heart that I have.”* It became apparent that every person in the sample demonstrated that they had gone through a process that began when they made an effort to understand their parents’ perspectives. For most, doing this
work helped them realize their parents’ limitations from an adult perspective, and for many it inspired empathy for their parents. This empathy often appeared to inspire forgiveness. Only one participant did not express that she had either forgiven, or come to a place of acceptance with, her parents. This progression, the role of accountability and apologies, and need for closure are explored below.

Trying to understand where parents were coming from, or trying to make sense of their behavior, was a common experience, though it took a different form for each person depending on their and their parents’ circumstances. A high level of complex reflection was evident for many participants who described approaching an understanding of their parents from multiple angles and perspectives. For others, it was as simple as getting older and “realizing everybody messes up…it's only human to mess up.”

For those who had struggled with some of the same issues as their parents, seeing that commonality was a starting point, though not everyone was able to access a shared perspective in that way. Penelope’s thinking demonstrates an ability to tap into common ground and move out from there. She said she felt like she herself had experienced “two different spectrums of life,” and having been homeless and using drugs in the past made her “recognize how easily I could be her…One choice is all it could have taken for me to be on that road.” She also made a very rational assessment that her mother’s drug use over so many decades had surely changed the way her brain functions, cognitively and emotionally, which would impact her decision making in the present. Having her own daughter, it was harder for Penelope to understand her mother’s lack of interest in having a relationship with her, saying “I think that's the hardest part…I don't see how that love just goes away.” Still, she concluded that she didn’t think her mom “has those motherly feelings towards me because she's never been a mom to me” and said she understood that.
Lucy felt like she appreciated that her mom had a really hard time trying to change her life. Even if she didn’t necessarily know why that was, it still gave her a point of departure: “…she really wants to do good, but she’s just so messed up she can’t or something. I understand that, so I just feel bad for her…” For Heather, recognizing that her mother had somewhat arrested development in certain areas had helped her see that her mom just didn’t have the ability to follow through with things, but that she also often meant well. Joanna, who was really struggling herself at the time of her interview, said that for her dad:

…out here it’s just a every day struggle and everything, he’s just trying to get by. He doesn’t have the time, or he’s stressed about something else so he yells at me, or doesn’t yell at me, or something. Like whatever he does…it’s not necessarily how he wants to be to me.

She felt like the letters he had sent her when he was in prison were a better representation of how he wanted to be towards her.

Forgiveness was not a universal experience, though half of the sample did explicitly say they forgave their parents or had “let go.” There were a few participants who had found themselves unable or unwilling to forgive, though one used the word “accept” as an alternative and the other expressed not feeling a need to forgive. People who identified having “forgiven” seemed to place less weight on the concept than those who didn’t, and talked about it in fairly practical or straightforward ways. They also tended to be those who had lived with a parent since leaving care, and had more tumultuous relationships with them. For example, Lucy explained:
I never held shit against her…I just kind of forgive her and let it go…I never really had issues with her. There’s a lot of stuff she’s done that I feel like messed me up, hurt me, but I’m not angry at her for it, never felt like I needed to talk to her about it…

Both Aria and Julie talked about it in terms of letting go of “grudges” and not wanting to be angry anymore. Julie described feeling like “I lived in the past” until getting some distance and letting go of some anger. Letting go of anger was described as an important step in moving forward for Julie, because “I've missed so much of my life being angry and afraid and living in fear. It just sucks knowing like how much happiness I've actually missed out on because I have missed out on a lot of happiness.” Aria’s forgiveness was a little bit more tentative, and she said that even though she had, for the most part, forgiven her mom she was still “cautious,” and if she felt she needed to “it would be nothing for me to cut her off. It really wouldn’t.” Penelope thought about it in different terms, however, expressing that she saw forgiving as being for her mother’s benefit, rather than her own, because she didn’t want her mom to die feeling guilty:

I think just like the kind of person I am, and the kind of heart that I have, I would want—just in case when she gets older, like if she died from an overdose or something—I would want her to know that we're doing okay.

Luna said she had come to a place of acceptance with her mother rather than forgiveness. For Luna, to forgive meant to say that what happened was alright, and something that could be moved past. While she did feel like she had been able to forgive her mom for a lot of things that occurred before she went into care, she could not forgive all of it. She said:

It’s harder to forgive someone, it’s easier to accept someone. So I knew if I couldn't forgive them I needed to accept it for my own personal health, of being able to move
forward and let go. Because everyone always told me that you need to forgive to let go, and don't hate the people that have hurt you, but I couldn't forgive them so I figured I'd accept them.

Heather had a similar sticking point with the term: "Hate to say it: You can't really forgive somebody, you can't really ever let something completely go." She said she doesn’t “feel the need” to forgive her mom, “but I'm never gonna really get over any of it.”

Several people conveyed that they had wanted their parents to take accountability for their past actions, and expressed frustration that this had not happened. Two participants who felt very strongly about this issue had been born with drugs in their systems. One had seen in her medical records that the doctors had thought she would be permanently cognitively impaired as a result of her drug exposure, and was upset that her mom still blamed losing her children on everyone else and never took any responsibility or addressed her drug use. The other said that in addition to being drug exposed she had also been abandoned as a young child for at least 2 days alone before she went into foster care. However, her mother continued to deny that she was born drug affected and insisted that she had a voluntary case with child welfare. She said:

Most addicts are trying to cope with something. She can't cope with things. That’s just her. I don't...blame her for her little la la land. She wants to think she was a good mom.

She wants to think she did the right thing. No one thinks ‘I’m a Bad Guy.’

She said that it was difficult to try to move forward with someone when they couldn’t even agree on the basic facts of the situation.

In Tatiana’s case, she too had a strong desire for her parents to take responsibility for her growing up in foster care, and said she was also “kind of expecting to get” an apology. She also had questions she hoped to get answers to. For example, she had always wanted to know why her
parents had not tried to get she and her siblings back, opting out of reunification services completely. She asked her dad about this, and found that “they believe you can just replace children. One gets taken away, you can always have another one, there's no point in fighting to get that one back,” a response that she said prompted her to stop asking those sorts of questions. Tatiana said she also hoped they would validate her perspective and help her work through things after the fact as much as was possible. After not getting the type of support she was looking for:

I realized that they're not saying these things because they want to be mean to me, they’re not saying these things because they actively want to ignore me, they are…not validating these feelings because they have no idea how to. They do not have the mental capabilities to validate you emotionally…And they were not able to see it from my side and because they were unable to do that they would never give me what I wanted…I knew it was in vain.

For those participants who didn’t have contact with their parents for whatever reason, they did all appear to have closure with regards to those absences. As mentioned previously, Tatiana ultimately decided to stop talking to her bio parents altogether several years before her interviews. She indicated feeling like she had closure with regards to her relationships with them, saying “I feel like it's thoroughly processed and closed case for me.” Even though Penelope didn’t get everything she had hoped for out of her meeting with her mom, she did feel like it had brought her at least some closure. She saw this as an important step in developing her own identity:

I think I was really ready for that [closure]. And I think I needed that to kind of move forward in my life. Just to know that…I don't have to be like her, and I'm not like her,
and she can be her own person and we can be related, but none of her has to be associated with me. And I get to choose that.

Closure was especially important for Aria after losing her dad. She was profoundly impacted by his death, saying she felt “lost,” “dark,” and “like a completely different person.” She said she was really angry with herself for leaving and regretted it deeply. She ended up finding closure through a dream that her dad was in, and she credits that with changing the direction her life was headed in:

I was in this depression, and I started doing drugs and everything like that, and…when I had that dream of him, I don't know, something changed. Something made me change and…when I woke up I never did drugs again. And I turned my life around completely. I went and got my GED. I had a baby. I put myself in college. I paid off 3 cars. I just have this determination.

She also received two notes from him after he had passed that he had left for her that she has held onto.

Fluidity of “family”: “It takes more than just the fact that they’re related to you.” A few patterns emerged with regards to how participants think about “family.” First, there was consensus that, as Julie put it, "family isn't blood necessarily, it's who you have in your life and who you call family personally." For at least half of the sample there was also a fair amount of fluidity in terms of who was considered family at any given time, with a pattern of connection and disconnection that sometimes included bio parents or other bio family members, although some did have a “you’re family, you’re family for life” belief that was important to them. Finally, a number of people wanted to stress to other foster kids the idea that they should decide
what is best for them in terms of whether or not they want relationships with their bio families, and that they should not feel bad no matter what decisions they make.

Some participants had more complex histories with the concept of what “family” is. For example, Penelope and Tatiana had both been adopted from foster care, and then placed back in foster care. While Penelope’s adoptive family was not described as having much importance for her anymore, Tatiana had continued contact with her adoptive sisters, some adoptive family members outside of the immediate family, and, off and on, her adoptive mother. She also had several biological half siblings that she has developed relationships with as an adult. She said she had never had a clear definition of who her family was in the past, and that now who she sees as family is “nebulous” and “subject to change.” Recently she had found it more confusing trying to figure out who from her bio and adoptive families is “family” than it has been with friends that she considers family. She noted that there were people who considered her family, but that she wasn’t sure she felt the same:

It's always been really easy for me to cut people out, and I find myself considering from time to time, ‘Do I really need this person in my life, even though they consider me family?’ And it makes me like 30% feel like a bad person, but I also understand where it's coming from in my own brain. And I don't hold it against me.

Penelope had a similar dilemma with extended family members from her bio family who had connected with her on social media, but had not made any effort to talk to outside of that context. She found this rather weird (“You could talk to me. I’m a person…”) and said those would not be people who she would count as family, instead saying, after thinking about it for some time, that she would define family as “the people who are there to support you.” Penelope
spoke movingly about her longing to have a mom, and how wanting a mom was not the same thing as wanting her mom:

I don't think I ever knew [my mom] well enough for it to really be a loss to me…well not her personally. I think the loss that I had…is the loss of a mom, just in general. Because I find myself wanting that all the time…just having a mom…I can't fix that now that I'm older. It's never going to change.”

She went on to say of her own mom, “I never felt like I lost her, I just felt like I never found her in the first place.”

For Luna, the idea that being family on paper is what makes family did not hold water, and instead she felt that “it takes more than just the fact that they’re…related to you.” She had come into care after being abused by her step-father; her mother hadn’t believed her and stayed with him. She had experienced extended family members telling her that they didn’t know who to believe, and that “was very heartbreaking because it really felt like I was stabbed in the back when it happened and…I felt like I was completely just kind of abandoned by my family.” She isn’t close with her paternal relatives, and said between the various branches of her bio family and her former foster family (who she is still in contact with), that it “kinda feels like I have these disconnected somewhat forced families, you know? But no true family.” She described feeling like her mother had “lost her privilege as a mother.” Despite this, she said she still felt compelled to keep some level of connection with her bio family, not wanting to completely lose them.

There was some role confusion with her bio mom that Heather found challenging, saying “she tries to be my friend, she tries to be the mom, she tries to…do all these other things and it
doesn't work.” She said that her mom’s lack of consistency made it really difficult to understand her as fulfilling any one type of relationship, and that it made it “feel forced or fake” when she had tried to be the mom. On the other hand, she said her “foster parents always act like parents. They are my parents. There’s no confusion. They’re not my friend. They’re not my whatever. They’re my parents. That’s it.” Like many participants, Heather expressed sadness about deterioration of bio sibling relationships, and said she would have liked to have better relationships with them. In the end, she said, “I was lucky. As much as I lost a family, I gained a better one…And they’re still my family after I left.”

Aria said her family is “always changing” but that “I know who my family is and the people who I can count on the most, and then I know who is kind of just like meh.” Between the first and second interviews she had gotten to know, and moved in with, a brother she hadn’t had contact with before, and had a sister and nieces stop talking to her. During one interview she had tried to describe a period of time when her mom and her sister weren’t talking, and then she and her sister weren’t talking, and then she and her mom weren’t talking, and it was getting so confusing she stopped and summarized it as “it’s a lot of no talking” and laughed. She also noted that she is not afraid to drop people from her life “if I don’t feel like they need to be there.”

At the time of the second interview, Julie had defined family in terms of her partner’s family, who lived very close by and was who she spent a lot of time with. Lucy was also striking out on her own, saying her family was “my baby, and boyfriend, and that's it.” She did report trying to reconnect with her extended family, but thought they hadn’t been very receptive because they probably thought she was lying about being clean and sober, which she said she could understand after using for so long and losing her older children. She was disappointed that it hadn’t changed since having her baby and being able to keep her with her, because “I thought
that after having the baby they would see that I was doing good, but it really hasn't made much of a difference.”

Several people stressed that they thought it was important to communicate to foster youth that they should make whatever decisions they feel most comfortable with regarding familial contact after emancipating. Tatiana said that if she were a caseworker she would say to emancipating youth that:

…no matter what they choose, whether they choose to have full contact, some contact, no contact, it’s okay. You should not feel guilty for not talking to people who make you feel terrible. You should not feel guilty for talking to people who wronged you in life, and if you have come to a workable place, you should not feel guilty about being okay enough to talk to these people.

Looking to the Future: “I Deserve to Live a Peaceful, Happy Life.”

Participants spoke about their futures both generally and in speculative terms about what will happen with their relationships with their bio parents. Most participants didn’t anticipate any major changes in contact with their parents in the future. This may be at least somewhat related to the general sense of most that their parents’ circumstances won’t change, as was explored above.

Several spoke about a desire to have a closer relationship with one or both parents, though not necessarily with much optimism. For example, Aria said:

I wish that we could get along better and stuff—like when we spend a whole lot of time together—or I wish that we were able to live together and not fight. But I just know that that's never gonna happen.
Lucy said that if it were up to her, she would want her mom “to be like a real mom, instead of me feeling like I have to babysit her. So, I just want her to act like a real mom would be." These participants had hopes about the direction their relationships might take, but did not have high expectations that they would be realized.

Luna had very specific concerns about what would happen to her relationships with her mom and half brother when he got old enough to figure out why she had been in foster care, describing it as being a “ticking time bomb.” While Penelope was interested in trying to see her mom again, her siblings were not supportive of that idea and she said she wouldn’t want to go against them and risk hurting them. Julie was feeling a greater appreciation for family, saying “I don’t know if that's because of my partner, or just because I'm getting older and I'm like, ‘they're not going to be around forever, so I need to spend time with them.’"

In general, participants tended to see the challenges they had faced as growth experiences, often trying to focus on the positives rather than the negatives, and many were very proud of themselves and all they had accomplished. Luna said:

I definitely had my low years, and self-destructive moments, I definitely struggled, but I think I really chose to try and learn from it, and to move forward. I knew I had to just keep going forward and learn, and make the best of everything, and be accepting…So, it took work but (laugh) I got there.

She was optimistic about her future, and said she was looking forward to establishing a “stable, happy life for myself.”
Despite experiencing numerous losses since leaving care (many of which were not included here), Joanna still said she was glad to have had the experiences she’d had since leaving foster care, because she thought they had made her a better person:

It’s been a very humbling experience…I’m glad now, that I’ve been able to go through that. Because before I was just so just blind to so many things in the world that I’m now aware of. And I give more people chances and…it taught me a lot about life the last couple years. I have learned a lot…as far as interacting with people and empathy and stuff, understanding where somebody’s coming from.

Lucy felt proud that she had gotten clean and sober and had her daughter with her. Despite her negative history with child welfare, she felt positive about having them involved, saying:

Really I just think they're helping me…they’re being really supportive and helping me do whatever they need me to do…Altogether, my whole thought, thinking about [child welfare], is like ‘I don't like them, because they've never done good for me,’ but right now I guess my head-place is different. So, I don't know…It's different now.

She expressed being sad that her mom, or other people she cared about who were “doing bad shit,” couldn’t be involved with her or her daughter, but regardless she was feeling happy with her life. When reflecting back on how she had changed since she emancipated, Tatiana said:

I respect myself a lot more. And because I respect myself a lot more than I did when I was 18, I am okay with changing things that I before would have considered selfish and I now consider necessary, because I deserve to live a peaceful, happy life.
Discussion and Implications

Theoretical Implications

As previously mentioned, in this section the researcher’s lens is used to engage with theory in order to further interpret the accounts of the participants. While the researcher went into this study with a theoretical framework that informed the overall approach and the secondary research questions, these concepts were bracketed during data collection and analysis. What follows is an exploration of the researcher’s interpretation of the extent to which each theory ultimately resonated (or didn’t resonate) throughout the participants’ accounts and perceived understandings of their experiences.

Emerging adulthood. Revisiting the five characteristics of Emerging Adulthood (Arnett, 2014), there was some evidence that participants either were experiencing, or had experienced elements of EA. Identity exploration can occur through exposure to new people, places, jobs, relationships, and more, and changes in employment occurred between interviews for most of the sample, and one participant had decided to take a break from school to test out a job in a field she thought she might be interested in pursuing. Nearly everyone was involved in stable relationships with significant others, however, which does not conform to that aspect of identity exploration.

Instability was very common among this sample. Between the first and second interviews, nearly everyone had experienced a change in living situation, and for several these changes included an adjustment to who they were living with and not just where they were living, despite there being less than a year in between interviews. For two participants these had been quite significant moves from one state to another. One participant, however, purchased a
house with her fiancé, and two had gone from staying with friends or parents to having their own independent living arrangement, so it’s clear that not all housing “instability” is equal.

Self-focus relating to identity development appeared to be in progress for some participants, while others seemed to feel a pretty secure sense of who they were. Most everyone in the sample was more than capable of insightful self reflection, and for a number of participants it was either evident from what they were saying that they had done work in therapy, or that they had dedicated much thought to their sense of self. “Feeling in between” was really only explicitly expressed by Luna, one of the youngest participants. Finally, despite the many stressors they experienced, optimism was abundant among the sample in terms of thinking about their own paths and futures. There was less optimism when it came to their parents’ prospects for change for those whose parents were still struggling.

While there were elements of EA present for most of the people in the sample—some components more clearly than others (such as instability)—overall this group appears to have had accelerated developmental experiences without a lot of time to “feel in between.” Given the experiences many had with poverty, homelessness, and other stressors and responsibilities, this appears to fit with Arnett’s (2000) proposition that situational influences can truncate or eliminate the EA period. It’s possible that foster youth move into emerging adulthood out of necessity when they are younger than non-foster care populations. In many ways, this sample’s experiences and understandings of their own developmental processes were quite similar to Berzin et al.’s (2014) results, particularly with regards to seeing self-sufficiency as a hallmark of adulthood, and seeing family as potentially hindering their ability to achieve their own goals. Whereas Berzin et al., quite reasonably, raised concerns about the finite nature of connections to
professional support people, the majority of this sample experienced continued support from former caseworkers, CASAs, therapists, and mentors.

**Attachment and ambiguous loss.** Cicchetti, Toth, and Lynch’s (1995) suggestion that internal working models established early on in development may persist into adulthood did find some support in this sample. For example, Aria’s vivid recollections of the differences between when her mother and father would leave her and the resentment she still expressed as being directly connected to that, and the parallel she drew between her mom disappearing when she was 5 years old and her mom choosing not to return to her home state while Aria was still in foster care seem to reflect deeply established relational patterns and interpretive understandings of her mother’s behavior. Lucy’s identification of her own abandonment issues related to her mother, coupled with a consistent pattern of seeking her mother out time and time again despite being treated poorly by her and engaging in unhealthy behaviors together may also reflect persisting internal working models established in childhood.

The descriptions of trying to minimize experiencing feelings, especially desensitization or numbness towards parents, likely reflect earlier experiences of disrupted attachment for at least some in the sample. By eliminating or minimizing expectations, participants who experienced this desensitization may have been attempting to protect themselves from further disappointments.

Ambiguous loss (Boss, 2004) appeared to be relevant both before and after emancipation for many in the sample. Again, Aria’s early experiences reflect more psychological difficulties with her mother, who would be gone indefinitely, than her father, who would also leave her but would explain why and when he would return. At the same time, her comments about receiving
comfort from seeing her mom while in foster care, regardless of whether they had a dysfunctional relationship, may speak to how even small amounts of contact might provide relief from feelings of ambiguous loss. Her decision to leave when it became apparent her father would drink himself to death may have been a choice between one type of ambiguous loss (physical presence, psychological absence) and another (psychological presence, physical absence). In other words, it’s possible there are more and less preferable types of ambiguous loss. Lucy’s comments about waiting for her mom to die may also be seen as possibly pointing to a preference between types of losses, though here the implication may be that sustained ambiguous loss is so painful that a clear cut loss may ultimately be seen as more desirable.

Penelope’s experience of hopefulness as a child resulting from her (theoretically) ambiguous loss of her mother appeared counterintuitive, but given her later explanation that she didn’t experience a feeling of loss around her mother because she never felt like she had her in the first place may explain this response. It also may simply have been an optimistic attempt at resolving the loss by the creation of her own explanation, as described by Boss (2007, p. 105). The idea that lacking certain normative experiences may be felt as losses (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Samuels, 2008) appears to be supported by Penelope’s comments about feeling unresolved loss for the idea of a mom, or the experience of having a mom. These comments were interesting and perhaps point to a type of abstract ambiguous loss.

For those with parents who were continuing to struggle with substance abuse, there were elements of ambiguous loss as well. Joanna’s comments about heroin addicts not being “present people” reflects the physically present but psychologically absent type of ambiguous loss proposed by Boss (2004). Her experiences of interacting with her parents while they were under
the influence of heroin seemed particularly painful for her because of the voluntary nature of their psychological absence from her.

The ability to attach to more than one set of parental figures was certainly present for more than half of the sample, with many feeling attached to both bio parents and foster parents or caregivers. This supports Bush and Goldman’s (1982) theory that many children, especially adolescents, are completely capable of positively responding and attaching to more than one set of parents. Further, the way participants defined family, and the people they considered family, were very much in line with Fox, Berrick, and Frasch’s (2007) findings that “family” can be a fluid concept.

**Resiliency.** While it may be tempting to interpret the way some participants spoke about their parents’ choices and behaviors as “making excuses” for them or minimizing their behaviors, it seems more appropriate to see these statements as attempts at making sense of them rather than excusing them. This appeared to be part of a larger process of trying to understand the contexts of their own lives from a new perspective in order to come to terms with the past and move forward. This process appeared to closely resemble Mucci’s (2013) model of “going beyond” trauma via bridging perspectives and forgiving one’s perpetrator. Of course, not everyone in the sample arrived at a place of forgiveness, and it’s possible that it’s actually the ability to see multiple perspectives and accept the past is the key element in Mucci’s model.

Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro’s (1987) metaphor for the ability to eliminate “ghosts in the nursery” as being a protective factor against intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment seems to resonate with most of the parenting participants. Heather’s comments about thinking her mom didn’t love her and that it was her own fault reflect internal working
models impressed upon her during her childhood that persisted into adulthood. It was only after she had her baby that she described taking back control of the situation because she didn’t want her son to feel the way she had as a child. This shift mirrors Fraiberg et al.’s description of the pivot to identification with the child. This same sentiment appeared repeatedly in Penelope’s accounts, particularly when she described looking at her daughter and wondering what had been going on around her when she was her daughter’s age, and even more poignantly when she speaks of wishing she could “be there” for her younger self. Aria also appeared to have a similar revelation when she described her feelings after giving birth to her first child.

While Lucy had clearly struggled through her first two pregnancies, there is room for hope that she is demonstrating “late-emerging resilience” (Masten et al., 2004). While her age puts her on the later end of the spectrum in terms of seeing emerging adulthood as a “widow of opportunity,” in terms of life skills she would fall on the younger end of the spectrum. The changes she had already made and the boundaries she had been able to enforce with her mother may point to a shift towards identification with the childhood self.

It must be said that even though there was diversity in the sample in terms of objective “benchmark” type outcomes, each participant in this study demonstrated a great deal of resiliency. Two participants who were not parenting had siblings who regarded them as parent-like figures; perhaps that was a contributing factor for them. The remaining two participants who were neither parents nor parental figures for siblings were incredibly introspective and demonstrated having put a lot of work into overcoming traumas from their pasts.
Practice Implications

While the period of time before leaving the foster care system was not the focus of this research, participants did share earlier experiences that point to issues that are deserving of reflection and may have implications for the transition period. In particular, those participants who described being given more personal agency over their contact (or lack of contact) with their parents while in foster care tended towards having exits from care that were less chaotic and abrupt than those whose contact with their parents was tightly controlled or who had no contact with their parents despite wanting that.

Notwithstanding the greater emphasis on providing transition aged foster youth with independent living services in recent decades, ILP programs did not feature heavily in most of the participants’ accounts of their experiences. The focus of most ILPs on “concrete skills” (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Propp et al., 2003; Samuels, 2008) is still a concern, perhaps more so given the assessments of several participants of the classes provided. However, this was at least somewhat overshadowed in this sample by the apparent lack of any ILP services provided to several participants. Luna had mentioned that while she took advantage of various types of assistance, she found that most of the people she knew in care had never been told they were eligible for them by their caseworkers. Several participants were also under the impression that there were too few spots available to accommodate all emancipating youth. Penelope’s experience with being dropped for missing meetings (despite the reasons for missing—work and school—being completely supportive of living independently) also may indicate a need to assess barriers to access.

However, those who were continuously involved in ILP tended to have strikingly smoother transitions out of substitute care. Most said they found the information from the ILP
classes to be far too basic to be helpful, so it’s quite possible the housing and educational assistance components contributed to less chaotic exit experiences rather than the classes or other services offered. It may also be that those who got referred to ILPs had more attentive or effective caseworkers, foster parents who served as mentors or advocates for them, were more motivated to take advantage of available supports, or were more likely to have other supports in place in addition to ILPs.

One thing that is clear is that not all supports are equal. Sometimes something that provides support in one way (such as having a place to sleep) is also detrimental in others (making you mentally unstable). Further, it’s apparent that it was possible to have a lot of people who provided housing support without actually having an impact on housing stability. Lucy’s experience with going from one person to another taking care of her and doing everything for her is another example of this phenomenon. This has implications for how we quantify “supports,” and there appears to be a need to consider not only the number of support people or entities emancipating youth have, but also the quality of those supports and a better understanding of their functions.

**Implications for Future Research**

The transitions from formal support people to informal support people evident in the support networks for most participants in this sample may be something that warrants further exploration. More critical examination of Independent Living Programs is likely needed as well in order to determine which elements are and are not making an empirical difference for transitioning youth. Many participants did not indicate that they had received any ILP services, and for those who did they generally did not report services other than financial subsidies to be helpful to them in their transitions out of care. Given the limitations of this sample’s size and
lack of diversity, it’s possible this is not a shared experience on a larger scale, but this could be an important resource to be aware of.

Finally, it would be advisable for child welfare agencies to take a more proactive stance in terms of preparing transition aged youth for decisions about contact with their parents, and helping them to understand how to set healthy boundaries and prioritize their own mental health and safety. For the young people in this sample, it was clear that consistent contact with biological parents is not an inherently negative thing, and bio parents can play a role in supporting former foster youth. Investigation is needed in order to determine how to do this in such a way that provides the greatest benefit for former foster youth. They do deserve to live peaceful, happy lives, and it is up to child welfare researchers and professionals to ensure this becomes the reality for a greater number of former foster youth.
Appendix A: Screening Script

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

Screening Script

Relationships with Biological Parents for Emerging Adults Who

Emancipated from Substitute Care

Thank you for calling about the study. I would like to ask you a few questions in order to determine whether you may be eligible for the research. Before I begin the screening I would like to tell you a little bit about the research.

The goal of this study is to learn more about the experiences of young people (ages 18-29) who “aged out” of foster care and their relationships with their biological parents.

Would you like to continue with the screening? The screening will take about 5 minutes. I will ask you about your age, when you left foster care, and your contact with your biological parents. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer or are uncomfortable answering, and you may stop at any time. Your participation in the screening is voluntary.

Your answers will be confidential. No one will know your answers except for the research team. If you don’t qualify for the study your screening sheet will be kept without your name. If you do qualify and decide to participate your screening sheet will be able to be connected to the transcript of your interview but will not be connected to your name.

Would you like to continue with the screening?

[If no, thank the person and hang-up]
If yes, continue with the screening

Thank you. I will ask you the screening questions now.

How old are you? If within study age range continue, if not end screening

Were you ever placed in foster care, a group home, with a relative, or in some other type of placement away from your parents by child welfare/DCFS/DHS? If yes continue, if no end screening

At what age did you leave your last placement? If under age 18, verify they did emancipate

Since you left your last placement have you had ongoing contact with one or both of your biological parents, regardless of whether you have contact with them now? If yes continue, if no end screening

Is there any reason you are not able to legally consent for yourself to participate in this research (such as having a legal guardian due to severe mental illness or a developmental disability)? If no continue, if yes end screening

Thank you for answering the screening questions. Indicate whether the person is eligible, requires additional screening, or is not eligible and explain why.

Do you have any questions about the screening or the research? I am going to give you a couple of telephone numbers to call if you have any questions later. Do you have a pen? If you have questions about the research screening later, you may call me, Leah Hanzlicek, and I will answer your questions.
If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about the study to someone other than the researchers, please call the UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program at (310) 825-7122.

Thank you again for your willingness to answer my questions.
Appendix B: Network Map

(Samuels, 2008)

Directions:

First, choose a “fake name” and write that in the center. Then:

Inner circle: List those people to whom you feel so close that it is hard to imagine life without them.

Middle circle: List people to whom you may not feel quite that close but who are still important to you.

Outer circle: List people whom you haven’t already mentioned, but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be placed in your personal network.
Appendix C: Participant Demographic Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES

Relationships with Biological Parents for Emerging Adults Who
Emancipated from Substitute Care

Participant Demographic Information Sheet

Fake Name:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Relationship Status:

# of children:

# of children currently living with you:

Age at first foster care placement:

Estimated # of foster care placements:

Age at emancipation/case closure:

Current living arrangement:

Highest level of education completed:

Employment status:
Appendix D: First Round Interview Questions

Can you tell me a little bit about how you left the system to give me an idea of what that process was like for you?

Were you having any contact with one or both of your [biological parents – use terminology they used when creating Network Map if different] while you were still in a placement?

Can you describe what that contact was like?

Can you describe what your relationship was like after you left the system [or “after you started having contact again” if there was a period of time in between emancipation and reconnection]?

Possible follow-up questions/probes for more info:

Who initiated contact? [If had not been in contact while in care.]

What was it like for you when you started having contact again? [If had not been in contact while in care.]

Did you ever consider not getting in touch with [them]? [If had not been in contact while in care.]

Was there any conflict that needed to be resolved?

What is your relationship with your [biological parent/s] like now?

Possible follow-up questions/probes for more info:

How often do you interact with [them]?

What kinds of things do you usually do together?
Did you/do you talk about your time in the system together?

Has your relationship been pretty much the same since you first left the system, or has it changed over time? [If it has changed, can you describe that for me?]

What do you feel like you are getting from your relationship with [them]?

Possible follow-up questions/probes for more info:

Are there certain things they are providing you?

Have you lived with your [biological parent/s] since you left the system? What was that like?

Are there certain things you go to them for help with?

Are there any ways you can think of that you help or support [them]? [If yes, can you describe that for me?]

Can you think of a time you felt really supported by your [biological parent/s] since you left care? [If yes, can you describe that example to me?]

Can you think of a time you felt like your [biological parent/s] made things harder for you since you left care? [If yes, can you describe that example to me?]

How do you feel about your [biological parent/s] now?
Appendix E: Follow Up Interview Questions

Last time we spoke [provide summary of their description of their level of contact and relationship with parent/s from previous interview transcript]. What is your amount of contact and relationship like now?

[If amount of contact or quality of relationship is described differently] Why did it change?

[If amount of contact or quality of relationship is described as being the same] Can you think of anything that could change that? What?

Are you happy and content with things as they are?

[If no] How much would you say you think about that? How do you feel when you think about that?

[If yes] Do you feel like things are stable and will stay that way? Can you think of anything that might change that?

Is there anything you would like to change about your relationship with your parent/s? What?

How do you define “family?”

Do you think you feel differently about yourself now than you did when you left the system?
[If yes] In what way? Do you think your relationships with your biological parent/s have anything to do with that? In what ways?

When we met previously, you filled out a Network Map for me. [Hard copy or electronic copy provided prior to interview] If you were going to fill out that same map again today, would it look the same or are there any changes you would make?

[If changes] What changes would you make? Why?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences leaving the system and your relationship/s with your biological parent/s?
Appendix F: Participant Biosketches

**Aria** was 25 years old at the time of her first interview. She spent 3 years in foster care and ran away when she was 15 years old. She has lived with both biological parents, separately, since leaving care, though her father has since passed away. She has two children.

**Heather** was 28 at the time of her first interview. She spent 16 years in foster care before emancipating and moving to college. She has one child and they have regular contact with her biological mother, with clear boundaries in place. She maintains close relationships with her former foster parents.

**Joanna** was 20 years old at the time of her interview. She exited foster care abruptly after her relative caregiver, who she had lived with for over a decade, passed away. She has lived with both of her biological parents at different times since leaving care, and has experienced a significant amount of instability and loss in that period as well.

**Julie** was 26 years old at the time of her first interview. She spent 8 years total in substitute care, some when she was a young child and most as a teenager. She emancipated when she was 21 years old after being involved with a number of transitional services. She has lived with her mother at times since leaving care, and continues to have contact with both of her biological parents.

**Lucy** was 27 years old at the time of her first interview. She spent 5 years in foster care during which she experienced an estimated 20 placements. She has struggled with substance use and instability since leaving care, losing two children to the child welfare system. However, at
the time of her second interview she was living in her own place for the first time, had her new baby with her, and was clean and sober. She has had varying levels of contact with her biological mother since emancipating.

**Luna** was 21 years old at the time of her first interview. She was in foster care for 6 years, in the same placement the entire time. She had been emancipated for less than a year at the time of her first interview after making use of various transition services. She has some contact with both of her biological parents, though she rarely sees them in person.

**Penelope** was 24 years old at the time of her first interview. She had experienced 30 placements, including a failed adoption, over 16 years in foster care. She left foster care abruptly when she was 18 years old after a placement fell apart and she was told there was no new placement for her. She has seen her biological mother once since emancipating, and has one young child.

**Tatiana** was 23 years old at the time of her first interview, and had left foster care when she was 18 years old after spending 13 years in foster care. She experienced eight placements, including a failed adoption, during that time. She had decided to end contact with her biological parents several years prior to participating in this study.
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