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A Critical Discourse Analysis of How Youth in Care Describe Social Support

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by

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Abstract

There are nearly 422,000 youth in foster care in the United States with 20,000 aging out each year. Youth who age out of care demonstrate worse outcomes in all areas (education, employment, homelessness, justice system involvement, and social support) compared to the general population. These outcomes represent an ideological production, or a production of knowledge regarding the discursive youth in care. Thus, dominant discourses of youth are informed and constitutive of these problematic outcomes. Similarly, youthhood is dominantly defined by risk and informed by peer groups and social relationships. This study presents findings from interviews with 22 youth preparing to age out of foster care across the state of Oregon regarding individual relationships and social support networks. The analysis was informed by social constructionism, poststructuralism, Foucauldian concepts, and Gee's approach to critical discourse analysis (2014a; 2014b). The study explores the discourses young people invoked when discussing social supports. Two prominent discourses emerged: the normal teen and the typical foster kid. The normal teen discourse was characterized by normative family structures, access to a variety of friendships, and normative transitions to adulthood. The typical foster kid discourse was characterized by constructions of youth through professional documentation, hyper-independence, professionalized relationships, dysfunctional family systems, unmet needs, and desires to participate in service planning. While participants invoked both discourses, they positioned themselves in contrast to either discourse, enacting resistance to these discursive constructions. This dissertation discusses the implication of these findings for child welfare research and practice.

Dedication

I often say there's no reason I shouldn't be dead, there's no reason I should be

where I am today, and very little set me up well for this. I feel grateful and lucky and I

have a lot of people to thank. But it wasn't all magic and piggyback rides. Perhaps I make

myself too small at times.

I dedicate this dissertation to me.

Even if I wasn't always, I'm proud of myself today.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From December of 2016 through April 2017, I traveled throughout the state of Oregon interviewing youth preparing to age out of the foster care system. The original purpose of this project was to develop a theory-based program model in an effort to support network functionality (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Blakeslee & Best, 2019). In pursuit of this goal, we sought youth perspectives on strategies to enhance support networks. During these interviews, youth mapped their support networks. I collected data both for the purposes of intervention development as well as my own dissertation research. I sought to elicit, center, and co-construct narratives of relationships from and with the young people I interviewed, asking questions about each specific relationship in every young person's map. Throughout the co-construction of these narratives, I began to identify patterns that paralleled stories and anecdotes from my own social work practice with young people aging out of foster care and reflected on my personal experiences with the child welfare system as a young person. In seeing visual representations, hearing stories that highlighted formalized relationships, and understanding the connection between interpersonal relationships and identity development, particularly for young people, I began to wonder about available discourses, or constructions, of youth as well the reproduction of those discourses within descriptions of social supports. This dissertation research seeks to answer what a critical discourse analysis reveals about how youth in care describe social supports. This analysis is informed by Foucauldian and poststructuralist understandings of discourse and uses an approach to critical discourse analysis proposed by James Paul Gee (2014a; 2014b). Finally, I recognize the socially

co-constructed nature of the descriptions of these relationships, as conceptualized through a paradigm of social constructionism.

Positionality

At the age of 17, I had what I colloquially refer to as a "brush with the system." My experiences as a young person inform my interest in this topic, but are not experiences I would argue are sufficient enough to claim a more intimate understanding of what it means to grow up in the foster care system. Rather, at a young age, I became aware of disparities that contribute to long-term system involvement. In short, I come from a family that was able to navigate both resources and systems in an effort to prevent my entry into the foster care system. I have a distinct memory of police bringing me to a youth services center in Salt Lake City, Utah after one of dozens instances that, since the age of 12, I either ran away or was forced to leave my parents' home. During my intake, I sat next to a boy, a year or two younger than me, who had also been brought in by police, but for assaulting his mother. Both the boy and his mother were Deaf. It was in this moment, I realized I was navigating two worlds – one comprised of so-called at-risk youth and one in which I had the support necessary to get avoid getting lost in this world. This moment is crystalized in my memory – I felt I had both insider knowledge of what it meant to be a young person without an advocate and without people to listen and also knew I had the opportunity to distance myself from what appeared to be a terrifying fate of long-term homelessness or system involvement. Shortly after meeting that boy, I met my caseworker in the shelter, a man who was probably the age I am now, and thought, "I want his job."

About a decade later, I worked as frontline staff in a shelter in Oregon that provided services to youth in foster care and juvenile justice systems as well as homeless and runaway youth; my own experiences continued to fuel my allyship with young people. During this time, I gained a different perspective of the foster care system from the young people with whom I worked. I began to understand many young people saw the child welfare system as a place where they were lost and forgotten, rather than a place who failed to protect them from certain contexts by leaving them in those contexts. For many young people, what traumatized them was not a return home, but rather their involuntary removal. Some young people had spent so much time in residential settings, their everyday vernacular was peppered with language only legible in those settings. I learned through policies and professional and organizational practices, that these young people became responsible for their own "bad behavior" and that the contexts of neglect and abuse from which they came were somehow their own fault. I became implicated in those practices and others which effectively isolated youth – contact had to be pre-approved by caseworkers, young people in the program were not allowed to interact with other people for prolonged periods of time while in public, especially people they knew, and young people were discouraged from maintaining friendships with other young people they met in this particular residential setting once they left. I found myself encouraging young people to "play the game" so caseworkers might eventually move them to less restrictive settings, all while failing to reconcile my own complicity. Several years later, during MSW coursework, I was in a field placement at an organization contracted by child welfare to provide Independent Living Program (ILP)

services and case management. The ILP provides services meant to prepare young people to live independently. Additionally, these services seek to support child welfare's preeminent goal of permanency for youth who age out of care. Historically, permanency referred to placements or living arrangements. Permanency is currently defined as permanent relationships with a caring and supportive adult, also known as relational permanency (Pine et al., 2009). Thus, in this field placement, I worked with young people to identify these relationships in addition to a network of supportive relationships in general. During an interaction with a young woman on a colleague's caseload, she mentioned it was easier to have no friends because her caseworker was constantly asking about her friendships. She communicated exasperation with needing to prove her friends were "good" and "positive influences" on her. Instead, she felt like her energy was better spent focusing on things like finishing school, maintaining housing, and exiting the foster care system as uneventfully as possible. During this time, I was also learning more about the foster care system through child welfare research as part of my PhD coursework and Graduate Research Assistant positions. Given the potential and importance of peer relationships and the limited access to those relationships this young woman mentioned, I began theorizing about surveillance and regulation of young people, recalling Foucauldian conceptualizations of governmentality I had read about in a queer studies course during my undergraduate education.

These experiences and interactions as well as various earlier academic experiences led me to wonder about the relational nature of power between young people and adult service providers, the formalization of these relationships, and the

governmentality of system-involved youth through practices and research that are both informed by and reproduce discourses that structure the limited possibilities of enacting "youth" available to young people, an identity often informed by peer relationships (Wyn & White, 2012). My perception, based on my interactions with young people and working within systems that aim to serve youth, is that youth are isolated from the social support that the child welfare system seeks to ensure through social work practice as usual, informed by a very specific and narrow body of research. This wondering reflects a perspective informed by Foucauldian conceptualizations of power, governmentality, surveillance, and discourse. These terms and others as well as a broader poststructuralist orientation to this research provide the lens through which to understand youth perspectives on social support. Additionally, I recognize my participation in the articulation of youth's perspectives and thus the generation of the data I plan to analyze reflects a socially co-constructed reality, as explained by social constructionism in which reality is constructed through practices including conversation (Lazzaro-Salazar, 2017).

Significance

Current estimates of the number of youth in foster care are just under 422,000 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Of those youth, over 20,500, or approximately 8%, "age out" every year, meaning they transition from formal care to independent living (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). The age at which this transition occurs ranges from 18 to 21, depending on the state. Prior to reaching this transition, youth in care ages 16 and older are eligible to receive services through the Independent Living Program, designed to aid in this transition. Eligibility for

these services and any available funding varies state to state. Recent estimates state 16,400 to 17,400 youth in any given year receive assistance through these services (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). While many young people receive these benefits (though not all), these abrupt transitions contribute to a host of well-researched and documented challenges, including educational deficits and lack of attainment, employment difficulties, involvement with the criminal justice system, mental health challenges, and drug use (Gypen et al., 2017).

The ILP provides services meant to mitigate some of the negative consequences of aging out of foster care and prepare young people to live independently. These services include educational and housing support, employment support, and financial literacy. The ILP also serves as a site to address goals of permanency through relational and social skill building because permanency as a preeminent goal remains central to most case management plans. Historically, permanency referred to placement or living arrangements. These placements ideally included reunification with biological families and families of origin and also included adoption and/or permanent guardianship (Maluccio & Fein, 1983). However, foster care drift, or the tendency of young people to experience multiple placements, means many young people remain in foster care without ever achieving permanency and thus age out (Andersen, 2014; Barth et al., 2008). This represents a failure of policies to effectively address the need for permanency upon exiting out of foster care. Of the number of youth who do leave the foster care system into more permanent living arrangements, 27% reenter foster care only to age out and most of those who do reenter foster care will reenter within the first year (Wulczyn et al.,

2019). This suggests current definitions of permanency do not successfully address relational needs of youth in the absence of child welfare involvement.

Foster care, from its inception, always operated under the assumption of temporariness, in terms of living arrangements. Despite decades of policy defining permanency as permanent living arrangements, foster drift has become a defining characteristic of the foster care system. Because permanent living arrangements have remained so elusive for youth in care, permanency is currently defined as permanent ties with concerned and caring adults and/or families (Pine et al., 2009). Typically, service provision seeks to encourage the establishment of a permanent relationship between a youth transitioning out of foster care and one caring, supportive adult. And, because of longer to permanent stays in foster care, foster drift, and a failure to secure permanent living arrangements, services have begun to rely more on this permanent connection to caring, supportive adults, or relational permanence, as the answer to preventing negative outcomes. This new conceptualization of permanency is known as relational permanence and is defined as enduring, long-term connections with caring adults (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013; Salazar et al., 2019). In an effort to establish relational permanence, services, particularly services through the ILP, target and promote commitments between youth and adults with the goal of establishing relationships that are supportive, presumed life-long, and resemble kinship as with biological families and families of origin (Foster Club, 2010). And despite constant revisions in policies, the establishment of new interventions, services and sites of services provision, an entire rebranding of permanency, youth still age out of care without ever establishing these relationships that

so much research identifies as critical protective factors against the various consequences of growing up in and aging out of the foster care system. This indicates the need to include multiple types of relationships in definitions of permanency, not just with adults, but potentially with peers as well.

Methods

Discourse, according to Gee (2014b) is language in use. Language in context demonstrates that use. Gee defines context as "the physical setting in which communication takes place and everything in it" (p. 12) including physical bodies, nonverbal communication, shared knowledge, and anything previously communicated by those involved in the interaction. People can talk broadly about support and potentially come to a similar agreement about what is generally meant. In the context of the foster care system, support takes on a more situated meaning, reflecting the context in which it is used and helping to create and reproduce that context. The same can be said for permanency, networks, relationships – these all act as building blocks of the figured worlds of youth in care. Like more context-bound uses of language, we all share general assumptions about what it means to be an adult or what it means to be a youth or young person. We form typical stories about each position. Hollands (1998, as cited in Gee, 2014b) defines figured worlds to include a "limited range of meaningful acts" (p. 77). This is reminiscent of Foucault's (1982) assertion that governmentality (and governing) means structuring "the possible field of actions by others" (p. 790). Situating youth in the context of the foster care system invokes a more specific figured world and thus a more limited field of possible actions. This field can be conceptualized as access to possible

selves, positionalities, subject positions. What is typical for a youth is different when using language like "adolescent" or "youth-in-care," both of which introduce an element of "risk."

Gee (2014b) distinguishes between specialist and everyday language and that "language has meaning only in and through social practices… which often leave us morally complicit with harm and injustices unless we attempt to transform them" (p. 12) and that "critical discourse analysis must *do* something" (p. 12). Social work academics and scholars assert a similar orientation toward research – that it must serve to advance a social justice agenda. If language gets meaning from what it is used to do, as Gee claims, and support is a social good that gives young people access to autonomy (i.e. adulthood) from the foster care system, then using discourse analysis to understand how young people employ language, specialist or everyday language, both inherently political in describing subject positioning and access to this social good (among others) can also highlight the potential limitations (harm and injustices) imposed by systems themselves. How do youth in foster care come to occupy a subject position in their use of specialized language? Given the exclusion of youth in foster care from normative experiences, relationships become limited to pre-approved lists of primarily adults with whom youth do have access and as dictated by the child welfare system. Thus, youth become further regulated through formalized relationships. Drawing on Foucauldian concepts and a post-structuralist framework, I anticipate youth in foster care may be regulated with regard to relationships through social support and permanency planning by asking what discourses youth invoke and reproduce in narratives of these relational worlds.

If policy identifies successful transitions out of care as the establishment of narrowly defined relationships replete with specified types of support (e.g., the Permanency Pact), then that support acts as a social good. Gee (2014) asserts that "discourse analysis can illuminate problems and controversies in the world… [including] the distribution of social goods, who gets helped and who gets harmed" (p. 10). In regulating relationships to which youth have access, formal supports are complicit in limiting young people's access to social goods.

Relevance to Social Work

For many people, child welfare has become synonymous with social work and thus the image of a social worker that is invoked is one of a child welfare caseworker. Colloquially, social workers have come to represent the people who show up to your home to take away your children. Discourse within child welfare and child welfare research is, of course, much more complex. Regardless, this practice and research has had tremendous influence on the available constructions we have of young people, why they come into care, and the contexts from which they have been removed. For all these reasons, child welfare and child welfare research have the platform to present more dynamic and nuanced understandings of youth in care. By relying on narratives that portray young people as not fully formed, at risk, or in some other way in need of managing, social work limits the field of possibilities for these young people.

While social workers may bristle at the minimization of their work as baby-snatching villains, so too do youth assumed to be incapable, criminal, overly innocent, in need of both saving and surveilling, and generally at risk. My hope is that whatever is

revealed through this research may contribute to new conversations and different framings of youth in care. Considering the role of child welfare in the field of social work, its various constructions of young people, and its function as an agent of the state, I find a poststructuralist lens to simply make sense. Youth in care are wards of the state, governed through prescribed relationships with agents of the state. Child welfare research continues to investigate both outcomes and ways to better support young people in care. Inevitably, this will require structural and systemic change – a project well beyond the scope of this dissertation research. However, this could be part of a different and more generative conversation that leads to different insight into how young people describe themselves. I believe this framework and method offer that possibility.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter outlines relevant literature regarding aging out of foster care, including background information on permanency and current discourse regarding outcomes for young people who age out of foster care. Additionally, this chapter reviews literature regarding relationships, social support, and support networks of young people in care. Much of this literature conceptualizes needed support and relational permanence as dependent on one caring, supportive adult, often framed as an informal mentor. While the presence of and access to such informal mentors may demonstrate impacts, the complexity of the provision of support and role of supportive individuals in a young person's life highlights areas of identity articulation and power relations both with individuals as well as institutions. This review will also introduce literature that discusses constructions of youth, drawing on critiques of the discourse of adolescence, framing of youth in care as at risk, and how youth accept or transgress the limitations of subject positions. To situate these conversations, I will include a brief introduction of key tenets of poststructuralism as well as terms articulated and conceptualized by Michel Foucault, both discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Key Terms

Poststructuralist and social constructionist frameworks assert that language shapes meaning (Belsey, 2002; Burr & Dick, 2017; Gee, 2014a; 2014b; Strega, 2005). Foucault's theorizing was greatly influenced by poststructuralism, but focused more on *power* and *discourse* (Foucault, 1977; 1980; 1982; 1997). According to Foucault, power is not fixed nor is it exclusively something imposed; rather, power is diffuse and

relational – it is everywhere and exercised through relationships between individuals and other individuals or between individuals and systems or institutions (Foucault, 1977). Discourse includes productions and reproductions of knowledge that effectively construct reality and highlight the *subject* of a given discourse (Burr & Dick, 2017; Foucault, 1980). Through interactions in relationships, people come to recognize socially constructed realities that provide scripts for how to enact socially recognizable identities in specific contexts, or subjectivities. In short, discourse both emerges through interaction and shapes identity. Like discourse and power, Foucault uses the term *governmentality* to describe how discourse and power relations encourage the acceptance of subject positions and thus conformity, a similarly dialectical process called *normalizing* (Foucault, 1982; Parton, Chapter 5 in Chambon et al., 1999). Finally, *biopower* refers to the administration of life, including the optimization of the body as well as regulation of a population through biological processes (Foucault, 1990).

Background and Scope: Aging Out of Care

Of the nearly 422,000 youth in foster care in the United States, over 20,000 age out every year (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). During the fiscal year of 2019, 8%, or just under 20,500 youth, emancipated from care (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Nearly 58,000 youth in care are ages 16 to 21 and thus identified as transition-aged. Research demonstrates a range of problematic outcomes for transition-aged youth, ranging from lack of educational attainment and unstable employment to substance use and incarceration. (Collins et al., 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Miller et al., 2017; Pecora et al., 2006).

The 58,000 transition-aged youth discussed above are potentially eligible for services through the Independent Living Program (ILP). While eligibility for funding and services varies from state to state, recent reporting estimates 16,400 to 17,400 in any given year receive assistance through these services, leaving thousands of young people vulnerable during the transition out of care (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). In an effort to mitigate outcomes, the ILP provides services to prepare young people for the transition out of foster care, with the goal of independence and self-sufficiency. Services include educational and housing support, employment support, and financial literacy. However, despite early preparation to transition out of care, including services through the ILP, many young people are not prepared for adulthood (Rome & Raskin, 2019).

Outcomes

Foucault states ideological productions are the production of instruments for the production of knowledge (1970). Ideology refers to knowledge and also informs how knowledge is produced. One such ideological production includes the measurement of outcomes for youth aging out of the foster care system. This particular ideological production depends on various discourses that render youth both "at risk" and demonstrative of "problematic outcomes" and thus a failure to successfully arrive at adulthood upon aging out of foster care. By continuing to measure and demonstrate these outcomes, those in the business of producing knowledge inadvertently preserve and reproduce these outcomes by contributing the body of knowledge that suggests they are inevitable. Outcomes, as defined by much of child welfare literature and discourse, refer to the negative consequences of youth aging out of foster. These undesirable outcomes

range from unemployment, lack of engagement in education, early parenting and difficulties parenting, inability to meet basic needs, homelessness, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Rome & Raskin, 2019). Difficulties are more significant during early stages of aging out, suggesting young people have to learn many adult competencies independently.

Lower educational attainment is typical for this population, including a decreased likelihood of earning a GED or high school diploma and even lower rates of college attendance or post-secondary enrollment of any kind (Courtney, 2009). In terms of health, young adults who had been in out-of-home care as adolescents were twice as likely to experience mental health stressors, are more likely to report poorer physical health, and describe overall health less favorably in general (Courtney, 2009). Young adults who age out of foster care are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, including delinquency, violent behavior, and incarceration, at much higher rates than the general population (Courtney, 2009; Courtney et al., 2011). This population is more likely to experience financial hardship as evidenced by greater rates of reliance on public assistance, higher unemployment rates, reported inability to pay bills or meet basic needs, disproportionate rates of poverty, and high rates of housing instability and homelessness (Courtney, 2009; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Education

Young people who age out of foster care face greater educational deficits than in-home youth (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Glynn, 2021; Gypen et al., 2017; Jones, 2019). Approximately one third of foster care-affected youth drop out of high school without a

diploma, suggesting two thirds do obtain a diploma or GED versus 90% of the national population. Only 18% of 19-year-olds with foster care experience are enrolled in college versus 62% of national sample of same-aged youth. Within the first year after transition, many youth never enroll in school and just as many drop out (Rome & Raskin, 2019). Some research states parental involvement may impact these outcomes, suggesting a connection between outcomes and social support provided both from families of origin as well as educational settings, which invariably provide young people with more opportunities (Gustavvson & MacEachron, 2011).

Child welfare and much of child welfare research literature act as a business of normalization. The most obvious example of this is the focus on middle class aspirations such as education attainment. Though in some spheres, this focus is shifting to include other pathways to adulthood that do not necessarily center post-secondary education, the focus continues to enforce certain mechanizations of biopower, including productive bodies. Various pathways are organized hierarchically, with populations of youth enrolled in post-secondary education as exemplars of strength and resilience, while those who pursue paths related to blue collar or more technical forms of labor are surviving, and finally the most subjugated folks within this hierarchical organization include neuro-divergent folks, young people with mental health issues, and other young people who embody the various other "problematic" outcomes that have become so emblematic of the "crisis" of young people aging out of the United States foster care system.

Employment and Financial Stability

Employment is the most challenging domain for young people aging out of foster care (Rome & Raskin, 2019). Similar to education, foster care-affected youth experience considerable barriers to stable employment and financial security (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Gypen et al., 2017; Rome & Raskin, 2019). Research shows that employment is often sporadic, meaning employment among young people who age out of care does not offer financial stability and young people who age out of care can experiencing multiple changes in their employment status (Rome & Raskin, 2019). Two thirds of youth experience unemployment at some point within the first year of aging out of care. Courtney & Dworsky (2006) found that over half of young people who age out of foster care experience at least one of multiple different hardships related to employment and finances. These young people were twice as likely to be unable to pay rent or utility bills, one and a half times more likely to have disconnected phone services, and four times more likely to be evicted (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Those who can cover living expenses typically rely on two or three sources of income to cover those expense (Rome & Raskin, 2019). With money as their biggest stressor, youth who age out of care drop out of school, remain in unhealthy relationships, and engage in dangerous employment, all due to inadequate financial resources (Rome & Raskin, 2019). As with education, this is another area where the most vulnerable are further subjugated.

Housing and Homelessness

Living situations for young people leaving care of often quite tenuous. Nearly 40% of youth leaving care have an initial living situation lasting less than 3 months

(Rome & Raskin, 2019). Although many youths do return home, some youths do so because they have no other alternative. Two thirds of young people who do return home after aging out state that, given the opportunity to do it all over again, they would not return home. This living instability also, unsurprisingly, contributes to high rates of homelessness among youth who age out of care. In Courtney et al.'s (2007) evaluation of outcomes, 18% of youth who age out experience homelessness at least once by the age of 21 with over half of those youth experiencing homelessness more than once. Some research demonstrates rates as high as 28% for homelessness within the first year of exiting from care (Shah et al., 2017).

Justice System Involvement

Justice system involvement as a juvenile may be predictive of justice system involvement as an adult (Yi & Wildeman, 2018). One study found anywhere from 7 to 24% of young people in foster care are also involved in juvenile justice (Cutuli et al., 2016). The variation in rates reflects different sites of data collection and thus is likely due to practices and policies. For example, group placements were positively correlated with justice system involvement versus lower rates with youth placed in family-based care. Youth who are involved in the criminal justice system may also be mandated to stay in care instead of leaving early (Miller et al., 2017). Ironically, extended stays in foster care correlate with a significant decrease in criminal justice system involvement for each year a youth remains in care after the age of 18 (Courtney et al, 2018). In an earlier study, Courtney and Dworsky (2006) found that young adults with foster care experience were three times more likely to be arrested and much more likely to be gang-involved,

arrested for property destruction, and arrested for involvement in violent fights with weapons.

Social Supports

Consistent across research are findings that demonstrate this population remains connected with families of origin (Courtney, 2009). While mixed, much of the literature has identified that youth both voluntarily reunify with families of origin and that family involvement, even while in care, can positively impact outcomes (Collins et al., 2008). The vast majority of young people who age out of care report strong connections with at least one relative and 54% return to families of origin after leaving care and 46% live with relatives after leaving care (Collins et al., 2008). Additionally, other non-parental family members, such as siblings are also meaningful sources of support (Ahrens et al., 2008; Rome & Raskin, 2019). Two thirds to three fourths of young people who age out of care maintain frequent contact with biological siblings and many are in contact with other extended family (Rome & Raskin, 2019). Other adults, such as foster parents, provide support for transition-aged youth. However, support did not just come from one supportive relationship. In fact, some research demonstrated that youth identified a median number of two supportive adults from a variety of domains (family or otherwise) and that for support to act as a protective factor from certain outcomes, support should come from different domains (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson et al., 2015). This suggests a network approach to the provision of support as most meaningful in ensuring better outcomes for youth aging out of care. Permanency exists, but the policies may not be translated into practice.

Findings regarding family-based relationships provide compelling evidence to support more network-focused relational skill building interventions (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Young adults with foster care experience as adolescents are more likely to be single, report decreased marital satisfaction, and solo-parent children who in turn demonstrate greater health problems and are also more likely to be involved in the child welfare system or live in out-of-home care themselves (Courtney, 2009). Along with surveilling peer relationships, child welfare can either limit access to relationships families of origin. This is often justified as an attempt to protect young people from further abuse, neglect, and other reasons for initial removals from homes that represent entry into foster care. However, research demonstrates the importance of families of origin (Collins et al., 2008). Familial supports represent lifelong relationships that provide concrete and emotional support (Collins et al., 2010). It is crucial to consider the relational potential of families of origin and the trauma of severing those initial attachments. Separation from parents can hinder the future establishment of trusting relationships (Nesmith & Christopherson, 2014) which in turn reinforces the tendency/phenomenon of survivalist self-reliance (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

While some of these outcomes are related to abuse and neglect within families of origin, premature transition out of care as well as foster drift, or longer to permanent stays in foster care with repeated transition to new placements, also impact outcomes (Holland, 2009). Thus, youth would benefit from longer stays in care and more targeted transition planning including relational skill building (Avery, 2010; Courtney et al., 2007;

Jones, 2019). Youth who stay in foster care past the age of 18 versus choosing or being forced to leave do in fact demonstrate better outcomes in many of the aforementioned areas (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Research and practice wisdom theorize barriers to more successful transitions include disrupted relationships and thus weak support networks, which in turn yield inconsistent support. Furthermore, due to traumatic disruptions in relationships and ambiguous loss, or unnamed, unaddressed grief related to both being removed from home and losing access to relationships with families of origin, youth involved in the child welfare system learn a sort of survivalist self-reliance that effectively threatens the formation and stability of support networks, opportunities for learning and practicing relational skills, and ensuring both the provision of support as well as permanency (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Jones & LaLiberte, 2013; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In short, the encouragement of independence (and devaluing of interdependence), repeated disruptions to these networks, such as placement instability, and barriers to multidimensionally supportive relationships from a variety of sources prevents young people aging out of foster care from establishing strong, supportive networks of relationships. While the presence of supportive adults is typical during adolescence, the general population of youth identify these relationships with extended family or through school, religious communities, and neighbors (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Collins et al., 2010). Youth in child welfare, however typically find these formal supports within the child welfare system. Thus, upon aging out of this system, these youth lose access to this support. Social support from specific and varied network members in multiple domains provides

different varied, multidimensional support, which in turn positively impacts a range of outcomes.

Research continues to identify the experiences of growing up in foster care as uniquely traumatic for this disenfranchised population of youth (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Youths' perceptions included independence as a result of recognizing the uniqueness of growing up without parental support. In addition, foster-care affected youth demonstrated pride in surviving the foster care system, but not in growing up in the foster care system. Youth communicate a disavowal and even fear of dependence (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and some youth have reported feeling involuntarily dependent on the system, their success thwarted by that dependence (Rome & Raskin, 2019). Research urges a more holistic perspective of youth development within a foster care system in which interdependence, in addition to independence, can be seen and accounted for as a response to the notion that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1208). While the presence of informal mentors may act as a protective factor, mitigating more worrisome outcomes, lack of available support, including disrupted and frayed relationships may be a potential explanation for some of the challenges youth who age out of foster care face (Jones, 2014) or at least correspond with disruptions in areas such as housing or education (Pryce et al., 2017).

Permanency, Relationships, and Support Needs

Because youth in foster care and especially youth aging out of foster care are regarded as vulnerable, they are seen as particularly in need of social support, especially during times of transition (Collins et al., 2010). Based on the presupposition of this need,

research literature regarding both available and needed social support for youth in care has sought to conceptualize characteristics of supportive relationships, support itself, and the relationship between social support and outcomes (e.g., Best & Blakeslee, 2020). Additionally, services through child welfare also stress the importance of permanency through relational and social skill building due to growing evidence that young people who exit care need continued support (Collins et al., 2008). Indeed, some research shows that various supports are integral to successful transitions (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). Unfortunately, most young people are not meeting goals related to permanency and the outcomes associated with lack of permanency primarily impact physical and mental health (Salazar et al., 2018).

While some research discusses qualities of supportive relationships, only broadly conceptualizing support as socioemotional (e.g., Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014), most research identifies similar categories of support. The first category of support includes guidance or advice and is often labeled as informational support (Ahrens et al., 2008; Munson et al., 2010). Secondly is emotional support, which may include encouragement or communicating that the youth is loved (Ahrens et al., 2008; Munson et al., 2010). Lastly, social support literature identifies tangible support, also called instrumental and concrete support (Ahrens et al., 2008; Munson et al., 2010). This type of support typically includes money, transportation, and/or a variety of basic needs. Less common types of support can include familial supports, developmentally normal experiential support, and even spiritual support (Collins et al., 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

Policy has historically conceptualized singular, supportive adults as the sole source of support and relational permanence for youth aging out of foster care. Perhaps due to these policy and practice norms, child welfare research continues to privilege support provision and exchange with parental and non-parental adults alike, or informal mentors. While informal mentors can include friends, this generally refers to parental-like (although non-parental) relationships with adults (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Foster Club, 2010). These mentors typically provide emotional and financial support as well as advice and guidance (Ahrens et al., 2011). In fact, research demonstrates a correlation between the identification and presence of these relationships with more favorable outcomes, including psychological outcomes such as lower levels of stress and greater life satisfaction as well as behavioral outcomes including decreased likelihood of criminal justice system involvement (Munson & McMillen, 2009). In addition to the presence of mentoring relationships, the duration of these relationships is an important factor regarding impact on outcomes (Munson & McMillen, 2009). Long term relationships may aid in the preservation of overall networks during times of transition. Thus, exploring these relationships in narratives that include network disruption may help researchers and child welfare service providers understand the differential impact of the disruptions of these relationships alone. Furthermore, youth readily identify these relationships as integral to their support networks (Ahrens et al., 2011; Rhodes et al., 2006). Some research has shown that informal mentors are identified by youth as the most helpful forms of support (Rome & Raskin, 2019). Thus, further understanding of how youth factor in informal mentors in their stories can contextualize the importance of

these relationships beyond the provision of support and assumption of mentorship as it is more formally understood in policy and practice definitions.

Informal mentors serve as one potential way to meet support needs, but certainly not the only or most comprehensive way to meet those needs. While informal mentors are undoubtedly integral to the socioemotional well-being of young people, these dyadic relationships may be insufficient to meet the relational and support needs of young people aging out of the foster care system (Blakeslee, 2015). In fact, in their own research, Munson and McMillen (2009) actually identify this as a major limitation. Furthermore, only considering adults as a potential source of social support delegitimizes the relational and support capacity of peers. Because youth identify shared lived experiences and shared traits as characteristics of strong network ties and close, supportive relationships, peer relationships may be an untapped resource. Worse yet, because placements in strict residential settings where contact must be preapproved or severed due to repeated placement transition, child welfare services may inadvertently thwart a crucial source of social support (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Collins et al., 2008; Okpych et al., 2018).

Youth need support from a variety of individuals occupying different roles in different network domains to ensure stable, consistent, multidimensional support, particularly during times of transition when unexpected loss and dissolution of relationships is most likely to occur. Therefore, a network approach to both understanding and providing support ensures youth have these support and relational needs met, particularly because the shifting and transitional context of child welfare

involvement. Ideally, youth receive a range of different types of support from a range of individuals, with at least one individual providing multiple types of support, or multidimensional support (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Multidimensional support from a variety of roles and relationships (e.g., family, friend, service provider, teacher, and so forth) can have a greater impact on outcomes (Jones, 2014). In addition to family, discussed above, other potential sources of support can include entire organizations, like schools and participation within those organizations (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Jones, 2014). Considering the supportive potential of organizations, it is crucial to address the disruption in this support due to transitions such as moving to a new placement and educational disruptions inherent in that kind of transition.

Research has long informed policy's conceptualizations of needed support and relational permanence as coming from singular, supportive adults, or informal mentors. The complexity of the provision of support and role of supportive individuals in a young person's life implies and potentially even demands the direction of future research take a network approach to understanding support. This theoretical framework shifts from a policy and background framework, to understand the role of social support specifically and in the lives of young people aging out of foster care. This body of literature demonstrates how social support from specific and varied network members in multiple domains provide different and multidimensional types of support and the impact these relationships have on how youth identify themselves as subjects of various discourses. Because research has identified that a range of support offered from a variety of roles and relationships can impact outcomes for youth, this framework will help address the roles

of families of origin, including non-parental members, as well as other adults, such as foster parents, as meaningful sources of support (Ahrens et al., 2008). This also demonstrates that support from a variety of domains can have a more meaningful impact on outcomes (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson et al., 2015).

The types of support these relationships offer typically include emotional support (Ahrens et al., 2011; Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Collins et al., 2010). Emotional support included advice, encouragement, and guidance. Another common type of support among much of the literature was concrete or tangible support, including help with getting into college, securing housing, or meeting other basic needs. Other, less common types of support included providing youth with developmentally normal experiences, like going camping, or even spiritual support (Ahrens et al., 2011; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Like receiving support from a range of individuals, a range of different types of support was also meaningful for youth and multidimensional support had a greater impact on outcomes (Jones, 2014; Nesmith & Christopheren, 2014).

Youth benefit from support in a variety of ways and indeed demonstrated more favorable overall health (Ahrens et al., 2008). Health outcomes included less suicidal ideation and fewer diagnoses of STIs. Youth also demonstrated a variety of positive prosocial outcomes including a greater ability to regulate their emotions, including anger management and setting boundaries and greater emotional resilience (Ahrens et al, 2011; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Other prosocial outcomes included conflict resolution and problem solving, more positive adjustments during times of transition, and decreased justice system involvement (Ahrens et al, 2008; Ahrens et al., 2011; Munson &

McMillen, 2009). Lastly, more tangible outcomes related to consistent and varied support included higher educational attainment, reduced likelihood of homelessness, goal setting, and a demonstration of skills related to self-sufficiency and independent living (Ahrens et al, 2011; Collins et al., 2010).

In addition to identifying various supports, supportive roles and relationships, and the impact on outcomes, research also provides compelling recommendations for practice and research. Some of this research explicitly identifies observed facilitators and barriers to supportive relationships (Ahrens et al., 2011; Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Syntheses of research on support argue that support alone may be insufficient to address outcomes, particularly for youth with complex trauma (Jones, 2014). Also, because, support decreases over time and comes from both formal and informal sources, this decrease and loss may also impact outcomes (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Greeson et al., 2015). Thus, natural mentoring from a variety of connections may be better at ensuring outcomes while offering youth more opportunities to build relationships and enhance networks (Collins et al., 2010; Duke et al., 2017; Greeson et al., 2015).

Identity development among young people is often assumed as inevitable, but might also be discussed in terms of outcomes. Relationships serve as an important site of identity development and youth depend on social support for development of identities (Greeson et al., 2015). Support from family systems, peers, and youth-identified mentors contribute to successful identity formation and increased self-worth (Collins et al., 2008; Duke et al., 2017). Not only do social supports contribute to these outcomes, but they help sustain identity and self-esteem as well (Cohen et al., 2000). Regular social

interaction in addition to support contributes to healthy identity development and perspectives on relationships.

Constructions of Youth

Emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental phase defined as "the age of identity explorations" (Reifman & Arnett, 2007, p. 39). This assumes eventual emergence into a normative trajectory of employment, engagement in education, and successful relationships with a variety of peers and adults. However, only some people have access to this path of exploration including wide-ranging possibilities for what kind of adult a young person might develop into. This access is limited by structural and cultural forces during this "volitional" period (Arnett, 2000). Additionally, developmental psychology contributes to discourse that decontextualizes lived experiences and essentializes adolescent behavior as a biological inevitably. However, "from [a] social constructionist perspective, developmentalism is a discourse within which children are constructed as not yet adult" (Woodhead, 2013, p. 144, as cited in Norozi & Moen, 2013). Adolescence is regarded as naturally occurring and thus universal, determined by age and biology and accepted as fact (Lesko, 1996). Adolescence is however not a natural process, but rather a process subject to historical processes and determined by society (Lesko, 1996; Norozi & Moen, 2013). It is socially constructed and constituted by a discourse of adolescence Discourses serve to outline expectations, which in turn justify governmentality. Adolescence is constructed as a period of overwhelming hormones and emotions, and vulnerability to risky behaviors informed by increased identification and anchoring in peer groups (Lesko, 1996). Adolescence is a time of risk upon which adults must

intervene to ensure a successful transition from this developmental task of adolescence to which youth are subjected. Middle class aspirations become defined as normative and thus conflated with what we define as healthy identity development. Outcomes like post-secondary educational attainment or financial self-sufficiency are in turn seen as integral milestones on the path of successfully achieving adult status (Arnett, 2000; Syed, 2016).

Developmental approaches conflate identity formation with physical maturation through the dominant biological view of adolescence (Lesko, 2012; Parameswaram, 2020; Wyn, 2012). Thus, the body becomes evidence of instability until physical adulthood is reached. This dismisses the capacity for change over the lifespan and instead focuses on regulation of the physical body. Indeed, there is a specific "right" body to have, partitioning not just youth, but also partitioning in relation to class, gender, ability, and other intersectional identities. This framing also dismisses a potential to reframe this instability as openness and flexibility – a greater willingness to explore, change, and grow. Cumulative experiences contribute to stable identities in which a person adapts traits to maximize functioning on a spectrum from surviving to thriving. Restrictive environments and the surveillance of systems may limit opportunities for these experiences that allow youth to draw on a wider variety of internal resources learned over time.

Creating discourses of outcomes that compare youth aging out of foster care to youth in stable family and home environments with greater access to resources only serves to partition youth in care from the larger population and reinforce normative discourse on emerging adulthood. What we gain when we say "most people" or somehow

identify "more favorable" outcomes is a reinforcement of a discourse based on statistical

normalcy and empiricism that in turn reinforces "power over" encouraging conformity to

these aforementioned middle-class aspirations. Arnett (2000) states, "in emerging

adulthood, there is little that is normative" (p. 477). In terms of power relations and

discourse, emerging adulthood then becomes a time of encouraging conformity and

discourse related to outcomes assumes adulthood as a static endpoint, which, for system-

involved youth, is inevitably damning.

Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

A key feature of adolescence is age (Lesko, 1996; Lesko, 2012; Parameswaram,

2020). Grouping youth homogeneously and identifying an entire group according to age

(or, not yet "of age") marks age as a one-dimensional measurement for adolescents in

which adults will always assume a position of superiority. However, age is a biological

factor and biological processes are socially constructed through practices, such as the

demonstration of certain competencies associated with adulthood (Norozi & Moen,

2013). Epstein (2007) asserts that age is a poor predictor of the competencies required to

function as an adult and that teens are just as competent as adults in every area considered

adult functioning (p. 147). Despite the relative similarities in competence, many adults

and experts still identify multiple competencies assumed to distinguish adults from

children and teens. These competencies include (but are not limited to) interpersonal

skills, love, sex, managing high-risk behaviors, handling responsibility, managing work

and money, education, and personal care (Epstein, 2007). These competencies reflect

specific social practices that construct a discourse of the competent, responsible, self-

sufficient adult that in turn informs the requisite competencies (or social practices) to claim the subject position in this discourse.

These competencies reflect middle class aspirations, but may not in turn be reflective of a range of value systems (Arnett, 2000; Syed, 2016). Higher education, for example, is often lauded as a desirable pathway of transition to adulthood. However, it is not the only pathway. Socially constructed discourses such as that of the successful adult highlight how discourse can frame experiences and identities in ways that can be oppressive. The delinquent youth transitions into the poor, uneducated, or criminal adult. Within the broader discourse that structures the subject position of successful adult that many services encourage, this identity becomes problematic for foster youth who aspire to "successfully" age out of the foster care system. These traditional markers of success are simply not as available, if at all, as demonstrated in outcomes typical of youth who age out of care.

According to Todd and Burns (2007), social workers "maintain relations of inequality through discourse" (p. 28). An example of this is through the construction of youth and aging out, often framed as a passive occurrence (at best) to the result of individual deficits of young people (at worst). One discourse of youth in care insists that aging out is an inevitable occurrence; this does not consider the potential role of child welfare in the subjection of young people in this process. Furthermore, the discourse of outcome, the demand for independence and self-sufficiency, and the failure to successfully transition as measured by those aforementioned outcomes also fails to recognize the material consequences of these discourses. When we impose certain

measures of "success" or measure only particular outcomes that youth who age out historically fail to demonstrate, we inadvertently ensure continued "failure" without allowing for a possible field of actions expansive enough to include variations of success or even culturally (i.e., collectivist) influenced outcomes. This example provides an illustration of how discourse serves to both construct identities of young people through their interactions with systems, organizations, and formal supports as well as how discourse limits the possible field of actions (represented by specific possible outcomes) for youth aging out of care.

Neither child welfare nor child welfare research, including this exposition, can proclaim innocence or separation from the discursive properties that portray youth as inherently problematic and in need of governance, a slippery slope to control and surveillance (Harris, 2001). What this research does aim to do is expose those discourses and power relations that effectually disenfranchise young people. In addition to reinforcing a discourse of delinquency, child welfare defines and constructs young people in a multitude of other ways, namely in outcomes. Young people are aware of the statistics that have come to define their eventual exits from care. In order to truly consider the experiences of young people, it is necessary to recognize that "aging out" is codified language for power relations between young people and systems. Child welfare aims to protect and provide care, but there is considerable overlap between providing care and governing. Foucault (1982) argues that to govern "is to structure the possible field of actions by others" (p. 221). So, child welfare governs young people by attempting to control and modify behavior in an effort to encourage conformity. Outcome as a

discursive tool seeks to shape the possibilities for young people by constructing the inevitability of the failure to successfully arrive at adulthood (and thus the failure to successfully develop into and achieve this identity). Outcomes also represent a construction of the identity itself – the at-risk youth's arrival to "failed adult" thus becomes an inevitable fate and anyone who manages to avoid that (or even perceives by virtue of optimism that they will avoid that) is consider an anomaly (e.g., "lucky"). In light of statistics and constructs and definitions of outcomes put forth by child welfare, a counter-discourse of "lucky" has emerged. However, this is arguably another discursive tool that attends to power relations – young people who come to see themselves as "lucky" were often given this identity by agents of the state. Additionally, these "lucky" young people often become the poster children of the foster care system, later enlisted as youth advocates and peer mentors upon aging out.

Generalizations of young people vary from era to era, which highlights that these discourses are historically bound and thus socially constructed. Narratives have shifted from "vitality, optimism and a world of discovery" (Wyn & White, 1996, p. 77) to a dichotomous understanding of youth as victims/threats, both of which demand governing. As victims, intervening of state systems is justified under the paternalistic guise of providing care and guidance, but the reality is an effort to govern or control (arguably another aim of paternalistic endeavors). As generational shifts have come to see young people as potential threats to social order, discursive turns move from victim to threat, both across generations (including aforementioned optimistic characterizations to now delinquency) and in the small imperceptible space between coming into care (victims)

and in need of behavioral intervention (threats). The real threat is not to actual social order, per se, but the threat of destabilizing hegemony. In other words, young people come to be seen as threats inasmuch as they insist on the equalizing of power through acts of resistance. Groups with power thusly employ structures and systems to shift and disseminate discourse to redistribute power in even more disproportionate ways. This redistribution is the discursive turn that has come to cast youth as problematic. The result of this shift is a discourse that ranges from infantilization to criminalization. This discourse demands that youth are a group who must be managed and controlled (governed).

At-Risk

Partitioning of the population, or separating and dividing subsets of a population from the larger population, occurs prior to the young person's entry into the foster care system. Indeed, multiple characteristics of family systems can predict an increase in the likelihood of becoming involved in the child welfare system, including race and class (Dworsky et al., 2007; Klein & Merritt, 2014). These characteristics considered "risk factors" for child welfare involvement effectively partition then govern these family systems, as demonstrated by the demographics of families likely to be involved in the child welfare system. In addition to the identification of family systems, youth are removed from these family systems for reasons of abuse or neglect. The purpose of this removal is to ensure the safety and well-being of these young people, an outcome not guaranteed by already "marked" families. This removal represents another partitioning. Because of the limited subject positions offered by discourses related to normative

development, efforts to normalize young people only serve to reinforce a discourse of

risk until they reach adulthood, unless of course normative trajectories are simply

unattainable. Most young people aging out of care may never conform to normative

adulthood; negative outcomes for certain young people who age out of foster care justify

continued partitioning from youth deemed resilient and successful, or rather, conformed.

Some, but not all young people are subjected to a discourse of normal or healthy,

constituted through practices in institutions (Irving, Chapter 2, in Chambon et al., 1999).

This is inevitably also an issue of class.

Removal and separation represent ambiguous loss and thus trauma for young

people entering the child welfare system. While there is arguably a dearth of literature

and a general resistance to addressing the impact of trauma by removal of young people

from their homes and the "behavioral issues" that result, there is even less discussion

addressing two salient issues: first, removal does not effectively strip young people of

identification with the contexts from which they have been removed; secondly, there is a

swift transition from the paternalistic endeavor of "protecting" victims to the

management of delinquent children, the two overlapping with each other to reinforce the

need for governance of youth in care (Wyn & White, 1996, p. 89). Family systems are

initially responsible for abusing and/or neglecting children, but children then become

responsible for their behaviors without the child welfare effectively addressing that these

behaviors are a manifestation of trauma partly imposed by the system itself. Young

people have become a problem in need of management (or governance; Wyn & White,

1996). In this way, the involvement of child welfare partitions particular family systems

and then particular youth in various classed and raced ways. Being Black and poor are sometimes inextricable positionalities within the American context and the overrepresentation of young people of color especially from families living in poverty is a widely accepted assumption when discussing system involvement and social service contexts (Rivaux et al., 2008). If young people are at risk, it is because risk is a discursive tool that mediates how young people identify as subjects of this discourse and are thus able (or unable) to attend to the material realities imposed by the inherent power relations of system involvement. Both risk and material realities in turn reinforce the construction of what distinguishes a young person as "at-risk."

However, adultism, or "the systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people" (Bell, 1995, as cited in Salazar, 2020, p. 4) also assumes a beneficence of systems meant to intervene on behalf of youth and so continue to reproduce children and youth as victims, though upon closer examination, this "victimhood" demonstrates a threat to the overall health of the population and youth are only victims of abuse and neglect (in name, and never victims of abuses of structural power). Children in care require assistance by virtue of dealing with "a multitude of issues that require assistance from multiple service sectors" (Child Welfare League of America, 2007, as cited in Modlin & Leggett, 2019, p. 34) including mental health, education, and various other governmental departments. Furthermore, children and youth with complex needs (arguably a majority of youth in care) are cast as "at risk" or "high risk" and thus in need of interventions to address challenging behavioral issues. Youth portrayed as not just risk-takers but also delinquents who, by virtue of underdeveloped brains, engage in risk

taking that compromises the safety and well-being of others. In other words, youth threaten the health of the population. This demands the partitioning of the identified abnormal element in an effort to normalize this element and maximize the health of the normative population. This illustrates the vacillation between victims in need and delinquents as threats.

Defining "at risk" youth as having complex needs and threatening overall safety fails to confront a system that undoubtedly exacerbates these problems and a discourse that reproduces itself with real material consequences for young people. This results in a circular relationship whereby in seeking to prevent certain outcomes, systems produce the outcomes they seek to prevent while partitioning youth, which in turn reinforces initial ideas of the deficiencies of youth. This result occurs because these systems are generally ill-equipped to meet the needs of youth (Modlin & Leggett, 2019). This, coupled with the overrepresentation of minoritized and thus most typically oppressed populations (racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities as well as children living in poverty) represents an intersection of two major social determinants of health and lack of access to adequate and appropriate care. Multiple system factors contribute to the identified deficits and challenges systems claim to address. Paired with oppressed positionalities and entries into a deficit-focused system dependent on risk frameworks and developmentalism that portray youthhood as an inherent risk factor, structures and systems reinforce power differentials that contribute to racism, classism, cissexism, heterosexism, and adultism. Thus, governmentality renders youth non-autonomous, vulnerable, and problematic based on failures to conform and perform according to normative standards of achievement and

through demonstrations of "problematic behaviors" at odds with neoliberal agendas and dominant ideologies of successful developmental transitions into adulthood. Structural and systemic barriers make the "failure" of young people in out-of-home care virtually inevitable. Youth continue to be sites of intervention in a system that is forever recreating itself, maintaining the hierarchical ordering of subject positions as defined and imposed by dominant paradigms. Rather than seeking to ensure different outcomes, child welfare's goal may actually be the governmentality of intentionally partitioned populations of youth. Otherwise, those who expend efforts to prevent problematic and inevitable outcomes by piling on more services and interventions might instead ask why these outcomes persist or discourses of these outcomes persist despite these efforts.

In addition to systems producing delinquent youth and youth identifying themselves as the subject of this discourse and reproducing themselves as delinquent, the structure and control imposed by the child welfare system is not replicated outside of theses settings (Epstein, in Chambon, 1999). This further ensures certain outcomes or at least the reproduction of this discourse as well as young people's investment in power relations by continuing to subject themselves based on a variety of factors including relationships to which young people do or do not have access as well as familiarity and thus comfort with subject/subjected positions. In fact, dialogic relationships may reproduce the very power relations they seek to critique (Jones, 2004). Prioritizing formalized relationships represents an effort to "know" those who arouse cultural anxiety and thus must be watched, which in turns justifies systems of surveillance in an effort to uphold the normative social order and quell those anxieties (Oppenheim, 2012).

Surveillance is further justified as a method of protecting some youth and partitioning out others because youth are positioned as both a threat and as innocent (Oppenheim, 2012).

Regardless of the impulse to surveil under the guise of protection, children in care are not the only people potentially in need of services. Assumed needs of youth in care include support for young folks with emotional, behavioral, and other special needs (Modlin & Leggett, 2019). Arguably, every person could benefit from this type of support, but we do not frame middle class, resource-connected families or young people as demonstrative of similar needs. Basically, if you have resources, there is no need for intervention on your behalf. Not only is the assumption that you have access to services and supports, but that family systems (read normative, middle class, educated, white families) are capable and indeed provide this support. This effectively ignores class and income disparity for system-involved youth and instead becomes about the governmentality and normalization of family systems and entire communities who have irregular access to not only services, but also basic needs that ensure livelihood and survival.

Extending this argument to a general population in which groups are partitioned, typically along classed lines, other youth and indeed adults would benefit from similar assistance, regardless of official system involvement. In this way, we rebrand, redefine, and effectively partition young people in care even further by virtue of experiencing abuse, neglect, or other precipitating factors leading to entry into the foster care system. Expanding the scope even just slightly, this partitioning includes families and contexts from which youth in care are removed, thus representing system involvement impacting

entire family systems and not just youth "in need" of state intervention. This scope makes clearer the reach of the child welfare system in an effort to impose social control over the types of family systems overrepresented in the child welfare system – namely families of color and poor families (Rivaux et al., 2008). Collectively, this represents the governmentality of entire communities and, expanding the scope slightly more, populations. The state becomes a tool imposing middle class values and espousing white supremacy veiled as assistance and intervention in family systems. System involvement becomes more about insisting on white ways of raising children (and even being in the world) and less about protecting children and certainly the least about reunification and preserving family systems on these systems' terms.

Peer Groups and Identity Development

Because of assumed deficiencies in the pursuit of the self-actualization assumed as part of achieving adulthood, adultism assumes various normative assumptions regarding the development of young people that seeks to govern family as well as youth and youthhood (Wyn, 2012). In the United States, the family is seen as the natural site for positive development. Arguably, the system extends this assumption to specific families only. However, research links peer groups to concepts of identity and subjectivity (Wyn, 2012). Thus, privileging family or adult relationships dismisses peer groups as a potential and important site of development. Categorical approaches to framing adolescence assume a homogeneity that underestimates diversity among young people and ignores relationships between differing groups of young people (Wyn, 2012).

Developmental perspectives cast youth as a time a turmoil and change and define adulthood in contrast as being reached after completing normative tasks including identity formation (Wyn & White, 1996, P. 19). Social institutions and systems contribute to identity development inasmuch as they encourage a normative identity development and reproductions of that identity (Wyn, 2012). Therefore, identities become inextricable from dominant narrative conceptions of acceptable, well-adjusted, fully formed (re: adult) identities. Poststructuralism argues these identities are maintained through performance and that identity as fixed is a fiction maintained by these performances (Wyn, 2012). Peer groups, according to a discourse of identity development of adolescence, "provide space to construct locally relevant and personally grounded performances based on a sense of moral order" (Wyn, 2012, p. 95). Thus, peer groups explain individual choices and the negative consequences of those choices in the pursuit of normative adult identities.

Poststructural approaches rebut several main ideas of developmental approaches to explaining and understanding peer groups as a site for identity development (Wyn, 2012). One such idea positions family as a site of positive identity development, which in turn positions peer groups as a threat to that development. However, in consideration of child welfare involvement with particular families, this suggests a certain type of family can be such a site while all peer groups remain a threat. This leaves youth in foster care so partitioned to the point of social isolation. For this population, interventions may ensure normative outcomes (Wyn, 2012). This dismisses the very real possibility that these interventions may reproduce the outcomes they attempt to prevent. Furthermore, categorizations of outcomes as good or bad continue to impose normative assumptions of

how young people should arrive to adulthood. Educational attainment is possibly the most obvious example of how social institutions and cultural norms impose white, middle class standards and values as indicative of normative identity development.

Youth Voice and Perspective

A major purpose of this dissertation research is to center the perspectives of youth in general, but especially regarding their own support networks. Based on my youth work experience, it is my impression that the constant surveilling of youth, the directive approaches to service provision, and prescriptive relationships effectively compound experiences of social isolation for this population. As a result, disenfranchised young people's transitions to adulthood are largely controlled and institutionalized (Kallinen & Häikiö, 2021). During these interviews and interviewing youth for previous research projects, youth frequently communicated that certain relationships were of great value to them in spite of perspectives of service providers, paternalistic approaches of adult mentors, and even their own awareness of the limitations of the relationships themselves. In other words, youth knew when relationships were toxic, but wanted the space to navigate those relationships on their own terms. Furthermore, youth are the services users of the foster care system, yet largely excluded from participating in service planning (Wilson, 2020). Over several decades of policy and practice, youth have become more minoritized and relegated to the position of *other*, but academic literature has started to recognize these first-person narratives are largely missing from this conversation (Chambers et al., 2017; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Whiting & Lee, 2003).

While there is increasing inclusion of youth perspectives in academic literature, the relative lack suggests an inattention to ethical issues of researching this population or excluding perspectives from both services and research (Holland, 2009b). In fact, youth perspectives indicate that a failure to include youth-led approaches in service provision or lapses in communication with youth regarding services actually negatively impact permanency goals (Scannapieco et al., 2007). This may also impact outcomes such as mental health stressors, criminal justice system involvement, and reliance on government assistance. In addition to research and services, policies that focus on independence may be detrimental with the consequence of youth fearing dependence, but instead showing pride in surviving foster care, but feeling shame of growing up in the system (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

This literature supports the assertion that youth involvement is missing from service planning by demonstrating considerable lapses in promoting self-determination and social support by excluding youth perspectives and involvement (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Because youth are service users, their experiences provide greater insight into their actual relational and support needs (Singer et al., 2013). And, while some research argues youth may not have perspectives on their own relationships, the same argument can be made for the lack of perspectives of formal service providers on their roles in the support networks of youth. Because youth regularly identify formal service providers, such as caseworkers, as sources of support, disruption of networks may mean particular types of support become unavailable (Singer et al., 2003). Some research demonstrates that youth-adult partnerships in youth services increases creative self-efficacy (To et al.,

2020). Thus, youth perspectives can expand methodological approaches of research with this population, provide insight into how support is accessed or what support is missing, and the impact youth involvement has on outcomes and relationships.

Conclusion: Youth and Subjectivities

In this dissertation, I understand child welfare and child welfare research as arms of a governing body, or the state. Thus, child welfare practice and research have a vested interest in biopower. One obvious example of this is the focus on middle class aspirations including educational attainment. Though in some spheres, this focus is shifting to include other pathways to adulthood that do not necessarily center post-secondary education, the focus continues to enforce certain mechanizations of biopower, including productive bodies. Various pathways are organized hierarchically, with populations of youth enrolled in post-secondary education as exemplars of strength and resilience, while those who pursue paths related to blue collar and [technical] forms of labor are surviving, and the most subjugated continue to include neurodivergent folks, young people with "mental health issues," and other young people who embody the various other "problematic" outcomes that have become so emblematic of the "crisis" of young people aging out of the United States foster care system. Defining certain youth as at risk, in need of saving, in need of behavioral intervention – among various other available discourses of youth, who threaten the fabric (re: capitalist structure) of society, successfully relegates them to the position of "other" upon which normalizing technologies must intervene to enhance the productive potential of the other.

The reproduction of these discourses also depends on the participation of youth in these discourses. Popular conceptions of youthhood (i.e., the social construct of adolescence) not only represent, but also help construct definitions and even experiences by "offering a frame of reference that replaces traditional frameworks" (Wyn & White, 1996, p. 20). These frameworks cast youth in dualistic terms, as the future of society as well as its victims, at risk of "violence, drug dependence, and moral degeneracy" (Wyn & White, 1996, p. 20). Additionally, constructions of youth vary from one researcher to the next, across disciplines, and can mean "very different things, theoretically, methodologically, ontologically, and epistemologically" (Threadgold, 2020, p. 688). Many youths with whom I have worked are aware of the statistics and outcomes and cast themselves in contrast to this discourse, describing themselves as "lucky." Over many years, this language was used with such regularity that I began to wonder if this was also a counter-discourse given to these young people. One person with whom I spoke about her experiences aging out of the foster care system said even though her foster parent failed to meet her basic needs and enacted abuse potentially more severe than her mother's neglect that precipitated her entry into care, was often told how lucky she was by caseworkers and therapists. She shared that youth who demonstrate some normative achievement, like doing well in school, being emotionally stoic in moments of crisis, or even just "speaking respectfully" to service providers are told they are lucky because they do not meet the criteria of what people assume is a fair characterization of most youth in foster care.

Adulthood is marked by specific measurements which locate young people and "emerging" adults in terms of neoliberal, capitalist measurements of success that represent privileged and hegemonic identities (Farrugia, 2020; Wyn & White, 1996, p. 62). This is evident in the outcomes consistently selected to demonstrate successful (or unsuccessful) transitions to adulthood. Unsuccessful transitions help locate young people at "risk" and young people who fail to meet normative developmental markers indicating the desired arrival to an "appropriate" type of adulthood. To successfully transition out of foster care is analogous to any young person successfully arriving to adulthood: demonstrative of social capital (socially well-connected, particularly to people who have idealistically achieved the status of "adult"); college educated; employed; heternormatively partnered/oriented (inclusive of sexually identities informed by Christian religious morality); abstinent from use (re: abuse) of drugs and alcohol; lack of involvement or interaction with a criminal justice system (i.e. not poor, not racialized, not a person of color); and decidedly middle class (Wyn & White, 1996).

To deviate from these markers of success is inhabit the status of deviant, a common association with youth (Lohmeyer, 2020; Wyn & White, 1996). Deviants are failed adults. Thus, neurodivergent folks and folks with disabilities, genderqueer, non-binary, trans, and LGBTQ folks, nontraditionally educated, part time or underemployed (re: poor, working class), addicts, sexual and sexualized young people (particularly women), criminals (in the most colloquial sense of the word), and working class and poor folks all represent failed adults. The problem lies in the individual and not the system that contributed to (and indeed constructed) these subjugated identities. To understand the

construction of youth as a social problem, we must consider visible differences based on social divisions including race, gender, class, and various subcultures of youth that are organized hierarchically (Wyn & White, 1996, p. 78). Youth whose construction of identities are informed by family systems who represent a hegemonic norm represent a non-threatening subculture because this group is deemed most likely to successfully achieve adult status by virtue of the "correct" race, class, ability, and so forth. Thusly, other constructed subcultures of youth are portrayed as representative of the social problem of youth in general.

Youth is a process informed by age and relationships and defined by the structures that influence this process (Threadgold, 2020; Wyn & White, 1996). Youth is constructed in relation to adult – what it is not, what it has yet to achieve, that young people are simply preparing for that eventual and final stage. Youth, by virtue of not yet being adults, is thus a deficit of the adult state. By virtue of age alone, we construct narratives about youth that assume such developmental deficiency that youth need systems and adults to construct relational worlds on behalf of youth. Youth are in a state of becoming while adulthood is the point of arrival. Age also informs transition and thus outcome. Depending on where a young person lives determines how structures define and demarcate the arrival to adulthood. And if young people are ill-prepared by virtue of being prevented from engaging in normative youthhood (either from abuse, neglect, system involvement, or compounded trauma from all three), adults shake our heads knowingly at the seeming inevitability of problematic outcomes. Arguably, adulthood itself is a problematic concept. Normative assumptions do not accurately represent the

heterogeneity of adult populations. Among a larger population, how adulthood is achieved, what marks its arrival and state, and how one maintains it is ambiguous and just as flexible as youthhood while also similarly defined by structures and systems that impose normative definitions (Wyn & White, 1996). Adulthood could never possibly represent a final endpoint because the process of becoming does not actually end (Threadgold, 2020). Even in adulthood, we are perpetually becoming something else.

Where "youth" begins and ends is dependent on how systems define and demarcate that beginning and ending. In comparing two different states, it would be empirically inconsistent and unsound to assume that all youth who age out at 18 and all youth who age out at 21 either across or within groups are in some way homogeneous simply by virtue of being thrust into adulthood due to the structures that define, impose, and enforce these transitions. Culturally, however, comparing youth who age out of foster care to a general population of youth, many of whom benefit from the support of stable family systems, highlights the relational process of "youth" in which youthhood is indeed primarily defined by young people in relationship to systems and structures that both define and limit their material realities (Threadgold, 2020; Wyn & White, 1996). Lastly, aging out of foster care replicates the continued disenfranchisement of youth within a capitalist system by perpetuating civic exclusion and limiting collaborative capacity. Other social divisions may not necessarily be class-based, but are still "shaped by power relations of social class in particular ways" (Wyn & White, 1996, pg. 35).

While considerable research introduced in this chapter demonstrates the importance of achieving permanency, these demonstrations have yet to gain traction

insomuch as the production of a new discourse suggesting a different type of inevitability (i.e., if youth achieve relational permanence) is possible, let alone measurable. Therefore, we may be on the precipice of a new ideological production demonstrating positive outcomes for youth aging out of foster care are dependent on service intervention and formalized supports and relationships. However, this only reproduces a discourse about youth that continues to render them inevitably dependent on adults – as ultimately helpless and lacking self-awareness or capacity and thus undeserving of autonomy. This is a demonstration of the continued need to govern young people specifically, which demands continued partitioning of this population. Despite potential counter-discourses or simply newer, alternative discourses, there is a larger framework and context ensuring the subject position of young people, especially system-involved young people, in certain discourses.

A feature of the exercise of power includes partitioning youth through out-of-home care in an effort to both control and exclude from institutions that govern them. However, in institutions like school, work, or clubs, genuine social connection depends upon institutional processes and provision (Wyn & White, 1996, p. 47). Marginalizing young people from these institutions such as school, work, or other sites of social connection, ensures they will be seen as threats to the very social order from which they have been systematically excluded (Wyn & White, 1996). Because of the discourse of adolescence and the framing of peer groups as threats to development (Shook et al., 2009) and thus society, social institutions meant to govern and surveil youth then prioritize relationships dictated by policies, including definitions of relational

permanency or a lifelong relationship with a caring and supportive adult or more formalized supports (Pine et al., 2009). While some discourses assert youth may indeed need the guidance and support of adults, it is in this relationship where power is produced and reproduced (Wyn & White, 1996). Adults become gatekeepers to autonomy and even civic participation as well as the arbiters of normative adult reproduction on behalf of transition-aged youth. Young people then remain "marginal members of society, awaiting their full participation when they reach adulthood" (Wyn & White, 1996, p. 13).

Youthhood is a process involving engagement with social institutions (Wyn & White, 1996). These same institutions systematically marginalize young people and this process is upheld by developmental psychological approaches to framing youth, where adolescence is seen as a distinct period of development related to age (Wyn & White, 1996). Youth are not a homogeneous group. Like any other population, youth are shaped by social divisions produced and reproduced by the aforementioned marginalization, exclusion, and failure to adequately serve youth. Frameworks of understanding youth must interrogate how the institutional forces partition youth in raced, classed, and gendered ways (Chilsom, 1990, as cited in Wyn & White, 1996). Outcomes are shaped by relations of power inherent in the social divisions these institutions produce and maintain (Wyn & White, 1996). Finally, like youth, transitions are neither fixed nor dichotomous, but unpredictable and variable by their very nature (Storø, 2017).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter introduces a theoretical framework through which to understand narratives of relationships of youth in care as well as language to guide the interpretation of those narratives. I begin with a brief introduction of social constructionism as the paradigm whose ontological assumptions, or assumptions I make about reality, guide both presentation and interpretation of my data. Next, I discuss poststructuralism as the epistemology within the paradigm of social constructionism, which agrees that reality is socially constructed through language to which we ascribe meaning, but also attempts to disrupt and critique such assumptions we take for granted regarding reality. To articulate this, I rely on language introduced by Michel Foucault, whose conceptualizations overlap considerably with central tenets of poststructuralism. Finally, I will present the context of this current study and an approach and process for critical discourse analysis proposed by Gee, who draws on the contributions of Foucault.

Social Constructionism

The social constructionist paradigm views both reality and knowledge as socially constructed through various social practices and interactions, highlighting the subjective understandings of reality (Lazzaro-Salazar, 2017; Weedon, 1997). Social constructionism argues that phenomena we believe to be fixed natural or metaphysical laws are "actually the product of specific sociohistorical or social interactional processes" (Weinberg, 2014, p. 4). Social constructionism views traditions of research that seek to discover objective, universal truths as harmful due to the tendency of these endeavors to reify certain phenomena and encourage a production of knowledge that naturalizes various aspects of

social reality rather than challenging and seeking change (Weinberg, 2014, p. 26). Qualitative methods have become the preferred methodological approach of social constructionist views of knowledge because a key feature of social constructionism is its "turn to language" (Burr & Dick, 2017, p. 13). There is no objective truth; research instead focuses on the meanings language and other symbolic systems convey and construct; this epistemological framework encourages an approach to research as a critique that reveals how language impacts unequal power relations. In this way, processes of research and knowledge-making are co-constructive, discursive, and performative (Gemignani, 2017).

Social constructionism argues that concepts like "reality" and "being" are phenomena mediated relationally, socially, discursively, and culturally (Noble & McIlveen, 2012). This claim reflects the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this paradigm. Social constructionism focuses on identities and subject positions provided by prominent discourses and how these subject positions may become problematic (Burr & Dick, 2017). Social constructionism suggests that the model of the person exists only in the context of social life; what it means to be a person (the model of a person or perhaps the subject of a discourse) is socially constructed and through social practices and participation in social life we become human (p. 68).

The researcher and participant dynamic represents an additional relationship through which reality is socially co-constructed in participants' narratives. As the social worker examines their position within the relationship between social worker and client, the researcher must examine their position within the relationship between researcher and

participant. In this dissertation, I incorporate reflexivity as part of a constructionist framework to "to embrace the negotiated, relational, and socially constructed nature of the research experience" (Gemingani, 2017). This will illustrate my role in the process of the interview, the emerging narrative components, and of course the active re-storying of these narrative components. I, as the researcher, will take the liberty of organizing these narrative components into a cohesive, chronologically-informed narrative. As previously mentioned, because "histories affect… present circumstances" (Todd & Burns, 2007, p. 31), stories provide insight into the particular effects of young people's histories. Stories can contextualize material worlds and unveil subtle power relations that have contributed to those realities.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a theoretical framework that examines the relationship between human beings and the [re]production of meanings through language (Belsey, 2002). Because poststructuralism claims that reality is socially constructed, it leads to questions of the origin of knowledge (Winges-Yanez, 2018). In this way, poststructuralism can disrupt a socially constructed reality that shapes its subjects through discursive action. This examination and a deconstruction of discourse also highlights power imbalances (Winges-Yanez, 2018). In poststructuralist research, it is a requirement to examine how power functions in both discourse and subjectivity (Strega, 2005, p. 200). Additionally, poststructuralist research attends to mechanisms of governance within a particular discourse (O'Malley et al., 1997, as cited in Harris, 2001). Governance, in this context, refers to structuring "the possible field of action of others" (Foucault, 1982,

p. 221). In other words, a poststructuralist lens highlights how discursive action and governance shape possible subject positions within a discourse. Poststructuralism has a particular interest in how language is constituted as a discourse, recognizing that language shapes lives (Strega, 2005). In its attention to the construction of subjectivities, poststructuralism also attends to issues regarding truth, knowledge, power, and self (subjectivity). This theory is foundational to critical discourse analysis, outlined in subsequent sections.

My framework also incorporates the work of Michel Foucault (discussed in the next section) whose own theorizing is informed by major tenets of poststructuralism. Foucault encourages a direction of research "towards domination and the material operators of power, [and] towards forms of subjection" (Foucault, 1980, p. 102). A general, poststructuralist framework allows consideration of both, allowing researchers to "base our analysis of power on the study of techniques and tactics of domination" (p. 102). In other words, while a Foucauldian framework encourages an analysis of power as it is embedded in more immediate contexts, a broader critical post-structural framework can also highlight how systems scaffold, reinforce, and reproduce discourses that in turn justify exercises of power in relationship While relationships represent more localized embodiments of power, poststructuralism can provide insight into the role of institutions in deputizing state workers in the governmentality of youth by partitioning (or separating and dividing) people in the pursuit of normalization.

Because I am an active participant in this construction, poststructuralism will lay groundwork for a reflexive and constructionist framework in understanding my role in

the process of the interview, the emerging narrative components, and of course the active

re-storying of these narrative components in which I, the researcher, have participated in

the reproduction and interpretation of these narratives. Because "histories affect…

present circumstances" (Todd & Burns, 2007, p. 31) stories provide insight into the

particular effects of people's histories. Stories can contextualize material worlds and

unveil subtle power relations that have contributed to those realities. Employing a critical

poststructuralist approach to understanding these stories also allows for multiple truths

(or epistemological relativism).

Foucauldian Concepts

As part of the conceptual framework of this dissertation research, I will draw on

various Foucauldian concepts, including discourse, subject, normalization,

governmentality, biopower, and power. This framing will serve as a lens through which

to interpret narratives of relationships and what discourses are revealed when youth aging

out of care describe those relationships. The following sections will define terms as

conceptualized by Foucault, informed by poststructuralism, and contextualize them

within a social constructionist paradigm.

Discourse and Subject

Discourse, according to Foucault, represents ways of knowing, social practices,

and the construction of the subject (Foucault, 1990; Weedon, 1997). Discourse invokes

particular meanings communicated through specific language and the current context of

that discourse is similarly informed by historical roots; to understand a particular requires

attention to our interpretation of language, the meaning we ascribe to it, and how this

discourse both originated and has evolved over time. Discourse constructs reality and the construction of social reality is discovered by observing both discourse and individual in interaction (Heller, 2003). That is to say, discourses emerge in interactions because they are dialectically embedded in those interactions. Discourse outlines taken-for-granted assumptions that structure a context for the individual's interaction with their world; Foucault's agenda was examining "how the self is constituted through practices and institutions" (Chambon, 1999, p. 54). This means the individual in interaction with their world comes to construct a reality that is mediated by that interaction while navigating a specific range of options available to them as prescribed by a socially constructed set of rules. A process of interaction reveals various dimensions of a socially constructed reality that provide the *subject* of these discourses a script of how to enact their identities. These interactional processes are fundamental to social order and the subject's field of possible actions; the relationships to social structures and social worlds constrain how individuals come to know and thus act in their own worlds (*subjectivities*). The process is circular – discourse (like power) emerges through interaction, but the interaction itself is constructed and constrained by discourse. Who I am and how I am to be is knowable only in the context of my interactions with my world (individuals, networks of relationships, organizations and institutions, systems, and so forth). Discourse is maintained through discursive practices, or processes that contribute to the construction and reflection of dominant understandings of social reality, including identity and knowledge. Areas with multiple and competing discourses are known as discursive fields (Weedon, 1997). One example of a discursive field is the legal system. Within the field of legal discourse exists

many varied and competing discourses. An example of this includes dominant legal discourse around sexual assault as provocation in which victims become responsible for provoking perpetrators of assault by wearing short skirts, walking alone at night, or drinking too much (Weedon, 1997).

Discourse determines social realities, constructs the individual, and exercises power (Jäger, S. 2001). This (re)production is circular, in which processes produce discourse and discourse informs discursive practices. Justice systems may respond sympathetically to misguided men while women remain responsible for violence prevention. However, within power relations exist opportunities for resistance. This resistance represents counter-discourses or demands made through defiant movements spawned by the very power relations that produce subjects (Tremain, 2001).

Because institutional practices both generate and constrain social identities, attending to discourse can highlight how (through a post-structuralist lens, see below) institutions establish these entities that can be known and thus controlled vis a vis this discourse (Irving, Chapter 2, in Chambon et al., 1999). Using the previous example of legal discourse around sexual assault, sentencing practices can be used to generate an identity of assault victim or woman as provocateur. It is therefore useful to consider how such discourse illuminates processes of power relations as well as the process of created identities by observing discourse in interaction (including constructions of identities and social reality). For example, "youth" is historically bound and, conceptualized as static, generated through practices that codify actions and prescribe how youth work should happen through the employment of knowledge (the presumption that one can know

"youth") – truth is formulated to inform action (i.e., practice, such as placing a young

person in a behavioral rehabilitative program).

Normalization and Governmentality

Governmentality denotes a broad understanding of government in which power

exists both in relationship and as a form of domination, where some attempt to control or

limit the actions of others (Foucault, 1997). While arguably less conscious a process than

governmentality and one in which we are all constantly engaged, normalization refers to

ensuring and encouraging conformity under the guise of helping people adapt to their

environments (Parton, Chapter 5 in Chambon et al., 1999). Normalization is also an

effect of discourse on available subject positions of that discourse. Governmentality and

efforts of normalization are accomplished by partitioning certain populations from the

larger population by state apparatuses. For example, the prison system acts as a method

of partitioning a subset of the larger population claiming an attempt to reform criminal

behavior while also asserting this practice protects the entire larger community.

Power

Foucault (1977) states that power is exercised rather than possessed; power is

action on others' actions and thus "an omnipresent dimension of human relations" (p. 5,

in Burchell et al., 1991). In other words, power is diffuse; it is everywhere (Foucault,

1977). One exercise of power entails guiding another's actions through government as a

way to structure the choices and actions of those governed (Foucault, 1982). Foucault

also argues that power is not necessarily something someone has, but rather is exercised

in the context of relations (Foucault, 1982). Foucault states "power relations are rooted in

the system of social networks." Furthermore, power relations have been

governmentalized, or "elaborated, rationalized, and centralized in the form of, or under

the auspices of, state institutions" (Foucault, 1982, p. 793). Additionally, all power

relations have been governmentalized more and more under the auspices of state

institutions and thus must refer to the state power (Foucault, 1982). A post-structuralist

critique and Foucauldian framework offer a valuable lens to both understand the process

of power relations in play with young people and adult caretakers, purveyors of support,

and the surveillance and normalizing efforts of the state. Power relations are deeply

rooted in society as an integral part of the social nexus (Foucault, 1982, p. 791). In

addition to relationships, power and subjectivity is produced by social institutions

themselves.

Biopower

Biopower consists of two forms of power over life constituting two poles: one

pole is centered on the body as a machine – the optimization of both its usefulness and

docility; the other pole focuses on biological processes in attempts to regulate the

population as a whole including birth and death, health, life expectancy, and of course the

propagation of the species (Foucault, 1990). These two poles function as the basis of

organizing power over life (Foucault, 1990, p. 139). This control over bodies in the

pursuit of production help make capitalism possible (p. 141). Biopower and our

preoccupation with capitalist pursuits as normative are represented in research and

literature that focuses on outcomes reflecting unstable employment, nominal education

attainment, reliance on public assistance, and markers of risk (and deviance) evidenced

through involvement with a justice system. The justice system provides a clear example of either pole of biopower in this system's pursuit of ensuring the usefulness of human bodies while rendering them docile by separating people from the general population and exploiting their bodies through prison labor.

The purpose of dividing (partitioning), governmentality, and hierarchical organizations of productivity is to maximize production, including investment in and contribution to the normative capitalist system as well as reproductive possibilities, which generate the labor force. The labor force aligns with those who own and control the means of production against those living on the edges of social life who pose a threat to this investment in capitalism. Laborers as subjects of dominant normative discourses, get to maintain some status as honorable (re: productive) members of society; this is the controlling of bodies for the means of production coined biopower (Foucault, 1991, as cited in Burchell et al., 1991).

Chapter 4: Methods

Current Study

This dissertation research is a continuation of the interpretation of the data analyzed in Blakeslee and Best (2019) as well as the paper submitted for comprehensive examinations (Best, & Blakeslee, 2020). The original purpose of this study was to identify youth recommended strategies to expand services to enhance support networks (see Blakeslee & Best, 2019). Initial research aims included identifying areas of potential intervention from the perspectives of youth, strategies that providers found feasible, and the development of a preliminary program model. In addition to these aims, I expanded the scope of the interview to collect data for the purposes of this dissertation research. So, in addition to asking about the role of systems and services in the support networks of young people, I asked various questions regarding relationships, including qualities of relationships, roles of both individuals and domains in the provision of support, and elicited stories regarding support network disruption and transformation.

In this dissertation, I approached this data through an entirely different framework. This research included a deductive approach, applying theoretical propositions of Foucault and poststructuralism. Although the initial research aims did not account for examination and analysis of discourse, I had considerable flexibility in adjusting the interview protocol to account for a potential methodological shift in my anticipated analysis. While this flexibility made such an allowance, this is a potential limitation I address after analysis.

Based on my experience working with this population, I was intentional (and confident) about building rapport with participants in brief, isolated interactions. Youth generously volunteered information regarding perspectives on services, formal supports and informal supports, relational qualities, and defining moments and experiences in foster care that impacted support networks. This yielded what I believe to be a rich dataset, which thus far has provided multiple opportunities for analysis. While I was immediately intrigued by narratives, part of my approach in building rapport with young people is a critical perspective on framings of (or discourses about) of youth and young people, particularly "at risk" youth. I have become curious about how these framings impact self-perceptions and how relational interactions reinforce certain discourses and provoke the emergence of counter-discourses.

Recruitment

Youth ages 16 through 20 who were in foster care at the time of recruitment were eligible to participate. We employed a purposive approach to sampling and recruitment of a total of 22 participants occurred in three phases (see Blakeslee & Best, 2019). First, youth attending a statewide ILP conference focused on post-secondary career preparation and planning, participated in a social support network mapping workshop and self-selected to participate. Next, in an effort to increase a more regionally diverse sample, the Oregon Department of Human Services Child Welfare (DHS) generated a random sample list of youth who, according to age, were preparing to age out of foster care. Lastly, halfway through data collection, co-investigators recruited for demographic and geographic diversity through ILP service providers to ensure a representative statewide

sample. Approximately 55% of youth we contacted agreed to participate and all participants provided written consent, in addition to DHS caseworkers' consent to contact all potential participants from each phase. All participants received a $40 gift card for participating.

Participants

Participants were ages 16 to 20 with an average age of 17.68 years. Half of participants were from metropolitan or urban areas, while five were from mid-sized cities, and five lived in rural settings (determined by population density per square mile). Twelve participants identified as female and ten identified as male. Eight participants stated they identified as part of the LGBTQ community, 17 were currently involved in ILP services, and youth-reported time in placement ranged from eight months to over ten years with an average time in care of between four and five years. Participants described their own race and/or ethnicity with exactly half (11) identified as White and/or Caucasian. Six identified as "mixed," two identified as Black and/or African American, and three identified as another race/ethnicity. At the time of the interview, 12 youth were living in a foster home (four of those were kin or biological families), four were living in residential facilities, three were living with friends or friends' parents (uncertified foster homes), one lived with roommates, one lived in college student housing, and one was living in a homeless shelter. To ensure anonymity, the interviewer assigned pseudonyms for each participant.

Data Collection

   Mapping. The support network map in this study is based on Blakeslee's (2015) map and outlined in further detail by Blakeslee and Best (2019). Prior to meeting participants, one intern completed a support network map and participated in an interview while another intern, who had experienced aging out of foster care, observed the interview and provided feedback regarding the map and interview questions. This process served as a pilot interview to aid in revising the map and developing the interview protocol. The research team revised the interview protocol following each interview from the first phase of recruitment.

   Participants completed support network maps and semi-structured, in-person interviews (see Blakeslee & Best, 2019). On each map, youth identified people who had played a significant role in their lives in the past year in four broad areas: family, friends, school/work, and community. Family included anyone the youth considered family, Friends included significant others, school and work typically included teachers, employers, and/or coworkers, and Community often included neighbors, people from church, youth groups, and service providers such as caseworkers, therapists or counselors, and/or ILP service providers. Youth drew lines between their initials in the center of the map and the people on their maps to indicate strength of relationships. Thicker lines indicated strong relationships, narrow lines indicated neutral relationships, and dotted lines represented weak relationships. Strong relationships, or strong ties, were defined as people by whom the participant felt most supported, while dotted lines (weak ties) could represent relationships that existed due to life circumstances (e.g. people with

whom participants lived), relationships where conflict was present, or people with whom participants had irregular or infrequent contact. Neutral ties, represented by narrower lines, were neither especially strong nor especially weak.

Types of support included emotional support (e.g. people with whom participants shared good news or bad news, someone to "lean on" or talk to during difficult times), concrete support (e.g. a place to sleep, money, food, laundry, a ride somewhere), and informational (such as academic advising, how to get a driver's license, writing a resume). Lastly youth circled individuals with whom they had daily or almost daily contact then drew interconnecting lines between people who knew each other, representing interconnection.

Interviewing. After completing individual support network maps, participants responded to a series of questions starting with what stood out to them or what they saw when they looked at their maps. Depending on responses and in varying order, the interview proceeded with questions regarding individual relationships, particularly relationship strength and support. While discussing strong network ties, participants consistently indicated closeness and trust as markers of strong relationships. Interviewers asked participants to define closeness and trust in their own words with questions such as what makes a relationship close, how they defined closeness in a relationship, how they defined trust, what trust looked like to them, and how network members earned their trust. Next youth discussed areas in which they received specific types of support, answered questions about interconnection and discussed their ideal maps, including obstacles in the way of their ideal maps and services that may or may not exist to support

ideal maps. In the final phase of the interview, participants discussed how they anticipated future maps would be composed either a year from the time of the interview or upon exiting care, depending on proximity to exiting (i.e., age). Participants also identified chosen family, older adult role models, and anyone who might be an informal mentor or like an older sibling, aunt, uncle, or grandparent. Participants ended with final thoughts for DHS or anything else they wanted the interviewer to know about their support network maps. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 45 minutes to nearly two and a half hours, with the average length between one and one- and one-half hours.

Field Notes. During each interview, I took notes. Initially, the purpose of notes was to refine the interview protocol. However, notes for each interview outlined personal reactions to each youth, impressions, subjective assessments of emotional experiences related to support, network ties, and holistic maps, and potential biases impacting the interview with the possibility of affecting the analysis. These field notes will supplement interview transcripts in my analysis in an effort to highlight my role in co-constructing narratives.

Method: CDA

I conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the transcripts of 22 interviews I conducted with youth across the state of Oregon who were aging out of the foster care system. CDA's principal aims should deal with abuses of power as well as inequality and injustice (van Dijk, 1993). Thus, CDA works well with one of social work's main ethical principles of challenging injustices (NASW, 2017). In dealing with inequality and

injustice, critical discourse analysists seek to combat this inequality by taking an explicit sociopolitical stance and working from the perspective of those who suffer from dominance and inequality (van Dijk, 1993). In CDA, dominance can be identified through examinations of power that take a top-down approach, while resistance, as evidenced by the potential emergence of counter-discourses, can be identified through bottom-up approaches. This reflects Foucault's conceptualization of power as relational and diffuse, without relying on popular conceptions of power as dichotomous (powerful versus powerless; Foucault, 1977). While critical scholarship should not assume a neutral stance to the topic and questions of interest nor should it "collude with dominance" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254), I examined both instances of dominance and resistance in my analysis. Thus, this data and analysis should remain grounded in the perspectives of the young people I interviewed.

Because forms of dominance appear to be intertwined (van Dijk, 1993), and, while power is relational, power and dominance are both organized within institutions – members of dominant groups exercise power in decision-making (governmentality) and as part of this hegemony, those who are dominated (through processes of normalization) accept this dominance (van Dijk, 1993). As social workers, we must take on similar critiques of dominance, especially when we are implicated. As social work scholars, we must examine our own (re)production of the discourse of young people in care and our disproportionate access to the production of knowledge and discourse. Knowledge informs our interpretations of the world and these transcripts inevitably reflect that influence. Critical discourse analysis allows researchers, as generators of knowledge, to

link these personal stories to larger social structures including discourses and social

representations (van Dijk, 1993).

As social workers and social work researchers, we have access to influence in the

production of knowledge and thus over discourses that reinforce our dominance (van

Dijk, 1993). Critical discourse analysis is only relevant if it contributes to meaningful and

critical perspectives within practice and social work education. This type of analysis

offers us an opportunity to interrogate our own modes of communication, both in our

scholarship as well as our pedagogy, to better understand how we shape and influence the

(re)production of discourse as well as control access to this (re)production through

relational exercises of power. Therefore, in addition to interrogating our own complicity,

participation, and perpetuation of dominance, we can also identify spaces for and acts of

resistance. This critical understanding is what hopefully yields change, particularly for

those who are governed by these discourses and thus acts of dominance. The work of

CDA is ultimately political and critical discourse analysts must therefore be critics and

activists as well as social scientists (van Dijk, 1993).

Critical Discourse Analysis Framework: Gee

While there are multiple and diverse models of critical discourse analysis as well

as overlap among those outlines, in this dissertation I used a framework of discourse

analysis as proposed by Gee (2014a; 2014b). Gee suggests there is no prescriptive

method for discourse analysis (2014b). Like Foucault's relationship with

poststructuralism, the terms Gee uses are reflective of a unique contribution to critical

discourse analysis as a method. Gee's terms are similar conceptualizations proposed by

Foucault and poststructuralism, though the terms may differ slightly; for example, where Foucault discusses subjectivities, Gee refers to identities. Regarding discourse, Gee (2014b) recognizes that the language of discourse informs identity, or "different ways of being in the world at different times and places for different purposes" (p. 3) and language is also the site where identity is constructed (Weedon, 1997). Thus, while identity is informed by available discourses, discourse is informed by context. Both determine the rules or conventions of discourse-informed identity to help determine who is acting appropriately or normally (Gee, 2014b). This enables surveillance and self-monitoring for the purposes of governmentality and normalization.

Similar to Van Dijk's (1993) assertion, Gee distinguishes critical discourse analysis by stating a goal of application. For Gee (2014b), this type of analysis can "illuminate problems and controversies in the world [and] can illuminate issues about the distribution of social goods" (p. 10). By identifying how discourses are enacted by young people, thereby shaping their identities, we can begin to understand differential distribution of social goods, including access to both power in relationships as well as relationships that provide social support.

Building Tasks

According to Gee (2014b), we "continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds through language" (p. 94) in combination with actions, interactions, and ways of thinking. Gee states there are seven areas of "reality" we build through speaking or writing, or what Gee calls the seven building tasks of language in use. These tasks include significance, practices (or activities), identities, relationships, politics,

connections, and sign systems and knowledge. According to Gee, we use language to enact and build these things in the world. One example Gee uses is political discourse that enacts a production of dominance called racism through policies that both confirm and cause that racism, such as laws regarding voting rights or policies that target protestors. This reflects ontological assumptions made by both social constructionism and poststructuralism. For this dissertation, I focused on identities, relationships, and politics. In an example of application that demonstrates flexibility in the method of discourse analysis, Gee deals only with one building task of identities.

Identities

A central task of discourse is the creation and projection of identity (Gee, 2014b) and defining oneself (or the Other) as part of a group. We use language in order to socially construct specific identities in specific contexts and in order to be recognized as taking on a specific identity or role. In addition to language, we use actions, interactions, values, thoughts, beliefs, and so forth to enact identities (subjectivities) of various discourses. Identities, like discourses, are contextually bound to time and place. As a building task, the researcher asks what socially recognizable identities the speaker is attempting to enact or get others to recognize through their communication (Gee, 2014a). Additionally, we ask how the speaker regards other identities, is in relationship with other identities, and how this positioning invariably invites those with whom the speaker is in relationship to take up those identities.

Politics

Gee uses the term politics to refer to "any situation where the distribution of social goods is at stake" (Gee, 2014a, p. 124). According to Gee, what is viewed as a social good can be widely recognized as a good or vary widely among groups and subgroups (such as guns). Social goods can also include how one is treated. Respect and deference reflect social goods recognized by most humans. As building task, Gee says to ask how language is used to construct what is considered a social good by the speaker.

Relationships

Since my interest was in how discourse showed up in narratives of relationships and because identities are socially situated, focusing on this building task was an obvious choice. Gee states language in use contributes to building and sustaining various types of relationships, including relationships with groups and institutions (Gee, 2014a). We also construct relationships based on our perceptions of others' identities. As a task, I asked how language was used to build, sustain, or alter various relationships between the speaker and those included in the speaker's narrative. This task is related to identities since constructions of our identities in a given context are defined by relationships with individuals, groups, or institutions.

Tools of Inquiry

To understand what each building tasks accomplishes, Gee's framework proposes an analysis of language-in-use using 28 tools of inquiry (Gee, 2014a). Due to the amount of data, going through each of the 22 transcripts using 28 tools of inquiry to ask how the building tasks above show up in this data is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Thus, I

selected a subset of tools I applied to further explore what each of the above building

tasks accomplish: The Fill In Tool addresses language and context, the Identities

Building, Relationships, and Politics building tools reflect building things in the world,

and the Big D Discourse Tool is a theoretical tool reflecting core ideas about the use of

language in the world (Gee, 2014a). While informed by Foucault's work, these tools of

inquiry include conceptualizations of terms distinct from Foucault's. For example, when

Gee discuss identities, he is referring to what Foucault calls subjectivities.

The Fill In Tool

The Fill In Tool asks the researcher to consider what may be missing from the

communication (i.e., interview transcription) that will offer clarity to the communication

given what was communicated and in what context (Gee, 2014a, p. 18). This tool reflects

how narratives and thus social reality will be co-constructed. I will communicate my

interpretation of what is inferred during these interviews as well as what assumptions or

knowledge are necessary to communicate to be legible to readers of my analysis in the

way I believe the speaker intended.

The Identities Building Tool

This tool asks what socially recognizable identity (or, as Foucault might

articulate, subject position) the speaker is enacting as well as the identities of those with

whom the speaker is in relationship (Gee, 2014a). According to Gee (2014b), people

anchor themselves in social identities depending on the context. Those identities in turn

inform the language we use and the context in which we use it. Thus, by understanding

the social language employed within these narratives (though the context of where and

when the story is told is specific and influential), I gained insight into the social identities in which my interviewees anchor themselves.

The Relationships Building Tool

This tool asks how language is used to build and shape relationships (Gee, 2014a). These include relationships among the speaker, people include in their social networks, and even relationships with institutions. Gee (2014a) states that the parameters for relationships are set up through identity building (p. 121). It is important to note that these two building tools, while closely related, are distinct tools.

The Politics Building Tool

As I mentioned in the section discussing building tasks, Gee uses politics to describe the distribution of social goods as opposed to government or political party (Gee, 2014a; 2014b). Therefore, this tool asks how language is used to build these social goods, their distribution, or even to withhold them from listeners.

The Big D Discourses Tool

Gee (2014b) understands discourse as a combination of language with other nonverbal ways of enacting identity. While identity includes language as well as actions, interactions, values, thoughts, and beliefs, Discourse refers to how language is used in tandem with the other concepts to enact a specific identity that is socially recognizable. For example, an individual may enact the socially recognizable identity of "professor" by virtue of dress (a tweed sports coat), tools (a presentation remote and PowerPoint slides), objects (a lectern) in the right place (Cramer Hall 271) at the right time (Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:00 PM to 2:50 PM) in combination with language (quoting Aristotle).

In an effort to employ this tool of inquiry, I relied on my field notes (observations and impressions) in tandem with transcriptions of interviews. I also depended heavily on clues within the transcripts that signaled nonverbal discursive cues employed to enact specific social identities.

Steps of Analysis

To analyze how young people used language to construct the three areas of reality (identities, politics, and relationships), or building tasks of discourse, I applied the five tools of inquiry to explore what these building tasks accomplish in youths' narratives of relationships. I read each transcript multiple times while listening to audio recordings of the interviews. About halfway through analysis, I relied solely on text and referenced audio recordings to contextualize particularly salient quotes. As I read each transcript, I labeled any section of text with the corresponding tasks as labels to more readily identify text that demonstrated evidence of each area of reality (relationships, identities, and politics). In addition to the five aforementioned tools, several other labels emerged from the texts. Thus, in refining labels, I created a codebook to more explicitly define each label, given the iterative and highly interpretative nature of this process. I first created the label "Map" to identify any text that explicitly or specifically referred to the physical map each participant completed. Next, I created a "Miscellaneous" label, which remained throughout coding, but quickly evolved into multiple other codes. The first label was ILP Plus ("ILP+"), which I later changed to Formal Support Plus ("FS+"). This label identified text where participants discussed formal supports at greater length and distinguished these relationships from other formal supports. The next label, "Context,"

demarcated excerpts where participants discussed explicitly physical contexts (placements, schools, jobs, neighborhoods) while also discussing at least one area of reality (relationships, identities, or politics). This code evolved to represent a more figurative context, beyond physical environment, including time (point in history, specific time in the past the participant references). Lastly, a label referring to "Critical Incidents" emerged. These were excerpts that referred to incidents that led to significant changes, sometimes in placement, in self-conceptualization (identity/subjectivity), or relationships.

After I labeled interview transcripts, I reviewed notes and labels across interviews to identify patterns. I also generated a report that compiled each labeled section into a spreadsheet. For each participant, I created one spreadsheet with quotes for each code in separate tabs. I then highlighted specific passages where language demonstrated or reflected the definition of each label. During labeling of each transcript, I compiled notes, or thematic summaries, of each interview. Thematic summaries provided broad overviews of each interview, including general statements regarding how participants broadly constructed each area of reality. Each thematic summary began with a reflexive exercise of comparing my own recollection of the interview to the transcript and audio recording (i.e., the actual data). This illuminated the many and various ways I exercised power related to a presumed subject position (researcher, doctoral student, youth worker) impacting language participants used, co-constructing narrative portions of interviews, and ultimately leading participants to a highly structured explication of support networks. I explore these impositions in my limitations section. While this was a critical reflexive

exercise, a more in-depth, reflexive exploration is beyond the scope of this dissertation, though I do address my role and potential influence throughout.

Thematic summaries also included interrogation of assumptions I made at the time of the interview, in my recollection of those interviews, and throughout reading each transcript. Thus, in using the Fill-In Tool during my analysis, I also sought to make strange (Gee, 2014a) taken-for-granted assumptions based on my experience and knowledge by asking what information was missing for someone unfamiliar with (the context of foster care, the phenomenon of aging out of the foster care system, and any associated experience or specialized language). This was the explicit function of the Fill-In Tool. Essentially, what would an outsider need to know in order to understand and contextualize the text, be it an excerpt, a story, specific language, a type of relationship, or any other utterance one could only understand through experience and/or study? Upon completing thematic summaries, I returned to reports (compiled quotes) and reduced the data even further by selected a fewer number of passages I felt articulated the three areas of reality, Identities, Politics, and Relationships, whose linkages later came to reflect each discourse that emerged in my analysis.

This process was in service of answering the following research question: *What does a critical discourse analysis reveal about how youth in care describe social supports?* Because relationships act as sites of resource provision and identity building, these are also sites where people invoke discourses to locate themselves in these relationships, enact these identities, and thus recognize themselves as subjects of the various discourses they may invoke. Through this analysis, I explored how youth located

themselves in relation to these discourses, in what ways these discourses have been internalized and reproduced, and how narratives functioned as the site of that reproduction. I also identified the emergence of counter-discourses or places of resistance in which young people engaged in power relations. In addition to the role of both formal and informal supports in the lives of young people aging out of care, these results highlight the various discourses and subjectivities available to the young people I interviewed.

Ethical Considerations

Youth in foster care experience considerable loss, especially losses of relationships and supports. Interviews with young people preparing to age out of foster care that ask them to reflect on some of that loss can be distressing. I extended every effort to minimize risk related to this distress, as outlined by the Portland State University Institutional Review Board guidelines. Prior to participating in the interview, I communicated the full purpose of the research study to guardians and participants, including potential risks and benefits. All legal guardians consented to the participation of the young people in their care, those young people assented to participation, and those over the age of 18 who were invited to participate provided consent. Following the interviews, I provided all participants contact information should any questions arise or should participants need support or other resources related to any risk of participating in this study. I explained to each participant the confidential nature of their responses, that their participation was completely voluntary and would not impact receipt of services through child welfare, and ensured they were appropriately compensated for their time.

Lastly, I provided every young person I interviewed with a copy of their completed support network maps. Recently, as per IRB guidelines, any identifying information connected to the data has been permanently destroyed.

Chapter 5: Findings

The purpose of this critical discourse analysis was to discover what discourses young people invoked when discussing social supports. In discussing friends, family, formal supports, and various other social relationships, participants invoked two broad discourses: those of the normal teen and the normal foster kid. This chapter will present the results of my analysis by first introducing these two broad discourses, defined by unique characteristics, or discursive properties and practices including the language participants used, of either discourse. I will also discuss ways participants positioned themselves in opposition to these discourses and contradictions that emerged related to that positioning. The discourse of the normal teen was characterized by normative family structures, access to friendships, and normative transitions to young adulthood. The discourse of the typical foster kid was characterized by the discursive technology of professional documentation, hyper-independence, professionalized relationships, dysfunctional family systems, and unmet needs.

While participants invoked either discourse at various points of the interview, they used these discourses to identify ways they, themselves, were neither exclusively nor entirely the normal teen nor the typical foster kid. Interestingly enough, while participants rarely explicitly affirmed that they were represented by either discourse, their resistance to one discourse often enforced the other. Thus, participants invoked discourses in ways the reflected a constant renegotiation of their subject positions, moving among both discourses and counter-discourses, expressed by opposition or rejection of the norms they articulated, representing contradictions to those subject positions. Contradictions included

independence as an asset; exceptionalism marked by accomplishments, luck, and invested

providers; and finally working with the system.

Throughout this chapter, I refer to the young people I interviewed as participants

to help distinguish when I discuss discourses of youth versus when I discuss the young

people (youth) I interviewed. When referring to specific participants or when using

quotes to demonstrate findings, I refer to the participant by their assigned pseudonym. To

contextualize the identities of individual participants, I have included a demographic

table for reference [see Appendix B].

The Normal Teen

The discourse of the normal teen was characterized by normative family

structures, friendships with specific characteristics, and normative transitions to

adulthood. Family structures were more traditional, often referring to biological families,

but also extended to adoptive and foster families that resembled that more traditional

structure. The discourse of the normal teen included discrete definitions of friendships,

how the subject of this discourse made friends, and the impact of transition on these

friendships. Lastly, this discourse accounted for normative transitions to adulthood

marked by college, work, and the impact of this transition of friendships. Access to

family, friends, and normative transitions was greater for the subject of this discourse

than access youth in care typically had.

Family Structures

The discourse of the normal teen was characterized as having support networks

with more robust and traditional family structures. When mapping out his network, James

aligned himself with the normal teen, suggesting family-based support comprised a substantial part of his support network. James said, "The biggest section would be family, I'd probably need, like, a second box for family." Wyatt, who was adamant that his foster parents were simply "mom and dad" felt protective over what was a new family construct for him, stating, "I'm extremely big on family. Never had a family so my family is my family. You fuck with them then I'd probably kill somebody." While Wyatt invoked the subject position of the normal teen by identifying his family, including a mom, dad, and siblings, he also pointed out that this was something he never had, positioning himself in contrast to the normal teen. This discourse was also characterized by family as a need. Matt, who had spent several years in a residential facility, stated,

> I need a family… Everybody does. I mean, if it's foster or if they can somehow find someone who will just take me in. Someone who, like, wants children, can't have them. I mean, I'm up for adoption. I want s- a family.

Wyatt and Matt both constructed a specific type of family that "everybody" needed or to which everybody should have access. In articulating this particular family construct was something "everybody" needed, the implication is that this construction was both normalized and that normal teens had this. Matt's descriptions also reflected a discursive practice of how youth in care became integrated into families and thus became subjectivized as the normal teen:

> Adoption usually happens after a foster family takes in a child and realizes that this child's parents aren't gonna be there for them. And it's like, "Hey. We actually like this kid. We want to take him into our family." That's usually how it works.

In addition to need, discursive constructions of the normal teen's family contributed to a young person's overall well-being. In other words, the discursive normal teen was seen as healthier because of this family support. Luca stated that "maybe having more of my family members in my life would be another good thing to have," and that the absence of those relationships was detrimental to his overall well-being. According to this discourse, normal teens' families guaranteed successful transitions to adulthood. Reflecting on the various types of contexts in which she had been placed while in foster care, Amy said, "Being placed in a family home that works with teenagers. That would be, like, my best shot…" and that she needed DHS "to understand that I needed this [family] and don't have it and that's gonna affect the way that I - I work with them."

Mothers. Within this discursively normative family, mothers played a specific role that reflected normative child-parent relationships and discursive practices of modeling relational skills. In addition to their families, the discursive normal teen had a mom who provided typically maternal support: she worried, she babied, and she wanted to ensure good choices. James stated, regarding his map:

> I think that if I went into a more independent situation, I think that might improve the relationship with my mom at least, because then she knows that I'm making good decisions on my own and she doesn't have to worry about babying me for the rest of my life.

James' remark constructed a specific relationship with his mother, as a parental figure enacting a normative role of mother through the discursive practice of encouraging good

decisions and worrying or babying their teenage child. Regarding her deceased mother, Reagan shared,

> … my mom was more of my best friend than my mom, you know?... Like, even though my mom was on drugs, she was, like, still, like, a good mom. Like, she got me and Shelby to school, she still kept food in the house, never, like- we were, like- we still got things that we wanted even though they weren't needed. Like, we got movies and new clothes, like, every month and stuff, and she still left money for us, even though she was also under the influence, you know?

Reagan's relationship reflected a mother/daughter dynamic often present in dominant discourse and invoked by many of the young women I interviewed, that a woman's mother was her best friend. Once placed in a foster family, Amanda's foster mother taught her how to have a "normal" relationship with her mother, saying,

> While I was in foster care, I kind of rekindled my relationship with my mom and we became best friends. 'Cause before I moved out of her house I kind of mothered her. And so, um, when I was in foster care, I learned how to not do that, and just have like a normal mother-daughter relationship with her.

Brianna's relationship with her mother echoed a similar sentiment when she said, "My mom loves me more than she loves anyone in the whole world. I'm her only child. I am her whole world," similar to Gabe's mention of his own mother who "loves me to death. She's great…" While being in care reflected relationships between parents and children that was deemed problematic, participants used their own family relationships as either

an indicator of their normalcy or to highlight barriers that prevented their access to the status of "normal teen."

Friendships

Like families, the subject position of the normal teen was characterized by greater access than youth in care to friendships. In describing social relationships, participants located their own networks relative to what they understood to be "normal" for youth who were not in care. Amanda felt her foster family offered what Amy and Matt felt they lacked, but still invoked when discussing their maps. Amanda poignantly stated, "I hope to grow that um, connection with my foster family. Um, and maybe gain a couple more friends, and just live a normal teenage life." This "normal teenage life" was thus characterized by multiple friendships and the absence of worry and concern. Amanda added that she "was in like, a carefree environment, where I wasn't worried about, you know, food and clothing, so that I could focus on relationship building." In discussing this environment, Amanda positioned herself in closer alignment to the discourse of the normal teen, suggesting the normal teen did not worry about basic needs, but instead enjoyed freedom and had more friends.

Discourse of the normal teen suggested a particular construct of friendships that a normal teen would pursue in specific ways, demonstrated by participants' descriptions of friendships and ways to make friends. When asked about how her friends supported her, Reagan stated:

> People always say this, but honestly, surround yourself with the people that are gonna, like, help you, and that aren't gonna talk about it to other people. People

that you can trust to, like, just, let your heart out and trust them to be, like, "I

understand, and I'm here for you, and if you ever need to talk to me again, you

can. And I promise that I will never, ever, ever make fun of you." Like, it's really

hard to find those people.

She described making and sustaining friendships following a move to Oregon after her

mother's death and exiting a drug rehabilitation facility. Sharing her story in a general

way, Reagan suggested to "look at the people who are trying to be here for you now, and

maybe just give them a chance. Reagan also shared friendships involved "people being

there for each other… not just a one-way street" and that "there has to be trust." The

discourse of the normal teen included a process of identity development anchored in

these peer groups, an emphasis on reciprocity in friendships, and practicing relational

skills. For Amanda, it was a matter of "just making sure that I'm as good of a friend"

while Luca expressed wanting friends that he "can have a connection to and can rely on

for support and that they can feel like they can rely on me for support too, because it

should go both ways."

Transitions to Adulthood

The social life of the normal teen was discursively constructed within and

institutionally mediated by high school settings, typical public high schools. Participants

suggested these settings offered access to friendships with peers that impacted "normal"

teens beyond the high school environment. In discussing how he might make friends,

Matt said, "something as simple as going to a public high school would be great. And,

like, b- mostly because I would have a diverse amount of people to talk to." Despite

having never attended a public high school, Matt was certain that high school was where

normal relationships were formed and enacted, asserting that, "more of people's

relationships either start or end in high school" and that "the friendships, those last a very

long time. The friendships you make in high school can make or break what happens later

in life."

Beyond just friendships, high school also acted as a site for interactions with

adults and, more specifically, normal relationships with teachers. Though distinctly

outside this discourse, James' invoked the normal teen discourse in sharing about his

experiences in a residential placement that prevented access to these relationships. James

said:

> I just wish that I didn't have to put the staff on here. I just wish that I'd be able to
>
> not be here and just be out in the community, and actually have, like, other
>
> people, like my boss, or my friends, or actual teachers who do care about where
>
> I'm at academically, and not just where I'm at physically, like placements and
>
> stuff.

Locating themselves in closer alignment to the normal teen, both Amari and Brianna

shared experiences they had with supportive teachers in high school. As with friendships,

the normal teen's relationships with teachers were also characterized by intentionality.

Amari stated:

> I always try to have some sort of relationship with my teacher, so like classes isn't
>
> so boring. Or not just so boring for me, so I've always like had to establish some

sort of connection with my teachers, so I'm able to like talk to them and like have

these things, because I've always had really cool teachers.

Brianna echoed the importance and impact of those relationships, saying her "previous

connections that I've had at school, they were so great, I have really high expectations.

And for college, I feel like they're unrealistic expectations to have those kinds of

connections." This assertion reflected part of the discourse of the normal teen, that

college was both expected and would be less protective, in terms of relational support,

than high school.

Brianna's remarks regarding college reflected an understood trajectory for the

normal teen that involved college and work. After discussing her connections in high

school, Brianna shared that many people in her support network "are people that I mostly

met because of college." Matt continued to describe the impact of friendships beyond

high school and into young adulthood, stating the following:

I know they're not gonna hear it from me personally, but, uh, just more to play

into that fact is young adults need to be able to have interactions with people their

age. Not just, not just other guys or just other girls. But just, like, they need to be

able to have connections. If you don't make connections earlier on when, when

you're a teenager, um, once you get older, it's gonna be harder because people

become more distant, they're more focused on working, taxes, um, their kids if

they have any, the stresses of getting a promotion. The stresses of bills. And l-

when you're gonna get your next meal.

Amari also alluded to the eventuality of adulthood stating, "I worry about money later. I need to graduate on time." Wyatt, while similarly considerate of the future, also wanted to prioritize school as a track to successfully transitioning to adulthood and how the support he received from adults was integral to that transition. Wyatt aligned himself with the normal teen, saying, "My teachers make sure I stay on track. My principal wants me to go to college. My sports coaches are preparing me for college," with this track clearly being the normative college-bound trajectory. Similarly, Matt's description of formal supports were also invested in his very normative transition to adulthood revealed his identification with the discourse of the normal teen.. Matt shared, "So basically, what we're trying to do is get me a good job, um, ready for college, and, um, like, just a concrete, like, plan for when I get out of here." Gabe invoked this subject position by alluding to a normative family structure and a typical transition, stating he had "become a little bit more, um, independent this year with like working and stuff so I don't have to rely on my mom and dad as much."

The Typical Foster Kid

Because I sought to center the experiences of young people aging out of care, a more robust discourse of the typical foster kid emerged during these interviews. This discourse included the discursive technology of documentation (and participants' paperwork), hyper-independence, professionalized relationships, dysfunctional families, and unmet needs. Participants invoked this discourse when discussing trust, few selective friendships and small networks, networks dominated by paid service providers, family

dynamics and the role of mothers, and various social goods related to placements and basic needs.

The Discursive Technology of Documentation

Participants invoked the discourse of the typical foster kid in their depictions of being trapped in a system where the support they needed was not available and they were no more than a file. Many participants invoked this discourse when discussing service providers, describing service providers who depended on the foster kid's case file in order to get to know them. This illustrated a feature of this discourse in which the typical foster kid was reduced to professional documentation. Thalia invoked this part of the discourse of the typical foster kid when I asked her what she wanted DHS to know. Thalia shared the following:

> The biggest thing is that these caseworkers need to really know their kiddos. Know them. Don't judge. Don't read paperwork. Know them. Hang out with them. Talk to them. They have busy schedules, we understand that, but at least meet with these kids. At least, I'm talking about not even once, like twice a month.

Thalia's response demonstrated that "these kids" rarely interact with caseworkers beyond the required monthly meeting, but instead supplemented what they knew about foster kids by reading paperwork. Brianna also discussed the tendency of the typical foster kid to be reduced to a file, saying "people can be different being explained and different on paper than how they are in real life." At the same time, Brianna resisted this discourse, discussing relationships with providers with whom she was close while also stating resolutely, "I am definitely different on paper than I am in real life." Matt said of the

typical foster kid, "They become their paperwork..." Matt's use of "they" implied a general collective experience while also setting him apart from this, a tension I discuss in the final section. Still, even while distancing himself from the discourse, Matt continued to employ this language, implying an assumption anyone would understand regarding service providers. Matt said his particular caseworker was "experienced in her job, so she knows that, like, while she is a caseworker, she's dealing with an actual person and not just a name on a sheet of paper." He felt his caseworker had gotten to know him and that he was "more than the paperwork. There's an actual person behind that. There's more than, um, what the paperwork says. There's a different story behind what someone else has written down. Or what other people have heard and written down." Matt also expressed appreciation that of his service providers with the following statement:

> Just people being real. Not like, being like, "Well I sorta have to do my job so I can't be a person with you." It's more like, "Well I can do my job and still be real with you and still like treat you like a person. Instead of a statistic."

Matt's language demonstrates that the typical foster kid is regarded as information written on paper, such as a statistic and that the norm of a service provider doing their job is to be impersonal. Even in this counterexample, Matt reinforced the presumption of the discourse as representative of a common reality.

Hyper-Independence

The discourse of the typical foster kid was frequently characterized by hyper-independence that inevitably led to the discursive typical foster kid being socially isolated, with more limited access to relationships than the normal teen. When discussing

limited access to relationships, participants discursively constructed a common trope of placement instability as a main contributor to social isolation. Jessica, who had been living with an aunt and uncle provided an apt summation of this trope and subject position, saying the following:

> …in foster care, you end up going around a lot of different places and it's hard to maintain contact, especially if you're younger in foster care. Like, I went into foster care at eighth grade, so I wasn't super young when I went in, but I still found myself losing a lot of what I thought was support networks, like, the first couple of years that I was in foster care, because I moved around a lot, and so it was hard to make any lasting connection with anybody.

The collective "you" Jessica addresses generalizes her experience, suggesting this is the norm for the typical foster kid. She then invokes her own experience to illustrate the legitimacy of her claim.

Because of the frequent loss of relationships, participants argued that they had learned to rely on themselves, seeing social support as unreliable and untrustworthy. This was presented as simply a feature of life as a young person in care. Jessica reflected this when she said:

> …being in foster care, you learn to kind of distance yourself from people and you just don't reach out to people as much because you're kind of taught to be self-sufficient and you're taught that everybody kind of just leaves you.

Again, Jessica generalized her experience, connecting herself and her experiences of relationship instability to the discourse of the typical foster kid. When I asked Jessica

follow up questions regarding her support, she expanded that this was something she learned because of the way she was treated, stating:

> It's just kind of the way that people treat you when you're in foster care. Like, people aren't willing to extend certain leniencies, or, are willing to lend you things, or they're not willing to help you when you're in foster care, because there's a stigma around being in foster care, that you're, like, a troubled kid, and so you kind of learn to do everything on your own. So, it's just kind of the people around you, in not helping you, teach you that you have to be kind of on your own.

When I asked Wyatt about support, he stated, "I don't ask for support. I'm a very independent person." Wyatt also shared, "I know people can't be trusted" and that he had "really bad trust issues." Kai also learned not to trust anybody and even communicated a general dismissal of relationships, stating that "friends always stab you in the back. So, I don't really want any of those. And when you do get any friends, I learned the hard way, they do stab you in the back." Ila was more resigned as well and stated, succinctly, "People come and go." While some people were resigned to the fate of the overly self-reliant and independent foster kid, participants also valued this type of independence. With pride and confidence, Diane asserted that she had "always looked up to myself. I'm my own role model. I've never really looked to someone and [said], 'I want to be like that, do it like that way.'" In these cases, self-reliance and isolation were constructed as essential features of the experience of being in care; whether seen as positive or negative, participants aligned themselves with this feature of the discourse of the typical foster kid.

In addition to explicit assertions of independence and a hesitancy to trust, independence was also represented by intentionally small networks of relationships that reflected a relational pattern in the discourse of the typical foster kid. Where the discursive "normal teen" was characterized by greater access to a broader range of carefree relationships, the typical foster kid discursively kept tighter networks out of necessity and self-preservation. The discourse of the typical foster kid included a subject with a small social circle they could more easily surveil, like Wyatt who stated, "I keep a very tight circle… Because you're least likely to get let down" and that it was "easier to keep an eye on them that way… To make sure that they don't fuck me over." Like the normal teen discourse, the discourse of the typical foster kid included intentionality regarding relationships, but this was more in terms of *who* one accepted as a close relationship versus how one ought to show up in relationships. Brianna said she was "very selective" about close relationships and that she had "high expectations, which could be a pro and a con, but it never backfires on me…" Kai, who vacillated between complete isolation and selectivity, said, "I don't have that many people, but all the people I have are close." Marie had a similar approach to Brianna, which also seemed to work well for her. Marie stated:

> I know a lot of people I am friends with talk about how like they don't have any loyal friends and stuff and I was sitting there like I don't have to worry about that because I am so picky about who I let into my life so I don't really have to worry about that aspect.

Similar to Marie feeling like her friends were loyal, Justin said there were "only a few worth keeping in my life" and "I'm not gonna put in the effort if they're not gonna put in the effort." Justin drew a clear boundary between his small network by saying, "We're all close and we don't let outsiders in… I don't want ghosts." Ghosts, for Justin, were people who were not connected to other members of a support network. These participants discursively constructed the typical foster kid as consistently let down, unable to trust, and whose network lacks close relationships as well as interconnection among unintegrated members. However, participants also took pride in the boundaries and emotional defenses they enacted in accordance with this discourse.

As an extension of self-protection and closed boundaries, the discursive typical foster kid was isolated from the possibility of building friendships with same-aged peers. Amy, who preferred relationships with her service providers and formal supports, invoked a "normal" foster kid experience saying, "I don't harbor relationships here well [referring to the "Friends" section of her map]. But that's not something they need to be worried about, just to know that that's normal and that doesn't make me crazy." The implication here is that normal teenagers have friends, but it's perfectly normal for the typical foster kid to have few, if any same-aged friends. Amy's statement also demonstrates the professionalization of the relationships of the discursive typical foster kid, which I discuss below in a separate section. Luca expanded on the experience of having few friends, sharing, "Outside of my family and who I work with professionally, outside of that, I don' t have many like, close friends that I can rely on for support."

This discourse suggested the typical foster kid had support networks that were further mediated by residential and other professional institutions. For participants in residential placements, there were strict guidelines and policies for friendships reflecting one discursive technology of social isolation for the typical foster kids, with few friends inside the program and many friends outside the program with whom the typical foster kid in residential care would or could not have contact. Among other challenges she encountered, Diane struggled to connect with people in residential, summarizing her experience with the following statement:

> I hate those programs I don't support them at all… I don't know whose smart idea it was to throw like kids with like, anxiety and like panic attacks and suffer from depression to be put with a kid with anger issues, ADHD problems, you know…

In this excerpt, Dianne linked her experience to the discursive typical foster kid, whose experiences were assumed to match her own. When Diane said "to throw like kids with like, anxiety…" she linked herself directly to *other* kids. She was thus aligned with the typical foster kid who got thrown into residential contexts devoid of organic relationships. Similarly, Savannah shared she had "a lot of friends outside of here" and that "it just kinda sucks like, not having anyone to talk to besides people here." Savannah shared that her best friends were outside the program and that she was "not allowed to see them. I can't even message them on Facebook. Like, they added me… but I can't talk to them." She said while she could get on Facebook, she could only "talk to the people that are on my contact lists, but I can't talk to anyone else." Patrick also discussed the process of getting friends added to his contact list, but that the process itself was prohibitive.

Patrick attempted to outline the process, but was uncertain how it worked or what contributed to the decision of who was added to the contact list, stating:

> I'll either ask my case manager here… or I'll ask my caseworker and see if I can get someone added to my contact list. It has this, like process, I don't know what it's called or anything, but to make sure they have like, no bad record or anything and make sure they're a good influence on me.

Both Savannah's and Patrick's statements reflect discursive technologies of bureaucratic and institutional processes that limit supportive connections and relationships, thus illustrating experiences of friendship for the typical foster kid. Matt, who did not have a single friend on his map, either inside or outside of the program, said the program was "preventing me- It's completely inhibiting my abilities to socialize with other people."

In addition to residential placements, child welfare providers, like caseworkers and foster parents, acted as gatekeepers to informal relationships by partitioning participants from peers. James, while also in a residential placement, said he also kept "a pretty small circle of people… so, they're [DHS] not wondering like, 'Oh wait, but who's this friend that he keeps talking about?' you know?" For James, like many foster youth, it was just easier to have fewer friends than to go to the process of having caseworkers approve (or approve of) these friendships. While Kai invoked an experience potentially common among "normal teenagers," he explained he was not allowed to have a girlfriend, which he did anyway, "because I was on the run for a while" and because of that his grades were "too fucked up for me to have a girlfriend." He saw this as an issue specific to his child welfare involvement. Frustrated by child welfare asserting control

over his relationships, Kai continued, "Like, don't have a girlfriend because your grades are bad? The two are not connected." For Reagan and Gabe, lack of friends was related to previous placements with unreasonably strict foster parents. Reagan recalled that her previous foster mother would not let her leave the house often and that, "she wouldn't let us have access to the WiFi, and we couldn't talk to anybody, really. Like, it was always, like, monitored, so I never really talked to him [her brother] for, like, two months…" Gabe also was confined to the property of his foster parents' home, saying, he "had to stay like, within the fence of our house. We could never leave. We could only really see our parents on visitations." In all cases, participants described these limitations and the corresponding surveillance as a given in out-of-home care. These characteristics of the discourse were assumed as an inevitable for the discursive typical foster kid.

The discursive typical foster kid was partitioned from informal relationships and participants invoked this when they expressed longing for more control over their social lives and relational worlds. Both Matt and Savannah described uncertainty who their friends would be once they left their respective residential programs, indicating a lack of control as well as anxiety over their social lives. Savannah said, "I have other friends, but I don't- I haven't seen my friends for a year so I don't really know who I would call my friend, really." Matt echoed that same uncertainty, saying, "I don't even know if those people either remember me or still hold me in the same standing that we once had." In continuing to express a yearning to reconnect with her friends, Savannah enumerated all the ways she had grown and changed, saying, "Foster kids talk to the people that they think are safe for them and just kind of monitor that, if they don't think they're safe."

Here, Savannah aligned herself with the typical foster kid. Reagan, expressing gratitude

for being out of the strict foster home said of her current foster parent:

> I wouldn't say that she's breaking the rules, but she's bending them, because you
>
> know how, with DHS, you have to do a whole background check and everything
>
> like that? But she's just kind of trusting me to choose the right people to hang out
>
> with, you know

Through this language, participants aligned themselves with the discursive typical foster

kid who whose informal connections or access to friendships was mediated by DHS.

Since DHS seemed to govern so many of the relationships to which young people had

access, Kai shared his idea for building friendships through events that child welfare

organized. Kai lamented that most of the events seemed geared toward younger kids and

suggested that foster kids could make friends through more age-appropriate events. Kai

stated:

> Like, if they had a basketball tournament, just for fun. Like, not like a, everybody
>
> get their own team, but I'm saying, you know like, anything where like kids
>
> interacted with each other, you know. 'Cause then [there'd] be more people like,
>
> 'Okay, now I have a friend, I'm not alone anymore.' People would be, like, 'cause
>
> I'm not saying it's me who's alone right now, 'cause I'm in good shape, I got
>
> friends and shit, but I'm saying like, there's other people in the system, going
>
> through- 'Cause me like, last year, I was lonely as hell. Had no friends.

While Kai was careful to position himself in contrast to the typical foster kid, referencing

"other people in the system" reflected the subjectification of the typical foster kid

experiencing isolation and loneliness, unable to access friendships or other informal connections.

Professionalized Relationships

Because participants had trouble establishing lasting relationships, were more selective in establishing and maintaining relationships, or simply lacked access to those opportunities, many participants' networks were dominated by formal supports, a feature of the typical foster kid's support network. The discursive practice of surveilling informal supports, particularly friendships was often reflected participants' support networks, which included people who were paid to be in relationship with them. As I shared above, Amy observed of her network, "Mine's like paid positions, which is like a normal foster kid thing." Amy accepted her experience as normative and thus in clear alignment with what was expected of youth in care. Amy's way of building relationships was through these formalized services. Amy shared, "I build good relationships through working with people but I don't necessarily, uh, accommodate a lot of friends in my life." When Matt mapped out his support network, not a single person was an informal support. In other words, Matt had no friends and no family. Every single person on his map was a service provider or a paid employee of the residential facility where he lived. When Reagan offered hypothetical advice to making friends, she made a point of saying one's team could stand in the place of friends, stating, "It's hard to find those people, and it takes time, but if you, when you find those people, it's really amazing. And, like, your team, even, like, your team people can be like that for you." This quote demonstrated Reagan's acceptance that the discursive typical foster kid had few non-professional friends, but

also sought to reframe this as a positive outcome. Matt's, Reagan's, and Amy's support

maps reflect a hallmark of the discourse of the typical foster kid: professionalized

relationships.

Brianna was another participant who had connections with service providers in lieu of

informal relationships with family. When Brianna talked about her family, some of whom

had cut her off and a couple who had died, she stated, "a large portion of my family has

not been permanent and that is something that I really struggled with especially like

coming out of high school, um, and then she [ILP provider] was like kinda my first super

permanent connection." Later in her interview, Amy, although she felt particularly close

to service providers, lamented, "I'm 19. People who are 45 don't want to be friends with

me. Like, I'm a child figure to them." Although she aligned herself with the discourse of

the typical foster kid here, Amy also questioned some of the features of those

relationships, highlighting their imbalance and lack of reciprocity.

The professionalization of relationships was further exemplified by the boundaries of

professional roles within these relationships. In the discourse of the typical foster kid,

service providers were not necessarily invested beyond the boundaries of their roles and

jobs. Many participants reinforced this when discussing service providers who were

indeed detached and limited by strict boundaries, reinforcing the assumption that these

are experiences typical for foster kids. Amy said, "I wish those people cared about me as

a human instead of just caring about me because that was their job to." James talked at

length regarding relationships with staff at his residential placement and the boundaries

of those relationships saying he wasn't "overly close, 'cause that'd be unprofessional"

and that if a resident got "too attached to somebody here, it can cause problems within the treatment." Even in day-to-day interactions, James was aware of the boundaries that existed due to the professional tone of the relationship, saying the following:

> A normal human thing is to ask, "Hey, what about you?" because a lot of what the staff have to do here is asking about you and your experiences, and you want to get to know them rather than just telling them all about you, right?... But, when you say, "So, how about you?" he'll say, "Oh, I, I can't tell you because it's an attachment thing." It's, it's a professional boundary that they are not allowed to cross.

While James wanted his relationship with his ILP provider to be reciprocal, he recognized "that he genuinely cares about me, but, um, because of his job and- and the field of work he's currently doing, he's not allowed to like, tell me a lot about himself." In general, James felt the staff at his placement were "not supposed to be like, friends. They're supposed to be like, co-workers or associates… that'll help you out with the stuff you need to get done." This language indicated the formal and professional nature of many participants' relationships. This language also reflected a central conflict inherent in the discourse of the typical foster youth: relationships are transactional and professionalized, limited by structures and boundaries of governing organizations and institutions. At the same time, youth in care were restricted from having many other organic relationships because of their status as foster youth

When I asked about specific types of support, participants identified other boundaries regarding support provision. When I spoke with Carla about her caseworker,

she simply stated, "She's a caseworker. Not my… best friend." This indicated a caseworker could not have a close relationship with foster kids nor could this caseworker really provide support beyond the implied boundaries of their professional role. Brianna elaborated on this idea saying of her caseworker, "I'm not gonna tell her about every problem in my life 'cause that's not her job." ILP providers sometimes occupied a similarly specific and minimal space in the support networks of foster kids. Patrick shared about his contact with both his caseworker and his ILP provider:

> I don't see her that often. She only comes out, like, if I'm doing a really bad job or, like, if I turn around and start doing a really good job. Those are like the only times she'll come out. Um. ILP workers, like, 'cause, like, you have to meet with them for your first 90 days. You have to meet with an ILP worker for 90 days, twice a month. Um, and then after that, it's once a month.

Patrick's providers fulfilled the minimum requirement of their relationships according to their roles in Patrick's life. Like Patrick, Gabe only had contact with his ILP provider when he absolutely needed to, saying, "I don't really talk to them [ILP] other than when I had to, uh, you know, see them once a month for my, um, monthly meetings about this and that or like my receipts and all that." Thus, participants' relationships with service providers were mediated by material necessity, a discursive practice further isolating the typical foster kid from more consistent relationships that might otherwise be deeper or more intimate.

In addition to the limited amount and types of support service providers could offer, the discourse of the typical foster kid included an understanding that relationships

that were largely temporary. While Gabe felt particularly supported by a previous foster parent, even this was not enough to sustain the relationship beyond foster care and Gabe said he felt like "a lot of kids get to like, a certain age or extent where their foster dad or foster parent kinda loses contact with them." Reagan said of her entire team, "I feel like they're all just gonna fade away, just because of confidentiality and stuff and like, keeping their lives separate…" Both statements reiterate the temporariness of formalized relationships, reflecting the very specific roles and boundaries of these people in the lives of typical foster kids. These statements also reflect the precarity of some contexts that lead to isolation and self-protectiveness, both characteristic of the discourse of the typical foster kid.

Many participants who spoke of frequent and unexpected changes in service providers, particularly caseworkers, further demonstrated temporariness. Ila shared regarding her caseworker that he only recently "became my caseworker not too long ago" and that they "didn't say nothing to me. I think they said something to my grandma and she doesn't live here." Ila continued, "he's been my caseworker I think for like, I'd say like… six months, because I used to have a- a different caseworker." Ila also did not seem to have much contact with him. When I asked Ila how often she saw her caseworkers, she replied the following:

> When he know we have court coming up, he'll like, come – like he'll just randomly show up here, and like, talk to us about, oh you know, we have court coming up, and what they're gonna be talking about and all that stuff, but other than that like, I'll be texting him, he doesn't answer my text, my calls, nothing. I

mean I know he busy but he could honestly get back to me, let me know

something, but he just – he only comes when or talks to me – he calls or-or shows

up when we have court coming up.

I asked Ila the last time she had contact with her caseworker, and she stated she had no

idea, that she would just "go on about my day because like, if you can't do something,

you can't do something. If you don't want to do it, you don't want to do it." Ila was

referring to a variety of resources, including basic needs, she had requested from her

caseworker. Ila's experience with her caseworker illustrated unavailability and

unexpected appearances as a common feature of the typical foster kid discourse. Thalia,

who had also been assigned to a new caseworker immediately following a traumatic

event, also illustrated the sudden loss of a formal support common for the typical foster

kid subject. Thalia stated the new caseworker came "out of nowhere" after she had been

abused in a relationship:

> …this white lady came, out of nowhere, with two officers and they knocked down
>
> my boyfriend's door and just so happens that was my caseworker, my new
>
> caseworker. And I lost my caseworker, my old one, and I ended up into a CSEC,
>
> DHS."

ILP workers also frequently changed and a typical foster kid would not have regular

contact with them. When I asked Savannah about ILP, she stated the following:

> I know I have an ILP worker, I just don't have them in my life. But then when you
>
> asked me, I'm like, "No," because I haven't seen them. I haven't talked to them.

And like, I've never met them. My caseworker's like, "Oh, but you have one." I

don't know where, they don't come to my… meetings…

Carla suspected she was enrolled in ILP, but was in between ILP providers because the

organization where her previous provider worked was "being like, taken over by another

place and so they're booting everyone who already worked there out and they're putting

in new people, so they're kind of assigning new people to everybody." Carla could not

remember when she last spoke with her ILP provider. Carla illustrated the discursive

practice of the reorganization of services for the typical foster kid, also reflected in

interviews with Ila, Thalia, and Savannah.

Dysfunctional Families

While formal relationships, even when limited, sometimes enhanced a small network,

participants were often cut off from family *because* of services and service providers.

Savannah was particularly vocal about her limited access to her mother, saying of her

caseworker:

their [caseworkers] job is to, you know, get them back to their parents, but I feel

like most of the time they're not really doing that. 'Cause the whole time I've been

at, like, foster care, like, they haven't really helped me have a better relationship

with my mom. Like I left home to get myself foster care. But my dad ... And my

dad's relationship with me are good, but it's like, my mom's relationship with me

are not good.

Savannah's quote reflected a fundamental element of the discourse of the typical foster

kid: by identifying the "job" of the caseworker, Savannah saw her relationship with her

family in the hands of her caseworker. Savannah felt like services like "family counseling" and to "help my family have relationship[s] with each other" would be beneficial to help relational repair within her family system, almost pleading with me at one point that if "you guys could help me better my family, that's what I want." This further illustrated the partitioning of the typical foster kid, reinforced by discursive practices of failing to support family systems or limiting the contact the typical foster kid might have with a family member. Savannah also shared, "My judge told me, like, you should go see your mom, and that she needs to get help, but you can see your mom." However, Savannah's placement in residential was preventing that because "mom isn't supervised… I'm not able to have that and DHS really isn't changing anything. 'Cause like, I have this program."

The discourse of the typical foster kid suggested a "broken" family structure replete with parents who, in addition to being absent, were otherwise incapable of caring for their children, hence their involvement with child welfare. Other participants who had limited contact with family either made the decision to cut off their families or were cut off by their families, reinforcing that the typical foster kid comes from a troubled home. Justin qualified any mention of his family of origin or biological family by also referring to them as "my biological family." This type of qualification further reinforced that the typical foster kid came from a troubled home with parents so abusive or neglectful, that the typical foster kid would willingly cut off contact. Regarding his father, Justin stated he had "never met the fool. I don't wanna meet him either. He's a punk." Regarding his mother, Justin said:

Yeah, she doesn't follow through so um, I gotta do what's important for me and

what's best for me and that means cutting my own mother out of my life. It's, it's,

an uh, unhealthy relationship that was going downhill and causing me to go

downhill, so, I said screw that.

Justin elaborated that he cut her off and didn't need her in his life because she was lying

and trying to cover it up. Amari's aversion to having contact with her family of origin

also reflected this part of the typical foster kid discourse, of the subject with parents

unable to parent. Amari shared, "I don't want to talk to either my mom or dad anymore.

They were holding me back from growing… I wasn't living up to my full potential

because I was being held back emotionally by them." She even shared that she "actually

talked to my caseworker about changing my last name, because I don't want no

relationship with my parents at all. Because that's how upset I am… how much they

don't help my life." Marie also worked hard to become who she was and was afraid her

mother would reject her. When I asked if she thought she wanted to have a relationship

with her mom, she stated:

I think the way that my life is going I don't think I really want her to be a part of

it because I have worked so hard to be the person that I am and for her to be like,

"Hey, I'm here" and not be okay with me.

Marie's distance from her mother was reflective of the type of intentional disconnection

from biological families. Disconnection evoked the feature of the broken family, central

to the discourse of a typical young person with child welfare involvement, stuck in the

foster care system.

Participants' descriptions of disconnection from relationships, while a feature of the typical foster kid discourse, implied a disconnection from some fundamental aspect of identity, which biological family offered. While Amari had chosen to cut off her parents, she still wanted access to other biological family from which she had been cut off, saying she wished she "had my biological family on there [her map] too because I don't know… hardly any biological family. Actually, I can say I know near to none." Both Brianna and Jessica had been cut off from their respective families after being sexually assaulted by a family member. Brianna shared the following regarding her father's side of the family:

> Um, there's this huge ordeal that uh… so I haven't talked to anyone on my dad's side of the family, they all disowned me, um so I don't have any support systems from that side, because of an incident that my grandfather- I had mentioned him before- he was a police officer, very well known in the county where I grew up, - um there's an incident where he had acted inappropriately on me and I'd reported it, and that's ultimately why I entered the foster care system. Um, and they said I was a liar and because he was a police officer in that county, it was never investigated there was nothing ever that came of it, um until now, um, six years later.

When I asked Jessica about her mother, Jessica shared quite matter-of-fact, "I sent her, um, second husband to prison for child molestation and she chose to side with him instead of me." These incidents invoked a discursive construction of the typical foster youth as abused and traumatized. Though youth in care do suffer abuse and trauma

within families of origin, the lack of access to biological family as a contributing factor to trauma is notable and what I seek to highlight from these excerpts.

Unmet Needs

Though participants pined for family, either biological or adoptive, foster families unfortunately did not always provide a family-like context and many participants found these placements largely unhelpful. This discourse suggested that for many foster families, fostering gave access to a particular social good of status, reputation, and financial benefit. As a result, the discursive typical foster kid was characterized by unmet needs.

Foster Parents. Kai regarded a previous placement as primarily transactional and said the foster parent housed too many children "'cause they take care of us and get paid." This statement illustrated the part of this discourse that suggested the typical foster kid had foster parents who were only in it for the money. Gabe's former foster parents would "present themselves in one way or when the caseworkers were around." Gabe, like Amanda, also invoked part of the typical foster kid discourse that included fostering for personal gain. Amanda was in an "iffy situation" where her foster parents seemed more concerned with what their church community thought of them and that "they were just kind of in it for the status of being a foster family, and 'Oh, look at all the good we're doing for, you know, these youth.'"

Amanda's situation got progressively worse, and the foster parents withheld things like basic needs and medical care. Amanda shared the following:

They appeared to care. For a while. It wasn't like a strong caring, but after a while

they're like, 'Oh, well we don't want to take you there.'… They started buying

like less and less food, the longer we lived there. Um, and at one point we didn't

have any toilet paper… It was kind of weird, because they were on like those um,

those diets where the food gets mailed to your door and so, they had that. But we

had whatever they went to the grocery store for.

Kai spoke of a foster home that was "very shitty" and that "It was horrible. They'd come

home with brand-new flat-screen TVs and shit for them and then we'd be eating baloney

sandwiches for dinner and shit. Like, that's not fair…" Amanda's and Kai's experiences

reflected a specific construct of foster homes and foster parents quintessential to the

discourse of the typical foster kid. This discourse featured foster families invested for less

idealistic reasons, but rather for personal financial gain, status, or reputation.

Basic Needs. This feature of the typical foster kid discourse also extended to

service providers in general and especially caseworkers. Like Amanda and Kai, Ila

aligned herself with the discursive typical foster kid struggling considerably with basic

needs as a result of an uncaring and unavailable caseworker. During Ila's interview, she

shared with me ways to remove sensors and security tags on clothing, a practice she had

honed by virtue of needing to clothe herself. She shared many examples of teachers

buying her food when she did not have any. At the time of the interview, Ila had been

staying with a friend and that friend's parents, an unapproved placement. Ila was

supposed to be living with her sister, but her sister lived a two-hour bus ride from school

and Ila ended up sleeping on the couch, sans blankets, after their mother showed up

needing a place to stay. When I asked how DHS might help Ila with relationships specifically, she said what would help the most was "me not having to struggle where to-somewhere to lay, sleep at night, food to eat, clothes to put on my body. Like, me not having to go steal some clothes to wear, shoes to wear" and this was actually what she needed, not support with relationships. Regarding her various placements, Ila said the following:

> They shouldn't place me where they want to place me or… If I feel comfortable somewhere, then I'd rather be somewhere I'm comfortable with than somewhere with strangers I don't know. Or, somewhere where there's no food, there's nowhere for me to sleep… Who wants to sleep on a couch? No coverage, no nothing… No blankets, at all. I was sleeping on the couch. No blankets, at all. I was sleeping on the couch.

Ila wanted DHS to know that "if a kid feels comfortable with where they're at, that they should like, try their hardest to make sure that something could happen, be with those people" and that if she was "comfortable being there, then I should be able to just be there." Ila moved from personal experiences to general statements about what a kid needed, specifically regarding placement. This generalization indicated a normative experience for foster kids, reinforcing this discourse. Ila, exasperated at this point, said of her caseworker, "He needs to step it up a little bit because I need help." She expressed too much preoccupation with her financial well-being for a "normal teen," but her experience invoked the discursive typical foster kid for whom stability was generally uncertain:

I wish I had more of, let's see, um, probably concrete, because I'd be in the need, I

don't have a job, I'm trying to focus on school, you know, make sure I pass all

these classes to graduate this year. And money is a big issue, and, yeah. I don't

need rides much. Only like, place I probably really need rides to is school so I

don't be late, because the clock is at half already, very important.

By virtue of being in foster care, access to social goods that a normal teen may be

afforded was limited for youth in care and thus a feature of the discourse of the typical

foster kid. Participants invoked this discourse by generalizing their own experiences of

unmet needs, particularly when articulating how DHS might help them.

Loss of Services. Additionally, the loss of services for the discursive typical foster

kid was an inevitable threat. Thalia mentioned an old therapist with whom she felt

particularly connected, but could not continue to see once she turned 18. Because of this

experience of losing this service so suddenly, Thalia said she thought "therapy at this

moment in my life would really help me in a lot of things, but when you sit there and say,

'Okay, they gonna take that away because of an age,' that does not help." The collective

"they" suggests this is a regular practice. The assumption here then is that age is a

significant feature of this discourse. Upon turning a particular age, a young person not

only loses access to certain social goods, but may occupy an altogether (though not

unrelated) subject position. Amy summed up this part of the discourse poignantly with

the following statement:

Like, and we talk about foster kids, but a lot of foster kids have severe emotional

breakdowns right after they leave care. And they don't have anyone there and a lot

of times you have to reapply for your health insurance so it hasn't kicked in, or

you don't know that you reapply for your health insurance so you don't have it.

Like, it's painful and it's hard and it - it leads to a lot of kids dropping out of

school, or homelessness, or drug addiction.

Amy's grim prediction was informed by the discourse around aging out of care and reflected what the typical foster kid would face following that transition. These ideological productions of outcomes functioned as key markers of the discourse of the typical foster kid.

As I discussed in the second chapter, ILP services seek to prevent some of the outcomes that Amy suggested are commonly associated with young people aging out of care. While every participant was eligible for ILP services and even enrolled, many did not know what ILP was. This reflected other features of the typical foster kid previously discussed (e.g., temporariness of relationships, frequent disruptions in services, and lack of various social goods). When I asked Tyler if he was enrolled, he simply said, "I don't know what that is." In reference to a service provider, Kai said, "He's a ILP. I don't know what that means." While this particular provider was included as part of Kai's support network, Kai didn't remember his name nor did he seem concerned with remembering. Kai invoked the subject position of the typical foster kid discourse, indicating his service providers only had minimal contact with him or changed frequently enough that he could not recall names. Of ILP, Ila shared she had "heard of it, but I don't like- he [caseworker] like, when he came, he signed my sisters up, but he didn't talk to me about none of that."

When I followed up with a question regarding her caseworker and the information he shared, Ila replied, "I think they just be too busy or something… They don't have time to talk or whatever. Whatever going on, I don't know." Ila said of services in general, "I need more information, just about the foster care stuff." Ila generalized this unresponsiveness, referencing "they" instead of her specific caseworker. "They" reflected not just caseworkers, but any and all service providers and the organizations they represented. This generalization indicated a typical experience of the subject of the typical foster kid discourse. Diane, who seemed informed and connected, initially lacked information she felt like she needed, stating:

> I started off knowing like, nothing… I shouldn't be kind of embarrassed to ask for that. Like for that initial help and stuff. I feel like, some kids just don't know like, they're able to ask their caseworker for like, money to get new clothes or new supplies and stuff.

Service Planning

The inherent disconnection from relationships, particularly service providers, precluded opportunities to participate in service planning. This discursive practice further structured the surveillance, governmentality, and isolation inherent in the discourse of the typical foster kid. Thalia talked at length about her voice being excluded, saying "caseworkers were not listening to the kid and they wanna sit there and listen to the foster parent, which was not okay." Thalia said she tried "not to put so much stress on the social workers" because she understood they had lives outside their jobs, but "at the same time, sometimes those people don't listen to the kid. They wanna listen to other social

workers." Matt invoked this discourse by expressing feelings of exclusion from major decisions. Regarding his placement in residential, Matt said he "was not part of this decision, no. In fact, I didn't get to choose any of the places I screened at." Over time and given how isolated he felt in his placement, Matt became more invested in participating in these decisions, a discursive turn shift in the discourse of the typical foster kid. Matt shared with me:

> I've been very adamant about in the last year and a half. Is, um, around my fifteenth birthday, actually, around 15. So, a bit earlier than that. I was sort of like, "Hey, I'm sorta getting tired of you guys governing my life. I'm stepping up to the plate and saying this is how it's gonna happen."

Matt indicated he had been excluded for a number of years from participation in his own service planning. Ila did not necessarily mind decisions beyond her placement being made without her, accepting this as an inevitable reality, but did say, "I want to know something, like what they talk about, what's going on, especially when it have something to do with me." Ila's continued use of "they" invokes a discourse that includes the archetypical service provider who is noncommunicative and unreachable. Brianna while more optimistic about service providers, particularly their support around relationships, alluded to the governmentality of the subject of the typical foster kid discourse, fully accepting this subject position by saying, "… that kind of sounds like they control me… but they don't… They influence me because they just want the best for me."

Positioning and Resistance

The main difference between the discourse of the normal teen and the discourse of the typical foster kid was positioning in relation to social goods. The subjectivized normal teen had access while the typical foster kid discourse featured innumerable barriers; sometimes those barriers were service providers acting as gatekeepers to social goods. In analyzing each interview transcript, tensions and contradictions arose for each youth and may be obvious to the reader, particularly because the same participants are quoted in both sections and thus invoked the subject position of either the normal teen or the typical foster youth. Participants reproduced discourses of what was normal for a young person, what a normal family was, what normal relationships looked like, all depending on the subject position invoked. Participants often invoked either discourse, but positioned themselves as *not that*. Even as participants articulated what was normal for either subject position, they moved back and forth, in opposition to the discourse invoked and sometimes contradicting their own responses. For example, Kai said he was no longer lonely, but also eschewed any claim that he had supportive friendships. Amy wished she wanted more people on her map, but was adamant she did not want that. Ila expressed frustration that her basic needs were not met, but at one point, immediately said she was fine and had enough clothes to wear. At one point, Ila stated she had enough emotional support, but quickly interrupted herself saying, "no actually I lied – not emotional because I do not like talking to people." Throughout, Amari insisted she was stubborn and independent, but later said being less stubborn and more open allowed her to make more friends.

Because most of the interview questions addressed foster care-specific experiences, contradictions were inherently in contrast to the discourse of the normal teen – by simply being a youth in care, participants could not be the normal teen, though at times they did invoke experiences that reflected this discourse or positioned it as aspirational. The contradictions and tensions that more *explicitly* resisted dominant discourse were resisting the discourse of the typical foster kid. While there are identifiable contradictions within each discourse (the normal teen and the typical foster kid), this section will address resistance to the typical foster kid discourse, including independence as an asset; feeling exceptional comparison to the typical foster kid, which included accomplishments, luck, and genuine relationships with invested providers; and finally, both encouragement to take advantage of services while also feeling inundated with services, contradicting the assertion that support was just not available.

Independence

Independence was a highly regarded social good reflected in the discourse of the typical foster kid. Independence, in this discourse, meant both a lack of desire for support as well as insistence that support and sometimes even relationships were unneeded. This led to intentionally small relational worlds and self-imposed isolation. In contrast, the discourse of the normal teen was characterized by easily available friendships and robust family systems. Although they lacked full access to everything included in the normal teen discourse in this regard, they did not exclusively construct their isolation or independence as a deficit by comparison. Participants expressed pride when articulating how they were self-sufficient and did not need to rely on anyone. While they may have

lacked friends, participants took care of themselves; this reflected a position of agency, not merely a limitation by virtue of being in care. Amari, who spoke frequently of her stubbornness and dismissed any need for support, particularly emotional, contradicted this claim and talked about opening up and building a more robust network, stating she was "not as guarded as I used to be" and that she "used to be extremely closed of'" but had "just grown up and realized that I need people in my life and not to… shut everybody out." She also said that a couple years prior to the interview, she was "not very family-oriented, I didn't have very many friends, but ever since I moved to [foster home], I was able to have more freedom. I was able to go hang out with friends." Amari clearly valued her freedom to have more friendships and implied she was more family-oriented than before, despite her insistence of independence from close, intimate relationships.

When I asked Kai who he would choose as family, Kai said, "Just me. I don't want nobody else in my family. I want to be alone." Kai felt his lack of desire and even inability to sustain relationships was a result of the "drama" that came from having a family. Kai felt other people had it easier, saying:

> Everything's built. All the foundations and they have everything set up. They started off good and finished off good… they didn't have to struggle because they had it easier or something… They work through their problems. I just, I tend to not work through it and just cut people off and burn bridges.

According to Kai, some families meant drama, but he sensed a different construct altogether, one that seemed attractive to him as he spoke about it. Thus, Kai's language reflected a tension between the inevitably drama-filled family versus the family that did

not struggle and worked through their problems. While he stated he did not want anybody else in his family, Kai also suggested he wanted a specific type of family that "started off good and finished off good." This reflected a tension between what Kai desired based on what he felt he lacked and what he desired based on his experiences.

Exceptions to the Norm

Participants constructed themselves in contrast to the discourse of the typical foster kid specifically by describing their exceptionality through accomplishments, luck, and more invested service providers. Regarding accomplishments, participants highlighted ways they had succeeded and aspired to succeed as distinctly different than the discursive typical foster kid. Participants also felt lucky, particularly because they felt they had good service providers, suggesting this was not the norm, and also because they still had relationships with family members. There was some overlap between luck and service provision; participants implied the invested providers they had were more invested than the average service provider, thus also making them an exception to the discourse of the typical foster kid.

Accomplishments. Reagan said of her entire team that "my team says that I've like, grown up really, really fast, and that I'm already an adult." The implication of growing up fast is a normative timeline for growing up, to which Reagan was an exception, resisting this discourse. Matt also felt what made him exceptional in comparison to his peers was his maturity. Matt said the other residents "act like they're hard and they're really not. 'Cause they're teenagers… so it's sort of hard to take some of my peers seriously here." He clarified this saying, "A lot of my peers aren't [mature]. So,

I have to deal with the immaturity." Matt's statements reflected an expected level of maturity and thus a dominant discourse that accounted for this level of maturity. However, Matt exceeded that maturity, constructing himself as an exception to this discourse. Amy's exceptionalism was also related to her maturity. She talked about her time in residential saying she was "emotionally a 15-year-old… but like, mentally I was much older and I still didn't identify- They only reason I identified with anyone my age is because I lived in youth shelters." In other words, the only relationships to which Amy had access were people her age, though she felt much older because of her trauma and "also in how trauma manifested for me."

Participants also resisted the inevitable outcomes reflected in the discourse of the typical foster kid, communicating they were exceptions and would have different futures than their peers. This prevented both recognition and relationships with peers. Although Amy could be in relationship with other young people her age, those relationships were short-lived because of the future Amy envisioned for herself. In addition to her trauma, Amy had "high expectations for myself and my life and I want to do something. Like, I have options of what I can do, but I- it's gonna be something. It's gonna be something important." When Amy spoke of the friends she had in youth shelters, she said, "I don't see many of them succeeding in the way that I want to." Of one particular youth she said that "even though he is a peer [based on age], it's like he has chosen a life for himself that I, you know, that couldn't work for me." Similarly, Wyatt also envisioned an important future for himself, which set himself apart from his peers. He said he was "determined to be something." When I ask about changes that contributed to his network, he said what

had changed was his "determination to get out, do something, [be] something that most aren't." Wyatt recognized this when he began playing football in high school. He said his "coaches see something in me that could be great" and that this was "something in me that I never knew about. When I started playing football, my coaches just since then, they said that I had a talent."

Brianna invoked the subject position of the exceptional foster kid, in contrast to the typical foster kid discourse, throughout our entire interaction. One of the first things Brianna told me is that she wanted to be the President of the United States. She also declared, "I hope to be the change in the world." Brianna shared even her caseworker felt she could make that kind of impact, relaying that "she [caseworker] just thinks that I should be working at DHS like, 19-years-old, and that I'm just gonna make this difference in the world…" This came from an invested caseworker who also wanted to see Brianna "succeed and she's like, 'Anything that you ever need like, I will help you along the way'…" Brianna also discussed a variety of accomplishments as a young person beginning in high school when she "got this internship that I was the only one selected in the state to participate in… I was talking to senators and congress people." One of Brianna's teachers told her she was "the queen of leadership… Even after I graduated, she had me saved in her phone as '[Brianna] Queen of Everything.'" Essentially, Brianna was and would be everything the discourse of the typical foster youth suggested young people aging out of care could not be.

Amari referenced a similar accomplishment where she was "nominated for one of [an organization's] candidates for Youth of the Year" and "had to like, create a speech

and to write an essay and say it in front of the mayor and stuff like that." These sorts of accomplishments, however, were not required for participants to construct themselves as exceptional. Marie simply saw a better future for herself, saying she was "to the point where people cut me off and I'm like it's not really important to me because I am doing bigger and better things with my life rather than working at a McDonalds or something."

Luck. In addition to accomplishments, participants constructed themselves as exceptions to the typical foster kid discourse by virtue of luck. One way that participants felt lucky was having providers who *genuinely* cared, versus the uninvested providers of the discursive typical foster kid. This movement implied a dominant discourse of the typical foster youth whose support system was predominantly detached adults, leaving them isolated with unmet needs, beholden to a broken system. But again, this subject position was rarely, if ever, static. Many participants evoked exceptionalism *despite* these barriers. Participants also reinforced the discourse of the typical foster kid by implying they were somehow outliers and exceptions to this default subject position. Participants positioned themselves in contrast to this discourse while also reinforcing its ubiquity. Because the discourse of the typical foster kid was so dominant, all participants needed to do was name themselves as exceptions (or lucky to not be represented by the discourse of the typical foster kid) to reflect this tension and resistance. A positive relationship with one's caseworker was a leading factor in participants feeling lucky. Jessica said the following about multiple caseworkers she had while in care:

> I've got really lucky with the caseworkers that I've had, they've all been really
> super proactive. Um, but I think that there's a lot of people that don't get that, like,

um, I think it's important that caseworkers care about their kids, and I got really

lucky, because mine have always cared about me a lot.

Jessica invoked part of the discourse of the typical foster kid that included the uncaring

service provider, limited by their role as defined by their job. She generalized what

caseworkers should do, implying they did not do that. Jessica then positioned herself in

opposition to that discourse, resisting it. Jessica did *not* have an uncaring caseworker.

Luckiness included an inherent experience of "*not* that" for Jessica.

Like Jessica, Gabe's feelings of luck reflected a similar experience he felt was

outside the norm, resisting a discourse of the typical foster kid that reflected what he

assumed a lot of people experienced with their caseworkers. Gabe said he had a "really

good caseworker" and had "heard a lot of people who haven't" had good caseworkers

and thus fared far worse than him. Gabe also felt lucky regarding the support he received,

resisting the part of this discourse accounting for lapses in services and unmet needs,

saying that he had "some of everything. I mean I'm sure there's people [i.e., the typical

foster kids] that don't have all these things."

Sometimes, resistance showed up in descriptions of relationships with families of

origin, contexts from which the subject of the typical foster kid discourse was typically

removed. Luca, despite a strikingly small network said he felt "thankful that I have my

parents still in my life, I guess. Because a lot of people who have experienced foster care

don't… So I'm happy about that." Lastly, Reagan described feeling lucky given her past

and in spite of being in foster care, saying, "I feel like I have this pretty good. Like, I look

at, like, other people, and I'm just, like, 'I'm a foster kid, but I'm kind of doing better than

they are,' you know?" The discourse of the typical foster kid accounted for poor outcomes and a troubled existence, which Reagan explicitly resisted by implying a typical foster kid should not be doing better than "other people."

   Invested Providers. While participants considered themselves lucky in many ways, be it despite their past, their relationships with their parents, or somehow getting a good caseworker, there was also overlap with the discussions regarding service providers. As a counter-narrative to the overly strict or simply uncaring foster parent, the isolating placement, or the service providers whose role not extend beyond their job description, many participants discussed invested service providers whose support was more than just genuine, but for whom their work was more than just their job. The characterization of this truly invested provider implied that the norm for service providers is to feign caring and concern or to simply engage in the relationship in perfunctory ways that reflected the limits of their roles in the participants' lives. Ila said of her first caseworker that "she actually like, came and visited [and] not just when we had court." Wyatt said of multiple providers, "A lot of people have put in a lot of time and effort into me." Justin felt a similar sort of indebtedness as Wyatt, sharing about a provider, "She's been with me through hell and back."

   Amari spoke at length about her caseworker saying she "does whatever she can and "puts… all of her into it. Like, she actually cares about, genuinely cares about the people she works for." Regarding other service providers Amari said they were "there for me and they're honest with me… I just feel a genuine like, support from them" and also that she felt "comfortable around" her providers as well. Amari's qualification that the

support she received was "genuine" implied a support that was merely part of the job for most service providers. Reagan, who lived in the same home as Amari, said of her foster parent that she felt "like she's not doing it just because it's her job, but because she actually wants to" and that helped Reagan "connect with her so well." Reagan also reiterated her foster mother "doesn't do it for the money and she doesn't do it just because she wants to do something nice. It's because she… genuinely cares." The implication here is that most foster parents are engaged in providing services to do something nice or for money. Reagan uses the word "actually" to imply her service provider's motivations as distinctly different from service providers described the discourse of the typical foster kid. This was also explicitly in resistance to the homes overcrowded with youth, like Kai discussed, or the image-oriented foster parents, like Amanda's first foster parents. Amy shared about a formal mentor in her network, "she's like particularly invested in me and like, she knows what's happening in my life and when something's wrong or when she sees something happen that's not okay like, she'll do something about it." Amy shared about two other providers, one who saw her "pro bono like, for a good period of time now" and another of whom Amy said their "relationship probably is what it is 'cause I work with her. But like, she also cares about me as an individual." Amy described multiple service providers that resisted the image of the service provider included in the discourse of the typical foster kid.

The counter-discourse that included the lucky subject also described service providers who were invested beyond care, once young people aged out. This also presented a contradiction to temporariness as a feature of relationships within the typical

foster kid discourse. Brianna spoke at length regarding her relationship with her service provider. While she felt she would "probably not have my caseworker on [my map] anymore… because people get busy, life happens," she did speak of a previous caseworker who, "even though she doesn't work in that part of DHS anymore… if I like needed advice on something, I could call [her] even though she's not a caseworker anymore." Losing contact with a service provider because "people get busy" and "life happens" resisted the image of the service provider who retreated once they were no longer required to provide services to someone and due to expectations around boundaries and confidentiality. Brianna had the same impression regarding ILP, stating she did "still think that my ILP workers will… even though they're not my ILP workers, I think that they will be there for the rest of my life." Brianna's qualification that this support from ILP providers would continue "even though" they would not be her providers anymore also resisted the expected boundaries of a service provider for the subject of the typical foster kid discourse. Similarly, Reagan mentioned her ILP provider who "moved offices and um, she wasn't taking any of her other clients, but she made like, a special exception for me. So, I thought it was really cool that she decided to keep me, you know?" Reagan's description of her ILP provider reflected a subject position of a youth constructed in contrast to their peers as exceptional in some way, whether they were inherently exceptional or exceptional as demonstrated by providers' investment or feedback.

Matt, whose map was comprised entirely of formal supports, said of the staff at his residential placement, "when I leave here, I'll still have connections with them"

though it would most like be "sort of a professional, informational relationship." This was in stark contrast to the norms of relationships with service providers at residential placements. And Gabe, whose twenty-first birthday was nearing and thus he would be aging out of care, stated his "caseworker said that she's not supposed to contact me after like, I'm 21. She said if I ever need anything still, I have her personal number." That Gabe's caseworker was "not supposed to contact" him, but would anyway also demonstrated explicit resistance to the typical foster kid discourse.

Working With the System

In contrast to the typical foster kid lost in the system and disconnected from service providers, many participants communicated DHS offered many services and resources, resisting the construct of both the unavailable service provider as well as typical foster kid with multiple unmet needs. Participants also resisted these assumptions when they communicated many foster youth did not seem to be aware of everything DHS could do for them, but at the very least, they should work with the system. This reflected resistance to a controlling, surveilling system or the system in which young people were lost and forgotten. Patrick recognized that "even though like, I don't like DHS, I still have to work with them to get what I want." Diane admitted she did not "know what I was supposed to expect out of DHS. So, I guess the longer I was in DHS, the more I understood what they do for kids and how they help kids." Diane also shared to following, regarding how she was currently engaging in services:

I advocate for myself, like I know what I like, what I'm able to do and stuff and if

like, like I just don't get how like, some foster kids just sit there and they're like,

how 'they don't do nothing for me.' And I'm like, they can do so much for you.

For foster youth who did not know where to start, Diane suggested to simply "ask your

caseworker for what you need." By advocating for herself, Dianna resisted the idea that

she was at the mercy of an unresponsive system, like the discursive typical foster kid.

Brianna went further saying, "Ask for a new caseworker… you have so many options."

Justin enumerated some of the resources DHS offered and said he intended to "enjoy the

benefits they give me now while they last… Schooling, clothing, food, stuff like this, a

roof over my head, um, gym memberships, all this other stuff." More significant than

these benefits, Justin said "if I hadn't have listened to them, then I'd be dead right now."

This was a stark resistance to the outcomes Amy enumerated for youth who aged out of

care, quoted in the section addressing unmet needs.

In addition to advocating for oneself and seeking out information regarding

resources, participants wanted to encourage other foster youth to defer to their providers

and take accountability for the part they played. This resisted a discourse that said neither

services nor service providers were available or that service providers were generally

disinvested, did not genuinely care, and that the system was ultimately responsible for

any challenges a typical foster kid might experience. Amari expressed this sentiment with

the following statement:

I think that they are, um, have been through a lot more, seen a lot more cases,

have been, um, a lot more educated than I am, so what I think is best for me, is

maybe completely different than what they think, because they have seen

similar… they know more than I do.

Reagan said while "there's stuff that's wrong with the system," she did "feel that it's not

all the system's fault. I just feel like some people need to work on their ability to connect

with others, even though that may be really super hard you know?" Reagan said she

"wanted my freedom and I knew I wasn't gonna get like, my freedom if I kept doing

things that would break trust, you know?" Reagan resisted the notion that youth in care

were disempowered and completely disenfranchised. For youth who said "the system's

screwed this way, this way, and this way, and they don't let me do this, this, and this,"

Reagan said people should "work on yourself a little bit before you start dissing on what

they're doing for you" and to "take a look at what you're doing to see if you can help fix,

uh, fix it before you blame it all on them…" Brianna identified resources she had access

to as a youth in care and reflected a similar growth as Reagan, stating the "opportunities

that they've given me along the way constantly helped me grow as a person and makes

me find things that I'm passionate about…" Brianna's access to these opportunities

contributed to her exceptionalism as well, counter to the outcomes associated with youth

in care.

Participants also resisted both discourses by communicating they felt

overburdened by services. Feeling overburdened resisted the point that services did not

exist, while also contradicting advice to take advantage of what was offered, an inference

that DHS and child welfare had a lot to offer. Diane talked about this at length. She said

she felt "like I have a lot of community support" that her providers "want to be there

more for me, but I just don't really want that help and stuff." Regarding being institutionalized, Dane said the following:

> After it was shoved down my throat once, I was like, "No thanks." Uh, like they
> want me to do, they want me to have a lot more support that I take and stuff. They
> want me to have like, tutors and like, like um, skills trainers. Like they want me to
> have a whole like, group of stuff.

Diane also said, "I got this. Like, you don't gotta do this" of her providers. Diane even felt like the services were detrimental that her "therapist at the last institution I went to, just pretty much told me, 'You're getting worse, so we have to discharge you.'" Of support in general, Diane wanted "things to be like, kind of simpler and stuff… also they're not benefitting me like in- with my future and stuff. And they're just gonna like, call me, just put me down or something." On one hand, Diane's experience in foster care included a lack of knowledge of services then an eventual appeal to other youth that child welfare had so much to offer. However, Diane also felt overwhelmed by services. Diane expressed resistance both to the discourse of the typical foster kid, but also to the counter-discourse she invoked by encouraging others to work with the system. This demonstrated one of the many moves between and among multiple subject positions. Matt had a similar experience of feeling overburdened by his residential placement saying, "I don't feel like it's beneficial for anybody to be here." Wyatt, who was with a foster family concluded questions about support with this statement:

I don't need any more help. I don't want any more help. Perfect where I'm at… I

have everything I could want. Great people, great life. What I want. Very

supportive team. I couldn't ask for better people in my life.

This was one of many ways Wyatt communicated resistance. He felt both well-supported

and embraced by a functional and loving family system.

Conclusion

None of the subject positions that participants claimed were static or stable. Many

participants felt they were both normal and exceptional, lucky and lost, the typical foster

kid and just a normal teenager. Youth constructed dynamic and nuanced identities within

the relationships they included in their support networks. Each discourse they invoked

was either an affirmation or a rejection, often both and frequently alternating. One

common and consistent thread throughout each interview was each response to the

question of what each respective participant's support network map looked like a year

prior to the interview. Nearly every participant stated their map was completely different,

that their current map included more relationships, and that they anticipated their map a

year from the interview or upon exiting care would be even more robust. Despite change,

an increase in the number of relationships, and feeling well-supported, participants still

communicated needs that suggested the subject position of being in care was not neatly

one-dimensional and stable, but like anyone, young people in care have conflicting and

even contradictory thoughts and feelings regarding supportive relationships. And, like

many young people, these tensions were reflective of the relational nature of power in

which participants confirmed various dominant discourses of youthhood or resisted the

limits of these subject positions altogether.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This critical discourse analysis of 22 interviews with young people aging out of foster care revealed two distinct discourses: the normal teen and the typical foster kid. Throughout the interviews, participants constructed subject positions that reinforced each discourse either through identification with or opposition to it. Hence, the third major section of my findings includes a presentation of the resistance to either and sometimes both subject positions, thus introducing a sort of counter-discourse of "not that, but not that either." While I name these sometimes as tensions and sometimes as contradictions and indeed present the two discourses in contrast two each other, this suggests a false dichotomy. Participants rarely, if ever, claimed the static subject position of either one or the other. Rather, they moved among discourses and counter-discourses. In resisting the discourse of the typical foster kid, they constructed it. In suggesting a desire to be a normal teenager, but feeling that subject position was beyond reach, they inadvertently claimed the subject position of the typical foster kid. Sometimes, being exceptional meant exceptionalism in comparison to both subject positions. Participants were lucky to be in care and youth were also lucky despite being in care. In short, reality was constructed discursively, particularly in conversation, through language and action (Lazzaro-Salazar, 2017). It was an active, fluid, fluctuating, and nuanced process.

This analysis sought to address three areas of reality built by language in use. These areas included Identity, Relationships, and Politics (or situations where social goods are at stake; Gee, 2014). The area of reality most often addressed in interviews was Politics. This is undoubtedly due to the structure of the interview and the framing of the

research project. However, it also calls attention to the inextricability of identity from systems. Young people's identities (and perhaps all people's identities) are structured by systems which also structure entire relational worlds and access to social goods. For young people in care, social goods such as services or even access to relationships through social supports are mediated by larger systems, like child welfare, independent living programming, and even immigration, as with Oscar who came into care because he was apprehended as an undocumented minor. These participants were, first and foremost, youth in care. To further illustrate this point, youth are students as mediated by schools, kids and foster kids as mediated by family systems, and multiple other identities depending on the context in which each relationship they discussed was enacted.

These relationships, mediated by larger systems and structures, also inform the subject positions with which participants aligned themselves. Inherent in all relationships is some manifestation and/or exchange of power, existing in relation to an object of particular discourse. For example, identifying youth as the subject of a discourse implies the existence of not-youth (i.e., adult). To identify the subject of youth in care, implies a relationship with a particular institution (i.e., child welfare). It also evokes certain types of familial relationships and/or constructs associated with dominant discourses of youth in care, such as the assumption of the presence of abuse and/or neglect or a particular kind of parent of the discursive typical foster kid, such as the bad mother, which I discuss in more detail below.

This language also suggests a relationship with context – these youth lived somewhere other than "home" whether or not the place they identified was home or the

foster parents were simply mom and dad. Home (or "home") is thus another institution informed by normative standards. Like the transitions out of care and into independent, self-sufficient adulthood, dominant constructions of "home" are inevitably a set-up for youth in care. Child welfare involvement can automatically construct an entire family system as not the right kind of family, the home as unsafe and thus not the right kind of home. In short, youth are doing it wrong, parents are doing it wrong, family systems (presumably dysfunctional) and homes are doing it wrong. It would be easy for any person or family system to construct themselves as *not* something else (e.g., right or correct), a central theme of the discursive positions participants in this study constructed

This chapter discusses interpretations of the findings of this discourse analysis. I specifically focus on relationships with family, friends, and service providers. I also discuss exceptions to the discourse of the typical foster kid, specifically young people in care who are doing well. I briefly address two discourses that also emerged as a direction for potential research: hegemonic masculinity and the bad mother. This chapter will also address limitations of this project as well as implications for social work.

Family

Adults from school, religious communities, and neighbors provide support for a more general population of young people (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Collins et al., 2010). The presence of a stable and supportive family is taken for granted in the discourse of the normal teen, as Kai suggested, saying, "Everything's built… They started off good and finished off good…" Family was a premier social good for the discursive normal teen and although participants typically did not have the polished family system of the normal

teen, though they longed for it. This was unsurprising given how well it is documented in the literature (e.g., Collins et al., 2008; Courtney, 2009). But the discursive positions articulated by youth in this study suggest something not just about family, but also perhaps the *desire* for family. When discussing family, participants' language reflected service goals of supportive, long-lasting relationships that resemble kinship similar to biological families and families of origin (Foster Club, 2010) as well as idealized normative family structures including adoption and permanent guardianship (Maluccio & Fein, 1983). This reflects a heteronormative, middle-class, White family structure, which may inadvertently structure the field of possibilities for defining family. To repeat what Arnett (2000) said regarding emerging adulthood, "there is little that is normative" (p. 477). Perhaps the same might be said for how youth in care would structure or define "family" if given different language or able to prioritize chosen family. At the same time, expressing a desire for this type of structure is legitimate and valid.

That so many participants constructed a subject position in direct relationship to the normative family, whether it be any family-like system or their own families of origin, reflects one of the biggest challenges of the child welfare system: identifying foster and adoptive families when reunification fails. While Matt did not have contact with anyone in his family of origin, he continued to express a desire for family through adoption, but "it's not looking good with my past and my age. No one wants a 16-year-old with my history." Not only do participants, like Matt, reflect the challenges of identifying placements with foster and families, it is not always guaranteed that these will be good placements. Indeed, stories of re-traumatization among youth in care are a

feature of a discourse describing typical experiences while in care, as Gabe articulated

when he said of foster parents, "you either gonna get good ones [or] bad ones."

The Discourse of the Bad Mother

Two common archetypes present in the discourse of the typical foster kid and

invoked by participants were the mother with mental health issues and the mother

struggling with addiction, experiences that precluded (and continue to warrant)

involvement with child welfare. Often, the typical foster kid discourse included mothers

who contended with both challenges. Another ubiquitous and familiar feature of the

discourse of the typical foster kid is the parentified youth, a common phrase in child

welfare and clinical work with young people. This was invoked by multiple participants

when discussing their "bad" mothers.

The parentification of these participants lends to the discursive construction of the

bad mother. During the advanced year of my MSW, transitioned from a field placement

in child welfare, specifically on the teen unit, to temporary employment in the

permanency unit as a Social Services Assistant. The main function of my job was to

facilitate visits between parents and children who were in state custody. I recall two

women I worked with: one was a White mother of two young boys living with their

paternal grandfather and the other was a Black mother of a very young girl who was, at

the time, living with a White foster family. Based on the case management of these two

women, I left that job with several distinct impressions: every burden of parenting falls

on the mother, the requirements for reunification are a set-up, and the system

disadvantages Black families. While this information is purely anecdotal, it still reflects

common assumptions regarding motherhood as well as the racism imbedded in systems that rely on carceral logics, such as surveilling and separating families, essentially incarcerating young people within child welfare (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

The former, the phenomenon of motherhood, is itself a set-up. The discourse of the bad mother constructs the mother as unfit and thus the intervention of the government (e.g., child welfare) is necessary (Brown, 2006; Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Reid et al., 2008). In western, U.S. culture, there are a myriad of "mistakes" women can make to be cast as the bad mother, beginning with the decision of whether or not to breastfeed. In nearly every decision a mother faces, the social good of a public perception of her as a "fit" parent is continuously at stake. The subject position of the bad mother is also often intertwined with child welfare involvement, mental illness, and addiction (Roscoe et al., 2018). Though participants do not explicitly cast their own mothers as "bad," they did often see their mothers as unfit, invoking the discourse of the bad mother. By their estimation, their mothers were incapable of taking care of them. This is not to challenge the validity of the experience of these participants, but rather to call attention to a cultural trope discursively constructed and mediated by the same institutions that discursively construct young people in care.

Friends

For most people, sustained proximity is one of the most promotive factors of friendships (growing up in the same neighborhood, going to the same schools together). In fact, participants discuss these as factors of close relationships (Best & Blakeslee, 2020). Thus, it is no surprise that access to lots of friendships was a hallmark of the

discourse of the normal teen. However, participants enumerated ways they were prevented access from this particular social good, probably one of the most crucial for any person, young or old, but particularly for young people with a host of adverse childhood experiences like trauma, loss, uncertainty, and transition. Given the unavailability of contexts that serve to provide the most consistency and stability for young people aging out of care, focusing on relational skill building may be moot if opportunities to practice those skills do not exist. It is possible that some youth in care not only lack access to relationships, but an integration of skills to develop and maintain relationships. Furthermore, the interruption of attachment of young people may exacerbate the potential for social isolation.

None of this is to suggest that young people in care are socially regressed and completely isolated from this possibility, although some of the literature does suggest this (e.g., Jones, 2014; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Simply, the relationships of young people in care are more surveilled, regulated, and ultimately governed. As participants like Reagan and Savannah suggested, young people in care, like any young person, are capable of deciding who they want as friends and even who might be good or bad influences, potentially an effect of self-parenting more common among youth in care. But disrupted placements, invasive service providers, restrictive foster homes, and a host of other factors that contribute to the loss of relationships mean that even if the relational worlds of young people were less governed, individual factors at more localized levels (home and neighborhood versus system involvement) may continue to prevent access. This is potentially a consequence of the discourse of risk, in which we assume young people are

both vulnerable and delinquent, a risk to themselves and a risk to others (Oppenheim, 2012). This is of course rarely assumed of the normal teen. The discursive normal teen has access to stable relationships, home, and schooling, which all provide modeling of relationships, access to relationships, and sites in which to learn how to navigate relationships. This governance of the typical foster kid, however, inevitably restricts a possible field of action, more directly shaping their subject positions (Foucault, 1982).

Another consideration for young people in care who lack access to friendships is identity development and the role of peer groups in that development (Wyn, 2012). It may be helpful to identify what contributes to identity development for youth in care who lack this access or an exploration of peer group factors that are present and thus contribute to the identity development of youth in care. It may also be helpful to understand whether or not peer groups pose an actual threat or if they simply provide a site to enact normative risk taking, like multiple participants suggested (Shook et al., 2009). Given the role of social institutions in normative identity development (Wyn, 2012), it maybe be useful to understand the role of disruptions in education (i.e., changing schools) and thus access to peer groups (Pryce et al., 2017).

Providers

Another tension for the discursive typical foster kid is an expectation of longevity of professionalized relationships in contrast to common policies and practices. When participants spoke about service providers with whom they anticipated having contact after exiting care, I had assumed they had not been informed of confidentiality and contact policies upon exiting care. Interestingly enough, I witnessed an interaction

between a participant and an ILP provider. The ILP provider stated the following to the participant:

> Well, I'll be working with you until you turn twenty-one. But even after you leave, I will continue to work with you. I'll give you my number and you can stay in contact with me. You can still call me, send me texts, and all that, if you need to.

Many young people anticipated maintaining contact with service providers, despite policies indicating contact would end once the participant graduated from certain services or aged out of care. Some participants had already experienced some of this loss, like Thalia who spoke of a former therapist she could no longer see once she turned 18. I would very much like to know if providers who promised to stay in touch actually did and if this happened in direct defiance of institutional policies. If participants did lose contact with service providers, particularly those participants felt genuinely cared for them and were particularly invested, this undoubtedly represented further relational trauma (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Greeson et al., 2015; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Halfway through data collection, Dr. Blakeslee and I facilitated two large focus groups with ILP providers across the state of Oregon. In discussing policies related to contact upon aging out of care, one ILP provider addressed a tension for indigenous communities: it was not possible to cut off contact between indigenous service providers and indigenous youth because they were part of the same, tight-knit community. It was also not culturally consistent to expect that providers in indigenous communities would sever ties with these young people. It may be useful to revisit the intention and necessity

of such policies, perhaps from a decolonizing perspective, which also demands further examination of the debate around ICWA (see Matheson, 1996 or Deer et al., 2022 for an exploration of public discourse around ICWA).

Exceptions to the Norm

As mentioned throughout this exposition, child welfare literature focuses on risk and poor outcomes. This dissertation is no exception. But there is another possible perspective and discourse worthy of discussion: many youth in care are doing okay. Certainly, participants invoked this experience, particularly in discussions around feeling lucky or otherwise an exception to the norm (the norm being the host of "poor" outcomes outlined in previous chapters and articulated by Amy). Youth who participate in the FosterClub All-Star Program reflect this and this program might even act as a protective factor.

Whether or not resilience is an inherent trait some people simply possess, traumatic experiences certainly demand resilience. While this might speak to my sample or any accessible sample for research, I left every single interview with the distinct impression that each participant was doing so much better than some much research might suggest (e.g., Courtney, 2009; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Rome & Raskin, 2019). Discourses of youth aging out of care are more reflective of a cultural anxiety around material success, traditional educational paths, and the heteronormative family structure and how class differences shape identities and understandings of the American Dream (Silva, 2013). Perhaps involvement in justice systems, lack of employment stability, homelessness, mental health issues, and so forth

are all reflections much broader issues and not just specific to (though certainly not disconnected from) aging out of foster care. If the narrative of poor outcomes is so easily invoked among youth in care, as it was among many of the participants in this study, then solely focusing on that also contributes to structuring the field of possibility for young people aging out of foster care. Instead, it may actually behoove youth in care as well as service providers to center stories of healing and different kinds of success, as opposed to risk frameworks that focus on deficits and failures. Many participants in this study invoke this counter-discourse when outlining their own successes and other ways they were exceptions to the discourse of the typical foster kid. Furthermore, there is a general dearth of research, especially first-person narratives, that discusses long-term outcomes well beyond young adulthood. It may be possible that many young adults who aged out of care a decade or more ago have transcended the despairing fate some dominant discourses suggest await the discursive typical foster kid on the other side.

While the discourse of the typical foster kid included unmet needs and thus a lack of services addressing those needs, participants resisted this discourse by communicating they felt overburdened by services. This was another way participants communicated they were an exception to the norm. These experiences underscore the possibility that many young people are well-supported in addition to simply being okay, and not at imminent risk as dominant discourses suggest. This project revealed multiple possible explanations for this. For example, participants in metro areas tended to have maps dominated by service providers while participants in rural areas had service providers who were also family friends or community members, who were more likely to be

interconnected with other people in participants' support network. In other words, the maps of participants from smaller areas tended to have support networks that more resembled family networks. This might point to a sort of practice-based evidence or model within rural communities while not necessarily replicable, might provide insight to working with young people who tend to have more professionalized relationships (Blakeslee, 2015; Blakeslee & Best, 2019). It also supports participants' desires for family-like placements or at least having access to families and family-like systems represent a significant and desired social good.

Limitations

Research design and the role of the research inevitably plays a role in the construction of narratives and reproduction of discourse. My contribution to the co-construction of discourse in these interviews is glaring. I provided language to describe relationships and supports that undoubtedly reflected both dominant discourse as well as a particular agenda. This language was often professionalized and institutionalized. My role in structuring these interviews, as a researcher, and in one case as a previous service provider, reproduced power imbalances to which participants had continually been subjected. At some points, I questioned my own authenticity. There are moments while re-listening to the interviews, where I heard changes in my tone and language. These changes sometimes reflected code switching, particularly with participants enacting hegemonic masculine identities. This code switching in turn reflected a desire to be read as straight or to at least pass just enough that my own presentation of gender did not somehow threaten the rapport and trust I sought to build. This says more about how I

have internalized messages regarding my own positionalities than whatever negative perceptions participants might have had. However, at one point, a participant did express a suspiciously effusive support of LGBTQ people, which made me question why I spent any energy attempting to "pass." Secondly, I have a tendency to over-ally myself with individual disenfranchised youth, particularly when they share their stories with me. It is hard not to align myself with these participants. While neither positive nor negative, this certainly influenced the construction of maps, identities, and discourses. Lastly, I selected pseudonyms for participants. While not particularly egregious, I ruminated on this throughout my analysis. Allowing participants any amount of agency and autonomy would be more in line with both my values and a poststructuralist agenda. This also highlights my desire to make time and space for member checking in my future research, which I also did not do in this project.

My analysis is based on my own biases and assumptions regarding child welfare research and practice. While my critiques are based on my work within child welfare as well as my participation in social work education and research, they are limited. I entered this analysis with preconceived notions regarding dominant discourses. I will say the discourses I that emerged were not quite what I expected. These preconceived notions, however, highlight the limitations of the research design. Initial aims sought to identify strategies to expand services to enhance support networks, from the perspective of youth. This was not explicitly designed for critical discourse analysis, though I contend that discourse is embedded in all text. Rather, the design was heavily informed by support network theory. This theory thus informed the interview protocol, which reflected the

language of this theory I offered to youth to describe social supports. In retrospect, broader questions and a less structured interview protocol that elicited narratives instead of shorter responses to multiple questions would have made more sense for a critical discourse analysis.

Also, I gathered demographic data that potentially offers a fuller picture of each participant, but I failed to take an intersectional approach in my analysis. There were many moments, as with Thalia and Ila, where race and ethnicity (i.e., young Black women with White service providers) were clearly and even explicitly barriers for participants, shaping relationships, networks, and invoking various other subject positions. Like, race, gender and sexuality were also important positionalities I did not fully consider or explore in interviews with participants. Savannah talked explicitly about discovering she was a lesbian while in residential treatment, which, to Savannah, meant her future friendships (upon leaving her residential placement and having more freedom and autonomy) would be markedly different than past friendships. Matt, who simply identified as part of the LGBTQ community, alluded to his discomfort with excessive demonstrations of hegemonic masculinity among his peers and longed for a more balanced perspective (i.e., relationships with peers other than those of the same gender).

Implications for Social Work

So many contradictions, paradoxes, and instances of resistance (even resistance to resistance) emerged throughout this project. Primarily, participants saw themselves as neither predominant discourse, but they also aligned themselves with both subject positions. Secondly, I have been and remain critical of social work research and practice

as well as child welfare research and practice, yet here I am attempting to appeal to those audiences, particularly child welfare researchers. Given the framing of my arguments, I imagine much of this would be received with considerable skepticism, which I welcome and enthusiastically invite! I am working within these same structures, reproducing these same discourses, in a position of privilege and what social work academics insist is also a position of power. Yes, we are in the business of knowledge production and at the expense of many other types of knowledge. While we contribute to various discourses, what is our actual reach considering social work's infamous disconnect between research and practice?

The knowledge claims I make in this dissertation are one interpretation – by its very nature, incomplete. The point of all this conjecture and pondering is that we are limited by language and in our tendencies to categorize and think one thing must only exist in contrast to the other or, by Foucault's own estimations, we define what something is by identifying what is not (as participants did in these interviews). But we lose too much nuance. I suspect this is pervasive throughout the field of social work. The nuance, however, can create untenable tensions, for example, advancing an abolitionist agenda through neoliberal, academic avenues. If there were a container large and porous enough to hold all this, we might consider and welcome the knowledge constructed by young people in care as well as practice wisdom and "evidence-based" research.

Resistance as an integral part of poststructuralist approaches to social work practice has the potential to negatively impact the material realities of those in subjected positions in power relations with the state. Therefore, in addition to resistance, this

approach also includes a disruption and destabilization of power, which, from a post-structuralist standpoint, is an exercise of power itself. A starting point for this destabilization may include individualized approaches to service (and support) provision that allow for the possibility of multiple truths by restructuring our approach to intervening on the lives of youth aging out of care. Child welfare could accomplish these goals by incorporating more collaborative approaches. While young people in care drive the work they do with ILP, including them more directly in case management may help address service gaps, as identified by youth and demystify child welfare itself. This approach may include a more flexible approach that allows young people the access to a "normal" teenage life. One of the biggest challenges here is improving rates of reunification while also recruiting more foster care providers. These approaches involve a more honest exploration of power relations between providers and youth in care.

Young people accessing services may also benefit from self-critical service providers who challenge ways they think about and treat young people. This might also include an exploration of how to provide support in equitable ways, where some youth need more and some youth need less, but the goal is to get them all to the same place without necessarily encouraging conformity. How do we maintain resistance against normalizing efforts? While it may seem trite, the connection between child welfare research and practice is important to consider. Research seems to inform policy and practice at a macro level, but (ironically) frontline workers do not have access, including time or resources, to this research. As youth perspectives become part of the larger conversation within research, this may be influential in imagining more collaborative

case management with young people where first-person accounts provide a meaningful contribution and there is a more concerted consideration of youth voice and perspective. Regarding policy, it may be time to completely reimagine confidentiality policies, especially within smaller and more collectivist communities.

Future Research

Several topics arose during conversation that I felt deserved exploration. However, many of these topics were limited by the design and scope of this project. Future research should include more flexibility with language and greater attention paid to the role of the researcher in co-constructing narratives. Additionally, a poststructuralist exploration of child welfare my further highlight how the lives of young people in care of largely controlled through governmentality and surveillance. The child welfare system is becoming notorious in popular news outlets and dominant discourse for housing children in hotels and the lack of stable foster placements for young people in care (Dowd, 2020). Given the well-researched area of outcomes, research that focuses on more holistic and preventative approaches is long-overdue. In addition to protecting young people from abuse and neglect, child welfare might be reconfigured as family welfare and consider what family systems need to better parent children and prevent entries into care.

Dead Parents

In addition to these broad areas of exploration, more research on the death of parents as a potential mediating variable for entries into care and the potential disproportionality of this experience among youth in care. It is noteworthy that at least six of the 22 participants had a dead parent who, at one point, had been a primary

caregiver and relational resource. While not all entries into care were precipitated by the death of a parent, several were. Furthermore, had the parent not died or was still alive prior to the precipitating event triggering entry into care, the participant very likely would not have entered the foster care system. While Reagan had been in and out of care for years, when her mother died, she was sent to live with an uncle who immediately placed her into a drug rehabilitation center. Reagan learned she was in foster care as soon as she exited that placement. Diane went to live with her aunt following her mother's death and prior to coming into foster care. Diane's aunt struggled to support Diane to grieve the loss of her mother. Diane's aunt saw Diane's behaviors as rebellious. Both Diane's and Reagan's family members were unprepared to support a grieving teen. What else is noteworthy here is that death or not, young people are continuously penalized for "bad behavior" that is frequently a response to a traumatic event or unmet need. Because so many participants had experienced the death of a parent, it seems crucial to address both structural responses to the behaviors of young people that are decontextualized, but may actually reflect a grieving process.

Hegemonic Masculinity

When discussing independence, multiple participants also demonstrated an investment in hegemonic masculinity marked by claims of invulnerability, aversion to relational intimacy, violence and anger, women (always "girls") as social goods, and especially women grouped together and only seen as individuals when discussing girlfriends, mothers, or sisters. This discourse was also marked by stoicism and assertions of a lone wolf-type independence and stubbornness. While this is also reflective of the

social isolation characteristic of the discursive typical foster kid, independence and being overly self-reliant to the point of refusing to be vulnerable in friendships is arguably traditionally masculine.

Participants invested in hegemonic masculinity also grouped friends together and were evasive regarding questions alluding to relational intimacy. They were hesitant to identify a friend that might be closer than the others. Participants eschewed the need for emotional support, close friendships, and even communicated aversions to relational intimacy by disparaging friends. For some, hegemonic masculinity could also be a liability though and hyper-masculinized environments threated a more balanced perspective, one that included the female perspective. Even in this regard, in order for a girl to have individual recognition, she needed to provide some personal benefit to participants.

Though not exclusively, this discourse was typically invoked by young men from rural to mid-size areas and/or had group care or residential experience. This reflects a socialization of boys and young men that seems to occur at the intersection of institutional norms and normative gender roles and expressions still enforced and encouraged in the United States. It is well-documented that queer youth are disproportionately represented in juvenile justice and child welfare (Janssen & DeMatteo, 2020; Wilson & Kastansis, 2018). This calls attention to multiple systemic and structural issues: demonstrations of masculinity among participants that reflected attitudes connected to violence against women and queer folks may be indicative of norms within child welfare systems and placements such as group homes or residential institutions, the

continued disenfranchisement of queer youth who may be system-involved as a result of cis- and heterosexist abuse inflicted by families of origin, and the socialization of system-involved boys and young men, particularly crossover youth (youth involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice systems). While this project did not explore participants' experiences related to sexuality and gender (addressed in limitations) more explicitly, it may be useful to implicate certain cultural norms while thinking about and designing culturally responsive services, including, but certainly not limited to gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

In invoking discourse of the normal teen, young people implied a yearning to be "normal" as well as an awareness of being labeled a foster kid, making normalcy seemingly beyond reach. Because relationships serve as a site of identity development for young people, this label served as an anchor for identity construction given the social isolation and limited access to relationships participants had experienced. Left without sites of enacting various subject positions, participants relied on the subject position of both the normal teen, what they most definitely were not, as well as the typical foster kid, which they also resisted. Identity, in other words, could only be constructed in relation to these two available subject positions. While limited, many participants did resist the boundaries of these subject positions, particularly through identifications of exceptionality, luck, and atypically invested providers.

There is a glaring irony of the discourse of the typical foster kid. Teaching relational skills by surveilling, gatekeeping, and professionalizing relationships seems

counter-intuitive. Given child welfare's emphasis on permanency and relational permanency, why do young people in care seemingly lack access to relationships? It seems reasonable to assume young people in care need additional support maintaining relationships given relational trauma, placement instability, and the stigma of being a foster kid. Indeed, ILP provides services that center relational skill building. But child welfare's emphasis on relationships with adults may come at the expense of other relationships youth in care identify as supportive and meaningful. These relationships include families of origin, friendships and romantic relationships, and relationships with whom young people are in proximity and share space consistently for sustained periods of time, such as other youth in residential placements and group homes. Given sustained proximity is how many relationships organically develop, particularly in adolescence and young adulthood, policies and practices that interrupt these relationships prevent long-term connections with peers. Relational worlds that lack same-aged peers then lead to identity constructions that primarily occur in relationships with adults and formal service providers. In addition to transitions into adulthood, relationships and identities are thus largely institutionalized and governed.

Due to aforementioned placement instability, limited opportunities to stay connected with peers may reinforce parentification and "growing up too fast" that seems to be common among young people who experience trauma and are involved in child welfare. Survivalist self-reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) may be borne out of earlier relational loss, trauma, or disruption, but it is also likely reinforced by other contexts of out-of-home care, like strict foster homes, residential placements, or over-surveilling

providers. This phenomenon may also be compounded by exaggerated cultural norms, such as hegemonic masculinity, that encourage self-sufficiency at the expense of interdependence and eschew emotionally intimate relationships.

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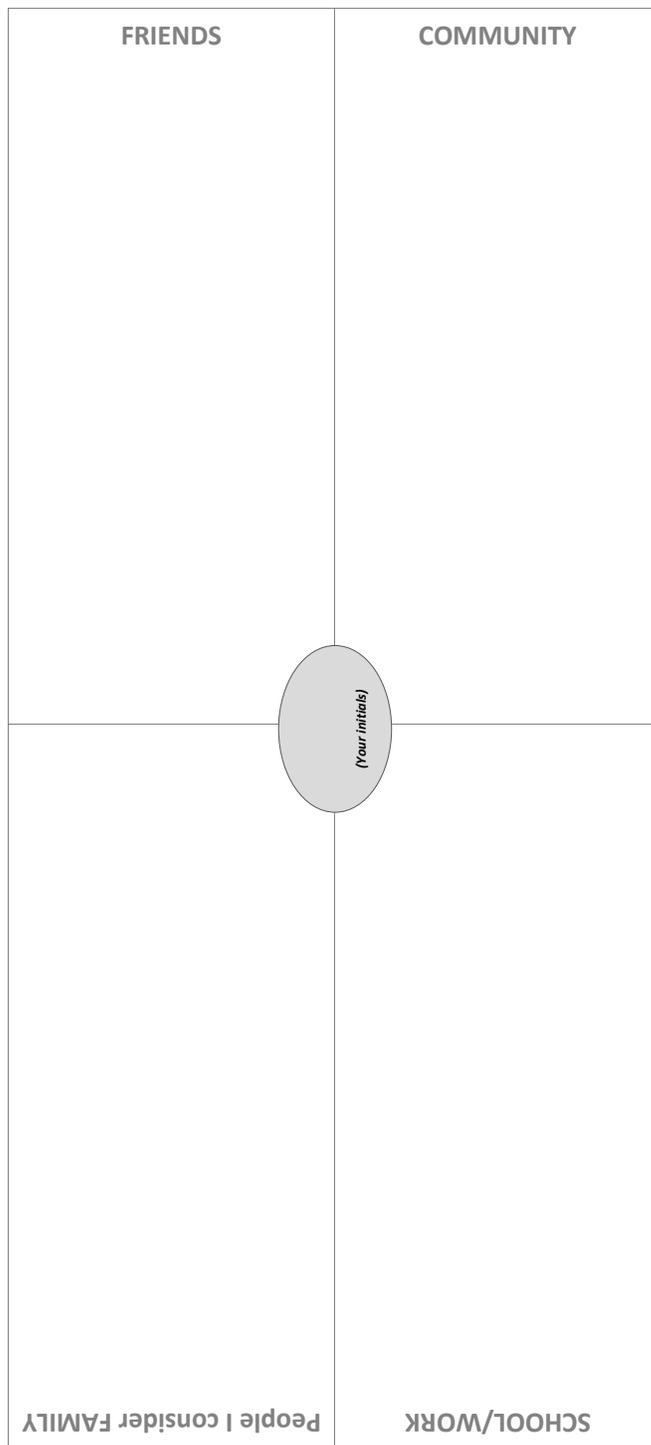
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Appendix A: Network Mapping Tool

Support Network Map

FIRST, write down the people who had a role in your life in the last year (like *Aunt* or *Mentor*), and draw a line between your name and theirs to show how strong the relationship is. **THEN** draw a line between any two people on your map who also know *each other*.

NEXT, circle the people that you usually talk to on a regular basis, for example daily, weekly, or at least once a month.

STRONG
NEUTRAL
WEAK

FRIENDS

COMMUNITY

People I consider FAMILY

SCHOOL/WORK

(Your initials)

EMOTIONAL ♡ INFORMATIONAL ? CONCRETE ☆

LASTLY, draw symbols next to people that support to you to show what kind of support they give—for example, maybe you can talk to them about important things (*emotional*), and/or they give you advice or guidance (*informational*), and/or they help you with daily challenges, like if you need to borrow money or need a ride somewhere (*concrete*).

[Note: map is based on Blakeslee, 2015, in *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 52]

Appendix B: Demographics Table

Area Size	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender Identity	LGBTQ	Race/Ethnicity	ILP	Time in Care	Placement
Rural	Tyler	16	M	N	White	N	8 months	Foster home (aunt & uncle)
	Patrick	17	M	Y	White	Y	3.5 years	Residential
	Wyatt	17	M	N	White	Y	1.5 years	Foster home
	Justin	17	M	N	Caucasian	Y	2+ years	Foster home
	Carla	20	F	Y	White	Y	2-3 years	Roommates
Mid	Reagan	16	F	N	White	Y	1.5 years	Foster home
	Amari	17	F	Y	Caucasian or White	Y	8-9 years	Foster home
	Marie	18	F	N	Caucasian	Y	1.5 years	Friend's parents
	Amanda	19	F	N	Native American (Choctaw)	Y	3-4 years	Foster family
	Gabe	20	M	N	Black/African American	N	7-8 years	Student housing
Urban	Savannah	16	F	Y	Native & Sicilian	Y	1-2 years	Residential
	Matt	16	M	Y	Italian & Native American	Y	5-6 years	Residential
	James	16	M	N	White	Y	2+ years	Residential
	Luca	20	M	N	White	N	10 years	Homeless shelter
	Jessica	17	F	Y	Jewish	Y	4 years	Foster home (aunt & uncle)
	Diane	17	F	N	White & Korean	Y	3 years	Friends (awaiting certification)
	Ila	17	F	Y	African American	Unknown	7 years	Friends (uncertified/unapproved)
	Kai	17	M	N	Black & White	Y	2 years	Foster home
	Thalia	18	F	N	Mixed (Mexican, Black, White, Native)	Y	10 years	Foster home
	Amy	19	F	Y	White/Native American	Y	4+ years	Foster home
	Oscar	19	M	N	Latino	Y	3 years	Foster home
	Brianna	20	F	N	Caucasian	Y	6 years	APPLA (grandmother)

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

<u>**Demographics**</u>

Age?

Gender identity?

Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ community?

What is your race/ethnicity, in your own words?

Are you currently involved in ILP?

How long have you been/were you in foster care?

What is your current living situation?

<u>**Phase 1**</u>

[Have youth look at blank network map first]

- Write your initials in the center, grey circle.
- Think about all the people in your life in these different areas (Family, Friends, School/Work, Other/Community).
    - Think about who might be in your network.
    - Who has played a [significant] role in your life in the past year?
    - Who comes to mind as part of your network?

- Draw a thick/broad/wide line between you (in the center) and people with whom you have strong or close relationships.
    - Maybe you feel really supported by them or really close to them
    - People to whom you feel particularly close

- Draw a dashed or dotted line between you and people you're not very close to.
    - Maybe you don't know them as well or they're only in your life because of circumstance.
    - Maybe there's conflict or tension in the relationship.
    - Maybe you just haven't seen them in awhile.

- Draw a single, narrow line between you and the people who are somewhere in between a thicker line and a dotted line.

- o Neutral, not as supportive, somewhere in between

- Next, circle the people you talk to or see the most (daily or even weekly).

- Draw a line between people in your network who know each other.

- Now I'm going to ask you about the different kinds of support people in your network give you. We think about support in three general categories.
  - o First, concrete support is support like a ride somewhere, help with money when you're broke, a place to sleep or do your laundry. Concrete support is represented by a dollar sign.
  - o Next is informational support. This kind of support includes things your caseworker or ILP coach might give you; things like academic advising, steps for applying for financial aid, how to get a driver's license… basically guidance and information. This is represented by a star.
  - o The last kind of support is emotional support. These are the people you call when you're upset and having a bad day. Or maybe you get good news and you want to share it with someone. Maybe you need relationship advice or someone to share your feelings with. This type of support is represented by a heart.

  - o Maybe someone in your support network gives you all three types of support or maybe they give you none. Draw the symbol for the kind of support each person in your network gives you, right next to their names.

Phase 2

- Tell me about your map.
  - o When you look at your map, what do you see?
  - o What stands out to you?

- *Tell me about the different people in your network.*
- *Tell me about the different lines.*
  - o *Dotted, why?*
  - o *Thicker?*
    - *How do you define close? What makes a relationship close? Less close?*
  - o *Narrower lines?*

- *Tell me about the different types of support.*
  - o *Why type of support do you have a lot of? Is it enough?*
  - o *What type of support do you wish you had more of?*

- o *Where (from what area) do you get most of your support?*

- *How do people in your network know each other?*

- What do you like about your map?

- What do you wish was different?
  - o What is preventing that change?

- What does your ideal/perfect map look like?
  - o Is there anyone not on your map you wish was/Who's not on your map that you wish was?

- What are the obstacles in the way of your ideal map?

- Now think about services you access and the people who provide them (like your caseworker).
  - o What could service providers do to help you get closer to your ideal map?
    - ▪ or to help make your map stronger
    - ▪ How can services remove those obstacles?

Phase 3

- Think about your map a year or two ago?
  - o What's the same?
  - o What's different?
    - ▪ Why?

- When you think about your support network a year from now/once you exit out of care, What do you think it will look like?

- Who on your map do you think of as family?
  - o If you could choose a family, who would be in it?
  - o Is there anyone who is like a parent, an older sibling, an aunt or uncle, or a grandparent to you?
  - o Role models/older adult role models

- What else do you want me to know about your map?
  - o Anything you think is important for DHS to know…