CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Emotional Intimacy Among Former Foster Youth

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

Yajaira Sosa
in collaboration with
Arianna Martinez

May 2018

The graduate project of Yajaira Sosa is approved:

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Dedication

"The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention."- Oscar Wilde

Table of Contents

Abstract

Emotional Intimacy Among Former Foster Youth

By

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Master of Social Work

Purpose: Foster youth encounter a magnitude of barriers as they age out of the foster care system and begin their journey into adulthood. Prior research has demonstrated that foster youth who have been involved in a mentorship program or have a consistent positive adult in their lives have better outcomes upon aging out of foster care. In particular, foster youth who had a consistent positive adult in their lives had increased academic achievements, financial stability, and positive behavior. Our study surveyed current and former foster youth and explored their ability to form intimate emotional relationships with others and the impact on their emotional well-being. Methods: Participants (n=10; 2 identified as Caucasian, 2 as Hispanic or Latino, 3 as African American, 1 identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2 as Multiracial or Biracial) completed an online anonymous survey, responses were recorded on Qualtrics software. Results: The results identified three themes; "intimate relationships enhance emotional well-being," "foster care staff as chosen family," and "mistrust in creating relationships." Discussion: Overall, our findings indicate that it is vital for former foster youth to have emotionally intimate relationships with consistent adults. Generally foster youth have a deficit in adults who they can trust, care for, or build a healthy relationship with and our results conclude that former foster youth seek out support from others during difficult times to manage life stressors.

Introduction

 The foster care system is a prevalent institution in the United States. According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2015 there were 427, 910 of youths in foster care. In the same year, 243,060 of youths were reported to have aged out of the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Children are placed into foster care when their birth parents cannot care for them for variety of reasons. During foster care placement, adults provide care to children until reunification can be made with the birthparents or in some cases adoption. Being placed into a foster home can be disruptive to a child, especially if the child experiences multiple placements and can impact a child's emotional development (UC Davis Extension, Center for Human Services, 2008). Placement disruption can lead to them experiencing profound distress and a sense of loss and not belonging, all of which can lead to distrust and a fear of forming secure healthy relationships (UC Davis Extension, Center for Human Services, 2008). Foster youth transitioning out experience a greater amount of mental and physical health problems in which more than 50% have at least one mental health diagnosis, physical health problem, or behavioral problem (Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-strong, 2016). To develop into a psychologically healthy human being, a child must have a relationship with an adult who is nurturing, protective, and fosters trust and security (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care, 2000). Attachment to a primary caregiver is essential to the development of emotional security and

social conscience (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care, 2000).

Research has been conducted on mentorship as a protective factor for emancipating foster youth in terms of healthy relationships. A key factor for foster youth to age out successful is to have a consistent and responsible adult in their life which can be hindered by the consistent displacement of foster homes (Atkinson, 2008). But there is limited research conducted on emancipating foster youth and their ability to form intimate emotional relationships. Our study will explore current and former foster youth and their ability to form intimate emotional relationships with others and the impact on their emotional well-being.

Literature review.

In 2015, there were almost 428,000 youth in foster care and approximately 17,000 foster care youth planned to formally exit the foster care system through a process called "emancipation" (Duke, Farruggia, & Germo, 2017). Research shows that increasing numbers of youth continue to emancipate, or most commonly referred to as "aging out", from the foster care system each year from 8% in 2003 to 11% in 2011 (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013) (i.e. reach an age in which the state no longer retains legal guardianship, which is usually between ages 18-22, depending on the state) (Singer et al., 2013). During this transition to adulthood and independence, these youth face an overwhelming number of new responsibilities for which many are often unprepared and left to solely depend on themselves. As youth formally exit foster care, many leave with limited social support which can impact their quality of life and wellbeing (Duke et al., 2017; Gypen et a., 2016).

Risk Factors and Adult Relationships

Most research identifies that a determining factor for the success of foster youth transitioning into adulthood is a positive relationship to non-parental adults and mentors. For many foster youth there are barriers that make it difficult to form a relationship with non-parental adults (i.e. individuals in foster youth's natural support network including extended family members, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, and professional staff) (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015). Ahrens et al. (2011) found that these youth were reluctant to enter into relationships with adults due to fear that these relationships would have negative consequences such as being emotionally hurt, owing something, failing to meet their expectations, and past experiences with biological parents or family members playing a role in their mistrust. Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2008) also discussed the lack of trust among foster youth based on past placement move experiences and described maintaining a level of safe distancing in their interpersonal relationships with others or living transient lifestyles thus not connecting to others. Aside from constant placement moves, emancipation from foster care, going to jail, non-parental adults moving away or loss of contact information are other experiences foster youth have identified as barriers to initiate getting close to other (Ahrens et al., 2011).

Protective Factors and Adult Relationships

Non-parental adults, also known as natural mentors, have the ability to promote successful transition to adulthood and improve overall well being for former foster youth. Although there are barriers and challenges for foster youth to connect with non-parental adults, foster youth do have the ability to form relationships with non-parental adults. Ahrens et al. (2011) found that the adult's characteristics and initial interaction style with

the youth determined the initial connection. Demonstrating persistence or patience even if the youth showed signs of rejection, displaying genuine affection or authenticity, conveying respect for the youth and their past experiences, similar interests, similar cultural background or gender, and connecting during periods of emotional vulnerability were found to be some of the characteristics that foster youth wanted in non-parental adults (Ahrens et al., 2011). Storer et al. (2014) also identified authenticity as critical to connect with non-parental adults or "foster families". Authentic inclusion and belonging is essential for foster youth to connect to foster families. Structure, consistency, guidance from foster parents, setting boundaries and consequences are some ways foster youth feel that their non-parental adult "cares enough" (Storer et al., 2014).

Social Capital and Successful Transition

Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital is useful in understanding the importance of healthy and supportive relationships (Duke et al., 2017). Social capital is used to describe the resources provided by relationships which help the individual's growth and adjustment and are primarily derived from the parent-child relationship (Duke et al., 2017). For foster youth exiting the foster care system, they leave with "social capital deficits" contributing to some of the difficulties they face. In particular, former foster youth who do not have or do not have strong relationships with a non-parental adult are illustrated to be at a greater risk of marginalization in adulthood (Thompson et al., 2016). Thus, the impact and importance of connecting and having a positive relationship with natural mentors is essential in the successful transition into adulthood for foster youth. The positive impacts non-parental adults have on foster youth's socio-emotional development are learning skills important to healthy

4

relationships; healthy conflict resolution, anger management, and setting boundaries with peers (Ahrens et al., 2011). Learning how to problem solve, independent living skills, helping foster youth understand their own potential/self-worth, and connecting them with other people/resources were other positive impacts non-parental adults had (Ahrens et al., 2011). Augsberger & Swenson (2015) also identified non-parental adults provide foster youth with different forms of support such as emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal. Ultimately relationships with non-parental adults influences better psychosocial outcomes for foster care youth. Foster youth have fewer depressive symptoms, social or emotional problems and increase their academic functioning and self-esteem (Duke et al., 2017; Augsberger & Swenson, 2015). Research suggests that gradually levels of social support for foster youth decreases between the ages of 17 and 26, a critical time for youth during emerging adulthood (Zinn, Palmer, & Nam, 2017) and a large percentage (40%) report not having family to rely on upon aging out of care (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016) thus the relationship with non-parental adults is even more critical for the success of foster youth.

Overall, research has demonstrated that non-parental adults have the ability to impact the quality of life foster youth have upon their transition out of the foster care system. Studies show how consistent positive relationships, in particular mentorship relationships, can assist psychosocial, behavioral, academic, financial, and housing within the former foster youth population. However, research among this marginalized and at risk population is limited. Available research does not focus on emancipated youth's ability to form intimate healthy relationships, which are prevalent connections individuals need in order to compromise their social network and increase their social capital. Thus,

it is essential for scholars to move away from studying how mentors can impact

emancipated youth and move towards exploring the healthy intimate emotional

relationships among former foster youth and their ability to create these types of

relationships.

Method

Participants.

There were a total of 10 participants identifying as male living within Los Angeles County. Of these 10, 2 identified as Caucasian, 2 identified as Hispanic or Latino, 3 identified as African American, 1 identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2 identified as Multiracial or Biracial. Six out of 10 participants were between 18-20 years old and the remaining 4 were between 22-24 years old. Four participants spend 2.5 years or more years in the foster care system, 1 spent 2-2.5 years, 1 spent 1.5-2 years, 2 spent 1-1.5 years, and 2 spent 6 months-1 year in the foster care system.

Measures.

The study was carried out online through Qualtrics anonymous survey that participants accessed through public Facebook page titled "Former Foster Youth Developing Emotional Intimacy". The research design is anonymous online survey. Our participants are 18-24 year old former foster youth males. Inclusion criteria are minimum of 6 months in foster care while also on juvenile probation. We projected the number of participants to be 10. The sampling method utilized was purposive. Participants all had access to an electronic device with internet access. They had an intermediate level of English comprehension; this includes writing, reading, and understanding the English language. All participants were made aware of consent disclosure at the beginning of the anonymous survey, their continuation of completing the survey acknowledge that they provided consent to complete the study. The qualitative data was collected through the online survey questions developed by both researchers to further explore participants'

perspective about emotional intimacy. Qualtrics survey and questions are in the appendix section.

Research Design.

Participants completed an online anonymous survey, responses were recorded on Qualtrics survey software. Each researcher read through each response separately to identify emerging themes and then met together to review identified themes. Both researchers discussed results and found similar emerging themes through a consensus meeting on the following emerging themes: intimate emotional relationships enhance emotional well-being, role of foster care staff, and the impact of mistrust in creating relationships with others.

Procedure.

Subjects accessed the survey link through a public Facebook page titled "Former Foster Youth Developing Emotional Intimacy". Once subjects clicked on the link provided on the Facebook page, they were redirected to Qualtrics survey system. The first page on the survey is a statement describing the purpose of this study, inclusion criteria, length of survey, and anticipated risk for emotional triggers; "You are being asked to participate in a research study; Former Foster Youth Developing Emotional Intimacy a study conducted by Arianna Martinez and Yajaira Sosa as part of the requirements for the MSW degree. The purpose of this study is to explore the level of emotional intimacy among former foster youth in their current relationships with others. You are being invited because you are between 18-24 year old former foster youth males who spent a minimum of 6 months in foster care while also on juvenile probation. This study will take 15-20 minutes. We do not expect any risks to you. We acknowledge that

some of the questions that are asked may cause some emotional distress and can be triggering. If this occurs, please feel free to take a break and return to the survey when ready. If questions become too difficult to answer, please feel free to pass and continue with the survey. Although, there will be no direct benefits for taking the survey, we hope that the knowledge we gain will highlight this topic among former foster youth as there is little research regarding this topic. Also caregivers, staff, general population who work with or come in contact with foster youth can benefit by learning more about effective ways to better connect with foster youth. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You will not be compensated for taking the survey. This study is anonymous (we will not ask your name) and all data will be reported aggregate (as a group, not individuals). You can choose not to take this survey, or not to answer any specific questions, without any negative consequence to you." The second page of the study asked subjects to provide demographic information (age, time in foster care and probation, and ethnicity), page states the purpose of collecting information is for demographic purposes. The third page is the actual survey. Questions in the survey were developed by the researchers to gain first hand understanding of emotional intimacy from former foster youth. The first 3 pages of the survey should take no more than 2 minutes for subjects. The survey questions took between 15-20 minutes for subjects to answer thoughtfully. Subjects were not compensated for their participation. There are no new procedures that we are investigating in this study. Deception was not used in this study.

Results

Using the original data and lists of themes, relationships among themes were analyzed using concept mapping (Novak, 1990). Verbatim excerpts were then pulled from the transcripts to create a rich text report of the results.

Intimate Relationships Enhance Emotional Well-Being:

Seeking Support in Others

Participants described intimate relationships in general as being important for emotional well-being. Specifically participants identified that intimate relationships are important as source of emotional support from others in times of distress. It is important to note that all participants have experienced negative interactions with others during their time in the foster care system: *"It was more difficult to trust certain people or weather they would understand your history."* But the majority recognize the impact healthy relationships have on emotional development. In reference to importance of intimate relationships, one participant stated: *"Yes I think it is very important because you have someone you can really talk to about any struggle you are facing."* Another participant noted the value of seeking support in others: *"because everybody needs somebody to talk to in difficult times."*

Importance of Human Connections

One participant describes importance of emotionally intimate relationships: *"I think that emotions are what bind every human together. Without emotional relationships, the human condition would not be what it is, and the ability to empathize would not exist. Emotional relationships create a safety among the general coldness/impersonality of our modern society's social structures, among others."*

Foster Care Staff as Chosen Family

Several participants described their relationships with foster care staff as family like and considering staff as part of their chosen family. One participant described the role and impact that foster care staff on his life:

"It is affected me in a positive way. I have been able to build relationships with staff I see certain staff as family that I rely on. I have become closer to certain staff than how I am with some of my family members."

Another participant noted that his relationship with foster care staff is still strong even after exiting the foster care system: *"Yes I have some people u get a bond with and you feel a strong family connection."*

Mistrust in Creating Relationships:

Impact of Displacement

Several participants discussed how their involvement in both foster care and juvenile justice systems impacted their ability to develop intimate relationships with others. Several participants identified constant displacement as the primary reason to not open up or trust other people. In the words of one participant:

"The fact that you have to keep moving no matter if you had already made close relationships, makes it harder for you to be open and express yourself to new people, because you know you will have to move away from them eventually."

Another participant stated: *"I have trust issues with people from the constant lost due to foster care."*

Institutionalism in Child Welfare

Institutionalism structure within child welfare and juvenile justice systems were

also pointed out by participants as a barrier to developing intimate relationships with others. Although the structure was necessary to maintain overall functioning within these systems, it was also restrictive in many ways. One participant adequately describes his experience within these systems:

"I think that foster care and juvenile probation desensitized me in a lot of ways. It distanced me from others in so-called "conventional" relationships in high school, for example. Since I was required to return to my group home on a daily basis, I feel as if I was never truly an "integral" part of any community for a sustained period of time. Foster care/juvenile probation also instilled a degree of distrust amid my relationships with authority figures and other paternalistic relationships. I think that the strong adherence to a structured lifestyle in these institutionalized settings left for little social fluidity and opportunities to connect with others aside from the required/impersonal relationships with guards/group home staff, for example."

Discussion

Overall our findings were consistent with prior research. Emotional intimate relationships with adults is a protective factor for former foster youth. The literature and study identified that implementing structure, consistency, and setting rules show foster youth that adults "care" about them. Our results demonstrated that foster care staff are viewed as chosen family. This can be attributed to the foster care staff being a consistent and stable presence in these youth's daily lives allowing an authentic bond to develop showing genuine care for their well being. The foster care staff represent parental figures and develop sense of normalcy through daily conversations and well being check ins (ie. "How's your day going?") which help foster youth develop emotional intimacy. Our study aligns with prior research regarding genuineness in foster care staff. The foster care staff interact these youth daily and have authentic dialogue that traditionally a parent would do. The foster care staff now take on that parental role and upon leaving the foster care system, these youth can reach out to former staff for support and help.

 Also consistent with prior research, displacement from multiple foster homes has contributed to foster youth not trusting others. Our results indicated that it was counterproductive for these youth to form intimate relationships with others if they would inevitable be moved. Our results also indicated feelings of loss being involved in foster care; loss of being able to connect with others and loss of "normal upbring". Although foster homes try to recreate a home setting and sense of normalcy it is difficult to foster youth to form intimate relationships with adults because of the dual role these adults provide; caring, empathetic, and firm parental figure but they are also the people who report back to foster care or juvenile justice social workers. Given past experiences foster

13

youth have had with authority figures who represent the foster care system, it is evident this is leading factor of foster youth not creating emotionally intimate relationships with others. A surprising result from our study was foster youth acknowledging the importance of having emotional intimacy with others. Although prior research indicates there are benefits of having a positive nonparental adult for foster youth, our results showed that foster youth actually value the importance of intimate relationships even though it is difficult for them to open up. Generally foster youth have a deficit in adults who they can trust, care for, or build a healthy relationship with and our results conclude that former foster youth seek out support from others during difficult times to manage life stressors.

Implications for the future

Some implications for future research are being mindful of providing adequate care to foster youth. Many of the youth entering foster care have experienced trauma thus it is essential for foster care staff to be trauma informed. Another important implication is that once foster youth age out of the system many do not have family support so the impact relationships during foster care have on these youth can determine success and social capital when they need to reach out for support and help.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that we only focused on the male population, could have also explored from the perspective of females and if the outcomes are different between genders. Our methodology of utilizing an online survey is also a limitation because there is no opportunity to further discuss or clarify misunderstandings in recorded responses. This method also limits the ability for researchers to see the

participant's body language, affect, or demeanor. Lastly the age and transition time after exiting the foster care system was a limitation because some individuals take time to process and reflect past life changing experiences. Given that on average the brain fully develops between age 23-26 years old and many of our participants were younger in age.

Recommendations

For future researchers we recommend including female participants and further research and resources into trainings for foster care staff to better aid relationship building with foster youth.

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Appendix A

Addendum
ADDENDUM – <u>Emotional Intimacy Among Former Foster Youth</u>

<u>"Emotional Intimacy Among Former Foster Youth"</u> is a joint graduate project between **<u>Arianna Martinez</u>** and **<u>Yajaira Sosa</u>**. This document will explain the division of responsibilities between the two parties. Any additional information can be included in a separate document attached to this Addendum page.

<u>Arianna Martinez</u> is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Participants recruitment through agency outreach
- Preparation of survey questions including consent forms and resources
- Creating public Facebook page to access survey link
- Creating survey on Qualtrics system and navigating survey results
- Coding of survey responses
- Master thesis paper formatting

<u>Yajaira Sosa</u> is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Participants recruitment through agency outreach
- Preparation of survey questions including consent forms and resources
- Coding of survey responses
- Master thesis paper formatting
- Organizing of research poster printing

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:

- Producing research poster
- Writing/ editing capstone paper

_____ _____		_____ _____	
Arianna Martinez Date		**Yajaira Sosa** Date	
Student ID: 102703066		Student ID: 104365181	

_____ _____   _____ _____
Dr. Alejandra Acuña   Date   Dr. Eli Bartle   Date
Committee Chair   **Graduate Coordinator**

_____ _____   _____ _____
Dr. Wendy Ashley   Date   Dr. Eli Bartle   Date
Committee Member   **Department Chair**

_____ _____
Dr. Judith DeBonis   Date
Committee Member

Survey

Former Foster Youth Developing Emotional Intimacy

Start of Block: Block 1

 You are being asked to participate in a research study; Former Foster Youth Developing Emotional Intimacy a study conducted by Arianna Martinez and Yajaira Sosa as part of the requirements for the MSW degree. The purpose of this study is to explore the level of emotional intimacy among former foster youth in their current relationships with others. You are being invited because you are between 18-24 year old former foster youth males who spent a minimum of 6 months in foster care while also on juvenile probation.
This study will take 15-20 minutes. We do not expect any risks to you. We acknowledge that some of the questions that are asked may cause some emotional distress and can be triggering. If this occurs, please feel free to take a break and return to the survey when ready. If questions become too difficult to answer, please feel free to pass and continue with the survey. Although, there will be no direct benefits for taking the survey, we hope that the knowledge we gain will highlight this topic among former foster youth as there is little research regarding this topic. Also caregivers, staff, general population who work with or come in contact with foster youth can benefit by learning more about effective ways to better connect with foster youth.

 Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You will not be compensated for taking the survey. This study is anonymous (we will not ask your name) and all data will be reported aggregate (as a group, not individuals). You can choose not to take this survey, or not to answer any specific questions, without any negative consequence to you.

Q22 What is your age?

○ 18-20 years old (1)

○ 20-22 years old (2)

○ 22-24 years old (3)

Q23 How long were you in the foster care system?

○ 6 months-1 year (1)

○ 1 year -1.5 years (2)

○ 1.5 years-2 years (3)

○ 2 year-2.5 years (4)

○ 2.5 years or more (5)

Q24 Please specify your ethnicity.

○ Caucasian (1)

○ Hispanic or Latino (2)

○ African American (3)

○ Native American or American Indian (4)

○ Asian/Pacific Islander (5)

○ Multiracial or Biracial (6)

○ Other (7)

End of Block: Block 1

Q1 How do you define an emotionally intimate relationship?

_____

Q2 Do you value or feel that having intimate emotional relationships are important? Please explain.

_____

Q3 How do you show others that you are emotionally connected to them?

_____

Page Break

Q* We acknowledge that some of the questions that are asked may cause some emotional distress and can be triggering. If this occurs, please feel free to take a break and return to the survey when ready. If questions become too difficult to answer, please feel free to pass and continue with the survey. Counseling resources will be provided at the end of this survey.

Q4 How do you feel your involvement in foster care while also under juvenile probation affected your ability to develop close relationships?

_____

Q5 Think of the last time you were feeling upset, angry, or sad. How did you seek support and who did you reach out to? How satisfied were you with that interaction?

_____

Q6 Can you describe your closest emotional relationship? Please describe how long you've known each other, where/how you met, and why do you consider this relationship the strongest.

_____

Q7 How do you feel these intimate emotional relationships impact your life?

_____

Q8 After leaving the foster care system has there been a time when you had difficulty connecting/bonding or building relationships with others? Please describe the reasons for having difficulty and how did it make you feel.

_____

Q9 Have you been able to maintain any of the relationships created in juvenile justice placement and if so can you please describe the relationship?

_____

Q18
<u>Resources</u>

California Youth Crisis Line (1-800-843-5200)
Provides 24-hour counseling service, information and referrals for all areas of California regarding medical services, shelters, crisis centers, AIDS testing, and transportation info.

Trevor Youth Suicide Helpline 1-866-4UTrevor {488-7386}
A national 24-hour suicide prevention helpline for gay and questioning youth.

SAMHSA
Provides free and low-cost mental health services. For assistance, call 1-800-6622-HELP or visit: https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov

211 LA County
Central source for providing information and referrals for all health and human services in LA County. Our 2-1-1 phone line is open 24 hours, 7 days a week, with trained Community Resource Advisors prepared to offer help with any situation, any time. Our community services go far beyond phone referrals – explore our website to learn more. https://www.211la.org/

West Vallet Mental Health
Provides outpatient mental health services through the county, (818) 598-6900
7621 Canoga Ave, Canoga Park, CA 91304

If you have further questions or concerns regarding the study, please feel free to contact either researcher.

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